NEGOTIATING INTIMACIES IN CHINA'S ONLINE SOCIAL MILIEUX

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Contents

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Abstract

This is a cultural study into China's cyberspace focussing on romantic relationships. The research asks: *how does culture influence the ways Chinese Internet users conduct romantic relationships online;* and *how might these relationships be seen to reproduce, extend and/or challenge the Confucian tradition governing social and familial practices, and the communist party-state's ideologies?* While the first question explores the issue of how culture may shape the ways the Internet is used in China and impact on users' experiences of online romance, the second question examines how Chinese cultural traditions may in turn be shaped by the Internet. The aims are to understand: (1) how Chinese define and make sense of their online romantic relationships; and (2) the significance of the Internet in influencing the ways Chinese negotiate their intimacies in relation to wider familial relations, the party-state's paternalism and the social climate of growing individualism in the society.

Mixed methods triangulation is used to approach the research questions, beginning with participant observation at three domestic social sites, followed by an online survey and narrative studies. Findings show that the Internet in China is appreciated as a distinct realm on its own as much as an extension of offline everyday life. The original contribution to the digital media literature comes from recognizing the meanings and importance of exclusively Internet-based online romance for participants. These types of relationships encompass the therapeutic ethos of love stressing self-realization but ironically also feature the quintessential elements of romantic love practically used by Chinese to reinvigorate their quotidian existence. Despite deliberately exploiting the dichotomy between online and offline, Chinese Internet users ultimately accept that the two are inextricably linked. This paradox results from the tension confronting Chinese when negotiating their freedom in private love affairs with Confucian tradition and the party-state. The study draws on Giddens' Structuration Theory and Foucault's governmentality to account for the power struggle.

Introduction

From its initial purpose of connecting academic institutions and the American defence system, the Internet has blossomed into a global social milieu. According to Internet World Stats it is estimated to connect 2.4 billion people worldwide, as of June 2012, which represents 34.3% of the world population. Contemporary Internet usage seems to be predominantly for social and communication purposes as seen in the Alexa.com ranking of global websites in terms of daily visitors and page views. On 27 February 2013, top of the list is Google, followed by Facebook, Youtube, Yahoo, Baidu, Wikipedia, Window Live, QQ, Amazon and Twitter. Although Baidu in China is primarily a search engine, it also has its own forum, personal space and games. QQ is China's largest and most popular Internet service portal that too encompasses all other functions of social media, such as instant messaging, microblogging, social networking, games and forums. In other words, these top ten sites offer platforms of social media for users to interact with one another and participate in content creation, collaboration and sharing.

As the Internet has become an integral part of many ordinary people's everyday life (for those on the right side of digital divide), making friends online or dating someone they initially met online is becoming a common global phenomenon. This study has two principal research questions. Firstly, ***how does culture influence the ways Chinese Internet users conduct romantic relationships online***? Are they similar to; or different (significantly, or marginally) from the more widely reported western experience and if so, how and why? This study focuses on online daters situated within a distinctively Chinese cultural background that blends socialism with a market economy. Unlike research that concentrates on the effects of computer-mediated communication (CMC) properties, such as reduced social cues and democratizing characteristics, my study centres on understanding how participants make sense of their online romantic relationships, the way they define the nature of the relationships and negotiate their intimacy in relation to wider familial relationships, all embedded within their larger socio-cultural context.

The study is partly inspired by James Farrer's (2002) book on Shanghai youths' sex culture. His ethnographic account of the effect of market reforms on young urbanites' changing attitudes towards love and sex is insightful. The new culture of courtship and marriage that emerged as a result of state sponsored structural changes emphasized material comfort at odds with the old ideal of romantic love primed on feelings and emotional satisfaction. Embroiled in this conflict, each individual has to construct for themselves a new ethic of love. The book provoked me to ponder series of questions, such as how individuals in China react to the changing environment of an accelerating process of individualization, first brought by the market reforms, but now coupled with the arrival of the Internet? What are their coping strategies when confronted by tensions between external normative constraints and internal impulses of self-direction? How do the new and old cultural practices co-exist in today's Chinese society and what is the role of tradition in defining societal values in this modern era?

Hence, the second research question asks *how might these online romantic relationships be seen to reproduce, extend and/or challenge the Confucian tradition governing social and familial practices, and the communist party-state's ideologies?* The aim of the enquiry is to understand to what extent the Internet may act as a new resource for people to seek fulfilment of their social and emotional needs, to manoeuvre between socio-cultural expectations, traditions and party-state sanctioned social mores that come into conflict with their private desires of love and intimacy in the era of growing individualism in Chinese society. In other words, my interest is not simply to find a yes or no answer to the question of whether online romances help liberate and empower participants in the realm of romantic love, but to focus on the negotiation process (successful or otherwise) of Chinese Internet users armed with modern technologies to exercise their agency in matters of love and private family life. While the first research question explores the issue how culture may shape the ways the Internet is used in China, the second research question examines how cultural traditions may in turn be shaped by the Internet. Together the two questions delineate a balanced account of the relationships between technology and the society. This study encompasses both issues of agency and structure to discuss how and why participants act in the way they do in their pursuit of private relationships. In a nutshell, the aims of this study are firstly, to examine the roles of

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culture in shaping Chinese Internet users' experiences of online romance; and secondly to understand the wider significance of the Internet in influencing people's private love lives with regard to normative expectations in contemporary Chinese society.

My passion in studying online romance developed from my past personal experience. My first boyfriend was my pen pal from east Malaysia. We eventually met after more than a year of writing letters and talking on the phone as he relocated to west Malaysia to study at my college. My subsequent relationship was also with a pen pal but this time we emailed. Although the absence of physical interactions at the beginning of the relationship sometimes felt like agony, this type of distant intimacy had its attractions too. I particularly enjoyed the level of control writing letter and email afforded me. I had the freedom of expressing myself in the way I liked, presenting myself in a charming manner and even taking the initiative to confide my love. When one of my close friends shared her story of dating a man from Hong Kong she met online, I could easily relate to her excitement and anticipation mixed with anxiousness and other practical concerns. Although the relationship ended not long after their first face-to-face meeting, the fond memories of the relationship remain. Another of my former classmates eventually married an American man she met through an online chatroom in 2007. My research interest began as I started to wonder why and how some relationships online work, but others resemble only short-lived affairs.

Although the West took the lead in venturing into the business of online dating and creation of social networking sites (SNS) and microblogging, other countries soon followed to offer similar domestic sites that better cater for the nation's needs. For instance, Renren in China, Odnoklassniki in Russia and Cyworld in South Korea are the equivalents of Facebook based in the US. Online dating has, since the mid 1990s emerged as a lucrative business. According to a news release from FriendFinder Networks (2012), the market is forecasted to exceed $2.5 billion by 2015. In China, although the market of online dating is less lucrative than in the US, the Internet consultancy iResearch estimates the total revenue from China's online dating will grow to $290 million in 2015 (Orlik, 2011), from just $24 million in 2006 (Cullen, Masters, Woo and Singh 2008). Jiayuan, Baihe and Zhenai are the

three largest dating sites in China. Together they have 84 million subscribers, approaching half of the 180 million single people in China based on a nationwide survey jointly conducted by the All-China Women's Federation and Baihe in 2010 (Wang, 2011). China's one-child policy, urban migration and imbalanced gender ratio are factors that have encouraged the growth of the nascent industry (Wang, Kwak, Whalen, 2013). However, the industry as a whole is becoming more competitive due to the emergence of SNS which not only allows members to connect with others for free, but also adds a sense of security due to the perceived familiarity of mutual friends.

SNS and dating sites might be the place to look for relationships, but the reality is friendships and romantic affiliations often occur as the byproduct of regular online contacts not initially intended by the participants. A study by Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons (2002) showed that participants who interact online tend to like each other more than those who interact face-to-face. This is the result of greater partner idealization online and the ease of expressing one's true-self online due to the relatively anonymous setting. They are cautious against taking this feature of the Internet lightly because "they can cause feeling of closeness and intimacy to occur at breathtaking speed" (p45). "Before one realizes it, one can find oneself in a friendship or intimate relationship that one wasn't looking for" (p46), creating complications in existing relationships or family life. In light of the ubiquitous occurrence of online relationships and their potential influence on an individual's social and family life and by extension the society as a whole, this area of research remains important.

Before we go further, it is perhaps helpful to explain what is meant by "online relationships". Baker and Whitty (2008) define online relationships as relationships of emotional and/or cognitive bonds that could be strong or weak and exist across various time spans. When referring to romantic online relationships, their definition has not been limited only to relationships initiated online, but also to include those in which the dyads first meet face-to-face, such as during a holiday abroad, or a night out, and later keep in touch online and/or through mobile phones to develop the relationship to a more intimate level. This is a more inclusive definition than those used in earlier studies such as the most cited Parks and Floyd's

(1996) study of personal relationships formed among newsgroup members. Cooper and Sportolari (1997) also conceptualized online relationships as relationships originating in cyberspace in their discussion of computer-mediated relating. These studies emphasized relationships that begin and develop on the Internet, involving "people they did not know face-to-face" (Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor, 2002:445). This current research focuses on romantic online relationships, or online romances ("*wanglian*" in Chinese) partaken by Chinese Internet users, domestically known as netizens. "Netizen" may have lost its currency, especially in the West, but the term is the closest translation of the Chinese word, "*wangmin*", literally meaning citizen of the net. It is a political identity that reflects China's civic-minded and active online population (Fung, 2012). Although only a small subset of Chinese Internet users are politically engaged, the term "netizen" remains irreplaceable in China's nascent digital public sphere. The language of rule of law, such as "freedom of expression", "political rights", "citizenship" and "democratic" are frequently used in official discourse and are enshrined in China's constitution, but state encroachment of citizens' rights is the everyday reality. The Internet opens up a relatively freer realm for expression and facilitates the practice of citizenship, hence the political relevance of the term "netizen". To preserve and reflect its social significance in China, I will continue to use the term "netizen" in my discussion, interchangeable with Chinese Internet users.

From my personal contacts with Chinese netizens throughout the study, there are subtle variations of the meanings of online romance. For instance, a female, aged 23 from Guangdong, did not consider herself as being involved in online romance despite first meeting her boyfriend online. The reason given was that they had met in person prior to falling in love. Her notion of online romance requires that the dyad not only first met online, but also developed intense romantic feelings that later lead to the face-to-face meeting. Her rejection of the label of online romance could also be due to the persistent stigma associated with the phrase in which it is still implied that online daters are naive and unrealistic. Another female aged 26 from Inner Mongolia has doubt whether her relationship with her lover first contacted online can be categorized as online romance because they met through her work colleague's introduction. To avoid confusion, in this study, "online romance" is generally used to refer to romantic relationships initiated online in which first contact happened in

cyberspace. No predetermined criteria of romantic relationships are given to participants as the purposes the study are to examine how participants make sense of their online relationships and the significance of the relationship to the participants.

Referring to the previous Alexa ranking, the only two non-English sites within the top ten global sites are from the People's Republic of China (mainland China). This again shows that it is pivotal for Internet researchers to pay close attention to China. Yet despite China's growing influence, our understandings of online relationships are mostly limited to studies based in the western context. To fill in the gap, this research focuses predominantly on Internet users from mainland China. The following section documents briefly the astonishing development of China (by which I mean mainland China throughout this thesis) and its Internet or ICTs industry in particular, which will be needed to contextualize the significance of this study.

1. China and the Internet

China's miraculous economic growth in last three decades and its rise to become a global superpower certainly deserves scholarly attention. But my interest in China lies in its capability to operate within a governing model that consists of many seemingly contradictory systems. The most notable example is the marriage between socialism and market economy brought in by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 which continues to be the ruling ideology of the country. It was Deng's opening up policy and market reform that fundamentally transformed the country. Hence, this gave birth to the notion of "socialism with Chinese characteristics". It represents a different or indeed reverse path towards individualization compared to the European model in which the market economy takes precedence over the development of individual basic civil rights and welfare system (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2010). "The Chinese reform of the market-economic individualization *truncates* – or, to put it bluntly, *castrates* – the process of individualization in its claims to democratic political participation" (ibid: p.xviii-xvx). The freedom individuals enjoy is confined within the limits of private and economic life. Political involvement remains under tight control and public life is allowed as long as it does not threaten the state's monopoly of power. More conflicting government policies and incongruous social

phenomena ensued following the adoption of the socialist market economy, such as the changing ideal standard of women from androgynous iron lady back to sexual objectification (Evans, 1997), and how Confucianism's role shifts from being the villain that hampered the nation's development during the early 20th century to become the defining cultural characteristic of China that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) relies on to advance their soft power on the international front (Bardsley, 2010).

In the post-Mao era, Marxist ideologies and class struggle no longer dominated the political discourse. As pragmatism became the guiding philosophy of the ruling elites, it rendered many inconsistencies in governing less problematic. Deng once said that "it doesn't matter whether a cat is white or black, as long as it catches mice" to make the argument that socialism is not strictly defined by a planned economy, and a market economy too can serve the socialist state to deliver growth and improve the living standards of the people (Jeffreys and Sigley, 2009). Deng's "one country two systems" is yet another example that showed how the end is used to justify the means. So long as it helps to unite Hong Kong and Macau with mainland China, different political, economic and legal systems can be accommodated. As the nation embraced the late Deng's exhortation that "to get rich is glorious" this has had profound implications on the society as most adopted an instrumental approach in their everyday life. The issues of moral vacuum and spiritual bankruptcy are deeply felt by many in the society (Zhao, 2007). The high profile incident of the death of a two year old in October 2011 witnessed by more than a dozen passersby who refused to help the girl hit by a van provoked nationwide soul searching.

The development of the ICT industry in China is even more astounding albeit under tight state surveillance and censorship. In January 1995, when the first public Internet service became available, according to the China Ministry of Information Industry, the country had less than five telephone sets per hundred population, equivalent to the US teledensity level in 1905 (cited in Qiu, 2003). According to the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), the Internet population in China has grown from 9 million in 1999 to 564 million as of December 2012. China overtook the US in 2008 to become the country with the largest Internet population.

With 245 million Internet users representing a 78.1% penetration rate, the US is facing the issue of market saturation (Internet World Stats, 2012). This contrasts unfavourably with China where the prospect of future growth is promising with only a 40.1% penetration rate (ibid).

According to the latest CNNIC report (dated January 2013), the majority of China's online population is young people aged between 10-19 (24%), 20-29 (30.4%) and 30-39 (25.3%). In terms of occupation, 29.2% are workers from private and state owned enterprises, 25.1% are students, followed by 18.1% self-employed individuals and freelancers. 55.8% are male, 44.2% are female, mainly residing in urban areas (72.4%). Netizens rely on the Internet mostly for social, communication, entertainment and information acquisition. The top three Internet applications are instant messaging (IM) used by 82.9% of Internet users, followed by search engines (80%) and online music (77.3%). QQ is the most preferred domestic IM service provider in China. For most Chinese youth, an almost essential part of their social identity is having a QQ number which they can pass on to friends for IM or inviting to visit their QQ personal space (Clode and Poppelwell, 2008). Despite the dominance of IM, microblogging (*weibo*) used by more than half of the Internet population (54.7%), represents the fastest growing application, increasing from 23.5% a year earlier. The report speculates that *weibo* is increasingly being used by netizens as the new information and news source that is leading to the steady decline of online news consumption. Other Internet applications on the top ten list are blogging or maintaining personal space, emailing, social networking, online video viewing and game playing.

Chinese society has long been operated within the culture of "*guanxi*", whereby established social connections are used to facilitate interpersonal exchanges of favours -fundamentally a classic form of networking (Chan, Ireland and Yu, 2006). The Internet has opened up tremendous networking opportunities for Chinese, compared with earlier generations who were subject to temporal and spatial limitations in their effort to cement their social ties with each other. In line with the cultural tradition of *guanxi*, Chinese Internet users indeed embraced social media more extensively than their western counterparts. For example, according to business consultant group, BCG's press release dated 12 April 2012, 79% of Chinese netizens

used IM compared with 21% of US Internet users. Sina Weibo, the most popular microblogging service provider boasted 300 million registered users by the end of 2011 in less than three years of operation (Xinhua, 2012), compared with Twitter which has operated since 2006 and is reported to have 100 million users as of September 2011 (Twitter Blog, 2011). The results of an online survey involving Chinese and American youths showed that the Internet is much more appreciated in China than in America (IAC and JWT, 2007). 77% of the 1,104 Chinese participants agreed with the statement "The Internet helps me make friends", compared to only 30% of the 1,079 American participants. While 66% of the Chinese surveyed think that online interactions have broadened their sense of identity, only 26% of American respondents reported to have this benefit. Shanahan, Poynter and Ho (2008) suggested that the one-child policy could be one of the reasons that contributed to the social media enthusiasm in China. The Internet also provided Chinese a platform to explore their sexuality as 32% of Chinese respondents admitted that the Internet has broadened their sex life. The role of the Internet in American respondents' sexual life is significantly less pronounced as only 11% agreed with the same statement.

Academics' interest in the Internet use in China rose in line with its remarkable growth. However, most existing studies have been concerned mostly with the political implications of the technology, often reflecting the popular belief that the Internet poses a threat to the authoritarian state with its open and democratic features (see for example Kedzie, 1997; Taubman, 1998; Locke, 1999; Yang, 2003; Qiu, 2003; Zhang 2007). But the CCP has proved the contrary that they are not only resilient to the risks brought by the Internet, but also adept at using the Internet to improve their governance and surveillance (Shie, 2004; Deans, 2004; He, 2006; Morozov, 2011). To redress the utopian belief in the Internet's democratic potential, other studies began to present a more moderate account of the impact of the Internet in Chinese society, emphasizing liberalization and informatization, instead of political democratization, and facilitating gradual social change (see for examples Hong and Huang, 2005; Y. Zheng, 2008; Yuan, 2010, Lagerkvist, 2010). Although more can be learned from studying the Internet in China at the macro political level, the use of the Internet in netizens' everyday life is an equally important research area.

As indicated in the latest CNNIC report (January 2013), for most online Chinese, the Internet is mainly a medium for entertainment and socialization. Earlier reports showed that this is an established trend of Internet application in China. Empirical studies of Chinese Internet users confirm that the majority of them are apathetic to political communication (Hong and Huang, 2005; Guo, 2007). The few prominent dissidents, activists, and government critics who turn to the Internet to express themselves are the exception rather than the norm. Most studies of the Internet in China tend to overemphasize the threats of the technologies to the communist regime and exaggerate "the extent to which the liberal conception of 'democracy' is of significance to Chinese Internet users" (Deans, 2004: 130). However, this is not to deny the Internet's political potential such as facilitating free speech, holding government responsible for their wrongdoings and undermining the regime's monopoly in news and information. To gauge the political influence of the Internet in China it is crucial to go beyond the formal political sphere and pay attention to netizens' engagement in micropolitics in their everyday life. This kind of informal, indirect, subtle and non-elite political participation and resistance to domination by the powerless is well captured by James Scott's (1990) notion of infrapolitics and Hanchard's (2006) notion of coagulate politics. These forms of political activity are in fact more relevant in China than in other developed democratic countries. Following the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, open and direct confrontation that aims at regime change has become a rarity. However, this does not imply the ultimate triumph of the party-state's hegemony but merely a change of political tactic. In recent years, so called mass incidents are indeed on the rise, involving mostly citizens of lower socioeconomic class who are often the victims of illegal land grab, forced eviction, environmental pollution, and official corruption (Yang, 2009). Nevertheless, the target of the demonstrators is local government, and most demand central government's intervention to hold the local officials accountable for their betrayals of the central state's directive of serving the people. The defiance that took place within the CCP's political framework certainly seems less threatening, therefore more likely to be tolerated than outright rejection of the communist rule. It is a necessary response for the survival of subaltern groups. It reflects the agency of ordinary people and how they mobilize themselves in the event of fighting for justice and initiating changes a little at a time.

In light of the evidence that illustrates the overwhelming role of the Internet in contemporary Chinese society, this research centres on Chinese netizens' use of the Internet in the private sphere of forming romantic relationships. Since the economic reforms, the state loosened it controls on labour, capital and commodities markets to stimulate growth. Individuals were liberated not only to pursue their own economic activities, but also to reclaim their private life. However, they also have to take greater personal responsibilities in life as the state withdrew the social supports that once catered for each individual from the cradle to the grave under the system of work units (*danwei*) in urban areas and collective production teams in rural communities. There are winners and losers under the market economy, but the changing idea or belief is that success or failure in life now lies solely within each individual's discretion, the state can no longer be blamed (Yan, 2009). This predominant sense of personal responsibility is in fact beneficial to the state as it diminishes the state's obligations and financial burden to provide social security to citizens.

Yet as previously mentioned, the development of individualization in China is curtailed by the absence of a democratic culture and welfare system to protect and support individuals. Despite being increasingly disembedded from Confucian familial tradition and community, individuals find themselves having to turn back to this traditional form of social capital when in need, as institutional supports are not in place to take up the role. This results in an ambivalent attitude towards family and kinship; constraining on one hand, but indispensable because familial relationships remain as the only reliable resource for support and social security for the individual. Therefore, while enjoying the personal freedom to live one's own life, many Chinese youth have not forgotten their responsibility to nurture their family, maintaining a harmonious relationship so it remains steady and ready to call into service when needed in the future (Hansen and Pang, 2010). This is how the influence of traditional forms of social authority and familial tradition persist in today's modern China. It is within this socio-cultural context that I conducted my research to contribute to the understanding of contemporary Chinese society with all its contradictory characteristics and contingent nature. Online relationships is a research topic studied by scholars from multiple disciplines, ranging from media and communication studies, cultural studies, psychology, family and interpersonal

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relationship, philosophy, computer science to business and finance. This study adopts a multidisciplinary approach in the investigation but before I go into the details, the theoretical framework of this research follows next.

2. Theoretical framework

Modernity and power constitute the two themes in this study. This approach to online relationships works within a tradition of social construction and critical theory but with a focus on the micropolitics of everyday life. Marriage based on romantic love, individualism and capitalism are the key features of modern industrial societies since the 18th century. Macfarlane (1987) provides an excellent account of the emergence of romantic love in Europe. Although evidence suggests that romantic love is not a creation of modern western industrial societies, Macfarlane argues that it is within the culture of capitalism and individualism that the ideology of romantic love flourished and became the pivot of modern society. Overwhelmed by the rational calculations of profit and loss, and feelings of loneliness and alienation, many developed a longing for the all-consuming passion of love untainted by instrumental motives. Similarly Lindholm (1998) contends that romantic love is a valuable source of solace and refuge for individuals living in a risk society lacking social security and detached from traditions, kinship and communities. Although romantic love may seem to compensate individuals' emotional needs for living in uncertain and insecure modern societies, it does not take long for capitalism to commodify love by associating romance with consumption. Going out dating has become an important part of courtship that relies exclusively on a modern consumer culture that values material possession, choice, pleasure and fun (Farrer 2002). The greater emphasis placed on materialism has gradually cost romantic love its aura of ethereality. Illouz (1997) also conceived a crisis of romantic love in contemporary society as the ideal model of love as an intense, spontaneous, irrational but transcendental feeling has gradually lost influence to a more realistic model of love based on progressive mutual understanding, shared interests, compatibility in personality and outlook on life.

In the early 1950s communist revolution, the party-state's bold socio-economic reform marked the beginning of the politicization of private life in China.

For instance, the Marriage Law 1950 that legally enforced monogamous marriage based on personal choice seriously weakened parental authority. This also led to the growing importance of conjugal love, making the relationship between husband and wife the central axis of a family instead of their relationship with parents. The power of local clans or kinship organizations was severely reduced through land redistribution and CCP became the new public patriarch demanding exclusive loyalty from the people. Since the post-Mao era, the one-child policy makes small nuclear households the norm. The market economy relaxed the ban on internal migration and improved the living standards of many people. Collective culture was gradually replaced by growing individualism stimulated and sustained by consumer culture. All these social and family changes resembled the changes that happened in Western Europe and North America as a consequence of industrialization and urbanization (Goode, 1963). However, what happened in China was not an organic development but the result of the CCP's pervasive and intrusive social policies that "pushed Chinese families toward a 'modern family' form at a speed unknown in European or American experience" (Davis and Harrell, 1993:5). Nevertheless, as pointed out by Stacey (1983), the CCP's revolutionary process in the family realm "can be less destructive of premodern family than has been the case with capitalist modernizing process" (p258). The state's land reform resolved the immediate family crisis of many poor peasants, and stabilized the family institution through collective welfare.

Involvement in online romance in itself is a sign of "being modern" because it shows not only the successful embrace of new technology, but also "emotional competence" by which Illouz (2007) means good at performing and experiencing emotions, expressing the private self, and following the therapeutic ethos of love. Giddens' work on intimacy in modern societies is useful to make sense of Chinese online daters' experience, particularly his notion of pure relationships. According to Giddens (1992), the pure relationship is the characteristic of modernity in which people engage in relationships primarily for the mutual gratifications the relationship provides. Therefore, lovers constantly engage in self-reflexivity to assess how fulfilling is the relationship. The relationship is maintained so long as it provides sufficient gratifications for the person involved. In China, this captures the essence of online relationships more readily than relationships in the face-to-face world.

Social mores and economic considerations still hold many back from pursuing pure relationships despite the rising divorce rate. As mentioned earlier, China's different path to modernity orchestrated predominantly by the party-state has posed different kinds of challenges to citizens in their quotidian existence. Socialism, Confucian familial tradition, popular culture and individualism fostered by the market economy are some of the cultural resources available to Chinese to draw on when talking about romantic love. The cultural dilemma confronting them has a profound impact on the ways they conduct private relationships. Hence, to answer the first research question of how does culture influence online relationships in the context of China, it is necessary to begin by focusing on the various ways Chinese netizens define and make sense of their online relationships.

Undoubtedly since Deng's reform in 1978 the party-state in China has restrained itself from directly encroaching into the private life and economic activities of its citizens. However, it is important not to misread this as a sign of complete retreat of the state and the attainment of belated liberation in the intimate realm of sex and love. The change of policing strategies in favour of implicit control and governing from a distance, especially through the discourse of tradition, may appear subtle, but is in fact more effective than direct coercive measures. Far from being neutral, traditions are invented to serve particular purposes, often becoming ideological when they are used to establish or sustain unequal power relations and serve the interests of the powerful (Thompson, 1995). Take for instance CCP's initiative in the revival of Confucianism in recent decades. The hierarchical social relationships sanctioned by Confucius require subservient and obedient subjectivities. They reinforce the status quo and legitimize the party's ruling power. In Foucault's terms, Confucianism is adept at reproducing the "docile body" that is particularly good at self-discipline. Instrumentalization of tradition reinstates the party-state's moral authority to govern the citizens' private life (Gross, 1992). The resurgence of Confucianism is nevertheless not wholly a state-initiated effort. The renewed interest is also driven by academics and the general public who are increasingly taking pride in their own cultural traditions for thinking about social and political life (Bell, 2010).

The revival of Confucianism shows that traditions are not inherently incompatible with the modern world. Many traditions survive at the margin of

everyday life. Some are refashioned into new forms and continue their influence in a subtle manner. Mass media may on one hand undermine traditional values and beliefs by exposing individuals to new ways of life, but on the other hand, also contribute to the renewal of traditions on an unprecedented scale and speed. Traditions are now increasingly sustained through mediated forms of communication, transcending temporal and spatial limitations to re-embed themselves in our contemporary lives (Thompson, 1995). As a result of the resurgence of Confucianism, the family as the fundamental social unit in Confucian ideology has now re-emerged as the primary structure shaping Chinese people's subjectivities and social relations, instead of class and political affiliations (Erwin, 2000). Family and sexual politics provide new possibilities, but also new constraints in defining Chinese subjectivities "as much as direct state control did in earlier decades" (p170). Foucault's (1988a) governmentality provides a vital framework to understand this intricate operation of power in contemporary society. Governmentality represents a modern mode of governance that concurrently appeals to the individuals' rights, but at the same time serves the interests of the ruling authority. This liberal form of governance can help to advance the state's interests much more effectively and peacefully, whilst not being seen as in direct opposition to individuals' interests. Foucault meticulously exposed how power in modern societies functions in a subtle manner by co-opting individuals' preferences and capacities into the boundaries of the state (Jeffreys and Sigley, 2009:4). In the context of China, it is how the party-state managed to harmonize individuals' aspirations with the direction of the CCP, so that they appear compatible and allow the state to claim it is representative of the people. Therefore, governmentality is simultaneously empowering and disempowering to individuals in their relationship with the state.

Engaging in online romance may seem liberating and empowering to some as it allows them greater freedom to at least ignore, if not challenge social conventions and norms governing the realm of interpersonal relationships. The platform provided by the Internet is in fact pivotal for alternative stories of romantic love from Internet users to be voiced and heard in public. The discursive space opened up by the Internet allows intimate stories of various kinds to contest with one another, and also with the state's dominant discourse. Online participants form wider communities of support to defend pluralistic accounts of private life. The Internet promotes the

exercise of "intimate citizenship" by which Plummer (1996) refers to a new field of life politics "concerned with all those matters linked to our most intimate desires, pleasures and ways of being in the world" (p46). Plummer argues that the stories individuals tell about their sexual life provide a window into understanding the status quo of political and moral life in late modern societies. In his study of sexual storytelling, he emphasizes the necessity of ensuring multiple stories proliferate and co-exist with conservative stories from established authorities as they "carry potential for a radical transformation of the social order" (p45). The triumph of traditional moralistic accounts implies the demise of cultural progressiveness. What is needed in late modern society is a "politic of possibilities" rather than prohibitions as individuals increasingly have to rely on themselves to make many decisions about life which require them to be flexible and innovative. Sexual storytelling, a confessional discourse, is indeed an example of Foucault's technology of the self, a project of emancipation through experimentation with subversive thinking and behaviour. Foucault (1988a) referred to it as a set of techniques that can be used to author the truth about oneself, to transform and to empower oneself to become an authentic being. However, individuals are not absolutely free in the process of self-creation because these techniques are embedded within the web of state and familial power relations, which limit the possibilities of subjectivity (cited in Danaher, Schirato and Webb, 2000). This leads us back to the notion of governmentality discussed earlier.

The Internet presents users with abundant opportunities to confess and share their stories of private life, and to pursue their love affairs or sexual desires with like-minded others. Personal visibility has become the new symbol of social status and power in the age of social media (Keen, 2012). However, increased visibility through digital self-exhibition renders many vulnerable to the state's reprisals when their online transgressive behaviours are deemed unacceptable and undermining public morality. In China, the Muzimei incident in 2003 is an example of how an initial sense of online liberation and empowerment has in the end subjected the individual to greater state monitoring. Muzimei, a journalist and magazine columnist published her sexual adventures with multiple partners on her blog causing a sudden Internet frenzy that developed into a national controversy. Some admired her as a liberated woman; others reviled her as a "shameless hussy". In contemporary Chinese society,

romantic love has become the moral standard for engaging in sexual behaviours; together with marriage and procreation, they became the legitimate and acceptable reasons for sex (Farrer, 2002). Sex separated from love though is not uncommon, but the sexual double standard made Muzimei an amoral figure. Eventually the state intervened and criticized Muzimei's behaviour as undermining public morality and condemned Sina, the portal hosting her blog as being socially irresponsible in giving her prominence. In the end, Muzimei voluntarily took down her blog and resigned from her job. Her book was also banned by the government (Yardley, 2003).

While Foucault's notions of power and governmentality are insightful in the discussion of power at societal level, concerning the state's relationship with individuals and regulation of their private lives, to fully answer my second research question, I also draw on Giddens' (1984) structuration theory to make sense of power relations at individual level, pertaining to the issue of Internet empowerment and disempowerment. Focusing on the interplay between agency and structure sheds light not only on the tensions between the two, but also how structures reproduce themselves through actions undertaken by social agents on a taken-for-granted basis. By drawing attention to both constraining and liberating aspects of the Internet and the socio-cultural structure, my intention is to problematize the simple account of empowerment or disempowerment of the Internet with regard to tradition governing the realm of private relationships. I also rely on the theoretical concept of play to highlight how the seemingly inconsequential playful approach to online relationships adopted by some Chinese Internet users can be an act of resistance, a form of empowerment to defy established norms, and encourage self-exploration and experimentation. A focus on the in-betweeness of Chinese netizens' experience yields greater insight into the ways they struggle and negotiate the conflicting demands of intimacy and autonomy on one hand, and state intervention through the discourse of moral traditions and family responsibilities on the other hand. My approach to understanding Chinese experience of online romance is similar to Swidler's (2001) study of the culture of love among the American middle class, focusing on the ways people think and talk about love and how the culture of love shapes individuals' experience and structures their collective actions. I also turn to Burke's dramatisim (1989), the study of human behaviour as embedded in language use. Language is itself a form of action containing elements of drama, such as

conflict, purpose, choice, resolution and possibilities for change and transformation. Gusfield (1989) provides a useful account of differentiation between Goffman's dramaturgy and Burke's dramatisim. While Goffman preoccupied himself with the art of acting in which the actor attempts to make believe of his/her performance, Burke is interested in the language itself or the action as constructed through the use of language.

3. Methodology

Burke (1989) focuses on the hermeneutic aspects of language, how language affects our understanding and shapes our experience of the world. Despite the constraining effects of language, the polysemic nature of language carries with it the possibilities of change and transformation. Burke's concentration on language as symbolic action is particularly relevant in my study since language plays an even more prominent role in the conduct of relationships online. To compensate for the lack of social cues online, Internet users have to explicate their emotions, and make tangible the intangible, often in textual form. Attention is paid to the ways Chinese netizens understand and talk about online romance in order to explore how their ideas and beliefs about love are used to resolve problems arising from incongruent motives, and how their sometimes contradictory views on online romance affect their actions and experiences of romancing online.

Burke's writings span across various disciplines, from literature to sociology and philosophy. He perceived the division of academic disciplines as problematic because all human endeavours rely on the rhetorical use of language to achieve certain purposes. Inspired by Burke, this study too adopts a cross-disciplinary approach combining both qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry to examine the interaction between individuals' agency and structural contexts in conditioning netizens' behaviours or experiences in romantic love. As pointed out by Elliott (2005), despite the different epistemological assumptions that underpin different research approaches "these do not map onto the qualitative/quantitative distinction in any straightforward way" (p.172). In other words, qualitative or quantitative methods are not inherently incompatible.

This study begins with participant observation at three Chinese domestic sites; Tianya bulletin board service, the Renren social networking site, and the Love Apartment relationship site. This is followed by an online survey and finally narrative studies based on interviews with participants who have had experience of online romance. Triangulation of methods not only allows me to cross-check my findings, but also to complement the descriptive data with interpretative accounts to enhance the study's credibility.

Time spent online at the three sites allowed me to familiarize myself with the ways Chinese Internet users interact, their communication styles, language used, rules and norms. I focus on the discursive construction of online relationships, the ways netizens talk about online relationships, their ideas and attitudes towards these relationships. The aim is to identify key cultural concepts, shared vocabularies, cultural assumptions of romantic love that affect their lived experiences of online romance. The findings from my participant observation help me to answer the first research question of understanding the Chinese cultural influence on online romance. For ethical reasons, my identity as a researcher was made clear on my profile on the sites and was reiterated to all other members I initiated contact with.

Based on the understandings gained from my participant observations, I constructed my questionnaire to explore further Chinese Internet users' perceptions of online romance and their attitudes towards it. Section 1 of the survey aimed particularly to establish the significance of, or how widespread are the playful approach to online romance, "Platonic" emotional love and cyber-marriage. These are the culturally distinctive features of Chinese online relationships that I discerned from my participant observations. The quantitative data collected also facilitates general comparison between online romance based in Chinese and western contexts to assess how both differed descriptively from one another. The online survey was conducted in Chinese and attracted 134 responses.

Burke's influence on my data collection continued to the last phase of my study in which I present the personal narratives of the experiences of falling in love with someone met online from my four participants. These narratives were shared with me through interviews using email. As participants recount their stories,

attention is paid on how they talk about their experiences, the problems they encountered, especially with regards to normative controls and cultural expectations, and how they resolved the problems or failed to overcome the challenges. Of interest is to understand the extent to which they feel empowered and liberated by the Internet in their pursuit of romantic love. This is my attempt to answer the second research question. Burke's emphasis on rhetorical use of language alerted me to the performative nature of storytelling. Participants do not objectively recount their experience of online romance, but rhetorically reconstruct it to make an impact. My role as a researcher, and also an audience, inevitably play a part in the construction of a narrative. The narrative also reflects the storyteller's sense of self and the cultural background he/she comes from (Riessman, 1993; Elliot, 2005). This implies that individuals are not completely free in narrative construction because members of a society share the cultural repertoire or resources that function to frame their narratives. Relying on participants' subjective narratives in research inevitably raises the issue of validity. As I do not aim to claim absolute objectivity and transparency in my representation of online romance in China, but to understand participants' lived experience of it and how they make sense of it in their communication with others, a narrative approach to data analysis is ideal to capture these subjective interpretations. A detailed discussion of my methods, reasons for selecting the three sites for observation, recruitment of participants, problems encountered in the process of data collection and ethical issues of harvesting data online, and privacy of those I observed can be found in Chapter 3.

4. Findings and key arguments

My observations online showed the definition of online romance shared among Chinese netizens is far from certain and unambiguous. Its meanings are contested and vary from individual to individual. However, Chinese literature generally defines online romance as consisting of two variances; either exclusively maintained within cyberspace or gradually extending into the offline world. Many of the Internet users I encountered indeed argued that online romance should be confined strictly online. They describe this type of exclusively Internet-based relationship as "Platonic". Introducing offline elements into online romance is likely to kill the relationship. With the absence of bodily interactions in the face-to-face

context, some also call this relationship emotional love. Used interchangeably or together "emotional" love, "Platonic" relationships in this context do not signal an absence of sexual intention, but merely the lack of corporeal intimacy. By naming the online relationship as "Platonic" or emotional, participants hope to attribute their relationship with a positive connotation of exalted spiritual love and meaningfulness. Calling a relationship "emotional" also makes the relationship appear innocuous as no actual bodily interactions are involved.

Romance, play, and everyday life emerged as the key conceptual terms in the discussion of online romance. Both romance and play rely on a realm of their own independent from everyday life to sustain participants' engrossment and the associated affects of intense love and amusement (Illouz, 1997; Huizinga, 1955; Caillois, 2001). The stereotypical understanding of romantic love as fated and all-consuming, overwhelming and beyond control, according to Illouz (1997) is in decline due to the social move towards rationalization of emotions based on pragmatic considerations which ultimately aim at self-realization. Chinese netizens who long for the experience of the pure romantic love untainted by the materialistic culture have increasingly turned to online romance as a substitute. Cyberspace provides romance with the perfect isolated space it requires to grow and flourish. The emotional high injected into lovers' everyday life functions to rejuvenate the worn out self and embellish their prosaic daily life. Therefore, the act of confining online romance exclusively within cyberspace can be interpreted as an attempt to resist the ordinarization of the enchanting fantasy-like romantic love because becoming part of everyday life, hence the ordinary, would compromise its charms, mythical feelings and transcendental quality.

Many of my survey participants understand online romance as a form of play, not a serious love affair. Chinese netizens generally believe play to be the correct mentality when engaging in online relationships. Like "Platonic love", play implies that the relationship is to be appreciated and enjoyed as an end in itself for the distraction, fun and excitement it provides which are crucial in everyday life. Play, demarcates the relationship off the limits of the external real world, it allows players to juxtapose incongruent motives and expectations in their online romantic encounter. Play also abates players' responsibility, to a certain extent protecting them from

serious consequences in "real life". So players can safely enjoy the relationship just like attending social events that are ruled by the spirit of non-instrumentality and inconsequentiality (Simmel, 1971). The way the terms "play" and "Platonic" love are used by Chinese Internet users also reflects their perception of online and offline as two distinct independent terrains, contrary to the scholarly discourse that prominently argues for their convergence. It is the making of this distinction that gives meaning to words such as emotional love and "*jian guang si*" (perish upon seeing light) which describe the inevitable end of an online relationship when the dyad crosses the boundary by expanding their relationship offline.

A typology is drawn in Chapter 4b to categorize participants into three groups according to their conceptualization and attitude towards online romance. "Romantic realists" refers to those online daters who desire to transfer their relationship offline. While enjoying the quintessential elements of romantic love online, they are not content with mere online interactions and aim to make their online romance a social reality. They treat online romance as a means to find a partner in the actual world. However, there is no lack of "sceptics" towards online romance who argue that treating online romance as a serious love affair is confusing play with reality. The difficulty to ascertain the intentions and identity of online lovers make it a risky pursuit. Nevertheless this is less of a problem for "pragmatic fantasists", who take advantage of the virtual nature of relationships to immerse themselves in the imaginative love bubble. The pragmatic fantasist is the key figure in "Platonic" emotional love, adopting an instrumental approach to online romance, effectively making it a way to satisfy their emotional needs. Through the constant practice of "disclosing intimacy" (Jamieson, 1998), they experience heightened affection online and are able to gain solace and support much needed to cope with their stressful everyday life. Participants may not necessarily call this relationship romantic in nature, nor commit themselves exclusively to each other. It is a flexible, contingent and open form of emotional intimacy. In reality, these categories often overlap. An individual can pragmatically choose to pursue a relationship online, but the ethereal feelings of romantic love he/she experiences may turn into a temptation to go offline, yet he/she remains sceptical of the lover's honesty and the prospect of expanding the relationship offline.

Exclusively Internet-based online romance is an understudied area of online relationships. Although Ben-Zeev (2004) did suggest the existence of profound online only romantic relationships which may seem to reflect some Chinese netizens' notion of online romance, he nonetheless argues that this type of online intimacy is transitional and unsustainable as people typically want to expand the relationship offline because by itself, the relationship is incomplete as actual embodied interactions cannot be fulfilled. This is however in sharp contrast to the arguments and desires shown by Chinese "Platonic" daters. Chinese discourses of online romance appear to put greater emphasis on emotional fulfilment over corporeal intimacy and/or material satisfaction. Only 23.9% of my survey participants defined successful online romance as cumulating in marriage or long-term relationship in the offline world. The majority of them (56.7%) would ideally like their online lover to become their soul mate in a nonsexual relationship. This nevertheless does not imply a Cartesian belief in mind supremacy. My participants showed no doubt in the importance of embodied interactions, but trade it off in return for emotional highs and distractions to "sweeten" their quotidian existence and to fill in their spiritual void. The ongoing social, economic and political transformations of Chinese society have left many feeling bewildered with a strong sense of inner emptiness. Relationships within the virtual realm allow many to temporarily put aside all earthly material concerns, and status differences to concentrate only on the emotion and rediscover their inner feelings. As a result, many living in this utterly competitive society have increasingly turned to the Internet for escape and to draw emotional sustenance. From Chinese netizens' prioritization of emotional satisfaction in online romance we can see how the culture of the post-socialist society has effects on the ways Chinese understand and conduct their relationships online. The therapeutic value of online romance is highly appreciated because it presents an opportunity for empowerment and self-transformation. Even the simple act of telling one's own experience of it online can be empowering and encourages the narrator to assert his/her true self.

To pursue my second research question concerning the roles of traditions and the issue of empowerment in online romance, I turn to the personal narratives of online romance shared by my four participants. The notion of power I am concerned with when analyzing these narratives is power at the personal level. More

specifically, the degree of autonomy my participants have and the extent to which the Internet helps them to take control of their own love life. My narrative studies show that the effect of Internet empowerment is contingent upon individuals' characteristics and life circumstances. Ownership of agency and attitudes towards social norms are the two key subjective characteristics identified to affect the empowerment potential of the Internet, and these findings conform to the thesis of "the rich get richer" Internet experience. Empowerment is found to be difficult for those who seem inclined to deny their personal responsibilities in their own actions, and identified strongly with normative expectations. The Internet can be used to challenge, as well as reproduce familial traditions and courtship norms. Giddens' (1984) structuration theory makes clear that social structures simultaneously enable and constrain individuals' actions and structural properties in society reproduce themselves through individuals' exercise of agency.

I draw on Foucault's notion of governmentality, technologies of the self and domination to extend the discussion of my narrative studies to power at the societal level. I examine several social policies of the Chinese party-state that clearly represent examples of politicization of private life but are presented as serving the people's interests. The support of the public is the result of successful harmonization of individuals' aspirations with the state's ideologies. Protecting minors and maintaining public morality are some of the reasons the authorities use to police the private life of citizens. There is no doubt that the Internet too benefits the regime in their surveillance effort and in the cultivation of free subjects who are good at self-monitoring and discipline, as well as content with their regulated freedom.

5. Original contributions

My research brings the issue of cultural tradition and power into the study of online romance, presenting an account of how Chinese Internet users deal with cultural contradictions in their search for greater freedom and autonomy. The Internet as a tool, although empowering individuals to act, also intensifying the social tensions because the increase of personal liberties, sits uneasily with Confucian familial traditions and the authoritarian state. One way Chinese netizens cope with the conflicts of interests and contradictions is strategically making a

distinction between the online and offline world. The separation of the two realms gives meanings to "Platonic" emotional love. Unlike existing studies that gloss over the significance of exclusively Internet-based online relationships from the perspective of the participants, I theorize and focus instead on the benefits delivered by this type of relationship. Instead of simply dismissing Chinese Internet users' online and offline dichotomy as regressive or a premature understanding, I focus instead on what it can achieve for them. Chinese netizens are acutely aware that the online and offline world are inextricably linked but when it comes to interpersonal relationships, they choose to reinstate the online and offline boundary because it serves their purposes of looking for distraction and emotional solace. What they aim for is not a replacement for their often less satisfied everyday life in the offline world, but to use online relationships as a means to help them to improve the quality of their daily existence.

6. Organization of the thesis

The organization of this thesis generally follows the chronological order of my study. The intention is to invite readers to share my journey of discovery and exploration into China's online social milieux. Chapter 1 is the literature review of research on CMC in general and online relationships in particular. I examine studies that show how the Internet can empower individuals and lead to greater self-acceptance, as well as studies that warn against the debilitating effects of over dependence on the Internet. I also include literature that addresses the issues of cultural differences in Internet use and how traditions reproduce themselves and extend their influence to cyberspace, a realm supposedly free from normative constraints. For those new to China, Chapter 2 functions as a quick guide into the historical context and contemporary life in Chinese society. Drawing on both Chinese and western literature, I examine the notions of romantic and conjugal love, as well as the changing social norms, courtship practices and family relationships in China. Chapter 3 lays out the methodology of this study inspired by Burke's dramatism and the decision to employ triangulation of methods. The process of my data collection and analysis, problems I encountered and limitations of the study are documented.

My empirical studies and their discussion are presented from Chapter 4 to 7. Chapter 4 introduces the discourse of online romance in China in two parts. To provide readers with a preliminary understanding of the public discourse of online romance in China approved by the party-state, a brief analysis of media representations of online romance gathered from the websites of China Youth Daily and People's Daily, the mouthpiece of the communist party, and a reality show produced by a commercial satellite TV channel is first presented. The objective is to illustrate the common media treatments of this topic which often problematize and sensationalize the relationships. These state sanctioned media portrayals function as cautionary tales for the public to guard against the dangers of the Internet, especially for adolescents, which also justify the state's control on the Internet. The second part of Chapter 4 consists of the analysis and discussion of my participant observation at the three selected Chinese domestic sites. It focuses on the ways netizens conceive online romance, the grammar or discursive elements of online romance, the key words they use when talking about online romance, its attractions and challenges faced by online daters.

Chapter 5 presents the findings and discussion of my online survey, exploring in detail the making of the distinction between the online and offline world, the notion of play in online romance and the characteristics of exclusively Internet-based "Platonic" emotional love. I also compare my survey findings with existing studies of online relationships partaken by western participants. Although the comparison is general (not aiming for methodological meticulousness), it reveals the similarities and differences of online romance in the two cultural contexts. I also present a case study of cyber-marriage in the Tianya forum to show that the act of getting married online can be more than mere play for some participants.

The next chapter is my narrative studies featuring four different experiences of online romance shared by my participants. The chapter explores the subjective factors that influence the empowerment potential of the Internet with regards to the pursuit of romantic love and how modern technologies interact and co-exist with Chinese familial traditions and social norms. Chapter 7 focuses on power relations at the societal level involving the party-state and the family institution. I subject the four narratives to a Foucaultian analysis of power which aims to show that through

governmentality, individuals are simultaneously being empowered and disempowered in their relationship with the state.

The thesis concludes that Chinese netizens' prioritization of emotional satisfactions in online romance is closely related to the context of contemporary Chinese society. They can be seen as a survival tactic necessary for living in a highly competitive market society ruled by an authoritarian regime that only nominally claims to follow the rule of law. The influence of culture on Chinese Internet users' romantic relationships online manifests itself in the form of contradictory desires and practices. Finally, it is important to reiterate that the Internet reproduces as well as challenges the status quo of familial traditions, norms and governing ideologies. It empowers and disempowers users to various extents as its impact is contingent upon individuals' subjectivities and life circumstances.

1 Literature review

This literature review begins with an overview of CMC research development from laboratory-based experiments that focused on the negative consequences of its "cues-filtered out" characteristics to naturalistic approaches in studying established CMC groups. The methodological change allowed researchers to uncover many social potentials of CMC previously overlooked. The second section highlights the current strand of thinking shared by many researchers that online life is an extension of life in the offline world, which undoes the earlier online and offline dichotomy. Since the online and offline are intertwined, cultural differences observed in the face-to-face world also reflect themselves in Internet consumption and content creation. The next section discusses studies that show cultural influence on Internet experiences and meanings. However, CMC studies in other cultural contexts have produced similar findings to western based studies and CMC theories constructed in the West have also been applicable. This raises the question of how much influence local cultures have on the global media and how the latter have shaped the former. My first research question continues this line of inquiry to examine the role of culture in shaping the use of the Internet and its experience.

In the fourth section, I introduce literature on Internet empowerment, especially on identity exploration and how online relationships empower socially disadvantaged groups. This account is balanced with examples of debilitating Internet use, also including concerns of whether it increases loneliness and depression, and how our reliance on it may deplete human relationships in the long run. From issues of empowerment which is closely linked to the notion of agency, I turn to explore the structural influence of traditions on individual life in contemporary society. Studies of online relationships in the Arab world elucidate the tensions between the Internet and Islamic tradition perfectly well. These studies provoke the question of to what extent can discrete transgressions of religious norms online benefit the individuals involved and facilitate social change. Of interest are the roles of the Internet in encouraging agency, whether it is to embrace a traditionally structured love life or to challenge and undermine tradition's influence.

More can be learned from studying China, a country which is undergoing torrents of modernization and individualization. The society's newfound personal liberties in private life sit uneasily with familial tradition which is similar to the Arab world. This chapter concludes with the importance of my two research questions in contributing to our understanding of how the Internet can be used to facilitate empowerment after taking into account the cultural influence on Internet use.

1. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) research development

Social Presence and Social Context Cues are the earliest theoretical concepts applied to CMC interactions. They emphasized the negative implications of the absence of nonverbal cues in CMC and concluded that CMC is an impoverished, "cool" medium with narrow bandwidth. Social Presence refers to the feeling of the presence of the communication partner. The theory predicts that people's awareness of and sensitivity to others depends on the number of codes available that make them conscious of the others' existence. Face-to-face meetings are warmer and information richer than CMC because of the presence of multiple relational cues. Consequently, the lack of social presence in CMC is claimed to result in self-centred and impersonal communication as interlocutors feel anonymous and distant from each other (Short, Williams and Christie 1976). Social context cues function as feedback and are important for people to regulate their communication according to the situational definitions. The limited social context cues available online decontexualize CMC, leading to polarization of views, disinhibition, non-conforming behaviours, reduced sense of accountability, and encouraging flaming behaviour - verbal aggression, exchange of blunt and extreme remarks online (Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire, 1984; Kiesler and Sproull, 1986; Kiesler and Sproull, 1992). In summary, studies from the paradigm of "cues-filtered out" imply that highly developed and close personal relationships are unlikely to happen and be maintained via CMC. It is effective for task accomplishment, but less so for exchange of socio-emotional information.

Walther's (1992) Social Information Processing (SIP) theory was developed to account for social interactions in the CMC context. SIP posits that the development of online relationships may have a disadvantageous threshold due to

the narrow bandwidth, but given sufficient time, the difference of quality between social relations developed online and offline would gradually subside and become identical. This is because CMC users gradually learn to uncover cues online and adapt their communicative behaviour to present social information using the limited cues available. This theory challenges the validity of those early laboratory-based studies. Critics argued that experimental research involving respondents with no prior knowledge of one another and no future expectation to meet again after a short period of artificially induced interactions may in itself account for the asocial findings (Joinson, 2003; Baym, 2002). Later studies recruited participants from established online groups and used naturalistic approaches to study CMC. This methodological shift marked the awareness that the Internet is not only a cultural artefact, but also a cultural context of its own (Hine, 2005). These studies presented the positive social potential of CMC understated by previous research. Baym's (1995a) ethnographic study of a Usenet group devoted to the discussion of TV soap operas showed the emergence of a distinctive sub-culture shared by group members. Turkle (1997) used participant observation to study how MUD (multi-user dungeons, text-based online games) players take advantage of anonymity to explore new aspects of the self through interactions with others.

In Parks and Floyd's (1996) survey of newsgroup users, 60.7% had formed personal relationships with other newsgroup members while nearly 8% developed romantic relationships. Replication of the study by Parks and Roberts (1998) involving members of a real time text-based virtual social site known as MOO showed even more promising social benefits of the Internet. 93.6% of their participants reported to have formed ongoing personal relationships with other MOOers, mostly close friendships (40.6%), with 26.3% being romantic in nature. According to Guo's (2007) survey of Internet usage in seven cities in China, QQ instant messaging is the most common communication tool that helps netizens to make new friends online. 64.7% of participants have online friends, and on average, they have 15 online friends, half of them have between one to six online friends. Regular interactions online encourage the development of relationships and offer an opportunity for the parties involved to turn mere acquaintances into close friendships or romantic relationships.

Far from discouraging development of relationships, Walther's (1996) later study showed that CMC interactions can in fact facilitate interpersonal bonding, more intense and intimate in comparison to parallel face-to-face interaction. He termed this phenomenon "hyperpersonal communication", referring to CMC that "surpassed the level of affection and emotion of parallel face-to-face interaction" (p.17). Hyperpersonal communication is premised on visual anonymity and the asynchronous nature of CMC. To fill in the information gap about their communicating partners, CMC users are predisposed to perceive greater similarities between themselves and their partners, and to idealize their partner's social and physical attractiveness. When attention is focused on the inner self instead of physical appearance, it may also heighten self-awareness and consequently encourage self-disclosure which might lead to a reciprocal cycle of disclosure, resulting in increased intimacy and trust (Collins and Miller, 1994). Asynchronous communication is more likely to lead to hyperpersonal interaction because without the pressure of answering immediately, participants have more opportunity for creative self-presentation and greater control over their impression management. Moreover because the Internet can effectively sort along many dimensions and increase one's chances of meeting compatible others based on common interests and shared values, it promotes longer lasting relationships and increased liking for in-group members (Cooper and Sportolari, 1997; Cooper, McLoughlin and Campell, 2000).

Studies undertaken by McKenna, Green and Gleason (2002) and Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons (2002) lent support to hyperpersonal theory. The former showed that intimacy and closeness in relationships develop significantly faster online than in relationships initiated offline because of the reciprocal self-disclosure online. Relationships based on the substantive ground of mutual understandings rather than superficial gating features, promote stability and durability of the relationships. Similarly, Bargh et al's (2002) study revealed that people communicating online are found to be more likely to project the attributes of an ideal close friend to their partners and hence like each other more than those who met face-to-face. It becomes clear that the tendency of disinhibition in CMC due to its anonymous setting may on one hand contribute to flaming, but on the other hand, encourage candid self-revelations (Bargh and McKenna, 2004). The hyperpersonal

inclination accounts for the rapidity of falling in love and speedy growth in emotional intensity many online lovers experience which also renders these relationships vulnerable to the boom and bust phenomenon (Cooper and Sportolari, 1997). In line with the hyperpersonal argument, Spears and Lea's (1992) Social Individuation and Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) theory also contends that reduced social presence online actually leads to greater saliency of social and group norms in CMC and subsequently promotes group identification and bonding.

Prior to the emergence of CMC theories, researchers relied on existing personal relationship theories to make sense of computer-mediated relationships, such as uncertainty reduction theory, social penetration theory and social exchange theory. However, these theories have failed to satisfactorily account for the new genre of relationships as pointed out by Parks and Floyd (1996). To reflect the imaginative nature of cyberspace and the interpersonal relationships it forms and sustains, Robins (1995), Cooper and Sportolari (1997) and Whitty (2003a) have unanimously turned to Winnicott's (1971) notion of potential space to theorize cybersex, online liaisons and flirtatious relationships as play. In his theoretical analysis of online romance, Zeng (2004) from China, combined Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor with exchange theory to account for the development of online romance and identify factors that influence its prospects of survival.

Despite the usefulness of the CMC theories mentioned earlier in accounting for the development of online relationships, these theories have the common problem of focusing on what CMC technologies do to the people and pay less attention on what people do with the technologies. In other words, how the technology determines the nature of those relationships, either impersonal or intensively intimate (Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer, 2007). Preoccupation with the implications of the reduced bandwidth, whether or not it is beneficial or disadvantageous to CMC participants have led to the roles played by participants in appropriating the media to serve their own purposes being overlooked. Joinson (2003) also pointed out that in most accounts of CMC, there is an oversight on the part of users who make strategic decisions in selecting which medium to use. Richer forms of media may not always be preferable depending on the context and purpose of the communication at hand. Utz's (2007) study showed that email is preferred over the phone in long-distance

friendships but when it comes to discussion of intimate details, close friends preferred using the phone because of the symbolic meanings associated with the telephone. In impression management, O'Sullivan (2000) argues that people make strategic choices of media in order to minimize the costs and maximize the rewards in their efforts of self-presentation. The constrictions of mediated communication are often seen as advantageous when dealing with negative topics or in a situation where positive self-presentation is threatened.

The imperative to communicate with others motivated users to overcome the technical limitations of CMC. One such example is paralinguistic reinstitution to facilitate the communication of emotions online. In a review of the role of emotion in CMC, Derks, Fischer and Bos (2008) concluded that emotional communication online and offline is rather similar. In fact, more frequent and explicit emotional communication is found in CMC due to users' efforts to minimize the channel's shortcomings. Tidwell and Walther (2002) also found that CMC's limitations do not paralyse CMC interlocutors. They also resort to uncertainty reduction strategies when communicating with unfamiliar people. The most common strategies used in CMC are direct verbal interrogation and mutual self-disclosure which are perhaps less common in the face-to-face context but are becoming the norm in CMC. Another way to address the obstacles faced in CMC is to simply supplement it with other channels of communication, or going offline. It is rather common for online relationships to evolve into the face-to-face context. Parks and Floyd (1996) argued that the Internet would eventually become obsolete and online dyads flexibly switch between the two worlds. McKenna et al. (2002) conducted a path analysis to explore the sequence of moving an online relationship into the offline world. The findings show that relationships starting from public discussion groups normally expand to private email, followed by real time Internet chat, and gradually migrate to the offline word by exchanging letters and later by telephone calls which are significantly correlated to eventually meeting in person. Similarly, Whitty and Gavin (2001) also reported that for some of their participants, the change of communication channels carries symbolic meanings indicating the development of the online relationships. From public chat, to email, to telephone, and finally meeting in person represents increasing levels of trust and commitment in the relationship.

Online relationships in fact develop through an inverted sequence compared to relationships initiated face-to-face. Couples with shared interests first meet online through participation in online communities and come to know each other before deciding whether to meet in person or not (Merkle and Richardson, 2000). Shared interests not only substitute physical proximity in relationship initiation, they often also blur the social boundaries of individuals. This on one hand encourages bridging social capital that benefits individuals in terms of access to resources and information, but also leads to societal discomfort as the development of these relationships sometimes challenges the social norms of appropriateness (Baym, 2010). Knowing someone inside out as opposed to outside in could also lessen the impact of physical appearance in initial attraction and relationship development (Cooper and Sportolari, 1997; Levine, 2000; Sveningsson, 2002). However, this argument is less applicable to people who deliberately turn to the Internet for romantic encounters using online dating agencies and social networking sites. Physical attractiveness remains the priority in sought after online romance, or even increases in importance due to the abundance of choices available (Whitty and Carr, 2006; Rosen, Cheever, Cummings and Felt, 2008; Ellison, Hancock and Toma, 2011). As online daters are aware of the problem of strategic self-presentation online, they tend to meet quickly as they rely on face-to-face contacts to evaluate the extent to which people match up to their profile. This alludes to the fact that the Internet consists of heterogeneous space that affects the dynamics and characteristics of the relations formed. As the Internet turns into an integral part of everyday life, hybrid forms of communication online and offline are becoming the norm for many.

2. Towards online and offline convergence

In contemporary networked societies, most relationships indeed operate in both cyberspace and the physical world. The popularity of social networking sites primarily used to maintain existing social ties shows that many offline relationships are now expanding online. The boundaries between the online and offline world are increasingly less discernible as Internet users shift flexibly between the two realms, for instance, talking to classmates online after school or privately chatting with colleagues using instant messaging while having an office meeting (Jones, 1998; Wellman and Haythornthhwaite, 2002; Bakardjieva, 2005; Meikle and Young 2011).

The literature cited so far suggests that it is natural for new relationships forged online to expand into the offline world, and for online romance, going offline is the ultimate goal. Successful online romances therefore are those that cumulate in long-term courtship, cohabitation or marriage in the offline world (Baker, 2002).

Most subsequent studies also show that Internet users' online and offline world are inextricably linked. Avatars constructed by "residents" of Second Life often bear some relation to the embodied self of the player, and life within the virtual realm often crosses the boundary to infiltrate residents' first life in the offline world (Boellstorff, 2008, Meadows, 2008). Therefore, 'virtual' should not be taken as unreal, because participants' experiences online have been found to have 'real' implications on their offline world, particularly their sense of self and identity (Turkle, 1997). The selves individuals express online are real in the sense that they enhance their overall self-image and self-understanding, and help them to achieve their "hoped-for possible selves" (Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin, 2008). Offline resources and knowledge are drawn upon by participants to make sense of their online interactions. Individuals' financial status, gender, age and race play an important part not only in Internet access, but also affecting the subjective meanings and online experiences (Kendall, 1999). For example, Colley and Maltby's (2008) study of forum postings showed that the Internet is appreciated differently by men and women in their everyday lives. The different impacts reported reflect the prevailing gender roles and social expectations, in other words, illustrate the two-way interactions between the online and offline world. These studies also show that cyberspace is not a space for Cartesian self because bodies are reproduced online, either through text descriptions, profile photos, avatars or the use of webcams (Young and Whitty, 2010). Embodied interactions online often exaggerate the body rather than abandon it.

Research that demonstrates cultural differences in Internet use, online information consumption and attitude is in a sense also reaffirming the argument that online lives, identities, behaviours and attitudes are an extension of the offline world. For example, Pfeil, Zaphiris and Ang (2006) examined the article on "game" in the French, German, Japanese and Dutch Wikipedia websites. They found that there is a correlation between the number of contributions and styles of changes made to the

article, and the cultural differences of the four countries. They concluded that the Internet and Wikipedia in particular, "is not a culturally neutral space", and "cultural differences that are observed in the physical world also exist in the virtual world". Similarly, a study of an online forum in the US catering especially for Chinese nationals living in the US by Yang, Ackerman and Adamic (2011) showed that a virtual currency initially aimed to encourage members' contributions has evolved into a medium for rich social exchanges, reflecting the traditional notion of *guanxi* and the cultural belief in the Karma principle in Chinese society. *Guanxi* refers to interpersonal connections fostered through the exchange of favours or gifts, operating based on a strict sense of reciprocal obligations. *Guanxi* realized through the virtual currency, encourages positive social interactions among forum participants. The next section explores culturally located Internet experiences and how the Internet also shapes the local cultures.

3. Cultural differences in Internet use

Although social networking is a global Internet phenomenon, the existence of regional variations provides further evidence for the socio-cultural shaping of technology. The success of some local SNSs like those in China, South Korea and Japan over Facebook in domestic markets lies in their ability to better reflect the local cultural assumptions, preferences and communication styles. Kim and Yun's (2007) study of Cyworld, the most popular SNS in South Korea, demonstrated that although members' communicative patterns on the site mirror the society's collectivist traditions, they also simultaneously reflect the growing individualism of the young generation. This can be seen in Cyworld users' reliance on the site for self-reflection, writing about one's own thoughts and feelings. This allows users to relate to themselves objectively and to develop self-relations which are not traditionally their culture's emphasis. Another individualistic trait that is becoming more prominent online is explicit and direct emotional communication, contrary to the society's high-context culture that is in favour of indirect communication and implicit emotional exchange. (Other than Korea, this is also the predominant communication pattern found in China, Japan, and the Middle East, as well as many Latin and African societies, corresponding to a collectivist cultural orientation. For more details on how this cultural property affects individuals and their

communication behaviours refer to Singelis and Brown, 1995). Cyworld is the only communication outlet where direct and elaborate exchange of information and expression of emotions are acceptable and becoming the norm. This study offers a lucid illustration of the dynamic processes by which socio-cultural context and Internet technologies are mutually shaping one another.

Premised on cross-cultural differences in communication styles, Farrer and Gavin (2009) surveyed Japanese users of an online dating site to investigate how members of a society in favour of high-context communication cope with the problems of limited contextual cues online. They aimed to examine whether Walther's SIP model, a western theory, also applies to Japanese online daters. The lack of contextual cues in CMC would in theory present a greater obstacle to Japanese users due to their cultural orientation of high-context communication in which speakers and receivers communicate indirectly and meanings are drawn mostly through implicit cues available from the communication context, such as nonverbal language, shared knowledge, values, and the relationship between interlocutors. The findings showed that like their western counterparts, Japanese online daters adapted their communication efforts to be more explicit and were able to uncover cues available through the dating platform. In fact, the limited cues available online are considered by some participants as an attractive feature of online dating because it allows better control over self-presentation and the development of relationships. The disinhibition effect also applies to Japanese online daters. "While Japanese remain sensitive to contextual markers in online communication, they are also able to use online spaces to engage in more direct forms of communication without the social costs associated with many face-to-face contexts" (p.411), similar to the experience of the Korean Cyworld users.

A partial replication of Parks and Roberts' study (1998) in comparing the quality of online and offline relationships by Chan and Cheng (2004) involving Hong Kong newsgroup users has yielded consistent results. Although the quality of offline friendships was higher than online friendships, the quality of both types of friendship improved over time and the initial differences between the two gradually subsided after a year, in line with Walther's SIP theory. Contrary to friendships in the offline world, cross-sex online friendships were found to be of higher quality

than same-sex online friendships, again supporting Parks and Roberts' (1998) argument that the impact of structural and normative constraints on the development of cross-sex friendships in the face-to-face context is reduced in CMC. As their study appeared to support the generalization of western studies' findings and theories in the Chinese context, Chan and Cheng (2004) raised the question of whether cultural differences are less pronounced in cyberspace. "Relationships developed through the Internet may in fact be less likely to be subjected to the cultural influences reported in the literature, as these cultural differences are predominantly manifested in offline, face-to-face interactions" (p.318). Studies of Korean and Japanese Internet users cited earlier also suggested that the cultural dichotomy of high and low-context communication is less rigid in CMC. These studies may suggest a globalization trend of moving towards cultural homogenization, but there is also much research attesting to the argument that creation and consumption of technologies do not take place in socio-cultural vacuum (see for examples Robins and Stylianou, 2002; Würtz, 2005; Ahmed, Mouratidis and Preston, 2008; Gevorgyan and Manucharova, 2009). Streeter (2011) has prominently argued that the social significance of computers and the Internet, their changing meanings and our understanding of them since their inception are not the product of technological design alone, but emerged in relation to the cultural and historical context of the time.

To continue this line of enquiry, my study examines the influence of culture in China on netizens' experiences of online intimacies. I focus on the roles played by Chinese online daters situated within a distinctive cultural background that blends socialism with a market economy. While diversities or opposing cultural traits do co-exist in a society, individuals' psychological makeup, communication behaviour and social relations continue to be shaped by the dominant cultural orientation of the society in which he/she belongs (Singelis and Brown, 1995). Not only do cultural differences shape technologies creation and consumption, cultural variances of individualism and collectivism also have an impact on romantic love and the role of emotional intimacy in relationship satisfaction. Cultures that value individuality, personal fulfilment, self-expression and realization, encourage romantic love as the basis for marriage and place greater emphasis on psychological intimacy in marriage, as opposed to marriage based on collective interests in which couples are bound together through practical mutual dependence (Dion and Dion, 1993). As China is

undergoing increasing individualization, the tension between personal fulfilment and family interests are growing in intensity. There is an urgent need to study how the young Chinese online population negotiates between the two conflicting demands, and to understand how cultural factors affect individuals' pursuit of romantic love. Hence, the first research question asks *"how does culture influence the ways Chinese Internet users conduct romantic relationships online?"* How are they similar to; or different (significantly, or marginally) from the more widely reported western experience and if so, how and why?

As pointed out in the literature referred to earlier, the anonymous setting and limited contextual cues in CMC setting might be a disadvantage but also present ample opportunities for self-experimentation, expression and impression management. The empowerment and liberation potentials of the Internet are appreciated by many. This is particularly so for those carrying various forms of inhibitions in the face-to-face world that limit their freedom and options in relational affairs, for instance sexual minorities, people with disabilities, illnesses and shy or socially inept people. There are niche dating sites aiming at plus size singles, seniors, single parents and those who prefer international relationships. The greatest attraction of the Internet is the ease of finding others in similar situations, with common needs, shared preferences and interests that are difficult to be closely matched locally and safely. In the next section, I will focus on literature that foregrounds Internet empowerment, as well as the debilitating effects of Internet use that some have experienced.

4. Internet empowerment and debilitating effects

According to Rogers (1951), the self persona we adopt in everyday interaction, or the "actual self", might not be what we truly are, but a version of self constructed in accordance with social norms. Given the opportunity, people are motivated to express their true-self. This is because "we have a real need to have others see us as we see ourselves" and to have the significant aspects of identity validated and affirmed by others (Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons, 2002:36). The Internet presents an easy and attractive means of making one's true-self a social reality. By putting into practice the "real-me" following intense self-disclosures

online, "they become authentic features of the self-concept" (p36). This has the psychological benefits of increased self-acceptance, self-esteem, self-worth and reduced social isolation, especially among stigmatized individuals. The Internet opened a new social niche for sexual expression, allowing users to explore the hidden aspects of their sexual self or to simply experiment with their sexual curiosities (Craft, 2012). This sexual opportunity is particularly crucial for sexually disenfranchised groups. The Internet provides them a safe and confidential means of relating (McKenna and Bargh, 1998; Cooper et al. 2000; Ross, 2005). McKenna, Green and Smith (2001) showed that a greater self-acceptance of marginalized sexual identity is the consequence of online expression of those aspects of stigmatized self one feels unable to express in the face-to-face context. The more one expresses one's hidden sexual self online, the more important that aspect of the self becomes to the individual. As individuals realize the importance of those aspects of sexual identity they become less susceptible to social judgments and increasingly rely on their internal self to direct their behaviour. In short, active interactions with similar others online lead to identity transformation when participants demarginalize the stigmatized self by embracing it offline in the context of everyday life.

Also drawing on Rogers' notion of therapeutic true-self, Mckenna et al (2002) defined the "real-me" as the "version of self that a person believes he or she actually is, but is unable to or prevented from (for any of a variety of reasons) presenting to others in most situations" (p.12). The relatively anonymous setting of cyberspace facilitates the disclosure or open expression of private feelings of the true-self. Their study showed that the more socially anxious individuals express their real-me online as opposed to in the face-to-face context, the more likely they form close and stable relationships with others met online, and subsequently transfer these relationships offline. After two years of Internet use, participants in the study reported reduced levels of loneliness and depression, and improved social lives. The Internet provides a safe place for the socially inept to learn and practice their social skills without the need to commit early. In online dating, even if being rejected, it is relatively easier to cope with than in the offline context (Whitty, 2003a; Whitty and Carr, 2006). It also allows men and women to escape the stereotypical gender roles and sexuality which automatically operate in face-to-face encounters. Cybersex can also benefit women by allowing them to actively negotiate their own sexual boundaries, mitigating the

threat of immediate sexual violence and intimidation from the powerful opposite sex. Within cyberspace, it is also easier for women to explore their own sexual desires safely and confidently without the fear of stigma imposed upon them in a patriarchal society (Döring, 2000).

A central argument underlying the studies mentioned above is Internet experiences can facilitate self-transformation and have positive "real-life consequences for the individual" (McKenna and Bargh, 1998:681). The empowering impacts for individuals include identity demarginalization, expression of true-self, and expansion of social circles. Beyond interpersonal interactions, web 2.0 also promotes group collaboration, making it easier to plan, coordinate and participate in collective actions online or offline (Shirky, 2008). Effective group mobilization has democratic significance as it "may bridge the chasm between real-world power and virtual world play" (Noveck, 2006:259). In short, "changes in the self…virtual activities and the virtual relationships one forms do indeed have a tendency to become social realities" or put differently, "be brought into one's offline life" (McKenna, Green and Smith, 2001:310). However, as pointed out by Shepherd and Edelmann (2001), the risk of Internet dependence by the socially inept should not be overlooked. The attractions and benefits of online liaisons may put them at greater risk of excessive Internet use and lead to greater social isolation in the offline world. Turkle's (2011) study also showed that although some people benefit from online experimentation and successfully use their Internet experiences to transform their lives offline, there are also those whose online lives have the opposite debilitating effect. This happens when they confuse the play of escapism as reality and become content with their fantasy online, deluded by the feelings that they are living a better life online.

Another potentially debilitating effect of Internet use lies in its impacts on users' primary relationships in the face-to-face world and their psychological wellbeing. Early concerns that Internet use leads to reduced social involvement and increased loneliness and depression (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, Hillygus and Erbring, 2002) have been refuted by later studies based on the contention that because most relationships are now maintained through hybrid forms of communication, a zero-sum claim that the Internet replaces and competes with time spent offline with

friends and family is flawed (Baym, Zhang, and Lin, 2004; Tillema, Dijst and Schwanen, 2010). LaRose, Eastin and Gregg (2001) argue that Internet experience, skills and digital literacy are mediating factors of the Internet's negative effects. Novices may simply lack the competence to use the Internet efficiently and are inadequate in dealing with technical problems which increases their stress levels and can contribute to depression. Competent users develop a higher sense of mastery, and are able to control their Internet use better, therefore readily enjoying the online social benefits. However, Turkle (2011) has recently reignited this concern as her nearly fifteen year exploration of human relationships in the digital era has shown a worrying sign of how online communication, performance of intimacies and care change from better than nothing to become simply the best. Technology simulation "creates a self that prefers simulation" because of its promise of convenience and control (p.285). Human relationships are depleted when what simulated relationships, which are simpler than face-to-face relationships, can provide "become what we expect, even desire" (p.295). Keen (2012), Lovink (2012), Carr (2010) and Mayer-Schönberger (2009) share similar concerns as Turkle on the long-term negative impacts of the digital media on various aspects of our lives.

The connection between the online and offline terrain may present the opportunity for empowerment and self-transformation, but it also implies that the social realities of hierarchy, inequality and domination, as well as cultural ideals, social norms and morality of everyday life are reproducing themselves online (Kendall, 1999). In other words, cyberspace is not as egalitarian as many would like to believe. Giese's (2003) study of a Chinese discussion forum showed that exclusion and hierarchy based on seniority of membership prevail in cyberspace, no different from the offline world. Newcomers have to participate actively and exhibit their linguistic skills to gain acceptance in the community. Similarly, in his study of online game communities in Hong Kong, Fung (2006) is both pessimistic and optimistic about the fact that players' online and offline lives are inextricably linked. On one hand, the Internet extended and enriched players' social lives, but on the other hand, he is troubled by the selling of in-game weapons and avatar bodies acquired by some professional gamers to other less skilful players. It mimics the capitalist world, its inequality and power relations. Structural constraints of cultural norms, religious beliefs and traditions may seem incompatible with modern

technologies at first glance, but are also benefiting from the Internet in perpetuating and reinforcing their influence.

5. Internet and traditions

Kluver and Cheong's (2007) study in Singapore showed that religious leaders are adept at spiritualizing the Internet, making it the perfect tool for religious education, critical to reach out to the young generation. The Internet is also being used to perform ritual practices and religious worship. Jacobs (2007) examined websites of simulated temples and churches where visitors can perform religious rituals far less constrained than rituals performed physically. The Internet also allows remote participation in customary practices, celebration of traditional festivals, and even revived the moribund cultural practice of polygamy in a small Turkish village (Morozov, 2011). Lo and Aziz's (2009) study of American Muslim communities also demonstrates that online matchmaking can both challenge and support Muslim values and traditional practices with regard to love and marriage. Online matrimonial sites run by conservative Muslim organizations are frequently used by parents to enlist suitable candidates for their children. These sites specialize in matching singles in America with singles from their homeland, such as Pakistan and India. These candidates are perceived to be more traditional than their American Muslim counterparts. These are examples of what Thompson (1995) called "mediatization of tradition". Traditions are now increasingly detached from their moorings in particular locales, in other words they are delocalized. To survive, traditions refashion themselves through mediated forms of communication. This transformation helps traditions to re-embed themselves in our contemporary lives. A search on literature dealing with traditions and the Internet returned mainly studies based in the Arab world. These studies showed that the Internet simultaneously supports and challenges traditional ways of life.

The adoption of the Internet in the Arab world, especially in the Middle East is full of controversies due to the culture clash between western values embodied by the global technologies and Islamic values embraced by the local kinship based communities. Research has emphasized how the Internet has empowered users to challenge religious norms and transgress social mores, most notably the rigid

practices of sexual segregation and gender inequality. The Internet provides Muslim youth opportunities to interact freely with the opposite sex and the liberating effect is particularly pronounced for young women due to the sexual double standard in which women as the bearer of family honour are required to observe stricter cultural expectations and social restrictions than men (Teitelbaum, 2002). When the social norms dictate that women passively wait for a relationship to happen to them either by men's initiation or arranged by their family (Wheeler, 2001; Galal, 2003; Brouwer, 2006), having an online relationship of one's own choice is liberating.

Anonymity is the Internet feature that helps to realize this freedom. It insulates young men and women who bend the gender rules from moral sanctions and protects women's reputations (Galal, 2003). Anonymous postings on forums and online chat with the opposite sex affords young people a rare and safe avenue to understand each other, and to discuss taboo topics such as love, marriage, and sexuality yet without actually appearing to transgress the established religious norms and gender boundaries (Brouwer, 2006). Wheeler's (2003) study of young Kuwaitis showed that CMC widens young people's cross-sex social circle and gives them certain influence over the choice of their spouse, although parents have the power to veto. However, since young people turning to the Internet for forbidden love has not gone unnoticed by the society at large, there is a social stigma associated with women who chat with men online. They are considered not an ideal candidate for marriage because of their sullied acts. Therefore, it is not surprising that women are more cautious in online relationships. They are less likely to exchange their photograph and telephone numbers, abstaining from video calls and voice chat to protect their anonymity. While 36% of the Egyptian university students studied by Galal (2003) reported expanding their online relationships into the face-to-face world, men are more likely and quicker to do so than women.

Most of the studies cited above focus on how CMC technologies permit "young people to circumvent cultural taboos without breaking them" (Bowen, Green and James, 2008:239). New media may have allowed individuals living in conservative societies to experiment with the social taboos, but transgressions that can only take place secretly, risk reinforcing the normative structure. Participants in the above studies seem content with keeping their defiance invisible to evade

detection. The Internet appears to have relieved their discontent but failed to inspire social change. However, this is not to deny the agency of Muslim youths as they actively define permissible boundaries and negotiate with cultural norms. There is a possibility that over time, the Internet may help to gradually blur the gender boundaries as the young generation continue to redefine traditions and expand their freedom while maintaining a facade of complying with Islamic dogma.

In her study of Internet cafes popular among Jordanian university students, Kaya (2009) paid attention to the safe semi-public and private discursive realm opened up by the Internet in allowing both sexes to discreetly negotiate between traditional moral strictures and the modern pursuit of personal goals. Unlike face-to-face relationships that can hardly remain a one-to-one affair due to the collective cultural norms, online relationships are often enacted independently from participants' larger social networks. The privacy afforded is experientially distinct and crucial to heighten their sense of autonomous self. Similar to Kawaiti youths in Wheeler's (2003) study, Jordanian women's romantic encounters with men they met online is an experience that is accompanied with feelings of guilt. The merits of Kaya's study lies squarely in her attention to the social space opened up by the Internet cafe, rather than focusing merely on the anonymous circumvention of religious norms. Her study shines a light on the impact of individuation that the Internet may have on Muslims' subjectivities in the long run. Contrary to most western Internet literature that credits the revival of an endangered sense of community online, Jordanian Internet users value the rare experience of individuality, a welcome escape from living in a tightly knit community. Kaya's (2009) study illustrates vividly that Internet use and its meanings are a culturally located experience. In Alsheikh, Rode and Lindley's (2011) study of Arabic participants' use of CMC in the maintenance of their long-distance romantic relationships, the use of webcams is particularly controversial because it allows women to talk to men non-chaperoned, to look at them and to be seen unveiled which is religiously restricted only to male family members or religiously engaged couples. Some female participants conform to the normative expectations; others secretly thwart the Islamic stricture and use webcams for communication with their lovers as they please. The authors concluded that all female participants in their study had exercised their agency, either "to act in a pious fashion", so they can "behave in keeping with the

Islamic virtue", or "to reinterpret their culture in terms of their own sensibilities and values".

While there is abundant literature about online relationships in the Arab world, there is no study of a similar nature in the Chinese context. Perhaps this is no surprise given the proliferation of sexual discourse in today's China that suggests that the society is no longer sexually coy or repressed, and makes the question of tradition seem irrelevant. Although there is domestic literature in China dealing with the issue of how the Internet has affected contemporary Chinese youths' attitudes towards courtship and marriage, the accounts presented are mostly didactic in nature, concerned with how to address the social problems created by the Internet, providing suggestions and guidance to tighten control in the name of protecting and strengthening public morality (see for example Zhong, 2006; Jin, 2007; Huang, 2007). Chinese and Muslim societies share many cultural ideals, such as female chastity and subordination, practise high-context communication style and relational sense of self with strong emphasis on kinship ties. Arranged marriage happens in both societies, although in China, parental influence increasingly operates based on consensus rather than force. An in-depth study of Chinese's sexual discourse also revealed that the society remains deeply conservative, intolerant of difference and moralistic (McMillan, 2006). The most obvious example can be seen in the society's worship of the marriage institution. "For most Chinese, even homosexuals, the very idea of not marrying is incomprehensible" since providing their family with offspring is one of the filial piety duties of a child (Burger, 2012:3). Even women who have multiple sexual relationships with men and take pride in their sexual capital, have the ultimate aim to get married. None of the women in Shanghai studied by Pei (2011) considered non-marital life as ideal. Although they depend on the official discourse of gender equality to justify their pursuit of sexual freedom, their preference for attracting men of higher socio-economic status as a means for social mobility exposes their instrumental approach to the idea of gender equality.

To redress the gap identified, my second research question asks "*how might Chinese netizens' online romantic relationships be seen to reproduce, extend and/or challenge the Confucian tradition governing social and familial practices and the communist party-state's ideologies"?* In essence, what are the impacts of the Internet

on netizens' private lives and the culture of Chinese society? The aim is to gain an understanding of the roles played by the Internet as users try to strike a balance between their newfound love and sexual liberties, and the age old normative influences that they are not yet able to forsake. Literature on online relationships in the Muslim world clearly demonstrates that freedom provided by the Internet and online circumvention has not undermined the deep seated religious worldview and social norms. Online relationships are viewed with scepticism, even among online daters, and the act of dating is still perceived by female participants as religiously wrong, immoral and risking dishonour to the family. They resort to online liaison because it is less subversive than physical liaison. Turkle (2011) has made it clear that online transgressions can both amount to practical resistance that leads to offline transformation, and as mere temporarily escape that displaces and relieves real life tensions and discontent. In the context of Chinese society, it is interesting to see to what extent the Internet is being used for experimentation and defiance, as well as to support and make compatible with the prevailing structural norms. My research questions examine the two-way influence of technology and society, in other words, the study is in line with the social shaping theoretical framework that focuses on the emerging impacts of the Internet as it interplays with the Chinese socio-cultural context.

Conclusion

CMC and the relationships it supports has been the subject of scholars' attention since the early 1990s. The beginning stage of the research based predominantly on laboratory experiments made dystopian claims about the nature of CMC and online relationships. They were perceived as shallow, inauthentic and troubled with issues such as deception and flaming because of the reduced socio-contextual cues online. Time spent online diminishing users' face-to-face relationships with friends and family, leading to increased sense of loneliness and depression were also the initial concerns of many researchers. As our understanding of CMC improved over time, the online/offline conceptual dichotomy has been replaced by the current strand of thinking focusing on the convergence of the online and offline worlds. Most studies now emphasize how the Internet is embedded in our

daily routine and contextualizing the online with the offline world becomes crucial to gaining rich understandings of Internet users' experiences.

Cultural influence on the creation and consumption of technologies is the logical consequence of the intertwining between the online and offline worlds. However, global technologies, like the Internet are also affecting local cultures, as seen in the communicative practices of Korean Cyworld users and Japanese online daters in transcending their native cultural preferences for high-context communications. Jordanian Internet cafe patrons, like their Korean Cyworld counterparts are beginning to appreciate individuality and privacy, concepts that are foreign to their collective tradition. The interpenetration of cultures leads to cultural mixtures of new plural forms and practices. This is not to say that cultural differences cease to exist or would eventually vanish, but the differences are based less in geographical locales. Only in a closed society can culture be conceptualized as internally homogenous and externally distinct (Hermans and Kempen, 1998). My first research question continues this line of inquiry. The aim is to understand how the domestic culture shapes the meanings, and influences Chinese Internet users' experiences of online romance. Understanding how the socio-cultural context in today's China influences the ways netizens use the Internet and make sense of their experiences may help us to avoid uncritically making utopian claims for the Internet.

As Internet research transcended the dichotomy of online and offline boundaries, researchers began to explore how the Internet could be used as a tool for self-empowerment in everyday life. However, studies have shown that the Internet can be both empowering and debilitating to individuals when it comes to resisting discrimination, domination, stigmatization and social norms. In other words, the effects are contingent upon individual users' subjective differences and circumstances. The interconnection between the two realms also makes reproduction of offline unfair social realities in cyberspace hardly a surprise. Therefore, the Internet has the dual functions of facilitating users to challenge and transgress normative powers on one hand, and reinforcing the status quo on the other.

Tradition like other parts of a society's culture is reflected in Internet uses, as well as being affected by the modern technologies. The Internet is capable both of

extending and contesting the normative influence of traditions on individuals' behaviours and subjectivities. Traditions change with time and have proved resilient in continuing to be an indispensable part of life and identity for many people (Shils, 1981). While stimulating social change, communication technologies and mass media in fact also help to sustain traditions. They "modernize" tradition through adaptation so it remains relevant, hence able to maintain its influence in our present day. Depending on individuals' attitudes towards traditions, the Internet's empowering potential with regard to the matter of traditions does not necessary mean emancipation from the shackles of tradition. The Internet has been used to facilitate customary and religious practices, and to revive other moribund cultural practices as desired by individuals. For those who struggle to challenge normative expectations to live an authentic life of their choice, such as victims of forced marriage, studies examining the interaction between tradition and the Internet would help to improve our ability to empower individuals and facilitate their exercise of agency.

Exploration of forbidden romantic liaisons by Arabic Internet users and their online manoeuvres around stringent religious norms has caught many CMC researchers' attention. Despite the seemingly different political contexts of Chinese and Muslim societies, the conservative social climates depicted in the literature above are not categorically different from what happens in China. Both societies also share many cultural commonalities with regard to family life. Although Chinese society has abandoned many feudal practices and the proliferation of sexual discourse is unimaginable in the Arab world, the society's values remain fundamentally conservative and moralistic (Evans, 1997; McMillan, 2006). The accelerated process of modernization and individualization undergone by China in the past three decades creates a unique tension between the new and the old that can be even more unsettling and contentious than in the Arab world. The party-state constitutes another powerful structural force that regulates citizens' intimate lives through both explicit and implicit measures. The objective is to "promote specific versions of citizenship and national belonging" and cultivate "a modern, high 'quality' citizenry" bearing the image of liberated socialist subjects (Friedman, 2010). Of interest is to examine the extent to which the Internet, in the social current of individualization sweeping across the society, can facilitate a growing sense of autonomous self with inviolable rights and obligations among the young Chinese

online population. This makes my second research question, investigating the roles of the Internet in realizing the discourse of self-fulfilment through private intimacies which is sometimes compromised by familial traditions and authorities' interventions, all the more important. Contemporary Chinese youths born under the one-child policy embrace "an openly and enthusiastically individualistic approach to life that values the bold and the innovative", and desire to be seen as "ku", the Chinese version of the American youth slang "cool" (Moore, 2005:374). This generation Ku has different attitudes towards normative expectations, resulting in increased intergenerational tensions. This is the subject of discussion in my next chapter, in which I turn to Chinese and western literature to examine the changing notion of love, marriage and family life, as well as courtship practice and sexual intimacies in China from being predominantly influenced by Confucian tradition, to communist collective ideologies, and subsequently by the market economy.

2 Intimate life and private relationships in China: Past and present

A series of radical socio-economic reforms followed immediately after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) established the People's Republic of China in 1949. The Confucian family institution had, since the early 20th century, been singled out as responsible for making China 'the sick man of Asia'. At the forefront of this social transformation was the Chinese family institution which has undergone many changes, and been subjected to astonishing state encroachment. This chapter provides an overview of the state's interventions into the private realm and the influence of cultural tradition in shaping the life of Chinese citizens. The objective of this chapter is to familiarize readers with the social norms and familial culture in China. Without this basic understanding, it would be difficult to answer the two research questions of identifying the Chinese cultural influence on online romance and the impacts of the Internet on cultural traditions governing social and romantic relationships in China.

The discussion begins with an introduction of the Confucian family model and how Confucianism lost its hegemonic ideological status following the end of Chinese imperialism. This is followed by an analysis of the Communist revolution which had profound implications on the family institution. Chinese people suffered from unprecedented state encroachment into their private life. The third section of the chapter focuses on the post-Mao reform era. The passing of Mao Zedong in 1976 marked the beginning of China's opening up and economic reform. The regime began to relax its direct control on people's private life. The Confucian family institution reclaimed its influence in Chinese society, but was also confronted by growing individualism. The final section moves the timeline to contemporary Chinese society, but in the discussion I also trace the changing notions of love, courtship, marriage and sexuality in China.

Towards the end of 20th century, Confucianism was rediscovered as representing the essence of Chinese culture. Its emphasis on maintaining social harmony is wholeheartedly embraced by the party-state to suppress dissidents' voices. The chapter concludes with a list of challenges faced by Chinese daters originating from the party-state and the Confucian familial tradition. The conclusion also highlights the importance of recognizing the fallacy of equating the proliferation of sexual discourses and relationship models in today's Chinese society as indicative of sexual revolution. Instead of direct repression and interventions, CCP has successfully co-opted cultural traditions to rein people's private life.

1. Confucian model of family and the wind of change

In late imperial China, Confucius' thousands years of influence can be seen across the realms of family relationships, politics, economics, education, social customs, moral ethics and legal codes (Stacey, 1983). According to Confucius, there are five basic human relationships and three of them are familial relationships: between husband and wife, father and son, and siblings. Domestic life is hierarchically structured based on the principles of generation, age and sex. The other two are the relationship between ruler and subjects, and friendship (Baker, 1979). This reflects the importance of family as the primary social unit in Confucianism and its emphasis on filial piety, lineage and ancestor worship has for years subjugated individuals' needs and interests to those of the family under the leadership of a patriarch (ibid).

Confucianism is preoccupied with cultivating good relationships. Each of the five abovementioned relationships has its distinct forms and proprieties defining the proper behaviours, duties and responsibilities for those involved. So long as everyone fulfils their obligations and behaves appropriately to the expectations associated with their status and roles, social stability and harmonious relationships would ensue (ibid). In this sense, Confucian ideology played a large part in sustaining the hierarchical structure of the society and perpetuating social inequality. In addition to propriety or etiquette, other Confucian social virtues include humanity, loyalty, sincerity, mutual respect and reciprocity (Stockman, 2000).

When it comes to husband-wife relationships, it was not love that initially bound the couple together. Most marriages were arranged by parents and the primary purpose of marriage was to reproduce at least one male heir to continue the husband's family lineage (Murstein, 1974; Baker, 1979; Morton and Lewis, 2004). Ideally emotional intimacy grows between the couple with the passage of time and brought the couple closer together. Even if the couple were attracted to one another, public display of affection was frowned upon (Murstein, 1974). After marriage, the bride would move to stay with her husband's family. The wife was often regarded as a servant in the family and her status improved only after a son was born. Among the wealthy, concubinage was a norm. The wife was subjected to her mother-in-law's supervision and domination. She could not count on her husband for support because he too was subordinated to his parents' power. Unable to endure the torment and sustained misery, suicide became the only option for many women as divorce was rare (Murstein, 1974).

When it comes to the father and son relationship, as the head of the family, it was the father's obligation to provide his son with a wife. The daughter and father relationship was less significant due to her eventual marrying into another family. Her main contribution to the family lay in her potential marriage and her chastity was essential to secure a good match. Marriage was usually arranged based on political and economic considerations to further the family interests (Murstein, 1974). According to Confucian teaching, throughout her life, a woman was required to show obedience to her father and elder brothers when young, to her husband after marriage, and to her sons when widowed (Croll, 1978). The marriage imperative of Confucianism made celibacy by choice an abnormality and early marriage the norm (Sang, 2003).

Many of the Confucian family ideals did not however represent the everyday realities for the majority of the peasant population. Unlike the gentry class, peasants' families were smaller in size, less hierarchical and more informal. The peasant wife had greater power than the wife of the wealthy due to her participation in economic activities (Murstein, 1974; Stockman, 2000). However, all families were closely tied to a wider kinship organization or clan sharing the same surname implying a common descent, with moral obligations on the part of rich families to care for the

poor. Inter-clan conflicts were a widespread phenomenon because Confucianism as a contextual based philosophy led to factionalism and parochialism, discouraging social trust and the practice of universal morality (Yum, 1988). In the mid of 19th century, social and economic disarray, internal political struggles and foreign invasions engulfed the middle kingdom. It became clear that the imperial state and its Confucian ideology were incapable of addressing the growing problems. This provoked soul-searching among intellectuals and nationalists. Many of them singled out Confucianism with its emphasis on family devotion and loyalty as the main obstacle to modernization of the country and development of national unity, weakening the state's power to defend the country's national interest and sovereignty (Murstein, 1974, Baker, 1979).

1.1 Anti-Confucianism movement

The need for an overhaul of the Confucian socio-cultural system reached its climax during the May Fourth 1919 students' protest in Beijing. The political protest evolved into a sustained movement that called into question the tradition of Confucianism (Dryburgh, 2011). Most urban dwellers in cosmopolitan cities like Shanghai were conscious that they were now living in a new era and Confucian ways of life were out of touch. Christianity and capitalist modernity brought in by foreign traders offered an alternative and more opportunities to make a better living (Mitter, 2005). Many educated youth and intelligentsia with a growing nationalist sentiment argued that for the survival of the nation, Confucianism with its veneration for the past and preoccupation with family and kinship had to be eradicated. Hierarchal order, particularistic morality, parochial thinking and patriarchal oppression of women were other Confucian norms under attack (Stacey, 1983; Mitter, 2005). At that time, the peasant population too were experiencing a family and economic crisis. But unlike their urban counterparts who had became disillusioned with Confucianism as a whole, peasant families remained hopeful and loyal to practice Confucian virtues and family relationships because their family life and economic activities lay in the effectiveness of the patriarchal system. However, many of them were too poor to realize the Confucian ideals and lost the institutional supports once provided by the paternalistic state (Stacey, 1983).

Democracy and science were thought to be the factors that strengthened western countries. Western notions of individualism, autonomy, self and freedom started to gain influence among Chinese urban educated elites, offering individuals the hope of self-emancipation. Focusing on the individual self, an alien concept with negative connotations of decadence and selfishness, was suddenly deemed necessary at a time of national crisis to strengthen the people and the country (Mitter, 2005). However, the merits of individualism, autonomy and freedom were measured instrumentally based on how these western ideas could help to revive China's past glory and fortify the nation-state. "As a result, Western individualism has never been understood in China as an oppositional mode of thinking to emancipate the Chinese individual" (Yan, 2010:29). The notion that each individual has basic inviolable rights given at birth is absent in China. According to Nathan (1986), rights in China are extended by the state to individuals through citizenship. The objective is not to protect individuals against state encroachment but the fulfilment of national duties by individuals (cited in Pei, 2000).

Equipped with this new western framework of thought and the concept of self, the May Fourth generation of educated urbanites was the first generation who had the opportunity to liberate themselves from the patriarchal shackles of arranged marriage, challenge gender inequality and confront the superiority of parental authority. The epoch of romantic love allowed social elites the chance to explore freely their individual emotions, experience courtship, choose their own partner and marry based on love (Murstein, 1974; Mitter, 2005). However, the effects of these social changes were largely limited to urban and educated groups. It was only after the establishment of the People's Republic China by the CCP in 1949 that radical transformations happened throughout Chinese society.

2. Communist revolution

Through propaganda, social engineering and law enforcement, the regime aspired to construct a new identity of socialist citizens whose loyalty and devotion were given first to the party-state for collective nation building, with family or private interests being secondary (Yan, 2009). The CCP's economic and social policies transformed the family institution from a private lineal association into a

public organization. The distinction between private and public life almost ceased to exist due to the extensive penetrative power of the state into every aspect of citizens' lives (Stockman, 2000). All forms of social relations were subject to state control and monitoring to avoid the development of alternative loyalties. Folk beliefs, local customs and festive celebrations, ritual practices and religious ceremonies such as ancestor worship were all under the state's scrutiny and were criticized as feudal superstition.

The politicization of private life began with the introduction of laws that promoted conjugal relationships at the expense of parental authority, redistribution of land that demolished the clan power base and collective farming that ended the family's functions as the basic economic unit and care provider (Stacey, 1983). All these reforms undermined Confucian patriarchal ideology and improved the social status of most women and young men following their participation in the revolution and economic activities. The legitimacy of marriage based on romantic love was enshrined in the Marriage Law 1950, promulgated extensively throughout the country (Croll, 1978; Stacey, 1983). It enforced monogamy and gender equality with regards to the right for inheritance, to sue for divorce and child custody. It also outlawed child betrothal, and arranged or forced marriage, together with the customary practices of high dowry, lavish feast and ceremony (Murstein, 1974; Yan, 2003). It also specified the appropriate relationships and reciprocal obligations between husbands and wives, as well as parents and children, aiming to promote a new democratic family model (Stacey, 1983; Stockman, 2000). Following the passage of the Marriage Law 1950, courtship became the state sanctioned precursor for a marriage. Ideally, young people should be allowed to spend time together to develop mutual understanding and affection paramount to the success of the new model of conjugal love. However, there were social constraints for young people to freely interact with each other due to the strict sexual segregation norm (Croll, 1978). Older generations, especially in rural areas, perceived the law as intrusive and threatening to familial tradition and their authority.

The same law also enforced married women's right to engage in productive work and political affairs. Women's involvement in public life was also presented as crucial for female emancipation. But at the same time, women were also responsible

for ensuring marital harmony by being responsive to their husband's needs and supporting their husband's revolutionary works (Evans, 2002). Women were required to adopt a sartorial style of short hair, simple dark coloured trousers, and high collared jacket (Evans, 1997). Self-beautification and an overt emphasis on physical appearance were condemned as decadent and resulting in self-objectification (Ip, 2003). The new standard of female attraction was the image of the Iron Lady: strong, vigorous, determined, and hard working, passionately committed to the socialist revolution (Jin, 2006). The party-state directed gender equality may on one hand have improved women's sense of self, but it also meant relentless work inside and outside the home (Liu, 2007). While sameness with men was presented as a triumph over feudalistic patriarchal domination, in reality it reaffirmed the superiority of masculinity as the ideal standard for emulation (Wang and Liu, 2009).

The party-state also took over many of the social and security functions traditionally provided by the extended family. The work unit in urban areas and the commune in rural areas provided everything one needs in everyday life (Stockman, 2000; Yan, 2003). "Never before had the family and individuals been exposed to state power and the formal administration system so closely", but paradoxically at the same time, many "were liberated from the control of the corporate family, kinship organisation, and other informal communal power" (Yan, 2003:231). However, the result was an unhealthy high degree of dependency on the state for access to scarce resources and opportunities that sometimes led to official corruption (Whyte, 1993). Despite the series of changes in family life, the state did not succeed in eliminating the age old Confucian family institution. Numerous ritual ceremonies continued to be observed privately at home (Baker, 1979) and at a time of political uncertainties, many relied on kinship moral obligations for social security and support (Siu, 1993). Actually the regime had no intention in destroying the family institution, but simply "to co-opt family activities and loyalties in the service of the revolution" and to weaken the power of the clan (Stockman, 2000:107). As the party-state was also aware of its dependence on peasants' support for future revolutionary process, the CCP had to make concessions to patriarchal family sentiment. For instance, after the high tide of divorce following the Marriage Law 1950, emphasis shifted towards reconciliation and getting a divorce became very

difficult (Stacey, 1983). The regime itself behaved as the public patriarch demanding everyone's subservience and loyalty.

The state-sponsored family reform came with an unintended consequence of what Yan (2003) called the perverse rise of individuals which was dialectically opposed to socialist collectivism. "By promoting loyalty to socialist collectives as opposed to one's family, and by replacing familism with collectivism", the CCP paradoxically created a social condition that was conducive for the development of individuality (p.232). This social space outside the family and kinship not only freed many of the younger generation from family constraints, but was also crucial for the emergence of the subjective self as an independent entity with rights. This force of individualism unleashed itself following the CCP's abandonment of a centrally planned economy for a market economy.

3. Post-Mao reform era

Deng Xiaoping, the successor of Mao, was a technocrat and pragmatist. His open door policy in 1978 ended China's decades of isolation from the outside world. Following the end of the disastrous Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Deng kick started market reform to refocus the nation's attention on economic development and also to dampen the chaotic revolutionary frenzy. The radical socialist ideology was replaced by neo-liberalism and the party-state retreated from direct intervention in both private life and the economic activities of the people (Yan, 2009). Individualism was rediscovered as the engine for economic growth and hence was actively encouraged by the party-state. The pursuit of self-interest was no longer deemed as bourgeois. The market economy stimulated individuals' production and consumption. Through the burgeoning consumerism, individuals were able to construct their unique identity which was previously impossible as most people consumed only the generic products allocated to them by the state (Davis, 2000). Individuals also became increasingly assertive in claiming their entitlements. Revolutionary socialist comrades were gradually transformed into rights-aware free-willed citizens, consumers who are driven by the gratification of desire, seeking material comforts, and individuals motivated by self-realization (Yan, 2009).

Decollectivization of farming and market privatization led to the re-emergence of rich families. Private family business reinstalled the power of the father, giving incentives for wealthy families to stay together. Conspicuous consumption, the comeback of lavish wedding celebrations and expensive banquets increased young people's dependence on their parents (Whyte, 1993; Stockman, 2000). With excess wealth, the practice of keeping mistresses, akin to the practice of concubinage re-emerged (Pan, 2006). Gender discrimination at the workplace reappeared and many women were drawn back to the domestic sphere (Tatlow, 2012). The first women's fashion magazine was published in 1980 and marked the change of sartorial politics. Women were told that self-adornment was no longer politically incorrect and their consumption of fashionable clothing and beautification products were politicized as testimony of China's economic prosperity under the Communist regime (Ip, 2003). Redomestification and refeminization were also deployed by the state to persuade women to withdraw from the labour market due to the shortage of urban employment. The new image promoted to women was the happy and pretty housewife who is affective, sensitive, supportive, fashionable and sexually desirable to her husband (Evans, 1997; Wang and Liu, 2009).

Deng's depoliticization of private life however did not restore fully the Confucian family institution to its former glory because surviving family traditions have to compete with utilitarianism, individualism, consumerism, global capitalism and the legacy of socialism that continued to interfere with private life, such as birth control policy and strict regulations on religious practices (Yan, 2003). The most noticeable change in the family was the waning of the patriarchal order following the displacement of the parent and son hierarchical relationship with the husband and wife conjugal relationship as the central axis of the contemporary Chinese family (Yan, 2009). The importance of conjugal love and emotional intimacy for self-fulfilment was given legal recognition in the revision of the Marriage Law introduced in 1980. The law allowed divorce based on the grounds of irrevocable breakdown in mutual affection (Woo, 2006; Law and Peng, 2006). The state discourse emphasizes self-cultivation and personal fulfilment through emotional satisfaction in intimate relationships, rather than material possession. This is part of the larger state's goal of "fostering a self-maximizing citizenry" who rely on themselves for materials and social support, rather than on the state (Friedman, 2010:

166). Many of the young middle class were no longer content with the traditional model of marriage based on reproduction, mutual aid and survival of the family, nor willing to stay in an unsatisfying marriage merely out of moral responsibility (Tian, 2008).

Yan (2010) also argues that the process of individualization that the Chinese people went through is, in a sense, incomplete or distorted. During the Maoist era, attempting to promote socialist collectivism, the party-state fostered a biased and inaccurate understanding of individualism by associating it with egotistic, selfish, calculative, hedonistic, utilitarian interests and deliberately obscuring the most important elements of personal liberty, freedom, independence, equality and individual rights balanced with social obligations and responsibilities. The negative consequences of this misguided understanding of individualism have been exacerbated since market reform as the society began to occupy itself with wealth creation, thoroughly imbued with instrumentalism and commoditization (Stockman, 2000). Many rampantly pursue their self-interests regardless of others, adopting a utilitarian approach to most social relationships. This also left them feeling bewildered with a strong sense of emotional void. As seen in my participant observation, Chinese Internet users are increasingly turning to online relationships for emotional sustenance.

The 1990s marked the end of Marxist ideology in China and the moral vacuum is being filled not only by Confucianism, but also Christian sects, Falun Gong and extreme forms of nationalism. The party state considers the latter three as undesirable alternatives that risk threatening the hard-won social and economic stability. Consequently, the state has encouraged the revival of Confucianism which prioritizes social harmony above all else (Bell, 2008). Confucian orthodoxy on respect for authority and obedience that excludes institutionalized opposition as the basis for maintaining social stability proved beneficial for the state in claiming political legitimacy (Stockman, 2000; Morton and Lewis, 2005). The resurgence of Confucianism is not only confined within the country, the CCP also established hundreds of Confucius Institutions worldwide as a means to promote the country's soft power internationally. Instrumentalisation of tradition also reinstates the party-state's moral authority to govern citizens' private lives (Gross, 1992). In the next

section, attention is turned towards private life in contemporary Chinese society. In the discussion, I trace the changing notion of love, including courtship, marriage and sexual practices from the Maoist era to present day China.

4. Private life in contemporary Chinese society and the evolution of the notion of love

During the Maoist period, the official discourse of love was devoid of intense emotions and erotic sexual impulses. The true socialist love of the proletarian was incompatible with the private indulgence of pleasure, also the bourgeois practice of hyper and homogamy based on socio-economic status (Evans, 1997). Embracing the revolutionary spirit and loving the socialist collective institutions became the new criteria for an ideal spouse (Murstein, 1974). As a result, many elite, middle class intellectuals, bearing the "bad class" label chose poor working-class spouses, effectively "marrying down", to redeem themselves through socialist love. Politically motivated marriages were particularly common during the decade of Cultural Revolution (Constable, 2003).

Deng's reforms resulted in the depoliticization of private life and constraints on public discussion of personal matters such as love and sex began to relax. Romantic feeling was no longer associated with bourgeois connotations and immorality. Mass media such as films, novels, magazines and advertising started to portray love as private affection and passionate longing. Images of romantic intimacy re-emerged, signalling the official recognition of private amorous emotions (Evans, 1997). In fact, relationships based on romantic feelings were accorded higher moral worth as opposed to those based on economic or political motives (Farrer, 2002). However, the public did not unanimously approve this new meaning of love. Young people continued to be told about the social significance of love.

Dating in the late 1970s and early 1980s in China resembled earlier US practices of 'calling' in terms of their non-commercial, or minimal expense activities such as meeting at home, letter writing and walking in the park. The family or work unit (*danwei*) normally arranged the date with a clear motive to find a spouse. Most people had few dating experiences as they felt obliged to marry their suitor.

Rejection was understood as an insult to the partner and also as a sign of insincerity and playing around (Farrer, 2002). In his study of wedding behaviour in Chengdu from 1933 to 1987, Whyte (1993) found that the socialist transformation had no doubt increased the autonomy of young people but the freedom gained from their parents was at the same time lost to state bureaucrats, mainly the work unit one was assigned to. Even in the post 1980s reform era, the majority of urbanites working in state enterprises continued to be subjected to the state's influence and depended on the state for survival. From discouraging romance among the workers, the work unit changed to facilitate it through organized leisure activities. The objective was to provide young workers with secure and orderly courting spaces to keep them out of the chaotic dating scene that was emerging at the same time (Farrer, 2002).

Towards the millennium, commercial culture turned dating into consumption and leisure activities for enjoyment. Dating several partners before marriage is becoming increasingly common among the young generation. They treat each experience as a learning process, a way of proving one's desirability, establishing intimacy and testing compatibility without making a hasty commitment to marriage. For some, dating even becomes an end in itself (Farrer, 2002). Improved financial independence of young people from employment outside the family and state enterprises has also reinforced their personal control in courtship. Migrant workers from rural areas in Law and Peng's (2006) study left behind not only parental controls, but also other familial traditions and values to embrace the liberal urban culture. This generation is predominantly the only child in the family, born after the Marriage Law 1980 making family planning a civic responsibility. The growing individualism of Chinese society can be seen most vividly among these youths. Not only have they escaped political hardships under Mao's rule and compulsory collectivism, but also grew up during a time of economic prosperity, enjoying their parents and grandparents' undivided love and attention. This nurturing environment is particularly favourable for the development of individualistic sentiments (Dion and Dion, 1993). Despite being the centre of a family, the pressure to succeed on the shoulders of these "little emperors" is tremendous. They are not only the bearer of the family's hope and honour, but have the moral duty to care for and support both parents and four grandparents (Stockman, 2000).

"Premature love" is the state's terminology aiming to problematize early relationships between those under the age of 18 (Farrer, 2006; Tang and Zuo, 2000). The widespread adoption of the Internet in China, especially among students, makes social control and monitoring difficult. Students can now date discreetly online and maintenance of relationships is easier. The Internet also provides Chinese youth a safe platform to explore their sexuality without the risks of unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease and public sanctions. The popularity of online relationships especially among university students could possibly be traced back to the success of a novel about online romance between two students who met through their university bulletin board service, written by Cai Zhiheng, a Taiwanese PhD student, in 1998. *The First Intimate Contact* turned online romance into a prominent phrase in China, a desirable romantic and memorable chance encounter, with intense and transcendental emotions.

In research conducted in 2007 across 9 provinces, 18.4% of the 4811 participating university students admitted to having one or more online lovers and 38.4% knew other fellow students who had such experiences. Only 11.6% of participants were against online romance because of the belief that online romance promotes a sense of irresponsibility, correspondent to the finding that 35.3% of students perceived online romance as a relational game. Nevertheless, 87.7% of the students argued that online romance is an effective means to satisfy their emotional needs (Wei, Li, Lu and Peng, 2007). Compared to a similar survey in 2003, where 24% of students disapproved of online romance, this growing acceptance implies the experience of falling in love online is becoming a mainstream way of meeting potential mates (Han, 2004). According to a 2008 report of Chinese Internet users' marriage and dating behaviour, 45.5% of the participants had used dating and social networking sites, and 32.6% of them had developed romantic relationships online (Hongniang, 2008). However, a separate survey in 2008 also showed that 81% of online romances failed (Chongqing Daily, 2009). Most media portrayals of online romance tend to be negative and sensational, suggesting that it is unreliable and dangerous. A detailed analysis of media representations of online romance can be found in Chapter 4.

In contemporary Chinese society, the marriage imperative persists and getting married "signals adulthood, a marker of psychological maturity, a necessary rite of passage when an individual shifts from depending to being depended on" (McMillan, 2006:56). In Xu's (2008) Shanghai study, 65.6% argued that everyone must get married and 84.4% were against the idea of not having children after marriage. The norm and desire to get married reproduces itself online as seen in cyber-marriage, a form of popular online play. Playing being married provides emotional satisfaction for some players where social and economic constraints make it difficult to partner or marry (McLaren, 2007). More on cyber-marriage is presented in Chapters 3 and 5. With the strong marriage institution, the traditional practice of "*xiangqin*", meeting with potential mates prearranged by the parents, relatives, neighbours or friends is alive and well in today's Chinese society. However, young people have the right to decide whether or not to date and marry the person recommended (Pan, 2006). Xu's (2008) study of Shanghai marital couples revealed that only 40% of the participants met their spouse personally, 60% via *xiangqin*. In fact, Zeng (2007) argued that *xiangqin* practice seems to be getting more popular in recent years due to the difficulty of finding suitable mates, the trend of marrying late especially among highly educated young professionals in urban areas, and the counter-trend of marrying earlier among some young women.

As the 'cell of society', the family is to be protected to ensure social harmony and strong national development which would help to legitimize the CCP (Sigley, 2006; Evans, 1997). The family is the only state-sanctioned relationship model for sexual interactions and childbearing. Parents are legally required to educate, discipline, protect and socialize children according to appropriate social values and conduct. Children on the other hand, have the duty of care for the elderly in the family (Stockman, 2000). Out of concern for the nation's future, the right to get married was not given to everyone. The Marriage Law discourages people with medical conditions from marriage due to the concern of their capability to reproduce healthy offspring based on the science of eugenics. Until 2003, premarital checks were the means by which the state exercised their right to veto people's marriage decision. To encourage the take up of voluntary premarital health checks, birth defects and infectious diseases were presented as the dire consequences of failure to do so (McMillan, 2006).

The re-emergence of sexual discrimination in the workplace drove many young women to return to marriage as a means for social mobility (Zeng, 2007). A study of contemporary university students' familial values and attitudes showed that female participants are more likely to emphasize financial status when choosing their mates (Tian, 2008). "I'd rather cry in a BMW than smile riding a bicycle", a trenchant remark made by a female contestant on a popular dating show in 2010 provoked social controversy. The pressure to get married soon felt by many young women in recent years also has its origins in the socially constructed "problem" of becoming one of the "leftover women" (*shengnü*). A leftover woman refers to a woman aged 25 and above who is still single, too old to be desirable, hence with no bright prospect for marriage. Fincher (2011) argued that "*shengnü*" is a sexist term popularized by the state to scaremonger women, especially those career-driven and highly-educated women, to get married soon and not to set their bar too high or risk becoming spinsters. The preference for marrying up renders many underachieving men unmarriable despite the excess of men over women (Larson, 2012).

Some worried parents even take matters into their own hands by gathering at public parks at weekends with their children's resumé for public matchmaking with other concerned parents, often without their children's knowledge. They then tactically recommend shortlisted candidates to their children for a date. Parents feel torn between the need to respect their children's right to a private love affair and fulfilling parental responsibilities in assisting their children to get married (Loewenberg, 2008). Perhaps because of the realization that freedom to choose one's own love does not ensure happiness (Branigan, 2009), young people in Hansen and Pang's study (2010) willingly followed their parents' advice when it came to choosing a marriage partner. They wish "to find partners who were both desirable from the individual's point of view and appropriate from a broader family perspective" (p.61). It is not uncommon for them to end a relationship due to concern for their parents' interests. A survey in 2008 jointly conducted by a dating site and a state governing body of the matchmaking industry in China also showed that 62.14% of participants would follow their parents' will should they disapprove their choice of partner (Hongniang, 2008). The personal account of one of my participants presented in Chapter 6 vividly illustrates this issue of parental pressure. During my

participant observation, it appears that even without parental disapproval, many female only-children in the family face the dilemma of choosing between their parents and lover living in a different province, because the patrilocal tradition dictates that married women move to stay with her husband's family. This is in conflict with the duty of care required by law and children's moral obligations to their parents.

Romantic love and desire for personal freedom have clearly not overwhelmed the young generation at the expense of family and personal responsibilities. But in Wang and Zhang's (2008) survey, 44% of young adults defined family as consisting of "me and my lover", almost equivalent to 47% of those who perceived family in its extended form, made up of parents and other relatives. The study supports Yan's (2009) argument that contemporary Chinese families are increasingly structuring around the husband-wife relationship, instead of the parents-child relationship. The tension between personal happiness and family interests is getting higher. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that love to most Chinese people is still deeply entwined with social responsibilities and family obligations, not merely private emotions (Li and Xu, 2007). By implication, marriage involves more than just the two individuals; it is an affair between the two families. This is one of the common problems widely shared in the relationship forum of Renren, a social networking site where I conducted my participant observation.

Given the growing emphasis on personal happiness, autonomy and rights in directing one's own life, it is not surprising that divorce is on the rise. According to statistics from the Ministry of Civil Affairs, 1.96 million couples divorced in 2010, more than the 1.2 million couples that tied the knot (Wang, 2011). But the social stigma associated with divorced women persists despite the commonality of divorces. Many divorced women have difficulty finding a suitable mate when they re-enter the dating scene. The situation is worse for those who already have a child. This leads some of them to turn to international dating sites to look for foreign partners (Constable, 2003). During my participant observation, the discussion of partner choice frequently brought up the word *beijing*, or background, referring to both personal upbringing and family's social standing. Divorce is an example that discredits a person's background. A good background is crucial to secure a good

match. The emphasis on compatibility of background is reflected in the traditional saying of "matching a bamboo door with a bamboo door and a wooden door with a wooden door". It is difficult for couples of vastly different social standings to convince their parents or even themselves that their relationship has a viable future, a view widely shared by my participants. Although what constitutes a good match has changed with time, female premarital chastity, a traditional virtue remains the cultural ideal, despite the widespread premarital sex engaged in by dating dyads.

4.1 Premarital sex and the cultural ideal of female chastity

In the official discourse, premarital sex is often linked to unwanted pregnancy as contraception is not openly available to unmarried couples. Females are taught to be self-vigilant in sexual matters as they are at greater risk of being blinded by romantic feelings due to their affective nature. In recent years, public opinions towards college students' dating behaviours have changed from initial outright objections to implicit condoning. In March 2005, the authorities finally lifted the ban on college students' marriage by removing the clause that marriage before graduation is subject to expulsion (Jin, 2009). This is widely interpreted as college students being given official approval to court while pursuing their education, including having sexual relations. Prior to this amendment, college or university students who were found to have had sexual intercourse could be expelled.

In recent years, mature student couples' cohabitation is becoming a common phenomenon. However, the official discourse still discourages the activity of dating among students and they are urged to focus on their study and constantly reminded of the responsibilities associated with love and sex (Jin 2009). Surveys in recent years indicate the trend of increasing premarital sexual permissiveness (Zeng, 2007). Romantic love has replaced marriage as a new moral touchstone for having sex. Among the younger generation, sex between boyfriend and girlfriend is nothing immoral, merely a normal way of expressing passionate mutual affection (Pan, 1993). A survey funded by the UN, involving Chinese aged 15-24 showed that 22% had premarital sex but more than half had not used any contraception during their first sex. The lack of sex education and difficulty in accessing contraception has in recent years resulted in increased numbers of abortions among young single women. Abortion as a legitimate means for birth control is widely and cheaply available in

hospitals, private, NGO operated, and unlicensed clinics. The absence of stigma associated with abortion and the social sanctions on bearing a child outside wedlock, make abortions the common way out (Olesan, 2011).

The law is often cited in arguments about the "serious fault" of premarital sex and cohabitation. Although it is not illegal, it is regarded as wrong as it is not protected or recognized by the law (Evans, 1997; Farrer, 2002). Premarital sex also risks creating complications in later marital life and may affect conjugal harmony due to the traditional cultural ideal of female chastity (Evans, 1997; McMillan, 2006). Since the late 1990s, engaged couple's premarital sex is tolerated by most parents (Yan, 2003). Some parents even encourage their son to have sex with their girlfriend because it helps to secure a marriage at reduced cost because a non-virgin cannot ask for high bride price (Zhou cited in Zang, 2003). In contemporary Chinese society, female virginity is no longer a nonnegotiable condition for contracting a marriage, only a desirable trait. Feminine rhetoric of romance and masculine rhetoric of coolness allow sex to appear as a natural part of courtship among the young generation (Farrer, 2002). The emphasis on premarital chastity is now presented as a means to ensure marital harmony and protect women from social stigma. Women are constructed as the agent responsible for defending sexual morality and maintaining the standard of sexual order through self-restraint (Evans, 1997). In my online observation, it became evident that female chastity is a contentious subject, often causing heated debate between the two sexes.

Other than friendships and romantic relationships, the Internet is also an effective tool for finding willing participants to engage in sexual activities of all sorts, such as extramarital sex, one night stands, group sex and spouse swapping. This degree of sexual emancipation was unimaginable during the Maoist era. Like the evolving notion of love, sexual discourse in China has also changed with the political climate.

4.2 Changing sexual discourse in China

Under Mao, sex became a social taboo and sexual puritanism characterized the revolutionary era. The only purpose for sex was for procreation with marriage the only legitimate outlet for sex (Jeffreys, 2006). Individuals caught engaging in

premarital sex or extramarital sex would face serious consequences ranging from public humiliation and criticism, demotion or dismissal to imprisonment under the crime of hooliganism. During the Cultural Revolution, sexual immorality was often invoked by the Red Guard to launch their political attacks on class enemies. In reality, there was no law prohibiting non-marital sexual activities (Honig, 2003). By describing sex merely as a biological need, sexual relationships were presented as morally inferior to lofty spiritual love. The emphasis on spiritual attainment was consistent with the socialist ideology as true happiness was not based in material enjoyment but resulted from having fulfilled the collective spirit (Murstein, 1974).

The state's discourse on sex began to change with the implementation of birth control policy in the late 1970s. To help reduce the birth rate, fertility control was framed as crucial for improving the quality of marital life and enhancing sexual satisfaction as women were free from the excessive burden of childcare (Evans, 2002). Commercialization of mass media during the reform era also led to a proliferation of sexual discourse in Chinese society as sex became the subject that sells well in the competitive market (Farrer, 2002). The sex industry not only re-emerged, but flourished since the economic reforms despite the government's declared war on the industry. All these changes resulted in increasing expectations of sexual satisfaction on both male and female. With the widespread sexualization of the society, it is not uncommon to hear the public contention that the sexual revolution has finally come to Chinese society. However, Erwin's (2000) study of a sex counselling hotline in Shanghai showed that the proliferation of sexual discourse is far from a sign of sexual revolution because it is part of the state's social engineering initiated to monitor and modernize the society and its citizens. Tacitly allowing certain sexual stories to be heard in public provides the party-state a window into people's private lives. McMillan (2006) rightly pointed out that close examination of sexual discourse in China reveals its conservative and moralistic characteristics, excluding and intolerant of differences which limit individuals' choices. An example is how the rhetoric of romantic feelings may have legitimized premarital sex or even extramarital sex, but it simultaneously discriminates against those who enjoy no strings sex without romantic association. Transgressive activities that attract too much public attention and allegedly undermine public morality and traditional values of the society are subject to state and public condemnation. For

instance, in May 2010 the government for the first time invoked the law that prohibits group licentious behaviour to prosecute 22 adults who were involved in group sex and spouse swapping. One of them was a university professor, Ma Yaohai, 53 who was sentenced to three and a half years imprisonment. The law prohibits any sexual activity between three or more people even in a private place and between consenting adults. Ma was the only one who pleaded not guilty and insisted that his victimless private sex life should not be criminalized (Wong, 2010).

Unlike swingers, spouse swappers or participants in group sex, "*tongzhi*" or same-sex lovers receive more public sympathy. Yet homosexuality remains a sensitive subject in today's China. Although the voice of sexual minorities can now occasionally be heard publicly, it is an issue not to be openly publicized or given prominent media coverage. The party-state's policies and attitudes towards it remain ambiguous and arbitrary. Unlike other Asian countries which tend to paint homosexuality as one of the corrupting western influences, same-sex eroticism had existed in China since the imperial period (Chou, 2000; Sang, 2003). Ancient China had a fairly open attitude towards sex and sex was never to be treated as a central aspect of an individual's sense of self. After the 13th century, under the influence of neo-Confucianism, the society gradually turned more conservative, anti-sex and anti-women. The emphasis on the family institution and procreation further heterosexualized the society. However, there is no parallel religious guilt that resulted in homophobia as in Judeo-Christian countries (Chou, 2000).

4.3 Homosexuality

According to Chou (2000), in imperial China, desire for opposite-sex and same-sex love was not understood in dichotomous and mutually exclusive terms. Homoeroticism was a sexual indulgence that everyone could potentially engage in. Therefore, marital life very often co-existed with same-sex love, especially for wealthy men. Female same-sex love on the other hand, was often trivialized by the society as an insignificant passing affection due to women's eventual marriage with men and procreation (Sang, 2003). Sexual orientation, gender and homosexuality were western concepts imported into China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The traditional cultural tolerance and insensitivity towards homosexuality gave way to a discourse of biological science which perceived homosexuality as a form of

sexual pathology that required medical and psychological treatment. Christian faith also contributed to the growing homophobia. Ironically, the western homosexual rights movement of the 1960s had no impact on China's homophobic sentiment due to the isolation of the country from the outside world (ibid, Evans, 1997).

There was never any law specifically banning same-sex behaviour in China. However, during the Maoist era, especially the Cultural Revolution, homosexuals were subjected to a great deal of harassment, and some were driven to suicide. Society's ignorance towards female same-sex love turned out to be a mixed blessing as it protected lesbians from public scrutiny and social control (Sang, 2003). Living in the homophobic environment, most homosexuals themselves came to identify and accept their own sexuality as abnormal and would take medical measures to change their sexual orientation. They often experienced guilt, shame, confusion, low self-image and self-hatred (Li, 2006). In the post-Mao reform era, although public humiliation of people caught committing homoerotic acts stopped, police harassment of homosexual continued and homosexuals were often prosecuted under the laws of public obscenity, hooliganism and loitering (Chou, 2000; Sang, 2003; Li, 2006). However, since there was no law governing same-sex behaviour, what constituted hooligan behaviours were subject to the local enforcement officers' interpretation. In relatively homosexual friendly provinces there were cases of same-sex marriage; one reported in Fujian, involved a male couple in 1990, another in Guangxi, a female couple in 1991 (Chou, 2000).

In 1997, the criminal court passed the law that sodomy is not a criminal act, and also removed any specific reference to homosexuality in the crime of hooliganism (Li, 2006). In April 2000, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security announced that people had the right to choose their own sexuality, and in the next year, reference to homosexuality as a form of psychological perversion was removed from Chinese psychiatric texts (McMillan, 2006). Depathologization and decriminalization of homosexual acts nevertheless have not ended social prejudice because many argue that it creates complications for marriage and undermines family stability. Many homosexuals, especially male submit themselves to the family pressure for marriage and reproduction. Their public appearance of normality makes their sexual transgression invisible and therefore tolerable, but often their spouse is

unaware of their sexual orientation and this leads to frustration in family life (ibid; Li, 2006). I came across a post in the Tianya forum in which the female author recounted her plan for having a sham marriage with a gay man so that her premarital pregnancy could be legitimatized. This is a "win-win" situation for both parties as it allows the gay man to appear to be observing his filial piety obligation of continuing the family lineage.

The cultural legacy of same-sex love and relational self make the western notion of identity politics less relevant in the Chinese context (Chou, 2000). Many refuse a fixed and exclusive sexual identity of "homosexual" that sets them apart from the mainstream society as a sexual minority (ibid). This is precisely the attitude of Nakai, one of my narrative study participants. She shared with me her previous dating experiences with the opposite sex and the current relationship with another woman she met online. In her narrative presented in Chapter 6, she describes herself ambiguously as "perhaps I am a bisexual". Both sexualities appear to her as normal and compatible. Only those single, young and westernized are likely to identify themselves as homosexuals and call for coming out (Chou, 2000). Most indigenous Chinese "*tongzhi*" do not think that a western-style confrontational strategy is suitable or effective. Compared to other conservative religious countries, homosexuals in China have at least gained legal recognition and protection. In recent years, the voice of outright intolerance to homosexuality is dwindling and respect for the private lives of others is gaining momentum. In a survey of young adults aged 18 to 30 in Chengdu and Kunming, only 23% openly rejected homosexuality (Wang and Zhang, 2008). However, respect for homosexuals' life choice has not been translated into approval of homosexuality. Even with approval, the public is far from actively supporting the rights movement of homosexuals (Wertime, 2012).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have organized China's changing discourse of private intimacy chronologically from the Confucian dominated era of late imperialism, through May Fourth republicanism, Communist revolution, post-Mao reform and opening up, to the contemporary epoch. However, the historical reality is far more nuanced and complex than this linear structure can adequately account for. In

concluding this chapter, it is important to stress that there were no radical breaks between these different periods. For instance, the notion of love existed prior to the May Fourth generation. Many of the classical poems in *Shijing* have a romantic theme, depicting marriages based on mutual affection (Hinsch, 2007). Although marriages in defiance of families' wishes and elopement were the extreme examples of the shared passion, conventional marriage arranged by the family could have an element of love too, refuting the idea that marriage in ancient China was passionless or always merely a pragmatic union between two families for political and economic interests (ibid). As pointed out by Lindholm (1998), romantic love is a near universal phenomenon, neither a modern nor western cultural construct. However, the ways in which romantic love is expressed, its role in marriage and its essential characteristics vary according to societies' cultural traditions and social structures. Yan's (2003) study of Chinese rural villagers' private lives under socialism showed, despite the fact that romantic love was being condemned as a bourgeois indulgence in the Maoist era, collective farming paradoxically provided a conducive environment for youth to explore passionate love as females and males worked together in the farm (Yan, 2003). Honig's (2003) study of sexuality during the Cultural Revolution also demonstrated that despite the state's presumed sexual repression, sexual discourse and activities were still part of everyday life. Many Red Guards and sent-down youths, free from parental control and school, had opportunities to experience their first taste of sexual encounters and engaged in sexual experimentation, ironically at a time when sexual immorality was one of the most commonly invoked wrongdoings that legitimize broader political attacks.

The underlying social continuities in the realm of intimacy can be seen most vividly in the affective notion of *qing*. *Qing* variously translated as feelings by Farrer (2002), sentiment by Lee (2007), and emotions by Hinsch (2007), is a deeply rooted cultural concept in private affairs from imperial China to contemporary post-socialist Chinese society. Although it's definitions, social significance and moral valuation has transformed over time in accordance to the socio-political climate, *qing* has remained the noble ideal and a moral touchstone for all private relationships. For example, Hinsch (2007) showed that as vernacular literature and popular fiction flourished, the emotional bond (*qing*) between couples was celebrated as the ideal marital foundation and divorce could only be justified with the loss of *qing*. The

prominence of *qing* has however provoked anxiety in some as they realized the potential disruptive nature of marriage based on *qing* may render the entire kinship network vulnerable to individual lovers' passing whims. Later writers have reinterpreted *qing* as feelings grounded in kinship, governed by social rituals, and a chaste marital virtue in opposition to sexual desires. In a similar vein, Farrer (2002) illustrated how relationships based on romantic feelings reclaimed their positive connotations in the reform era and were accorded with higher worth than relationships motivated by economic or political interests. For a detailed account of the changing meanings of love and its impact on individual and collective identity construction in China, readers can refer to Lee's (2007) genealogical study of sentiment based on Chinese literature in which she elucidates the transformation process of love, showing how the late imperial cult of *qing* evolved as it confronted the May Fourth generation's free love movement and later enmeshed with revolutionary nationalist feelings.

From being the moribund tradition that held China back from modernization in the early 20th century, Confucianism had rehabilitated itself by the end of the century as representing the essence of Chinese society and culture (Stockman, 2000). The CCP now constantly draw on Confucianism to legitimatize authoritarian ruling and use nationalist rhetoric to justify the Chinese model as opposed to the democratic model of the West (Zhang, 2010). The family has re-emerged as the cell of society in need of the paternalistic state's support and protection to promote social stability. Deng's reforms helped the family to regain many of its economic and control functions that underpinned the patriarchal system (Stockman, 2000). The state's retreat from citizens' private family life has not however led to a full revival of Confucian familial tradition due to the growing individualism in Chinese society. Collective family interests and individuals co-exist uneasily and the conflict of interests is dealt with through constant negotiation. With the widespread adoption of the Internet in China, the tension between the two is running high. The Internet also presents the CCP with a tricky problem in social engineering, particularly for moulding the minds of adolescents. Their concern for protecting minors becomes the legitimate reason to control and censor online content.

Individualism and gender equality are the crucial elements of romantic love, love that derives from genuine emotional involvement of the two individuals based on the principles of egalitarian, freedom and self-realization (Giddens, 1992). This chapter identifies eight prevalent contentious cultural practices governing Chinese people's pursuit of private life and romantic love. The list is far from exhaustive but simply reflects the most common issues faced by the majority of Han Chinese. Some of these practices are not uniquely Chinese. Of interest for my study is how Chinese netizens manoeuvre around these norms and traditional expectations, i.e.:

- The marriage imperative and procreation
- Strict gender roles observed in heterosexual relationships
- Parental approval for choice of partner
- Compatibility of background between the dating dyad
- Stigmatization against divorce, especially for women
- Romantic feelings legitimize sex (but exclude sex for material returns or sex devoid of love for mere pleasure.)
- Monogamous heterosexual marriage is the only legitimate relationship model for bringing up children.
- Social prejudices towards homosexuals

In post-socialist Chinese society, individuals have certainly enjoyed greater personal freedoms in many aspects of their private life. Although the traditional heterosexual monogamous marriage with one or two children remains the dominant relationship model sanctioned by the state, in today's China, remarriage, families with no children, singlehood, cohabitation, no strings attached multiple sexual relationships and homosexual relationships are not unheard of. This proliferation of relationship models may seem to support the popular argument of the eventual sexual liberation of Chinese society. However, to argue that the regime has completely retreated from policing citizens' private lives is a failure to recognize the governmentality of the party-state. The regime is wary that sexual liberation based on the discourse of rights, if not closely monitored, could easily risk turning into a forerunner for political liberation (Sigley, 2006).

The state's ideology dealing with the intimate life of the people is often presented as the universal law of nature. Therefore, it is in the interests of the people

to organize their lives accordingly (McMillan, 2006). Official disapproving attitudes towards love for money and sex without love are widely shared by many occupying the same moral high ground as the regime. There are also many who support the official effort in protecting the family institution and upholding public morality. Some even come to rely on the state to play the nanny's role in the name of maintaining social stability, giving the state a legitimate reason to encroach into the private domain. Only a handful of liberal social commentators are mindful of the consequences of increasing the state's power in regulating private affairs as constituting a step backward (Sigley, 2006). It is difficult to disentangle the effects of economic reform, the party-state's social engineering, Confucian familial tradition and the roles of new media in transforming the culture of Chinese society. But one thing for sure is the party-state, with the help of familial tradition, continues its involvement in people's courtship, sexual and marital life, but in a way very different from the earlier decades of direct repression. A discussion of the state's deployment of subtle strategies to police citizens' private lives based on the idea of rights and consensus is presented in Chapter 7. How Chinese people negotiate their own freedoms and rights in private life is the subject of interest in this study. The approach I have taken to address my research questions is what follows next.

3 Methodology

Many existing studies of computer-mediated relationships have used surveys as the only research method (see for example Parks and Floyd, 1996; Whitty, 2003a; Underwood and Findlay, 2004; Hardie and Buzwell, 2006). Another frequently used method of studying life online is ethnographic or participant observation (see for example Baym, 1995b; Turkle, 1997; Kendall, 1999; Constable, 2003; Boellstorff, 2008). This research uses mixed methods data triangulation beginning with participant observation on three selected Chinese domestic social networking sites (SNS), followed by an online survey and finally interviews for narrative studies. The intention is to complement each method's strengths and weaknesses, and most importantly to provide both descriptive and interpretive accounts of the social phenomena under investigation.

Before I go on to define the objectives of each stage of my study and how my methodological decisions are informed by my two research questions, the epistemological concern of mixing qualitative and quantitative approaches from seemingly opposing paradigms is addressed. Burke's (1989) notions of grammar and rhetoric provided a useful direction in my thematic and narrative analysis when I conducted the participant observation and interviews for narrative studies. I outline the studies in sequence, detailing the considerations involved in my decision making. Included in the discussion are problems I encountered, ethical issues relating to Internet research and my reflexive thoughts. Methodological concerns regarding authenticity and credibility of online data are taken up at the end of the chapter.

1. Mixed methods triangulation

Pragmatist researchers, to use the term coined by Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005), use mixed qualitative and quantitative methods in data collection. Their flexible approach to research is underpinned by their belief that epistemological assumption does not dictate which method should be used. Polarization between qualitative and quantitative paradigms can be transcended with pragmatism as the philosophical foundation (Morgan, 2007). The pragmatic approach refuses to operate

within the two ends of externally defined boundaries because the differences between qualitative and quantitative methods are neither absolute nor incommensurable. My belief in the merits of both methods and how they can be used together in a complementary way led to my identification with pragmatist researchers. In fact, quantitative and qualitative inquiries share significantly more similarities than differences, as eloquently pointed out in Onwuegbuzie and Leech's (2005) article.

Mixed methods are used in sequential manner in this research with priority given to qualitative data, reflecting the hermeneutic and constructivist tradition of my study. It began with online participant observation, followed by an online survey and finally interviews for narrative analysis. Each of the three methods plays a distinct role in data collection. Together they help me to answer my two research questions:

- *How does culture influence the ways Chinese Internet users conduct romantic relationships online*?

- *How might these online romantic relationships be seen to reproduce, extend and/or challenge the Confucian tradition governing social and familial practices and the communist party-state's ideologies?*

Participant observation contextualizes my survey findings to facilitate holistic interpretation of the empirical data. The survey on the other hand, is the means by which I validate the inferences drawn from my observations and enhance the study's overall credibility with the survey's larger sample size. The final stage of interviewing aims primarily to answer the second research question. It also presents the opportunity for me to clarify any ambiguity before concluding the research. This arrangement is analogous to theory initiation, followed by theory testing and theory refining, "a version of *abductive* reasoning that moves back and forth between induction and deduction" (Morgan, 2007:72).

2. Online participant observation

Participant observation involves interactions between the researcher and informants in their natural setting. The researcher can see what is happening first-hand and do what informants do on a daily basis with the purpose of gaining insights into informants' feelings and interpretations of the situation or event being studied (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984; Brewer, 2000). To obtain an insider perspective and overall understanding of Chinese netizens' online social interactions, I began my study by conducting participant observation at three selected Chinese domestic SNS which I will introduce next. My participant observation is guided by Burke's (1989) notions of grammar and rhetoric in the study of language as symbolic action. According to Burke, human behaviour consists of both cognitive and operative aspects. The cognitive side is rooted in the grammar of language used to define the situation or context. The operative side deals with the rhetorical use of language with the purpose to affect changes to the situation. To gain insights into both aspects of netizens' discourse of online romance, attention is paid to the ways they talk about online relationships, the words they use, how they interpret their own experiences of it and justify their actions, their communication strategies, expectations, emerging norms and conventions, main concerns and challenges faced. By focusing on these areas of language used online, I aim to identify the defining elements or distinctive cultural characteristics of online romance as experienced and understood by Chinese Internet users, in effect to answer my first research question.

The three sites chosen for my participant observation are Renren (www.renren.com), Love Apartment (www.ipart.cn) and Tianya (www.tianya.cn). Renren is the Chinese equivalent of Facebook, the pioneer in China's SNS established in 2005. As one of the leading players in the industry (based on Alexa.com site rankings), this site was chosen because of its popularity among young adults, especially students. Renren was previously known as Xiaonei, literally meaning campus, reflecting their initial focus on university and secondary school students. To broaden its target audience, the site changed its name to Renren, literally meaning everyone in August 2009. Renren also hosts discussion forums catering for various topics such as lifestyles, showbiz, hobbies and interests, arts and cultural activities, academic and career life etc. The love and relationship forum is particularly useful for my study. It exposed me to the problems faced by dating

dyads, such as parental disapproval, long distance and other issues of contention. Online romance is a rather common theme in the forum. From these discussions, I managed to gain valuable insights into young adults' interpretations or understanding of romantic love, cultural expectations, parental roles and courtship conventions.

I included the Tianya bulletin board service (BBS) in my participant observation precisely due to the effectiveness of discussion forum in familiarizing me with others' lived experience of social and romantic relationships initiated online. Established in 1999, Tianya aims at providing a communication platform to connect Chinese people, within and outside China. It has more than 350 different topics of discussion, covering almost every aspect of daily life, such as family, love life, friendship, career, interests and hobbies, economics, politics, education, health, fashion trends and entertainment. The forum dealing with online romance is particularly useful. This is where personal stories of online romance, concerns, problems encountered and others' opinions towards online romance can be heard and shared. These forums create communities of support among members who identify with each others' experiences and feelings, sharing advice and solutions. Tianya also has personal space for blogging, photo albums, private mailbox, chatroom, and online games, very similar to functions typically provided by SNS.

Tianya was chosen for study also because of its cyber-marriage forum. Tianya invented the idea of getting married online in 2001. The "marriage" has no legal basis, it is merely online play. However, for some participants, it is a meaningful symbolic act. All applications to register a "marriage", delivery of the "marriage" certificate and virtual wedding ceremonies are handled in the forum named "Tianya Wedding Hall". Due to its asynchronous mode, wedding celebrations in the form of posting congratulatory remarks and images can go on indefinitely. The original post a couple initiates for their "marriage" becomes in effect their virtual home. As long as the couple continues posting or friends and family visit by posting messages, the virtual home will stay in the forum; otherwise it becomes submerged by the stream of new posts. A case study of cyber-marriage is presented in Chapter 5.
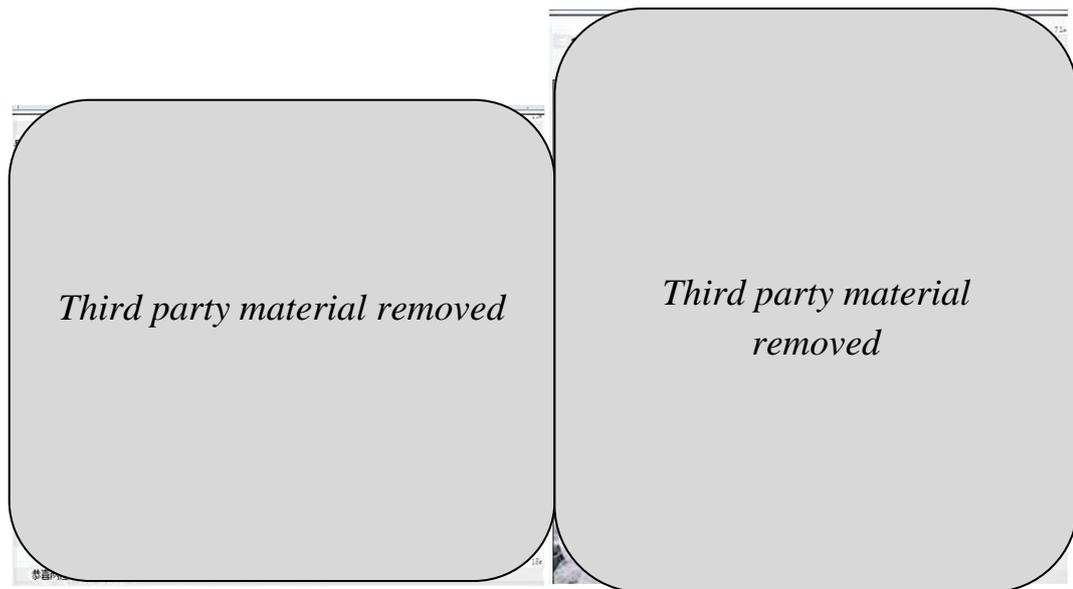
Example of Tianya marriage certificate   A makeshift wedding photo shared by a newlywed in Tianya

Love Apartment (LA) was selected for study because of its unique gaming appeal and its nature of edging towards a relationship or dating site. (I did not choose dating sites for the study because of their lack in wider community relationships due to their focus on private one-to-one relationships which are also too personal to observe.) The homepage of each member is presented as a virtual room with his/her avatar residing in the room. The members' profile is featured next to their individual room. Members can furnish and decorate their virtual room, beautify their avatar with fashion items using virtual currency that can be bought with real money. Writing online diaries and participating in advertisers' activities are also ways of earning some virtual money. Items are purchased only for a limited period of time and after the expiry date, items will simply vanish unless renewed. Some celebrities are also members of LA, and use it to interact with fans and as a publicity platform. Members can meet their "neighbours" by visiting their "apartment" and leave a message publicly or privately via an onsite mailbox, view their photo albums and read their blogs or diaries and comment on them. LA differs from other SNSs because members can also send invitations for "cohabitation", either with a same-sex or cross-sex member. Should the invitation be accepted, the two avatars would appear in the same room, usually standing next to one another. The nature of relationship for a cohabitating pair is publicly listed, and most describe their relationships as mere friends, close friends, soul mates, or husband and wife,

girlfriend and boyfriend, while other less common are family members and kin. Either party can move out at anytime, without having to inform his/her partner.

Virtual cohabitation in Love Apartment

Although Renren, Tianya and LA can broadly be categorized as SNS, the interactions they generate are not homogeneous in nature. My decision to study these sites was made based on the awareness that the Internet consists of heterogeneous domains with distinct structures, norms and technical protocols. These differences are likely to affect the dynamic and characteristics of online social interactions. I played the role of "observer as participant" when conducting the participant observation. I made my researcher's identity known in my member's profile. My research intention was made clear to members I had contact with in order to ensure informed consent. Most time was spent observing online interactions, reading others' posts or blogs and only occasionally participating in the discussions, or when I had questions to clarify. Being a Malaysian Chinese is an advantage when conducting participant observation. My background and familiarity with Chinese culture provided common ground to ease my interaction with the groups observed and also facilitated the interpretation of data collected. But growing up under an entirely different socio-political context has given me a beneficial distance from the in-group. It makes it easier for me to identify taken for granted ideological assumptions that appear natural for participants.

I adopted a Grounded Theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) in my data collection and analysis. I began my observation with no rigid preconceived theoretical assumptions. Notes were taken about the structure of the sites, online activities, special events, members' interactions, and meaningful posts were collected. The notes also included my own reflexive thoughts. I analyzed the notes for patterns and associations, and subjected them to thematic analysis. The ultimate goal is to identify key categories that shed light on the cultural distinctiveness of Chinese online relationships. Although I constantly reminded myself to guard against personal bias, my notes and final account of the participant observation presented in Chapter 4 are inevitably the results of my subjective interpretation.

As I am aware that public sentiments and discussion online may not always be consistent with mass media coverage of the particular issue due to the state's media control and censorship, I also analyzed news articles dealing with issues related to Internet initiated relationships available from the websites of China Youth Daily and People's Daily. Also included in my analysis of media portrayals of online romance is a reality show produced by a commercial satellite TV channel. The focal point of this media analysis is to identify the common media treatments and the general trend of coverage for the topic. I focused on these two publications because they provide a manageable amount of articles for analysis and most importantly, as the government's mouthpieces, their content reflects the party-state's directives and ideological control on public opinion. The objective is to assess the disparity or the extent of consistency between Chinese Internet users' relatively freewheeling discussion online and its counterpart of state regulated mass media representations. The findings of this analysis are presented in Chapter 4 prior to the discussion of the online participant observation.

Unlike email exchange and private group discussion, the online contents I draw on in this research are publicly accessible materials, not limited to members. The implication of open access is that the messages or information falls under public domain (Jacobson, 1999). Therefore, no individual contributors' permission was asked to include their posts in my study. Furthermore, as the research is for academic purposes, under the category of fair use, consent of the owner of the copyrighted materials need not be sought (ibid). However, I am aware of the ethical issues

involved in using this online source of information. The dilemma I face comes primarily from the conflicting demands of respecting the copyright of the original contributors and maintaining the anonymity of the contributors' identity. Cavazos (1994) argues that to quote without giving credit to the authors of any published written materials online constitutes infringement of copyright (cited in Mann and Stewart, 2000). But as pointed out by Elgesem (1996), private interactions do occur within a public context and the boundary between public and private is even more difficult to distinguish within cyberspace (cited in Sharf, 1999). Contributors' private disclosures in online discussion forums should not deprive them of the right for anonymity. Furthermore, since I am studying naturally occurring online discourse, those who are being studied cannot choose to exercise the same sort of control as the participants in online surveys or interviews where informed consent can be withdrawn easily. I resolved to base my judgement on whether to prioritize anonymity or copyright on the nature of the information I am dealing with. Highly personal confessions, messages containing private or sensitive issues warrant being treated confidentially. Other information would be used with credit to the authors.

All materials I refer to were originally written in Chinese. The subsequent survey and interview are also conducted in Chinese and I later translated the data collected into English. My role as both researcher and translator may have ensured greater transparency and consistency, but as pointed out by Temple and Young (2004), translation is more than a technical issue of transferring meanings from one language to another. Translation decisions have epistemological and ontological implications. My translation added another layer of meanings, despite my desire to feature participants' own voices more prominently and allow readers an active role in interpreting the original messages. Following Birbili's advice (2000), to best represent participants' words, in my translation, the structure, tone and style of participants are preserved as closely as possible, but not to the extent where word-by-word translation would seriously invalidate English grammar and risk distorting the meanings and undermining readability. In other words, minor grammatical error is tolerated and since I prioritize semantic equivalence over structure, I occasionally rearrange sentence sequence if it helps to better convey participants' meanings in English. It is not always easy to find English words with conceptual equivalence to the Chinese words. An example in this study is the words "*jingshen lianai*", literally

meaning "emotional love". However, the original Chinese words carry a connotation of the spiritual which the lexical equivalence of "emotional" has failed to reflect. Therefore, the risk of information loss when translating quotation is greater as additional explanation is precluded. It is not possible to achieve sameness with its source in translation and different translators would produce different versions of translation. The same translator can also choose alternative words to rewrite the account (Bassnett-McGuire, 1980). As the complexity of translation cannot be objectively resolved, what is required is increased reflexivity and awareness. Being reflexive on the different language use experienced by participants, researchers and translators would also provide valuable insights into the research (Temple and Koterba, 2009).

Compared to participant observation in the physical world, online participant observation is relatively easier to conduct, in terms of cost-efficiency, flexibility in participation and notes taking, minus the risk of physical danger associated with some research. The absence of physical embodiments between me and the people I studied, may on one hand reduce the problems of subject reactivity, researcher effects and going native, but on the other hand, make building trust and rapport difficult. Furthermore, the sheer numbers of people I encountered online made it almost impossible for me to maintain constant contact. The amount of information, new posts, and constant online activities on these sites were overwhelming at times and I found myself unable to follow as closely as I would have liked to. I stopped my participant observation after 10 months of study beginning from May 2009 as I was convinced that theoretical saturation had been achieved. This is when no major discoveries or new insights were being gained and I am confident that my account of the phenomena studied is comprehensive and sound for the purpose of my study. In spite of the drawbacks mentioned, no other methods could provide me with this degree of understanding and the amount of contextual information crucial for further study into online romantic relationships. The understanding I gained from my online participant observation guided the design of my questionnaire. It highlighted the important questions to ask and provided an opportunity to put to test the inferences drawn based on my participant observation.

3. Online survey

Playful attitudes to online romance and the conceptualization of online romance as exclusively Internet-based Platonic emotional love are some of the key findings that I aimed to verify using a survey questionnaire distributed online. Participants' perceptions and attitudes towards online romance can be effectively explored and measured using a survey. It also allows me to assess the degree of associations, for example how engagement in certain activities or possession of certain attitudes or perceptions relate to participants' demographic makeup. The second objective of the survey was to examine how Chinese netizens' online relationships differ characteristically from their western counterparts.

The questionnaire is divided into four sections, consisting of 60 questions in total, mostly close-ended questions with multiple choices. Section 1 sets to measure the popularity of online romance, respondents' perceptions and attitudes toward online romance, and the related issue of online infidelity. Section 2 explores the online acts of playing getting married and cohabitation informed by my participant observation. Participants without such experience are asked to proceed to Section 3 which focuses on personal experience of online romance. This section includes questions such as how participants met their lover, how the relationship ended or its future prospects, the role of physical appearance, online daters' levels of satisfaction, commitment, self-disclosure, idealization, intimacy, misrepresentation, patterns of relationship expansion, concerns or problems encountered, regular modes of communication, participation in online sexual acts and experience of online infidelity. Non-online daters are asked to proceed to the final demographic section. The questionnaire is deliberately designed not to begin with demographic questions in order to secure respondents' interest by first asking questions directly related to the research topic and salient to respondents. (Copies of the English and Chinese versions of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix I.) A pilot study was conducted to test the questionnaire before I published it online. The pilot study consisted of five males and five females who represented the prospective participants. Five of them are my own online contacts, the remaining five were randomly recruited in a university library in Sheffield. The pilot study helped to make sure the questions and instructions were clear, important questions were included and options were relevant.

The survey was hosted on a Hong Kong based commercial site which supports Chinese surveys, accessible at http://www.my3q.com/home2/235/ylchin/70890.phtml. Data collection began on 7 May 2010 and lasted for three months. To encourage participation, I offered a lucky draw cash prize of RMB300. I did not specify Chinese mainlanders as the target of the survey to broaden the criteria for participation. Nevertheless, the majority of my participants (77.6%) are from mainland China. Despite my anticipation of the difficulty of recruiting participants, it has proven to be even harder than I had imagined. My initial plan was to promote the survey at the sites where I conducted my participant observation, rely on my onsite contacts and snowball sampling to increase the response rate. However, I was barred from advertising my survey in Renren. I posted messages with links to my survey in two related forums. One caters for university students, dealing with research and study matters; the second is a relationship forum. However, I soon realized that both posts were taken down by the administrators without any explanation or notice. I later tried to invite other members to participate in my survey by leaving messages on their "walls". I enlisted these individuals from pre-existing posts discussing online romance. As soon as I realized this strategy was working to generate responses, I was prohibited from leaving any messages linked to my survey. A popup window suggested that my message was being treated as unsolicited advertising spam, probably the result of being reported by someone I contacted previously. The restriction was so stringent that it applied even to private emails sent to my "friends" on the site.

As for LA, since March 2010 only paid members can freely initiate contacts and respond to others' contact. This greatly limited my interactions on the site, together with other non-fee paying members as we were subject to "pay per view" requirements for every new contact. The site also stopped operating its discussion forum. All these unexpected changes seriously impeded my efforts to recruit participants online. To make matters worse, my access to Tianya was interrupted beginning in early 2010. Access was either denied or the connection lost after few clicks. My first thought was that the site might have been shut down by the government due to carrying critical remarks about the regime. But after contacting others I met on the site, I realized that this access problem seemed to occur only to

overseas users. I reported this problem to the site administrator, but the problem persisted throughout the data collection period. Ideally I would have liked to have had Internet users residing in China to take part in the survey, but I made a necessary compromise to look for participants within my own university. I spent a day looking through the university's internal message system to identify Chinese students based on their name, and sent them a message containing a link to my survey. It was only through this method that I began to see an improvement in the response rate. As the sample now consisted mostly of university students living in the UK, this inevitably has an impact on the results of my survey. In an attempt to balance the sample makeup, I intensified my efforts to recruit more participants living in China by venturing to other Chinese domestic social sites. As the survey closed, it elicited 134 responses from self-identifying "Chinese". The participants are predominantly students (70.1%), aged between 18 and 25, 59% of them were in the UK when they completed the survey. Bearing in mind the potential influence of living away from parents and exposure to the UK's culture, the physical location of my participants is treated like other demographic variables that might affect participants' responses. SPSS was used to analyze the data collected and details of the complete test results can be found in Appendix II while the discussion is presented in Chapter 5.

4. Interviews for narrative studies

At the end of my questionnaire, I invited those with personal experience of online romance who would like to take part in an interview to leave their contact details. The aim of the interview was to collect personal stories of falling in love online for the purpose of narrative analysis. Again I provided the incentive of entering a lucky draw to win a cash prize of RMB 400 to encourage participation. Despite the incentive offered, the response rate was again very disappointing. Out of the 19 participants who indicated their interest to be interviewed, 17 were from mainland China, the other two from Hong King and Taiwan. I decided to focus only on mainland participants for the purpose of answering my second research question. Despite their initial indication of interest, most did not reply to my follow up emails. Eventually I was only able to interview two of these participants. I recruited another two participants from Renren and Tianya. In spite of the limited number of participants, the narratives I gathered, shared with me via email, are illustrative and

insightful. Together they provide a meaningful account of the issues of Internet empowerment and agency in the realm of private relationships. The narratives collected and my discussion of them are presented in Chapters 6 and 7.

Narrative is defined as "discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience" (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997). Although narratives do not objectively reflect the world "out there", they are creatively authored for a definite audience with persuasive intentions (Riessman, 1993), their construction is nevertheless not a freewheeling process. Narrators have shared understandings, cultural resources and ideological assumptions with other members of the society. These cultural forces will impinge on the narratives constructed. Therefore, narratives can function as a means to understand both the individual, as well as the cultures of the society which the individual comes from. The narrative constructed not only reflects, but also perpetuates the prevailing socio-cultural structure. The audience also plays a part in co-construction because the narrative is created through social interactions between the narrator and the audience(s) (ibid; Elliot, 2005).

The main objective of my narrative studies was to gain an insight into the lived experience of online romance and its subjective meanings to the individuals. When participants recount their experiences of online romance, attention is paid to the language used, not merely to what is said, but why and how it is said, because attending to structure or form of the narratives should also shed light on the larger cultural contexts in which the narratives are embedded. Participants were given with the freedom to voice their stories in their own terms and in ways that matter to them. When participants recount their past experience, there are effectively engaging in a process of self-reflexivity to make sense of what happened. It involves a process of selection, ordering, invention of various elements in order to produce a coherent meaningful narrative (Elliot, 2005). Through participants' narratives, I attempt to identify the interpretative repertoire participants draw on in their discursive practice. What are the taken for granted cultural assumptions that require no further explanation and the opposite that have to be justified? Secondly, the analysis aims to unearth the meanings and motives of my participants' behaviours, their perspectives and sense of self shaped by their socio-cultural backgrounds.

My ultimate aim is to assess the significance of the Internet in their romantic life through their narratives, whether it contributes to maintenance of the status quo or liberates them from normative constraints and family expectations. In other words, the extent to which the Internet is able to empower them in juggling the conflicting demands and tension of freedom in pursuing romantic love on one hand; and compliance with norms and social strictures that compromise their agency on the other. Burke's (1989) Pentad is an analytical device useful to examine these narratives. Act, scene, agent, agency and purpose are the five basic forms of thought used to frame a situation in communication. They provide answers to the questions of what happened, the context in which it happened, who was involved, how was it done, and why or what is the intention. Prior to the interview, I conveyed my intention to elicit firsthand accounts of online romance to my participants. For ethical considerations, I forewarned participants that depending on their experience, they may find themselves having to recall unpleasant or even painful memories. Should the interview lead to overwhelming negative emotions that made them unable to continue, they had the right to withdraw at any time. This in fact happened to one of the participants. She however allowed me to use the data already collected for the purpose of this study.

Relying on participants' subjective narratives in research inevitably raises the issue of validity as participants may distort their past experiences intentionally or unintentionally. But situated within the interpretivist tradition, the central focus of this research is on the hermeneutic aspect of participants' sense making. It is neither my intention to claim, nor the aim of the study to provide an objective and transparent account of online romance in China. Drawing on Burke's (1989) study of language used makes me aware of the performative nature of human actions. It sensitized me to look for the underlying motives of "storytellers" whenever I came into contact with others recounting their experiences of online romance. Burke's emphasis on rhetoric also makes me realize that my presentation of participants' narratives, and in fact the writing of this entire research, constitutes yet another narrative, inevitably influenced by my biographical background, personal interests and values. The final account I present is not the definitive interpretation of the phenomena studied. It is exploratory in nature, not to be mistaken as claiming objective representation, and cannot be uncritically generalized to the more than 500

million Internet users in China. Narrative approaches to data collection and analysis encourage reflexivity as we recognize "ourselves as the narrators of sociological accounts, we are forced to examine our own role in the construction and maintenance of the social world" (Elliott, 2005:187). Before ending the chapter, I feel the need to justify my decision to conduct the research entirely online.

5. Methodological concerns of Internet research

I conceive online relationships as an extension of our embodied social relationships. Therefore, "virtual" should not be taken as unreal, as if participants' experiences online have no "real" implications in their offline world. Turkle's (1997) study shows that life within the virtual realm often crosses the boundary to infiltrate participants' life offline. Similarly, Kendall's (1999) participants draw on their offline resources and understandings when interacting with others online. This affects their own actions online as well as their interpretation of others' actions. Therefore, reproduction of offline norms and power relationships online should not be a surprise. While rejecting the online and offline dichotomy, the use of participant observation to study life online may raise the question of paradoxically treating cyberspace as a bounded field, "that could be examined in its own right, as internally meaningful and understandable in its own terms" (Slater, 2002: 541). This is precisely the position taken by Boellstorff (2008) in his study of Second Life (SL). His research was designed and conducted entirely within SL. For Boellstorff, virtual worlds are genuine sites of culture and as such, they are a legitimate locus of research. However Boellstorff's study is radically different from my research, in which participant observation is only the preliminary stage of my study. In my participant observation, the object of study is not the online communities but how the three selected sites provided me a natural setting to observe the culture and discourse of online relationships. Nevertheless my research, like Boellstorff's, is conducted solely online. Although including offline interactions with participants to verify the data collected, and contextualizing the findings within the offline realm, would be ideal, insistence on doing so is unwarranted. It is un-reflexive of the subject and context of my study. The people I am studying are falling in love with others they never met in person before and some even have no intention to meet face-to-face. Slater (2002) argues that whether or not offline information is needed

when studying virtual worlds depends ultimately on the research questions. Similarly, Mann and Stewart (2000) contended that it is both accurate to perceive virtual worlds as domains in themselves and an extension of actual everyday life, depending on the researcher's interests and research questions. The ability to contextualize online within offline is nevertheless an added advantage for gaining in-depth understanding.

Another related concern confronting Internet researchers is the authenticity of data collected online. Identity play and the ease of misrepresentation risk compromising the credibility of the study. However, the discrepancies between self-presentation offline and online, have been found to be less dramatic than might be expected (Baym, 1995b; Mann and Stewart, 2000). Age and other physical attributes may be easy to manipulate online, but deliberate distortion of interests, experiences, and other background characteristics are hard to sustain as these become the central topic of conversation over an extended period and deception can be detected through internal inconsistency (Cornwell and Lundgren, 2001). In fact, the anonymous setting online encourages candid revelations as participants feel less inhibited to share their true-self and less fearful of social disapproval when speaking their mind. This is because online interlocutors often do not have access to one's close social circle, hence minimizing the social risks of disclosure (Bargh et al., 2002). The lack of contextual and bodily cues online can also present a challenge for researchers studying unfamiliar cultures online. However, my familiarity with the Chinese culture helps compensate this practical pitfall of Internet research. Nonetheless, speaking from my personal experience, the most challenging aspect of conducting Internet research is researcher's sole reliance on the accessibility of the website under study. Access could be precarious due to the ephemeral quality of the web. Sites can simply vanish or become inaccessible permanently or temporarily, contents may be blocked either by the government or due to technical interruption. Access is also dependent on the whims of the site's administrators who can render the researcher powerless without any opportunity for negotiation. Even with the approval of the administrator, researchers can be subjected to some members' unpleasant flaming as they disagree with the administrator's decision to allow the research to be conducted on the site. It is to the Chinese party-state's didactic discourse of online romance in the domestic media that we now turn our attention.

4(a) Observing discourses of online romance: Representations of online romance in Chinese mass media

In China, the state's strict regulation on media has an inevitable negative impact on the media's credibility. Censorship instructions and reporting guidelines are issued regularly by the Central Propaganda Department and its subordinate bodies, and sometimes local authorities. Failure to follow these "directives from the Ministry of Truth" can be fatal to media organizations. Therefore, media representations of various social issues in China do not always truthfully reflect public sentiments, but instead mirror the official attitudes or stance on those issues. The party-state actively exerts its control on all media content to make sure they do not contradict the official line. Public opinion is carefully moulded into a favourable direction that also stamps out any other alternative views that the party-state considers inappropriate. Therefore, analysis of the ways online romance is portrayed in mass media should allow us to gain an insight into state approved attitudes towards the issue. My analysis involved news articles gathered from the websites of two state print media and a reality show produced by a commercial satellite TV channel.

As media narratives of online romance may not coincide with Chinese Internet users' own narratives of their experience, the analysis should also reveal the extent of discrepancy between the two. There are three objectives in conducting this media analysis. Firstly, to trace the overall trend of media representations of online romance from 2000 to 2010 in state media. Secondly, to identify the main media frame used to depict online romance which reflects the state's preferred reading of social affairs related to online romance. Finally, the state sanctioned media discourse is then compared with netizens' own accounts of online romance shared with one another in cyberspace with the aim of assessing any disparity between the two. The discussion begins with the state media's portrayal of online romance, followed by the reality TV show featuring an online romance couple's story. My analysis suggests that in China, online romance is officially perceived as a problematic social

issue. It is one of the harmful Internet effects that distorts public morality and is detrimental to the development of minors. As a result, the paternalistic state has to rein it in to protect the young and the family institution.

1. Chinese state media's portrayals of online romance

The following discussion is based on 446 news articles in which the word "online romance" appeared, either in the headline or within the body of text. These articles were gathered from the websites of People's Daily and China Youth Online, the mouthpieces of the CCP. People's Daily was founded in June 1948, and is published by the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The paper claims daily circulation of 3 million copies, and "is the most influential and authoritative newspaper in China" and one of the top 10 newspapers in the world (People's Daily Online, 2013). People's Daily provides the authoritative account of the state's policies and its editorial reflects the official attitudes or viewpoints on various social issues. Since the mid-1990s, withdrawal of state subsidies and market competition from other news sources has resulted in the commercialization of its content to attract advertisers and to improve readership. The online presence of People's Daily began in 1997 and the publisher of People's Daily now publishes more than 20 different publications, catering for both domestic and international readers with different interests, such as finance, investment, automobiles, health and sport, as well as regional newspapers. My analysis here is not limited only to the national newspaper People's Daily, but also includes the other publications hosted on the publisher's site.

Established in April 1951, China Youth Daily is the official paper of the Communist Youth League of China. It provides the official guidance for Chinese youths with regard to life in general, education, careers, sports and culture in particular. Millions of copies are circulated in state affiliated organizations, schools, colleges and universities nationwide. The publication claims to continuously rank within the top three in terms of credibility rating among all other mainstream national newspapers in the past ten years (China Youth Daily, 2012). China Youth Online is the website of China Youth Daily started in May 2000. Despite being the

first commercially run newspaper in China, China Youth Daily like other media, is subject to the influence of the state's Propaganda Department.

Method

I performed a keyword search for "online romance" (*wanglian*) on the website of People's Daily (http://www.people.com.cn/) and I limited the search results to news publications only, excluding blogs, photos and video clips, for the period of 1 May 2000 to 30 April 2010. The search returned 355 articles from a range of publications under the group of People's Daily. I conducted the same search on China Youth Online (http://www.cyol.net/) for the same period of time. The search excluded supplements, focusing only on the main edition and 91 results were found.

I coded each article into a category representing the media angle used when referring to "online romance" (*wanglian*). Although some articles fit into more than one category, they have only been coded once, depending on the main theme of the article. Six categories emerged from the analysis. "Negative outcomes" categorizes articles that centre on the dire consequences of dating someone met online. Representations of online romance in a positive light, or in a positive tone are coded into the "positive" category. The category of "neutral" groups together articles that are neither positive nor negative about online romance. 18.4% of the total 446 articles mention the term "online romance", but are not talking specifically about online romance. These are categorized as "mere citing". In these articles, "online romance" appears mostly once in passing and is not crucial to the discussion. 37.8% of articles in this category are promotional texts for new books, movies, or TV soaps in which online romance is the theme. When the terms are used in an obvious negatively value-laden way, but the article is not really about online romance, it is coded in a category of "negative association". Although not dealing with online romance directly, mere references to the term indicate its currency in the media parlance of a particular time, and therefore should not be simply eliminated from analysis. Last is the category of "Youth/ students" which encompasses reports of online romance involving this group of Internet users. Although this category could possibly be subsumed under the category of "Negative outcomes", doing so would

fail to reflect the significance of framing online romance as an issue of youth delinquency in which all parents ought to show extra vigilance.

1.1 Media framing of online romance

As mentioned previously, online romance came to prominence, especially among university students, following the success of Cai's romantic novel published in 1998. But falling in love with someone met online did not become a widespread social phenonmenon due to the low Internet penetration rate in the early decade of the 21st century. According to China Internet Network Centre (CNNIC), by the end of 2000, only 1.7% of the Chinese population had access to the Internet, compared to 39.9% by the end of 2012. With the increase of Internet population every year, online romance gathered momentum, turning into a popular trend, a marker of the Internet savvy and a media buzzword. As seen in the following chart, media references to online romance increased yearly from 2000 and reached a peak in 2003, followed by a steady decline, but bounced back in 2009.

Overall media reference to online romance
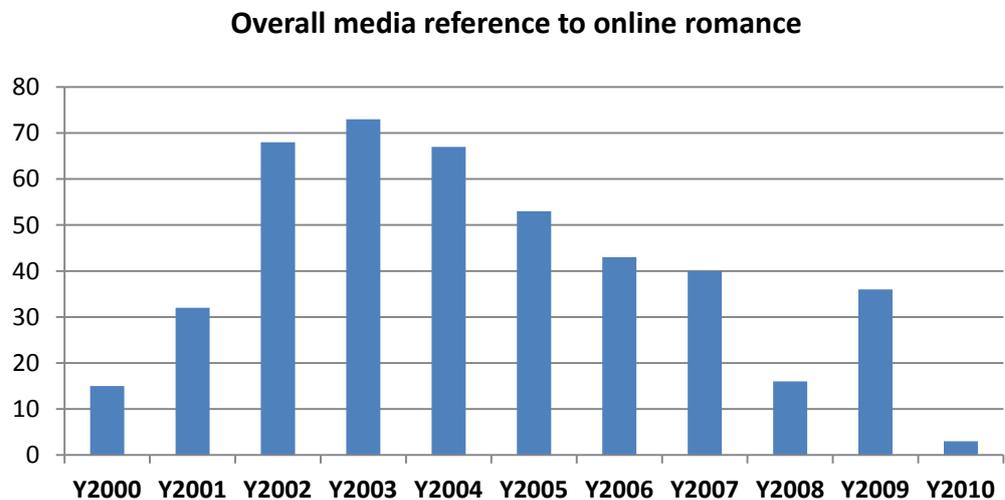
Media interest in online romance declined since 2003. An article from the People's Daily (2003a) labelled online romance as one of the outdated trends on a list of 18. The decline of media references to online romance could be due to the loss of novelty and/or the state's aim to silence or suppress this "problematic" social trend. A brief news item in the People's Daily (2005a) provides an example of the state's media instruction of "not to hype up online romance". The author began by

criticizing a prime time TV series showing on a local TV station in which the two main characters met online and eventually married. The author argued that online romance has resulted in many social problems and has a harmful influence on youths and adolescents. Such portrayal is irresponsible and online romance should not be encouraged, especially on prime time TV.

Media framing of online romance
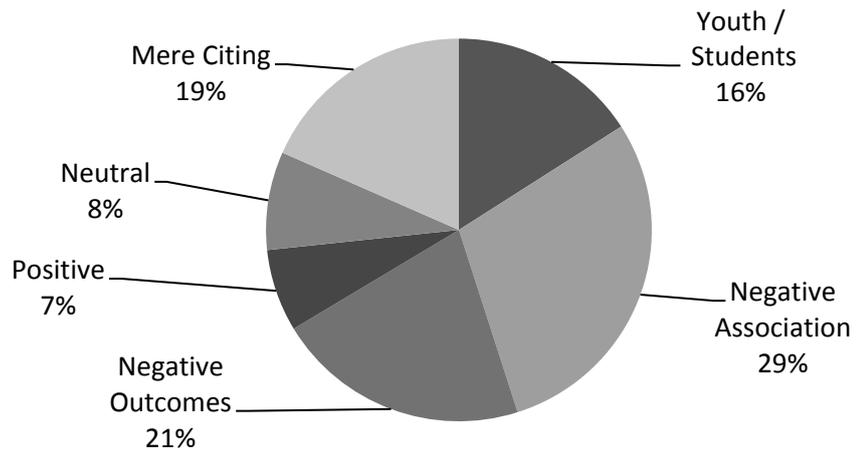
Half of the articles analyzed here represented online romance negatively, either leading to a tragic end or associated with other social problems. Examples of the former are "After being dumped, man strangled online romance girlfriend" (People Daily's, 2006a); "School teacher stabbed girlfriend more than 20 times on the street" in which a 24 year old brutally ended his online romance because of his girlfriend's new found love (People Daily's, 2004a); "Online romance formed a poor basis for marriage, violent attempt to reclaim brideprice" reported a case in which a man was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment because of his attempt to murder his extranged wife who refused to handover RMD 9000 brideprice he paid when they got married (People Daily's, 2007a).

Problematization of online romance can also be seen in the way the term is frequently used in association with other social concerns. Often "online romance" is embbeded in a string of social problems, for instance online addiction, pornography, school dropout, truancy, drugs, premature love, one night stands, extramarital affairs, premarital pregancy and love scams. This negative usage of the term suggests that

online romance is no different from other social problems. These negative media representations of online romance send out a clear warning to the society about the dangers of the Internet. This also lends legitimacy to the party-state's Internet control and censorship.

Online romance stories involving students or youths seem to be framed in a predominantly negative way. Internet addiction and obsession with online romance are represented as carrying the risks of falling into other degenerate behaviours with irreversible damage and ruining one's whole life, such as robbery, kidnap, online fraud, elopement, murder and suicide. Examples of headlines include "Travelling thousand miles to meet net friend, female university student died for online romance" (People's Daily, 2002a); "13 year old girl obsessed with online chat, runs away to cohabit with online lover" (People's Daily, 2007b); "University student robbed to go online to meet lover" (People's Daily, 2004b); "Girl obsessed with online romance, successfully rescued by police" (People's Daily, 2003b); "Female research student cheated of large sum of money by online friend" (People's Daily, 2005b); "Female university student took her own life after being robbed of her chastity by net friend" (People's Daily, 2006b); and "A wealthy young man killed his online lover and ended his bright future" (People's Daily, 2008). My analysis of the articles shows that females are more likely to be represented as the victim associated with online romance. Only 28% of the victims are male. Women are also simultaneously more likely to be the party who cheats in the media representation of extramarital affairs due to online romance. 59.1% of reported marital infidelity was caused by married women falling in love with other men met online, compared to only 40.9% of those committed by men.

Positive representations of online romance are scant, only 7% of the articles analyzed here can be categorized as positive. The most remarkable example is the love story between a Poland Presidential candidate and a female migrant worker in Shenzhen. 57 year old Mr. Stan Dimingsiji met with 37 years old Ms. Wu Mulan through a dating website. Wu relied on English translation software to communicate with Dimingsiji and they married in April 2004 after seven months of liaison (People's Daily, 2005c). There were also similar stories in 2001 and 2002 involving

foreign men (People's Daily, 2001a; 2001b; 2002b), but no reports of Chinese men marrying foreign women met online.

In a discussion of increasing numbers of student couples cohabitating outside their university campus, the author cited an example involving a dating dyad met online. The tone is surprisingly aprroving and sympathetic (People's Daily, 2002c). There were also stories of ordinary Chinese netizens who met their loved one online and married after overcoming many challenges. In China Youth Online, there were personal accounts of online romance that although not leading to a successful relationship, were highly valued by the individuals involved. Another article vividly depicted an online dater's intense emotional bond with his lover and longing to meet face-to-face one day (China Youth Online, 2002a). These positive references to online romance however tend to be concentrated earlier in the decade, mostly in 2002 but reduced subsequently and remain scarce in the second half of the decade (see chart below).

Pattern of online romance media representations over 10 years
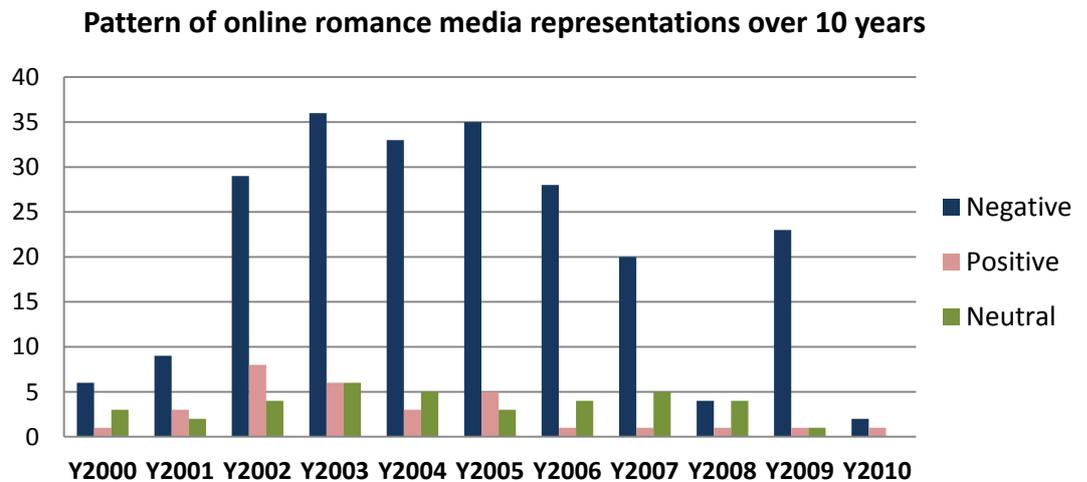
Neutral reference to online romance is as uncommon as positive portrayal. This category contains articles that discuss the pros and cons of online romance, for instance, "Online romance: rose or trap" (People's Daily, 2000), and "Is there true love in online romance?" (People's Daily, 2002d). There are two articles in 2004 discussing the Internet in general but mentioning online romance as an example. One argued that the Internet has brought many conveniences to everyday life and it is merely a tool not to be blamed for problems such as online addictions, social withdrawal, scams and spreading pornographic materials (People's Daily, 2004c).

Another article about protection of minors from the detrimental Internet influence focused on young netizens' social and emotional needs that lead to their dependence on the Internet (People's Daily, 2004d). Similarly, two articles in 2006 examined the motivations behind playing cyber-marriage (*wanghun*) (People's Daily, 2006c; 2006d). Many perceived cyber-marriage as an extension of online romance and controversial because it involves mostly students and also married adults. Another article in 2002 documented the experience of a young man who had diffulty in finding a date due to his short height who finally found his loved one online. They also "married" each other online. However when his "online wife" wanted to meet him offline, he rejected the meeting, worried that his disappointing physical appearnce would end their relationship (People's Daily, 2002e). In two separate articles featuring letters sent by readers in 2003 asking for advice dealing with online romance, both advisers did not immediately reject the relationships but advised the readers to move their relationships offline (People's Daily, 2003c; 2003d). In China Youth Online, there were three reports of online romance in Han (2008), Wei et al. (2007) and Han (2004) based on research involving the general public and university students. Another article in 2009 discussing the changing marriage institution since the CCP established the new China in 1949, cited online romance as a latest courtship culture (Lin, 2009). A similar article by Lin (2005) mentioned online romance as providing an option for many lonely hearts in contemporary Chinese society. The category of neutral also includes media reports of the profitable online matchmaking industry in China. Their reference to online dating is neither positive nor negative, but focuses instead on its market potential.

The 2009 sudden increase of references to online romance (mainly negative) in the state media is poosibly due to the government's Internet clean up campaign launched on 5 January 2009 which aimed to curb the so called vulgar culture spreading online. This campaign is listed on CNNIC as one of the important Internet developments for the year. As online romance is associated closely with other Internet related "problems" in media discourse overseen by the state, it becames one of the government's clear targets. The likely intention of increased negative media portrayals of online romance is to create a deterence effect. The campaign also included a crackdown on the online gaming industry and tightened regulations to reduce games' violent and obscene content that is argued to be particularly harmful

to minors. The Ministry of Culture mentioned cyber-marriages and requested game developers to limit this function (Hartono, 2009). As part of the campaign, the government made it compulsory for all old and new PCs to install filtering software, Green Dam Youth Escort, effective from 1 July 2009. But due to widespread protests and complaints from Internet users and IT business players, the authorities backed down to make the installation voluntary (Branigan, 2010).

Comparison between People's Daily and China Youth Daily
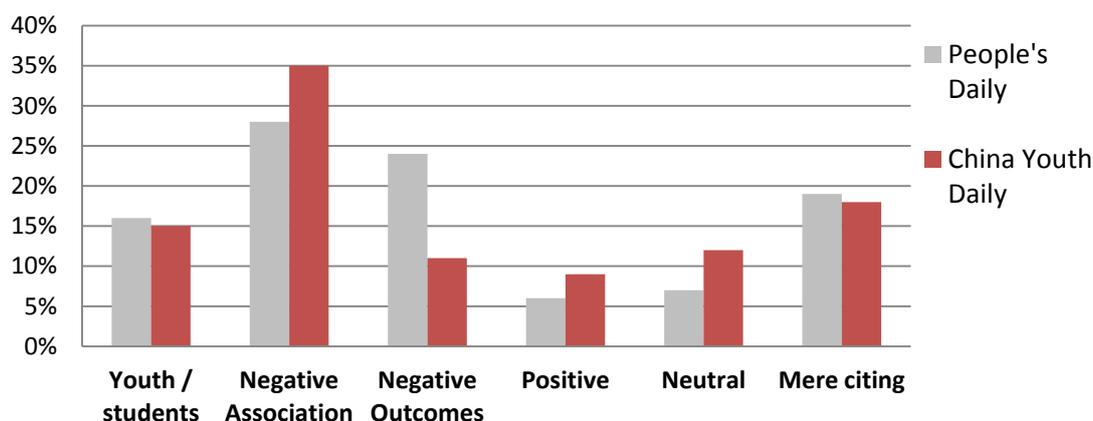
Overall, China Youth Online is more likely to represent online romance in both a neutral (12%) and positive (9%) angle than People's Daily at 7% and 6% respectably. But in both publications, negative portrayal is the norm. China Youth Online is less likely to focus on tragic consequences of online romance than the People's Daily, but often associated the terms "online romance" with negative connotations. In the media discourse, online romance is closely (but not exclusively) linked to youth delinquencies. Parents and school authorities are urged to be extra vigilant in guarding youngsters against the detrimental Internet effects on their psychological and intellectual development. Actually, protection of minors assumes priority in almost all developed and developing societies. The widespread media coverage of the dangers of the Internet to children and youth can be found across the globe from the West to the East. In her study of US youths' use of MySpace, Boyd (2007) rightly pointed out that the moral panic created by the mass media about the menace of social networking sites has its historical precedents, such as over rock and roll in the 1950s and reading novels in the early 1800s. "The message is clear - if you don't protect your kids from this evil, they too will suffer great harm to their minds, bodies or morals". In China, adolescence is identified as a distinct and crucial stage

for laying the proper foundations for the future, forming "correct" outlook and morality. Appropriate supervision at this stage provides life-long significance to the individuals, and also contributes to the nation's development and social stability (Evans, 1997, McMillan, 2006). In reality, adolescents' evolving reproductive capacity and sexual potential is the source of anxiety for parents and authorities.

1.2 Comparison between state media representations of online romance and netizens' own accounts shared online

Only in articles from China Youth Online am I able to find any resemblance to the discussions and narratives I observed online. This perhaps is not a surprise for a newspaper aiming at the young generation to tailor its content to reflect more closely the reality faced by the target group. These articles appeared mostly in 2002. For example, in "You are a shining star in my life" (2002b), the author wrote about a long-lost online relationship, yet still considered it sweet and memorable. His experience of gradually falling in love with an online friend despite his initial disbelief and rejection of online romance is a typical line of stories that stress the transcendental quality of the relationship beyond one's rational control. A separate personal account of online relationship talked about how a relationship developed unintentionally from online chat to telephone conversation and finally a face-to-face meeting. But the meeting was disappointing to both parties. The author is no longer willing to meet any online friend following that meeting that made him realize online relationships are best kept in cyberspace (Wu, 2002). Another article vividly described many online lovers' anticipation to talk to each other regularly online and longing to be with one another in person (China Youth Online, 2002a). My online observation confirmed that physical distance is indeed considered as one of the determinant factors in the success of an online relationship.

"Play/game", one of the key words in the discourse of online romance, is deployed in two articles published in 2002. One author described how she and her ex-online lover played along to pretend knowing and loving each other. But with the passing of time, the game drew to an end. Nevertheless, there was no heartache as they were aware of the rules of the game from the beginning (Yu, 2002). Another narrative is less fortunate because the relationship was one-sided with a lack of reciprocity from the man. The female author treated the relationship seriously but her

lover regarded it merely as play. She unwittingly became part of his play only realizing it after she was deeply in love with him. She considered the emotional pain she suffered as a penalty for not playing according to the rules (China Youth Online, 2002c). Based on my participant observation, narratives of this kind are rather common. Many netizens use game/play metaphorically to describe online romance, also reflecting the playful approach to online relationships many embrace, or arguably ought to adopt when relating online. This perhaps explains the taken for granted linking of online romance with online games as seen in many of the news articles analyzed earlier.

In a nutshell, Chinese Internet users' narratives of online romance shared in cyberspace capture the nuanced feelings of the participants and focus on the challenges encountered. This differs dramatically from the state sanctioned media discourse that relies on negative sensationalism to depict online romance. More detailed discussion of netizens' discursive construction of online romance experience and their views or attitudes is presented in the second part of this chapter.

2. Representations of online romance in Chinese commercial media

In the process of gathering the news articles I stumbled across a reality show produced and broadcasted by Hunan Satellite TV channel. This is one of the successful commercial media in China, claiming an average daily viewership of 127 million in the first half of year 2009, ranked third in the national TV ratings, behind two central state TV channels. The programme is called "8090", referring to its focus on the relationship problems and love stories of the 1980s and 1990s generation. On 22 December 2009, the programme featured a story of online romance between Yao Peng and his girlfriend, Mumu. The one hour long entire episode is available at tudou.com, the Chinese equivalent of youtube.com (Hunan Weishi, 2009). I decided to include this reality show in the discussion because of its insightful and illustrative content. Despite its dramatization, audience reactions in the studio provide a rare glimpse into public sentiments and attitudes towards online romance more readily than newspaper textual representations. The ways relationship problems were articulated in the show also throws considerable light onto the prevailing cultural expectations, traditional practices and social norms underpinning familial and

romantic relationships in contemporary Chinese society. Other than the studio audience, the show also invited a female psychologist, and a panel of mixed gender judges consisting of office workers, media representatives, parents, university students, and game players. The show began with a reconstruction of Yao's story. Mumu left Yao by secretly moving out from their flat on their third anniversary in October 2009. Yao said that he did not understand why Mumu left him and he loved her very much, hence turned to the show for help to find Mumu.

Online game turned romance

Yao and Mumu met through playing an online game. They fell in love with each other and got "married" in the game world. Their north/south physical distance did not hamper the relationship development. After four months of online relating, Mumu relocated to the city where Yao was living to be with him. Soon after introducing how the couple met, the camera panned towards the panel of judges to capture their disbelief and suspicious look of how people could fall in love prior to any face-to-face meeting. They expressed their further doubt in the authenticity of a relationship that initiated from game playing, implying the couple were naïve and unrealistic. Yao continues to recount his relationship with Mumu and mentioned that Mumu's parents, especially her mother's dislike of him was the main challenge they faced. They were not happy with him being unemployed. Yao later enrolled in college to study online games development.

Courtship norms of women marry up, men marry down and gender roles' expectation

The message left by Mumu seemed to suggest that she was emotionally exhausted, and unable to wait any longer for Yao, which Yao said was understandable because Mumu was seven years older than him. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the cultural norm is for men to date younger women and women at the lower end of the social ladder. (However this is not uniquely Chinese as it is also not uncommon for women in the West to achieve social mobility through marriage.) Although no longer a non-negotiable requirement in Chinese society, it is still the cultural preference. Divergence from this convention is a potential source of tension not only between the couple, but also their families. A seven year age gap was simply too great for everyone to ignore, including the panel, and Yao's non-

achieving background also made Mumu's choice questionable. The judges' reaction showed a consensus that Mumu's "marrying down" was one of the problems leading to the dissolution of the relationship. They argued that Mumu's age and Yao's lack of financial stability and accomplishment left her feeling insecure, and objection from her parents was not unreasonable.

Upon being contacted by the station, Mumu told the reporter that she decided to end the relationship because of her disappointment with Yao's immaturity, irresponsibility and dishonesty. She no longer trusted Yao and blatantly rejected the possibility of getting back with him. She also mentioned that none of her family approved of the relationship and they considered Yao unreliable and incapable of taking care of her. Mumu's reference to her family reaction to her relationship with Yao showed that dating in contemporary Chinese society is not a private affair between two individuals, but a familial business. The couple's disregard of established gender roles and expectation is arguably another source of concern for both families. The conventional practice of men marrying down eases the performance of traditional gender roles in which the patriarch provides financial support, guidance and protection to his young and dependent wife. While they were in the relationship, the couple seem to have played a reverse gender role in which Mumu became the breadwinner and paternalistic care provider. Yao's extended family members and his fellow villagers perceived him as Mumu's toy boy, seriously undermining his masculinity and dishonouring his family. The role reversal between Yao and Mumu represents a crisis of identity to both families.

The dangers of the Internet

Yao admitted that before they met in person, he spent most of his time in cyber-cafés playing online games. When he ran out of money, he lied to Mumu that he was ill and in need of money for treatment. Mumu gave him money without suspicion. Even after Mumu realized that it was a lie, she forgave Yao after his confession. Yao accumulated more than three thousands yuan debt at a cyber-café due to his addiction to playing online games. Mumu paid off the debt for him and thought that he would have learnt a lesson, but she was wrong. On several occasions, Yao told Mumu that he was going to work, but she found out that he was in fact playing games at the cyber-café. This revelation reaffirmed the state discourse that

online romance is largely problematic. Like so many females, Mumu was blinded by romantic feelings and became the victim of the anonymous Internet. Yao is also portrayed as the victim of the Internet's harmful effects. His addiction to online games, dishonest personality and failure to accomplish anything in life is again consistent with the official line that Internet addiction is ruining the life of many Chinese youths.

Inauthentic online romance

In the midst of facing mass criticism, a young woman stood up from the audience to defend Yao. Xiaoxi claimed to be Yao's online friend of two years, also met through playing the same online game where Yao met Mumu. However, it was later revealed that Xiaoxi and Yao had also married in the game world. While dating Mumu, Yao also met privately in person with Xiaoxi several times. Mumu knew about Xiaoxi but felt that Yao simply did not care about her feelings. Although Xiaoxi eventually admitted her admiration for Yao, she insisted that they were merely friends. Yao also claimed that Mumu was always his priority, which the judges mocked as this implied that Mumu was not his only love. They also poked fun at Xiaoxi, suggesting that she and Yao would be a better match since they are of the same age. Undoubtedly, Xiaoxi's presence is likely to have been prearranged by the producer to dramatize the show. Yao's relationship with her is nevertheless in line with the state moulded public view that online romance is far from genuine love.

Family intervention

Mumu said that she longer had any feelings for Yao and was convinced that they had no future together. She was now seeing a man introduced by her mother. When talking to the reporter, Mumu's mother mentioned Yao's young age, rural upbringing, Internet addiction, lack of ambition, joblessness and financial dependence on Mumu as the reasons for her disapproval. When asked about his family's reactions towards their relationship and Mumu's age, Yao said that his parents had no problem with Mumu being older than him and accepted their relationship. However, Mumu replied that she personally felt that his parents did not like her. The host then introduced Yao's aunt to the show to speak on behalf of Yao's family. Yao's aunt confessed that the family was indeed unhappy not only because Mumu is older than Yao, but also her being a divorcee. The camera captures

the panel and audiences' shock upon knowing that Mumu had been married before while Mumu looks down awkwardly. All these reactions confirm that the social stigma associated with divorce remains strong in Chinese society and is especially disadvantageous to women.

Yao's aunt insisted that love or feelings can be cultivated gradually after marriage, and it should not be the pre-condition for courtship. The audience laughed at her old fashioned thought and the judges argued that in urban society, romantic love is the only basis for marriage and there is no room for such feudal practices. Manifested here are clear cultural clashes between the rural and urban, as well generational differences. Having lived in the city for a number of years, the influence of rural social mores and traditions on Yao began to dwindle. He practiced romantic love, made his own decision to date Mumu and disregarded the social stigma attached to Mumu and their unconventional age difference. But moving the relationship offline meant embedding the relationship within a familial network. This is when social norms, family influence or intervention became inevitable. Despite their dissatisfaction with Mumu, Yao's parents and extended family tolerated his choice, never openly rejecting Mumu. In their struggle to condone modern romantic love, everyone in the family felt the pressure of violating the social mores which led to loss of face for the family within the village community. The "family's face" may not have taken precedence over Yao's feelings, but is certainly no less important. Yao's aunt also thought that Xiaoxi would be a better choice for Yao. Yao seem surprised to learn his family's true feelings and took personal responsibility for bringing shame to his parents and made a public apology to his family.

Social stigma of divorce

As mentioned in Chapter 2, remarriage for divorced women is much more difficult than for divorced men due to the cultural ideal of female chastity. When a divorced woman re-enters the dating market, she would be labelled as second-hand and hence, less desirable than those never married before. Yao's family blamed Mumu for seducing and corrupting Yao's young mind. While many criticized Yao for his relationship with Xiaoxi, Yao's aunt considered the relationship positively as it helped to restore Yao's masculinity and is potentially a corrective measure for the family's tarnished reputation. The show's psychologist concluded that the problem

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lies primarily in Mumu's insecurity and low self-esteem. The "diagnosis" suggests that Mumu is self-aware of her own past failure in marriage and accepted it as her key limitation. Perhaps convinced that this is all she could realistically ask for given her social inferiority, and also blinded by unruly romantic feelings, Mumu settled with Yao despite knowing his problems. Her three years of frustration, coupled with her parents' strong rejection made Mumu come to terms to end the relationship.

The importance of background (class) compatibility

While Yao's family despised Mumu's divorcee background, Mumu's parents look down on Yao's rural family background. This reflects the longstanding social tension between urban and rural population, a legacy of the household registration system (*hukou*) introduced in 1958. This was the state's measure to control the mass migration of rural population to major cities in the interests of structural stability. Although the system has been partially dismantled since the 1980s, it has not been officially abolished. Urban residents not only enjoy better living standards and social security, but also are perceived to have higher cultural tastes than rural residents (Qiu, 2009). This system is not only widening the gap between urban rich and rural poor, but is also divisive and subjects the latter to social discrimination and prejudice. In summary, both families agreed that Yao and Mumu's backgrounds are simply incompatible for different reasons.

This reality TV show shines a light on the contemporary courtship culture, norms, familial practices and other social tensions confronting today's Chinese youths in their pursuit of romantic love. If Yao and Mumu had met in the offline world, their knowledge of each other's backgrounds would have been very likely to deter the formation of a romantic bond. Although they both intended to defy the social strictures that discouraged their union, they were ultimately "normalized". The show ended with Mumu's rejection of Yao's proposal even though Yao had already found a job. By proposing to Mumu, Yao made a public display of rebellious spirit in the name of love. Mumu on the other hand, felt obliged to listen to her parents' opinions and take into account the family interests. Although the Marriage Law guarantees an individual's right to choose their own marriage partner, parental influence over children's romantic life continues and the exercise of this power has been transformed from coercion to a combination of consensus and tacit

interventions. As mentioned in Chapter 2, any relationship without the blessing of both families is not likely to last long.

In conclusion, my analysis of Chinese mass media texts suggests that negative portrayal of online romance is the norm. Media narratives of online romance are mostly didactic in nature and fail to reflect the pluralistic voices' of netizens who share their experiences and opinions online. State sanctioned media discourse of online romance has the effect of stigmatizing online daters and turning "online romance" into a derogatory term. The online communities' accounts and interpretations of online romance, together with those depicted in mass media are contesting with one another and collectively shape the public discourse of online relationships in China. In the second part of this chapter, I will refocus my attention on netizens' discussion of online romance observed during my participant observation on the domestic Chinese social networking sites.

4(b) Observing discourses of online romance: Chinese netizens' experiences and attitudes towards online romance

The following discussion is based on my participant observation on the Renren and Love Apartment (LA) social networking sites and the Tianya bulletin board. The discussion forums and personal blogs of these sites are fruitful areas to explore. The personal narratives of online romance shared by netizens and their understandings, opinions and attitudes toward online romance provide clues to answer the research question of *how does culture influence the ways Chinese Internet users conduct romantic relationships online*. Personal narratives shed light on the larger socio-cultural context and how it might have impact on the individuals' life experience and their identity as they reflect on their own sense of self in the process of recounting their experience (Elliott, 2005). Forum participants form a community of support as they seek each other's advice in dealing with their online relationships. The Internet provides netizens a public discursive space to construct their own accounts of online romance and to exchange opinions with others who share a similar interest in the issue.

In my participant observation, I examine the ways participants make sense of online romance, the words they use when describing online romance, their definitions and perceptions of online romance, and attitudes toward it. For those who have personally experienced online romance, attention is paid on comprehending the meanings they assigned to the relationship, the feelings involved, problems encountered and how the relationship ends. The first section deals with the ways Chinese Internet users define online romance. Section 2 details the overall public sentiment towards online romance. In section 3, I introduce language used to talk about online romance. *Yuanfen* (destiny), *jian guang si* (perish upon seeing light), distance, presence, "Platonic" emotional love, virtuality and game/play are the keywords in the discourse of online romance in China. Throughout this discussion, I

rely on participants' quotes to make my arguments and to preserve their voices, minor grammatical mistakes are tolerated in my English translation of the original quotations.

The keywords mentioned earlier relate differently to each other depending on participants' perceptions of online romance. I categorize Chinese netizens into romantic realist, sceptic and pragmatic fantasist; and their relationships to those key conceptual issues are illustrated by means of a typology in section 4. My observation showed that the public discussion of online romance has shifted from the early years' debate on the possibility of finding genuine love online and the prospects of these relationships, to the sharing of personal experiences and challenges encountered in online relating in more recent years. The subsided public debate of the pros and cons of online romance suggests that it has lost its novelty and is becoming a mainstream option for courtship. Despite being a common experience, online romance is far from gaining wider social approval. Although the Internet has facilitated the telling of online romance narratives in public, these online narratives have however not been able to challenge the dominant stories of courtship based in the face-to-face world. Drawing on Plummer's (1996) study of sexual storytelling, section 5 concludes the chapter with the political process of telling narratives of the self.

1. Meanings of online romance

Although the term "*wanglian*" (online romance) is frequently used, its precise meaning varies and is not clear to everyone. For some, it refers to romantic relationships initiated online and gradually expanded into the offline world, maybe even cumulating into long-term relationships or marriage. This is close to the common understanding of "online romance" used in the West. But substantial numbers of Chinese Internet users also understand online romance as the act of romancing online, or referring to exclusively Internet-based relationships. By definition of the words, "wang" means net and "lian" refers to love, online romance would indeed imply romantic relationships happening and confined within cyberspace. Some are simply confused between the two, for instance, Zhang Caiyuan who has developed a romantic relationship with another Renren member shared his experience on the website's forum in which he said:

I think I have a misconception of online romance. Online romance is a romantic relationship taking place online without any offline interactions. I met her online, but our relationship developed in the offline world, I think strictly speaking, it cannot be categorized as online romance. This is a very ambiguous concept (2009-02-17 08:32).

Similarly, Jipingliuer from Tianya participated in a discussion that asked could online romance become an offline reality, replying that "*I think online romance is not the same as turning an online acquaintance into a courtship partner*" (2005-6-16 11:13). The answer suggests that the author thinks the two are different romantic experiences that should not be conflated. Other nuanced differences of online romance mentioned in my introductory chapter that cause confusion include whether it applies to romantic relationships that developed only after face-to-face meetings, and amorous affiliations developed online between partners who were first introduced by an offline friend. In short, "*wanglian*" (online romance) denotes not a single homogeneous type of computer-mediated relationship and its contestable meanings have led to different implications depending on the way the term is used.

For the purpose of this study, I will focus on the two main types of online romance as defined by Chinese scholar Zeng (2004) in his theoretical discussion of online romance. The first type are romantic relationships that exist exclusively online in which couples confine their interactions within cyberspace and refrain from having any offline contacts with each other. The second type are relationships that rely on the Internet merely as a tool for communication in which couples first met online but gradually expand their relationship into the offline world. These relationships are ultimately not very much different from conventional courtship. A similar definition is also used in research of online romance involving 4811 students across nine provinces in China. In the report, online romance is defined as Internet initiated relationships that flourish into romantic bonds, remaining either exclusively online or materializing into the offline world (Wei et al., 2007). The definition provided in Chinese literature nevertheless seems to emphasize the presence of romantic sentiment prior to any offline interactions. In other words, in the Chinese definition, couples that met online but only become romantically involved after

meeting in person and spending time together offline would not be considered as online romance.

The definition of online romance in China intrigues me because western literature on online romantic relationships is concerned mostly with only the second type. For instance, Parks and Floyd (1996) argued that the Internet would eventually become obsolete as online couples flexibly switch between the two worlds; Merkle and Richardson (2000) highlighted how online relationships develop through an inverted sequence that eventually leads to face-to-face meetings; McKenna et al. (2002) conducted a path analysis to explore the sequence of moving online relationships offline; Baker (2002) defined successful online relationships as those that cumulate into long-term courtship, cohabitation or marriage in the actual world. Although it does not mean that exclusively Internet-based relationships do not exist in the West, or all western online daters desire to move their relationship offline, it does however show that this type of relationship is not on the top of western scholars' agenda, presumably because this type of relationship is perceived, rightly or wrongly, to be insignificant or impossible. For example, Ben-Zeev (2004) argues that "profound online only romantic relationships", distinct from those intended to find offline sexual/romantic partners or superficial cyberflirting/cybersex, are transitional and unsustainable. Without embodied interactions offline, these relationships are incomplete. His underlying assumption is that people typically want to expand the relationship offline, but this does not apply to all Chinese Internet users as some of them made their choice to confine their romantic liaisons online. The immediate reason is to isolate the relationship so that its potential negative impact on offline life can be minimized. As seen in the later discussion, this "incompleteness" is indeed desirable for some, because confining within cyberspace, the effectiveness of the relationship to fulfil couples' emotional needs would be enhanced yet without creating too many complications in their everyday life.

2. Public sentiment towards online romance

On 21 May 2005, a Tianya member with the ID Vkb4545 started a discussion in a forum dedicated to online relationships. The title of his post asked "could online romance become reality", refering to the possibility of moving online romance

offline and turning it into long-term courtship or even marriage. He personally did not think so, despite having the aspiration to personally experience it. The post continued to attract responses and as of the time of writing, the last reply was dated 9 February 2010. It seems that public opinion and attitudes toward online romance remain constant, despite online romance having become much more common in recent years than in 2005. A significant number of respondents (45.34%) believe that online romance could turn into offline reality. Most of them argued that it does not matter where couples first met because the crucial elements are genuine love and commitment from both sides.

> *The Internet is only a tool to get to know each other. Whether or not it could become a reality depends on the individuals* (Nuoya123, 2005-7-16 14:32).

> The *Internet is only another way to meet, no different from a friend's introduction or meeting on the street. The success of a relationship depends on both parties' commitment to make the relationship work and trustworthiness* (Kalendianzai, 2006-4-10 17:39).

> *The Internet provides us tools to connect with others…whether you found true love online or were heartbroken, it has nothing to do with the Internet… as long as you are serious, true to the relationship, there will be true love* (Wanzhouqiancha, 2009-3-31 17:52).

Some of the proponents of online romance are informed by their personal experience of online romance or had witnessed others' successful online romance. For instance,

> *My brother and sister-in-law met online, their baby is one year old now… so I believe in online romance. It is also a kind of destiny. As long as you are true to the relationship, you would have no regrets regardless of how it turns out in the end* (Siniandexingfu, 2005-6-17 22:18).

> *I believe. My online romance has turned into reality, we are getting married* (Dongcuidengyujun, 2009-10-1 11:07).

Only 15% of replies rejected the idea of expanding online romance offline, or do not think that it is possible. They either spoke from their disappointing personal experience in the past, or their conviction that the quality of the relationship is better when kept strictly within cyberspace.

> *Limiting the relationship online, not to materialize it is better than making it a reality. It will stay perfect forever in your heart* (Gudanbeiyiwang, 2007-8-15 15:29).

> *Dust is dust, soil is soil, online is online, reality is reality. I have reservations towards online romance* (Xiaoxi, 2005-6-2 19:47).

Substantial numbers of respondents (30%) possess an ambivalent sentiment towards online romance, suggesting that they do believe that online romance might become a social reality, but it is the exception rather than the norm.

> *The chances of online romance turning into reality are very slim* (Shuiyao_83, 2005-7-1 20:51).

> *I am not sure. I met a very good lady online, but our differences in the real world are huge. I dare not tell her that I love her…* (Zw0822, 2005-6-17 03:20).

> *Actually, there is not much difference between online romance and traditional romance… but I dare not try* (Zuochengyouan, 2006-3-25 13:50).

It seems common that many of the participants began with a dismissive attitude, but as online romance happened to them, it softens their attitudes and yet they remain unconvinced and uncertain about the future of their online relationships. For example,

> *I don't believe [in online romance], but it happened to me. We met not long ago, but it felt like we have known each other long and very well… he has become part of my everyday life, he teaches me a lot, I trust him and he is gradually changing me* (Tinaye, 2007-7-26, 02:19).

Online romance is a question of distance. I met a guy online, but I don't know how long the relationship could survive. I am afraid of losing him. It might be better if we never began the relationship (Xiaoyururu, 2009-9-9 13:40).

Similar discussions can also be found in Renren. In its relationship forum, online romance is a rather common theme that I encountered regularly. Since most of the members are university students and young adults, it is perhaps not a surprise that they are concerned with courtship and their dependence on the Internet makes online romance more likely to happen to them than to other age cohorts. For example, Longting, a female member said that "*almost all of my dates in the past began online and expanded into the offline world*" (2009-9-4 10:25). Experiences of online romance shared by Renren members are mostly positive. There are plenty of personal testimonials of online romance resulting in long-term relationships, engagement and marriage.

I met my lover online and we have got engaged. Both sides of our parents approved it [the relationship] and we will be getting married next year. We are very happy ... The Internet is only a platform for making new friends, there is nothing wrong with it, as long as you know when to turn the virtual into actual (Wu Guifang, 2009-9-3 15:03).

I feel lucky that I have had an online romance before ... Although the relationship failed, it left behind a sweet and unforgettable memory ... I wish I could have another online romance in the future and succeed in the end (Yang Bo, 2009-8-15 18:59) .

I met my girlfriend online, we have been together for 4 years ... We have met each other's parents, and are planning our engagement next Chinese New Year .... (Wang Yong, 2009-8-11 19:40).

I had an online romance. Went online, played game, met him online, chatted regularly, chatted overnight, exchanged instant messaging, talked on the

phone, met in person, went on dates, married, now getting ready to deliver
baby (Zeng Weijun, 2009-9-28 22:12).

These positive sentiments and outcomes of online romance suggest that this generation of netizens are able to deal with online romance better than their predecessors. This is likely to be the result of their early exposure to the Internet, and their dependence on it increases their skills and experiences. Although critical remarks of online romance, such as calling it merely a social trend lacking in substance, driven by loneliness more than love, not worth taking seriously because the chance of success is too low, and online romance participants are naïve and normally have a disappointing physical appearance, are also present in the discussion, these nevertheless are the minority views.

On 17 July 2009, LA hosted a public debate entitled "can online romance work"? Members took part by submitting their views through diary writing. It attracted 109 pro online romance entries and 31 argued against it. Even among those who argued for online romance, many also stressed the risks involved and difficulties entailed. Despite this pessimism about online romance's prospects, many highlighted the transcendental process of being in love online over its outcome. The viewpoints presented were generally similar to those offered by Tianya members but with one obvious new thread of argument absent in Tianya's earlier discussion. The more recent discussion of online romance showed a clear trend of emphasizing on how online romances play a key part in satisfying lovers' emotional needs and providing solace in the face of adversities encountered in everyday life. This issue will be explored in detail later in the discussion. In summary, the Chinese Internet users I encountered, on one hand possess a romantic aspiration to relationships online, but on the other hand, are also aware of its practical challenges that make it harder to have a happy ending than relationships initiated face-to-face. Although the majority of participants are in favour of online romance, substantial numbers of them also harbour an ambivalent sentiment. This is perhaps not a surprise considering that it was the novel, *The First Intimate Contact*, by Cai (1998) that first created the hype about online romance in China. For many, online romance is akin to a romantic fiction that can hardly exist in reality.

In the following section attention is turned to examine the words frequently used by netizens when talking about online romance. These words reflect the conceptual issues of online romance and are relate especially to the relationships' perceived drawbacks.

3. Keywords of online romance

3.1 Destiny (yuanfen)

In Chinese, "*yuanfen*" is a concept rooted deeply in philosophical tradition. Chinese people traditionally believe in destiny and accept its arrangements in life. When it comes to matters of interpersonal relationships, the concept remains prominent even in today's Chinese society. In his study of Shanghai youth's sex culture, Farrer's (2002) participants frequently referred to karmic destiny when constructing their romantic narratives. Drawing upon Cao Xueqin's *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*hunglou meng*), the classic Chinese literature of love, Paz (1993) differentiated the notion of love in the East from the western understanding of romantic love. In the former, love between two individuals is a fate imposed upon them by the past, or more precisely, it is the manifestation of karma beyond individuals' control. In other words, relationships are prearranged based on people's previous lives. On the contrary, in the West, romantic love is the manifestation of individual freedom, autonomy and the right to choose. The success of a relationship lies in the hands of the relating dyads more than any invisible karmic force. Although *yuanfen* conveys a sense of passivity, relationships based on *yuanfen* carry an aura of authenticity and inevitability.

In their discussion of online romances, many participants applied the concept to account for the success or failure of an online romance. The word has been used on 30 occasions in the Tianya post mentioned earlier, also among LA and Renren members in their debate of the practicality of online romance. Some of the examples include:

> *I like online romance because it allows people who have never met before to*
> *come to know each other, this is essentially yuanfen, prearranged to happen*
> (Lansky, 2009-7-21 16:11).

Depending on yuanfen, there are many successful examples of online romance (Wulili949, 2009-4-29 13:59).

Perhaps online is not practical, but it also depends on yuan. I didn't believe in yuanfen before, but it was yuan that brought us together; we met because of yuanfen. With yuan we became friends, with yuan we became lovers! (Vkb4545, 2005-5-28 17:54).

I absolutely believe in online romance. With yuanfen, people will eventually meet even when separated by thousands of miles (Badaizhanglao, 2005-5-24 10:18).

I think online romance could work, as long as you are serious about it, believe in yuanfen, you will eventually meet your other half (Ezy, 2009-7-23 22:14).

It isn't easy to find mutual love; it isn't easy to meet the loved one you can also get along with. It is yuanfen. If you have found it, please appreciate it, if you haven't, please be patient (Lanruoer, 2009-7-23 09:58).

Online romance isn't impossible, my husband and I met online while we were in high school. We dated 5 years happily and on 9 September 2009 we received our marriage certificate. When yuanfen arrives, it makes it [online romance] possible (Zhang Lili, 2009-9-28 15:03).

My boyfriend and I met online, with yuanfen we were enrolled into the same university. 5 years now, we have also graduated… (Wang Yueyue, 2009-9-2 14:19).

It was destined to happen by yuanfen, I have been a member for three years, but I never came across anyone who I can really talk to. But it all changed on one night, when CC left a message in my mailbox. Although it was a meaningless message, we were brought together by it. Everything happened

naturally and effortlessly. Because of her, I came to believe even more in yuanfen (Mangutang, *no date*).

The citations above show that *yuanfen* or destiny is an unexplainable and unpredictable natural external force that has a direct impact on the dynamic of relationships. It mystifies and endows relationships with a positive moral evaluation. Online romance like other relationships is also subject to the influence of *yuanfen*. Therefore, many argue that the question about whether or not online romance works is a question that tests their belief in *yuanfen*. It is frequently used to account for the first encounter with the loved one, particularly when it was seemingly impossible or difficult for the meeting to happen. Without *yuanfen*, no matter how much effort is put into sustaining the relationship, the relationship is likely to be short-lived. Therefore, *yuanfen* is also the language used to comfort those who have split from their loved one because there is nothing anyone could do to defy *yuanfen*. The quotation below from a female LA member conveys this sense of helplessness to challenge the karmic force.

> *Because I don't have transformational power to change the reality, although I miss you and love you, and I would like to give you the whole world but the world doesn't belong to me. Our online romance is sure to go nowhere. There are too many factors involved, no matter how much effort we put in, it is inevitably a song with no lyrics* (Neishui, 2009-7-21 16:29).

By the same token, because couples with *yuanfen* are destined to be together, so any obstacles they face will ultimately be resolved. Hence, *yuanfen* also becomes "a metaphysical corrective to the inherently fickle nature of feelings" (Farrer, 2002: 197).

Chinese cultural belief in karma leads many to perceive that major events happening in one's life are not random, but predetermined as if a right path has been prearranged waiting for the individual to discover and explore. People who believe in *yuanfen* are similar to what personality psychologist Rotter (1966) called "externally controlled people". They are more likely to consider events affecting them as inevitable since they are dictated by powerful external forces that are beyond

their control (cited in Dion and Dion 1988). Internally controlled individuals on the other hand, consider themselves as the master of their own life, actively exerting control to make changes. One's levels of perceived "personal efficacy as a causal agent" (p.266) has a direct implication on any effort of self-empowerment. Therefore, depending on individuals' predisposition, the Internet in general and online romance in particular, maybe able to empower and transform some Internet users' lives but not others. The issue of empowerment and online daters' agency will be explored further in Chapter 6.

3.2 Perish upon seeing light (jian guang si)

This term was invented uniquely to describe the most common problem of online romance, which is the difficulty to survive after moving offline. It becomes the basis for the conviction that most online relationships work well and can only exist within cyberspace. Any act of transferring a relationship offline is likely to result in great disappointment and end the relationship. Most of the online romance sceptics are against it because of this problem. For instance, "*no doubt there are examples of online lovers turning into real life partners, but not all online romances have happy endings, most are jian guang si*" (Guoguo, 2009-7-19 19:43). Their conviction is in fact consistent with Ben-Zeev's argument (2004) that extending online romance into the offline would demystify the divine and idealistic love and contribute to its termination. Only a small fraction of online relationships could survive the onslaught of social reality in the offline world. Awareness of this problem has made many online daters hesitate to arrange face-to-face meetings with their lover. For instance, Yashu from Tianya initiated a post to ask for others' advice of whether or not he should meet his online lover of four years.

> *We have known each other for four years, from online friend to online lover. For many reasons, we have never had the opportunity to meet in person. I will be graduating soon in a couple of months time, I would really like to meet her. But I am afraid that the outcome would be the same like so many online romances – "jian guang si"* (2006-3-27 10:43).

Proponents of online romance like Yazhuer from LA, encourage online daters to overcome the fear of *jian guang si* and to give the relationship a chance:

If it is indeed 'jian guang si', it is still better than to let the relationship perish before even meeting, or struggling between life and death (2009-7-20 20:41).

The root cause of *jian guang si* seems to lie in the discrepancy between one's imagination online and the face-to-face reality. Research has shown that the anonymous setting online not only provides communication partners the opportunity to engage in creative self-presentation, but also encourages the idealization of the partner (Walther, 1996; Bargh et al., 2002). Many online relationships fail because of the mismatch between participants' expectations and the reality presented in front of their eyes when they meet in person, either because of their lover's physical appearance, manners, or the discovery that his/her actual background is disappointing, and this subsequently leads to loss of chemistry feelings. Joinson (2003) has warned online daters against having unreasonable expectations prior to face-to-face meetings. But for some Chinese Internet users, "*the attractions of online romance lay squarely in its differentiation from reality*" (Grace, 2009-7-20 14:19).

I also don't know why I only seem to be attracted to online friends. Perhaps it is the distance that creates the beauty of online romance (Lala aichi xiangjiao, 2006-1-20 16:05).

Therefore, confining online romance within cyberspace is the way to make it forever wonderful. As long as you don't destroy the distance [keeping the gap between expectation and reality], you will never lose it (Hong, 2009-7-23 11:39).

Unlike *yuanfen* (destiny) that applies to all social relationships, *jian guang si* is an online romance specific term. However, the problem it refers to is not culturally unique as the same issue also confronts online daters in the West. Although *jian guang si* is related to the problem of "distance away from reality", Chinese netizens also used the same word "distance" to talk about physical separation from their lover. This is yet another frequently mentioned limitation of online romance.

3.3 Physical distance

Online relationships reported by members of these sites, whether ongoing or in the past, involve mostly couples who are physically separated far apart. The most frequently cited online spaces where they first met their lover are QQ instant messaging chatrooms and while playing online games. Unlike relationships initiated from online dating sites in which members with a clear objective of finding romantic dates would usually look for others who are close in proximity to ease face-to-face meeting (Whitty and Carr, 2006), romantic relationships reported here happened as a by-product of regular online interactions, therefore they very often involve individuals from different provinces. Physical distance becomes the main obstacle for those who intend to make the romance an offline reality. For instance,

> *I told myself not to believe [in online romance], but I am in love. I would like to overcome the challenge of distance but he said he can't. This is online romance … unless you both live in same city* (Wangleyoudeyu, 2005-6-12 16:22).

> *Online romance's success is negatively associated with the distance between the lovers* (Manman chuhua, 2005-5-26 22:55).

Similarly, in replying to the discussion of "do you believe in online romance", Luo Wuzheng from Renren simply replied that "*if from a short distance, may stand a chance to succeed*" (2009-9-26 10:22).

In line with Baker's (2002) study, the willingness of at least one partner to relocate becomes one of the factors that affects the success or failure of online relationships. Many participants delineate the dilemma they face between choosing to live with their online lover or parents. In China, most adult children continue to live with their parents. Work, study and, for females, marriage are the three legitimate reasons to move out of the family house. Many feel that they have the duty and responsibility to stay with their parents and to look after them, especially when they are the sole child. As a result, physical distance is the most likely factor that leads to the dissolution of online romance taken beyond cyberspace. "Distance" used in Chinese discourses of online romance also relates closely to the concept of

presence, the felt existence of the lover and feelings of being together with him/her. Although presence is normally felt through embodied interactions, physical absence or disembodiment can also induce the feeling of presence through the signifiers of immediacy, simultaneity and spontaneity (Milne, 2010). However, for some online daters the prolonged absence of their lover due to the spatial and temporal distance is indeed a problem.

3.4 Presence

Online daters frequently highlighted the lack of tactile interactions as one of the main drawbacks of online romance in which the simple act of holding hands, kissing, hugging, going out together can only be a dream that takes time to realize, or may never be realized in some cases.

> *A loving couple's simple act of holding hands, strolling down a street, not to mention a passionate kiss, can easily outweigh the value of exchanging hundreds of text messages* (Ermodang, 2009-7-20 22:04).

Many online daters lament the pain of being in love yet unable to be with their lover.

> *I'm here in the south, you are there in the north, we are just like the floating clouds on the two sides of the sky, can only look at each other from a distance, but can never be together* (Neishui, 2009-7-21 16:29).

> *Longing for the loved one you can't be with, you just have to be content with unrequited love. We can only wish for each other because when we need love and care, he/she isn't there for us…We can only passively think of the loved one, waiting for him/her to text or phone when convenient* (Baobeibuku, 2009-7-22 10:30).

The author of the last post highlights the loss of personal control many online daters have to endure because of the long distance. It subjects many into playing a passive dependent role at the mercy of a dominating lover. She is convinced that dating someone online is not likely to result in a fruitful ending. Perhaps to comfort herself, she wrote "*I was told that true love is about the process of loving, not its outcome.*

An unfinished tale might be regretted, but it can also be wonderfully memorable (2009-7-23).

For those who intend to extend their romantic relationships offline, the body remains paramount not only because of couples' longing for corporeal intimacy, but the presence of the body also reaffirms online daters about the existence of their relationship. Most online daters expressed ontological doubt on their relationships, especially prior to the first face-to-face meeting. They may have experienced telepresence of each other before but only co-presence in the physical sense can assure online daters that their lover and the relationship they formed online really do exist. So long as their bodies are not directly involved, regardless of how intense they felt, what has been said or done before, they remain uncertain of whether anything real has actually happened or if it were merely an illusion. A female Renren member illustrated this sentiment vividly in her post entitled "Once disconnected from the Internet, how long can our love last?"

> *Many times, I told him I miss him, he replied that he misses me too, but there's nothing else we can do. Those sweet talks of hugs and kisses no matter how intense, are cold, we can't feel the warmth. At best, it is a moment of exhilaration, but we can never feel any tactile sensations…. We can see each other through the webcam online, but when we reach out to touch each other, we can only feel the cold computer screen…. Often we talk about our flaming love online, like a rising sun shining through our face, but immediately after disconnecting from the net, I wonder is he still thinking about me? … We are deeply in love, but once we are offline, are we still in love and how long could it last? One day, two days, one week, perhaps yes. But one month, one year? No, for sure* (Wang Mudi, 2009-7-6 04:02).

Letter writing has long proved that the absence of corporeality did not prevent relationship formation. Often the materiality of the letter comes to stand for the correspondent's body due to its physical contact with its author. This is particularly obvious in romantic exchanges where the letter is kissed, cried over, and held in place of the lover's body (Milne, 2010). Unfortunately, online daters do not have the same opportunity due to the immateriality of CMC. Even if they print out the

exchanges, the content appears standard and unable to reflect the uniqueness of each individual. This is echoed by Wang Mudi,

> *Writing using computers is not the same as hand-writing… I long for those old days of exchanging hand-written love letters. These letters can be kept for years, it leaves the traces of love [to remind ourselves of the past loving memory]. But now, our love exists online, what kind of proof can we have in cyberspace? Once we disconnect from the net, who can prove the existence of our love?*

Underpinning the author's sentiment is the ephemeral nature of the Internet. The surrealistic feelings many online daters lament are encapsulated in the metaphors they sometime use to describe online romance, such as water in a cloud of mist, a flower seen in a mirror, and the reflection of the moon in water. These are entities you can see and feel its presence but cannot physically get hold of. What bodily involvement yields is the feeling of certainty in which lovers obtain an assurance of the ontological existence of their online relationship. "It is as if, by being physically together, lovers can pinch not only their own selves but their mate as well, to reassure themselves that what is happening to them is really real, that they are not dreaming or imagining things. It is as if, intuitively, the body serves as the ultimate token, the proof and the guarantor of the reality of their experience of being – or of having once been – together, really together" (Weitman, 1998:76).

Due to their physical separation, most Chinese Internet users also refer to online romance as emotional love. Sometimes the term "Platonic" is used together with emotional love to reflect the absence of corporeal interactions, also emphasizing the emotional intensity of online romance.

3.5 "Platonic" emotional love

During my participant observations, I regularly came across participants referring to online romance as emotional love, talking about how it could provide emotional solace (*jinsheng weiji*) to lovers that would help to rejuvenate their worn out self.

Online romance, even if you can't be together, you can at least enjoy the illusionary quality, the most pure emotional love. Even if heartbreaking, it is still a wonderful and unforgettable [experience] (Luohuarumeng, 2009-7-30 19:58).

Most people's everyday life is full of regrets and adversities, and the dull daily routine makes everyone crave for excitement. In the real world, too many worries and inhibitions make it difficult to relieve tension. The Internet can satisfy these needs, gratify people's imagination, albeit just virtually, it is a way to relieve tension. People can then get on with their study or work when back to the real world of everyday life. Online romance is the emotional supplement [that invigorates] the everyday life (Jimogaoshou, 2009-7-23).

Life is full of frustrations. Unable to find what you wish for in real life, then the Internet is the best you can count on… Nothing wrong with going online to unwind and readjust your emotion. So moderate online romance is actually good [for the individuals] (Xueshangfeier, 2009-7-23 23:07).

The last two arguments are underpinned by a utilitarian attitude to strategically make use of online romance to promote lovers' psychological wellbeing. It reflects the pervasive therapeutic ethos of contemporary society in which emotional life is "in need of management and control and on regulating it under the incessantly expanding ideal of health" (Illouz, 2007:63). Achieving emotional competence, "namely self-awareness, the ability to identify their feelings, talk about them, empathize with each other's position and find solutions to a problem", becomes imperative to success in both public and private lives (p.69). Online relationships are particularly good at helping participants to develop their emotional competence as the performance of intimacy online relies on constant verbalization and exchange of private inner feelings. Nevertheless, not all online daters are satisfied with mere emotional interactions, yet their physical separation makes regular corporeal interactions difficult.

Although this relationship is only online, can only stay in the virtual world, I know what we can gain is only the emotion of love [as opposed to bodily manifestation of love]… (Baobeibuku, 2009-7-22 20:30).

The warmest of online love you can hope for is in the form of text, at best the voice of the lover. When in trouble or feeling upset, emotional support is what you can get …there isn't a shoulder for you to lean on …no open arms to comfort you. When you needed him/her the most, you might not be able to get hold of him/her, like a loose kite flying on the sky … (Fanfan, 2009-7-19).

Describing online romance as emotional excluding actual bodily interaction reflects the way some Chinese Internet users understand online romance as romancing exclusively online. Although the relationship can be extended to the offline world, it ideally should be confined within cyberspace.

In cyberspace, emotions become even more crucial. Social interactions seem much purer. Romancing online, everything turns illusionary yet wonderful, like a fairytale … (Stefanie, 2009-7-22 19:52).

Online romance is largely about emotional solace; it brings emotional support and happiness but when the relationship grows deeper and becomes an offline reality, everything will not be the same (Fanfan, 2009-7-19 20:37).

Online romance literally means romantic relationship online. So what can you rely on to maintain the relationship? Occasionally seeing each other using webcam? Getting intimate through the keyboard? Sometimes online romance indeed provides us a unique feeling, a sense of emotional comfort, but …. (Ermodang, 2009-7-20 22:04).

"Platonic" love is frequently used interchangeably or sometimes together with emotional love to refer to these exclusively Internet-based romantic relationships devoid of physical embodied interactions.

Platonic love ~ ~ very much the theory of online romance ~~~~ (Maio Chenlin, 2009-9-26).

Online romance is the legendary Platonic love. If you wish for true love, you should believe in yuanfen arranged meeting with the loved one in the real world…. (Zhe, 2009-7-21 14:48).

While Feizhou Xiaobainian (2009-7-23) celebrates the opportunity provided by online romance for many to experience "Platonic" love, Keerhu argues against using the Internet to pursue "Platonic-style emotion love" as he considers it pathological to demonize the body and sexual pleasure in a relationship (2009-7-21 22:10).

Some online daters choose to partake in "Platonic" love by which I mean they have no intention or desire to expand the relationship offline and are content with the relationship's mere online existence. Others reluctantly become "Platonic" online daters as they are either unable to overcome the physical distance that separates them or to defy the social norms that discourage their amorous liaison, for example if they are already married or from different ethnic backgrounds. Despite their longing for corporeal intimacy, this latter group of online daters unwillingly accept that they cannot make their relationship a social reality. As they called themselves "Platonic" lovers, they unintentionally broadened the meaning of "Platonic" love to include also relationships with erotic impulses which regrettably cannot be consumed. In other words, "Platonic" love used in Chinese discourses of online romance refers to emotional love without physical interactions, but might not necessary preclude sexual desire.

Those pursuing "Platonic" online romance by choice seem to approach their relationship strategically for self-gratifying purposes. They rely on this relationship for the excitement or distractions needed to spice up their banal everyday life, to satisfy their unfulfilled emotional needs, and to provide solace in the face of life's adversities. They carefully demarcate the online and offline world to limit the negative impacts their online activities may have on their offline life and show no sign of confusing the two. There is a clear priority put on the offline reality and they utilize their online relationship to improve the quality of their daily life. They are

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therefore content with the disembodied presence of their lover in the virtual world, motivated not by physical intimacy. Calling their online romance "Platonic" love not only conveys a sense of lofty spiritual love unsullied by carnal lust, it also softens the image of a cheating partner as a mere online emotional liaison is allegedly innocuous. Although there are also "Platonic" online daters who genuinely appreciate the coming together of the two minds, and treasure the deep emotional bonds that develop as a result of their regular mutual self-disclosure, most netizens' viewpoints suggest a rather practical attitude towards online romance.

> *Life pressure in contemporary society is enormous, there is nothing wrong with using online romance to rejuvenate one's life. Many people's family life is not perfect anyway. Chatting with several boyfriends and girlfriends online doesn't make it worse. It can perhaps even improve the family relations* (Wodeaizaoyibuzai, 2009-7-30 13:58).

> *Family life is tedious and boring, but most people refuse to be content with the prosaic life. Everyone is longing to re-experience passionate romantic love, injecting new exciting elements into life, but there is a heavy price to pay for infidelity... Online romance easily fulfils this emotional void ...* (Baobeibuku, 2009-7-21 09:40).

3.6 Virtuality

When talking about online romance, it seems inevitable for many participants to use the word *xu*, meaning empty, hollow, feeble, illusion, unreal, fiction and misrepresentation. Those who are sceptical of online romance base their arguments precisely on this notion of *xu* or virtuality. They assume it to be the intrinsic property of the Internet, contrary to Slater (2002) who argues that virtuality is a social accomplishment in which users may or may not choose to realize or value it. The following are examples how the word is being used.

> *We don't care if this illusionary love online lasts forever, but we treasure the moments when the two hearts are mingling together* (Baobeibuku, 2009-7-22 10:30).

I think most netizens have experienced online romance, including me, love in an illusory and dream-like realm (Ermodang, 2009-7-30 12:54).

Online romance is too perfect, like a colourful sweet dream that many refuse to awake from its charms; online romance is too hollow, you can never get hold of the lover's heart on the other end of the line (Baobeibuku, 2009-7-21 09:40).

Through online romance, we can alleviate the feelings of inner emptiness. Although the Internet is a fictitious world, you can be truthful and searching for authentic love online (Ezy, 2009-7-23 22:14).

The Internet has its virtual side, but also its genuine side… The one you talk to in the virtual online world isn't virtual… (Jinyou, 2009-7-21 12:32).

The mask of misrepresentation worn by most people when online also reflects their inner true-self because under the protection of the mask, people are more likely to express their true-self. Of course, there are also many who take advantage of the Internet to commit fraud (Fengbuyiyang, 2009-7-23 00:30).

The Internet presents the best mask… you can become another you…no one knows. What hides behind the deceptive mask, [could be] a love scam, genuine love, play… (Fanfan, 2009-7-19 20:37).

While Fengbuyiyang and Fanfan use "mask" to metaphorically refer to identity play and misrepresentations online, Guoguo uses "mask" to describe the situation in the face-to-face world where most people are pressured into masking their true emotions and opinions. *"In the online world, facing the computer screen, pressure is much less; we can stop pretending, engage in open and truthful textual exchanges with others. These authentic interactions push two hearts closer together …."* (2009-7-19 19:43).

From the above quotes we can conclude that most participants are concerned with being duped or cheated by their online lover, and some are feeling insecure as the love they experience online seems illusory. Because of their perception that the Internet is inherently virtual, online romance by extension becomes a risky pursuit. Yet despite the virtuality of the Internet, many also argue that cyberspace is occupied by real people and the emotions expressed online are genuine. The contention that people can be more truthful and authentic online than in the face-to-face world due to the safety provided by the relatively anonymous context which facilitates mutual self-disclosure has been proven in several studies (see for examples Whitty and Gavin, 2001; Tidwell and Walther, 2002; Derks et al., 2007). However, for online daters who desire to expand their relationship offline, knowing the lover's actual self, as expressed and practiced in everyday life is more important than understanding his/her clichéd true-self. Most netizens are aware of the discrepancy between the self expressed online and offline, and consider this a problem of misrepresentation.

A person's online self is not the same as his/her offline self. Therefore, the relationship should start from friendship not romantic love, and gradually understand each other via offline interactions (Py19860219, 2005-7-14 14:28).

Online romance should only be online, it cannot be extended to real life. The Internet is a virtual world, people you meet online are not the same person offline. You can't be sure of his/her character, life circumstances, family etc. Therefore, it is alright to have online romance, but you cannot transfer the relationship offline (Hongsexianrenqiu, 2009-07-30 08:23).

According to Pizicai [the pen name of Cai Zhiheng, author of the infamous online romance novel, The First Intimate Contact], the Internet gives birth to three types of people. Firstly, people who express and prioritize their secondary personalities or characteristics when online; secondly, those who become the type of person they wish to be when online; lastly, those who become the person they know they never can be in the real world…. The one you love online may turn out to be an entirely different person in the offline

world. Therefore, online romance is incomplete and it can rarely survive the offline transference (Ermodang, 2009-7-30 13:48).

What Cai (1998) argues in his novel is in line with the psychological theories of possible selves that differentiate between the ideal self, ought-to self, and true-self which are distinct from the actual self, the representation of self exercised in everyday life (see Whitty, 2002; Bargh et al., 2002). The comments above are in fact consistent with the findings of Whitty's research on online dating in Australia where respondents rated dates that actually lived up to the description presented in their profile as honest and genuine. They are not impressed by those who express their "true self" or the "real me" online but showed no resemblance to the individual they met face-to-face (Whitty and Carr, 2006).

3.7 Game / Play

Virtuality also renders cyberspace a playground for fun. The term "game" or "play" is frequently used to describe online romance by those sceptical of online romance. They express doubt in online daters' levels of commitment and the authenticity of the relationship. This scepticism often also turns into cynicism as they urge online daters to adopt a playful approach to the relationship to avoid getting hurt. Not surprising that this creates a self-fulfilling prophecy for "players" as they fall in and out of love more quickly than those who take the relationship seriously.

Online romance can be described as a type of adult game, it is illusory and cannot be materialized (Wodeaizaoyibuzai, 2009-7-30 13:58).

... online romance is only a play, a dream (Guoguo, 2009-7-19 19:43).

Online romance is love play, whoever becomes serious, he/she will be the loser (Taxiangyu, 2005-5-28 14:41).

Games are governed by rules, online romance also has its rules. The rule is never take it too seriously, if not, it would turn prosaic, frustrations would also ensue. Plagued with too many miseries, it would no longer be online romance (Baobeibuku, 2009-7-21 09:40).

The author of the last quote suggests that online romance's enchantment would vanish when it stops being a game. She continues to argue that online romance is fascinating because "*it has no responsibilities. Love without responsibilities is relaxing, but at the same time illusionary… just by talking everyone can enjoy being in love, no monetary investment required, not much obligation and is mutually entertaining, such a good deal should indeed be encouraged*!"

It is perhaps not a surprise that many participants associate online romance with games because most indeed met their lover while playing games online. Relationships originating from the play domain often become the target of online romance critics. Even the players themselves express doubt in the seriousness of their relationships. But some participants are also aware that there are advantages in deliberately treating online romance as a game. A playful approach helps some to cope with the inherent conflicts between reality and virtuality. Through play, the real is rendered virtual and players have the opportunity to work out their problems and test out options available (Kane, 2005). Getting sexually or emotionally closer to someone met online, yet calling it mere play has the effect of trivializing the relationship and making it appear harmless because play is not real and should therefore be free from any practical and moral consequences.

Feeling desirable, becoming a playboy or playgirl online is also a boost to one's self-esteem. As play, even if the relationship fails, the consequences are light. "*Online romance is not real romance, so even if split up, it would not result in too much pain*" (Jitenglian, 2009-7-23 16:37). The playfulness of online romance renders it unreliable, but a low investment, low risk romantic pursuit that in turn encourages netizens to explore and experiment with love online. Players have low expectations on what they can hope for because commitments are rare and therefore unburdened by the force of serious love. They enjoy their online relationship as an end in itself, and continue relating as long as it brings laughter and good feelings. If a consensus is reached by both parties to treat their online romance in a playful manner, it could be mutually liberating.

4. The three conceptualizations of online romance

In summary, based on my observation online, most Chinese Internet users have a positive sentiment towards online romance but are not optimistic about its prospects in the offline world. Yet despite all the doubts and cynical comments about online romance as unreal fantasy, its charming appeals are hard to resist. Online romance provides netizens an opportunity to experience par excellence romantic love taking place within its own magical realm away from everyday life (Illouz, 1997). The above discussion also suggests that Chinese Internet users conceptualize online romance in three different ways and they can be categorized as romantic realist, sceptic or pragmatic fantasist. The relationships among all the key conceptual issues examined above are related to the ways online romance is perceived.
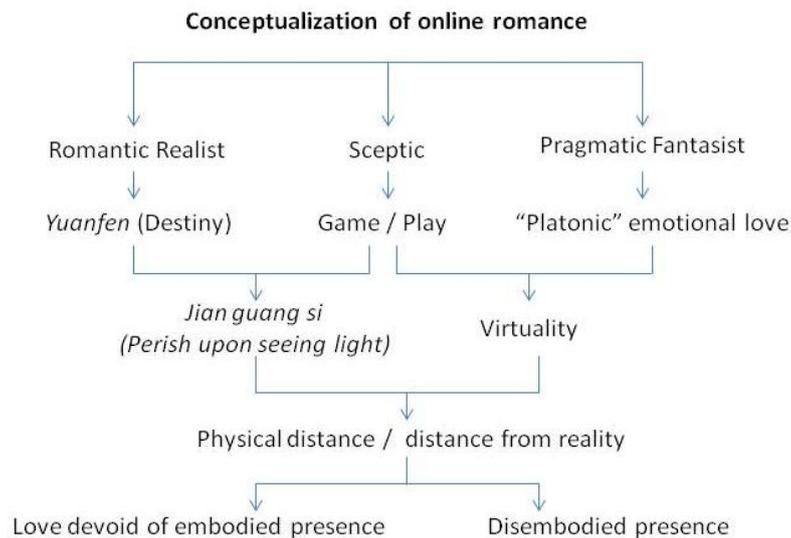
Diagram above shows how the key conceptual issues of online romance relate to one another. These issues represent the problematic features of online romance, but can also be taken advantage of by netizens depending on their conceptualization and attitude towards online romance.

4.1 Romantic realist

Romantic realists are rational netizens who are aspiring to turn online romance into a social reality. They perceive online romance as not essentially different from romantic relationships initiated in the face-to-face world. In fact, relationships online built upon a foundation of constant emotional exchange and deeper mutual understandings are considered to be more meaningful by some. Like other interpersonal relationships, online romance is also governed by the traditional principle of *yuanfen* in which fated individuals will eventually meet regardless of the medium. They argue against the idea of "romancing online" and understand online

romance as initiated online but gradually expanding offline and potentially cumulating long-term courtship, cohabitation or marriage. This perception of online romance is consistent with the dominant understanding of online romance in western literature.

As romantic realists harbour the intention to move online romance offline, sustaining the heightened emotion and turning it into offline reality is the challenge and *jian guang si* (perish upon seeing light) is their immediate concern. Having realistic expectations and not to deliberately misrepresent oneself online are advice given to couples to help overcome this challenge. Perish upon seeing light is not the only worry that puts many online daters off from meeting in person, physical distance between the two can be a practical problem too. Until either one relocates to be with the other, regular bodily interactions are impossible. Having to endure romantic love devoid of embodied presence is one of the serious drawbacks of online romance for romantic realists. Many online daters in this category lament the pain of being deprived of corporeal intimacy.

Overall, the reservations netizens show towards online romance are closely related to their realization that technologies do not liberate human beings from the constraints of physical distance and embodiment which are paramount to the maintenance of romantic relationships. Advice given to the online daters often includes regularly spending time together offline to truly understand each other and to make sure both get along well. If the relationship survives *jian guang si* and is successfully transferred offline, it will then be subjected to the same influence of social conventions and familial norms that typically control people's dating behaviours, for example family disapproval, "w*e dated online for two years and went offline, it went well, but was eventually destroyed by family members ...* (Wujunnan, 2009-10-4 01:07). Similarly, Yuanqi from Renren talking about his own experience of online romance in which he gave up his love because his girlfriend's parents disapproved of their relationship and she even committed suicide after a heated row with her parents over their relationship. He left his girlfriend to spare her from enduring anymore parental pressure (2009-7-23 01:17).

4.2 Sceptic

Those not in favour of online romance are mostly sceptical about the feasibility and authenticity of online romance. Their apprehension lies beyond the problematic tendency to contrast the virtual with the real. The emotions involved are real but the relationship is far from genuine love. Online romance for them is a free play of make-believe, an imagined fairytale that is fun but transient, therefore should only be consumed incorporeally within cyberspace. They are also likely to oppose the idealistic model of romantic love characterizing most online romance.

In cyberspace, emotions become even more crucial. Social interactions seem much purer. Romancing online, everything turns illusory yet wonderful, like a fairy, untouched by worldly concerns… If everything stopped here, it would be fabulous (Stefanie, 2009-7-22 19:52).

Online romance has enchanted beauty, online romance makes some people obsessive, online romance makes love even more romantic, online romance embellishes life with the beauty of confusion. But no matter what, regardless of how much more beautiful is online romance, it is just too virtual (Ermodang, 2009-7-30 13:48).

Jian guang si and the virtual nature of online romance that frees participants from social norms and moral obligations are the main worries of online romance sceptics. Their sceptical attitude towards online romance often also turns into cynicism when they call for a playful approach to online romance and argue that it is unwise to take online romance too seriously as it is just an inconsequential game. Those who desire to move the romantic relationship offline would be regarded by the sceptics as confusing play with reality. It is a futile attempt because transcendental romantic affairs are always short-lived. They argue that the excitements and enchantments of online romance lie precisely in its virtual nature with a distance away from reality. It allows misrepresentations and sustains the illusion of a fairytale with heightened and volatile emotions. As they subscribe to the realist model of prosaic love, they are critically aware of the incompatibilities between idealistic online romance and the semantic and phenomenological properties of everyday life which is tedious and occupied with earthly petty concerns and chores (Illouz, 1998).

I think online romance is only suitable in cyberspace, when it goes offline, its quality is deteriorated (83gzhuazi, 2009-4-10 09:01).

Reality is never as good as the virtual world. It is romantic, because the Internet hides its ugly side. Only when keeping the online romance within cyberspace, does it remain perfect" (Heizi, 2009-7-27 00:01).

Therefore, they argue, the best way to deal with online romance is not to expect too much from it, not to commit oneself to the relationship and just play along and enjoy the feel good affects it brings.

4.3 Pragmatic fantasist

This refers to those netizens who have an apparent paradoxical approach towards online romance. On one hand, they interpret online romance in a utilitarian manner based on its therapeutic value. On the other hand, the relationship is appreciated for bringing the all-consuming feelings of romantic love which, according to Illouz (1997) is in decline, undermined by the therapeutic ethos of love that calls for a rationalization of emotions and stresses self-realization in relationships. Online romance presents the opportunity for netizens to re-experience the stereotypical image of romantic love originated from the European cultural history of courtly love (Swidler, 2001). This can be seen in the way many online daters described the experience of being engulfed by the flame of passionate love beyond their rational control. The outpouring heightened emotions have a mysterious self-transforming and transcendental quality. It allows lovers to put aside all worldly concerns, such as status, background differences, social norms, and concentrate only on their innermost feelings with the ideal lover. Ironically, these feelings of stereotypical romantic love also provide pragmatic fantasists with the therapeutic functions of distraction away from the miseries felt in everyday life and through the constant practice of "disclosing intimacy" online (Jamieson, 1998), they also come closer to being a self-reflexive subject. Therefore, they treat online romance as an effective means to the end of self-help and improvement too.

Under therapeutic culture, online relationships could be empowering as they help couples to deal with their emotional emptiness and pain, preparing them to cope with the tensions and uncertainties resulting from the volatile and chaotic nature of selfhood and social relationships in late modernity (Illouz, 2007). The therapeutic model of relationship also helps individuals to discover their true-selves and become autonomous persons leading an authentic life (Swidler, 2001). Despite the romantic undertone, couples engaging in this type of online relationship may not necessarily consider their relationship a serious romance. Often they are regarded as flexible, contingent and open forms of emotional relationships not motivated by sexual desire. Although some participants may have longing for physical intimacy with their partner, this desire is usually not acted upon. This is because they either made their choice to confine their liaisons online or their real life circumstances discourage them from doing so, for example they are already married or too far away from each other. The decision not to have anything to do with each other offline is made for several reasons: firstly, to limit the online relationship's negative impact on the primary relationship or family life offline; secondly, to help sustain its magical quality that is crucial to invigorate their tedious everyday life and make them feel rejuvenated.

Since pragmatic fantasists have no strong yearning to expand online relationships offline, issues such as *jian guang si*, physical distance, virtuality, disembodied presence, misrepresentation, familial and societal pressure are not problems at all. The kind of relationship they desire in fact thrives in the virtual enclosure because its distance from reality is crucial for the relationship to fulfil its therapeutic function of self-discovery and romanticizing everyday life. The utilitarian approach to online romance discussed here is not to be mistaken as taking the Cartesian view of the superiority of the mind over the body. Chinese Internet users I encountered during the course of my study have no doubt on the importance of the body in romantic relationships, neither were they enthusiastic about cyberspace's disembodiment in general. They are taking advantage of the Internet for what it does best, in this case, connecting people, extending human communication capacities which in the process fulfils their emotional needs and promotes their psychological wellbeing.

Some netizens call the exclusively Internet-based online romance "Platonic" emotional love because of the absence of actual bodily interactions between the dyads but this does not preclude the sexual impulse. Pragmatic fantasists are the key character in "Platonic" emotional love. The relationships they pursue are akin to Giddens' (1991) notion of pure relationship, the self-gratifying relationship. The relationship is "pure" because it is no longer organized by the network of kinship and community, but driven by the reflexive self, and it is continued so long as it is fulfilling to the individuals involved. Giddens (1991) argues that the pure relationship and its democratic model of confluent love is replacing romantic love that demands lifelong commitment to the fated only one true love, characterized by compulsive behaviour and dependency, which is most importantly oppressive to women and tramples individuals' right to choose. However, my study shows that the appeal of romantic love has not been lost completely. Swidler's (2001) study of middle class Americans also showed that even those who critically reject the myth of romantic love also frequently draw on this idealistic model when making sense of their own experience of love.

Giddens' pure relationship is in practice difficult to achieve or possible only among the privileged (Jamieson, 2002). In China, despite the emergence of a nouveau riche and growing middle class, making ends meet is still the daily preoccupation of the majority. The high cost of marriage, the social anxiety of being single, family responsibilities and reputation give many no liberty to walk out regardless of how dissatisfied they are with the relationship. It is only within cyberspace that netizens have the opportunity to experience the therapeutic self-satisfying pure relationship based on equality of emotional exchanges. Given the fact that life in contemporary Chinese society is bitterly competitive and stressful as many are driven to pursue economic success that Chinese Internet users are turning to online romance for solace, emotional support and self-reflection may not be a surprise at all. Acting as a release valve, online romance provides feelings of being understood, happiness, gratification, hope and intimacy, hence hard pressed netizens feel invigorated when they go back to the reality of everyday life. "Platonic" online daters may occasionally be tempted to cross the online and offline boundaries, but they are clear that boundary crossing does not serve their purpose of seeking

emotional sustenance and distraction, therefore reaffirming the distinction between the two realms.

Despite having identified these three different conceptualizations of online romance, in reality, these categories are not mutually exclusively. An individual may pragmatically choose to pursue "Platonic" emotional love online, but in the process get carried away by the intense romantic affection that leaves him/her contemplating the possibility of expanding the relationship offline, but remain sceptical because of the conviction that the reality of everyday life is simply incompatible with the idealistic online romance. One thing in common between sceptics and pragmatic fantasists is they see online romance as a fairytale, too good to be true in the offline world and it is the virtuality of the Internet that sustains the wonderful illusion. The difference between sceptics' playful approach and pragmatic fantasists' utilitarian approach to online romance lies in the former's ruling spirit of non-instrumentality and inconsequentiality, the two same principles that govern social occasions (Simmel, 1971). Non-instrumentality means that socializing and playing is engaged in for its own sake, not as a means for attaining certain goals. Inconsequentiality insists on the importance of not being in earnest and just having fun (ibid). Pragmatic fantasists on the other hand, are motivated to use the relationships to help meet those emotional needs unfulfilled in everyday life. The relationships could turn serious and meaningful for some couples.

Similar to their western counterparts, Chinese romantic realists desire to gradually expand their mode of communication from the initial textual interaction online to richer voice conversations and video calls, mobile phone texting and some eventually lead to face-to-face meetings (McKenna et al., 2002; Baym, 2002). While the Internet may eventually become obsolete in their relationship as they shift flexibly between the online and the offline, this is however the opposite of how sceptical online daters and pragmatic fantasists experience their online romance. Romantic realists see the intertwining between the online and offline world as natural and inevitable, but the other two groups on the contrary, attempt to re-enact the boundaries between the online and offline world by repeatedly emphasizing on how the two realms are distinctively different from one another. In their discussion of online romance, the Internet is constantly being contrasted with the real life, the

reality of offline world, the physical, the tangible, and the actual. Many of them opposed the idea of expanding online romance to the offline world, either because of their belief that the idealistic relationship can only live within cyberspace or it is morally wrong or irresponsible to let online activities affect the primary relationships or family life.

I came across a personal advertisement in a Tianya online romance forum, dated 2009-9-15 00:45, from a male aged 22, specifying that he is looking for a strictly online romantic relationship, precluding any face-to-face interactions. This may seem inconceivable in the West, but rather common among Chinese Internet users. An online survey involving Chinese and American youths showed that 61% of the former said they have a parallel life online, compared to only 13% of the latter. In fact, 63% of Chinese participants agreed with the statement that "it is perfectly possible to have real relationships purely online with no face-to-face contact" compared to only 21% of Americans (IAC and JWT, 2007). Some netizens' tendency to demarcate the online and the offline world and their motivations for doing so appeared to me as a culturally distinct phenomenon that deserves to be investigated further. I followed-up this issue in my online survey and a discussion of its findings is presented in next chapter. I draw on Huizinga's (1955) notion of play and Weitman's (1998) socioerotic realm to account for both the sceptics' and pragmatic fantasists' attitudes towards online romance and their insistence on differentiating their online and offline lives.

5. Online romance story telling

The proliferation of self narratives in the West, especially since the 1960s, is a welcome development for liberals campaigning for a more open, tolerant and inclusive society. Online romance is yet another narrative of self that has managed to find its place in contemporary Chinese society as romantic love and individualistic pursuit of freedom is becoming the norm. As pointed out by Plummer (1996), the ability to tell one's own story in public can be liberating and empowering. The Internet with its low threshold for publication makes self-broadcasting easy. The relatively anonymous setting online also encourages self-disclosure, and confession of private stories can have a therapeutic effect on the narrators. Collectively, these

stories, like other stories dealing with our intimate lives, have the potential of bringing social transformations because storytelling about the private self is a political process. "Such stories play a prominent role in understanding the workings of the political and moral life of late modern societies. The stories we tell of our lives are deeply implicated in moral and political change" and these stories could transform lives, social order and cultures through the making of new politics of different life choices (Plummer, 1996:45).

Plummer (1996) postulated a generic process of successful sexual story telling which listed five necessary conditions for any story to be heard and create an impact in society. The process captures the progression from a story told in private to becoming part of a public discourse. This can be applied to the telling of online romance stories. Firstly, having romantic feelings toward someone met regularly online is becoming a common experience and it is also not difficult for those without such experience to empathize with people who find themselves engulfed in volatile emotions not initially sought for. Secondly, language pertaining to this experience develops gradually and flourishes as seen in the above discussion. Words are constructed or borrowed from the traditional courtship discourse so that the story of online romance can be articulated. Thirdly, an identity is invented, for example as a lesbian. Formation of a community which becomes the basis of identity politics is the fourth condition. Netizens sharing their personal experiences of online romance are often echoed by others with similar experiences. Members feel encouraged to share their story and they form a community of support for more stories to be heard. Finally, for storytelling to become a political process, the story has to enter the wider public domain and create a culture of public problems. This is particularly vivid in the example of online romance as seen in my analysis of Chinese domestic media representations of online romance presented in the first part the chapter. The largely positive discourse of online romance in cyberspace is countered by state sanctioned negative portrayals of online romance. Problematization of online romance suits the party-state's political agenda for tighter Internet control in the name of protecting public morality and minors against the damaging effects of the Internet. In a free and democratic society, the existence of pluralistic stories is necessary. However, as pointed out by Plummer (1996) it is not easy to sustain this ideal situation because "with every new story, there is a rival old one" (p.47). Traditional and authoritarian

stories continue to challenge and suppress the new stories. The Internet has facilitated the telling of a multiplicity of stories, but there is no guarantee of social transformation because the dominant stories and other alternative voices are also taking advantage of the Internet to be heard. In Chapter 6, I will examine the empowering potential of storytelling to the narrating individual, but before we turn to these narrative studies, what follows next is a more in-depth discussion of Chinese Internet users' making of the distinction between the online and offline world.

5 Surveying the Chinese cultural characteristics of online romance

The discussion in this chapter is based predominantly on the findings of my online survey. A copy of the survey is attached in Appendix I. It aimed to examine Chinese cultural influence on the conduct of relationships online by identifying the key characteristics of Chinese Internet uses' online romance and the extent to which they are similar to or different from the more widely reported western experience. I draw particular attention to my participants' tendency to foreground the separation between the online and offline world and their awareness of the limits of such separation.

Section one of this chapter analyzes participants' perceptions and attitudes toward online romance. It shows that online romance is mostly perceived as a form of play and a valuable source of emotional sustenance. The next section focuses on the meanings of "Platonic" emotional love as used by Chinese netizens when talking about online romance. Although the term refers to exclusively Internet-based online romance, it however encompasses online relationships of various natures. The discussion also includes the motivations of "Platonic" online daters. The third section highlights Chinese Internet users' strategic making of the distinction between the online and offline world to facilitate their exercise of agency and to improve the quality of their quotidian existence. The following section continues this line of argument but focuses instead on some participants' playful approach to online romance which is not only stimulating, but can also be liberating and empowering. The fifth section situates my survey with existing studies of online romance partaken by western participants. The juxtaposition shows the similarities and differences of online romance in these two cultural contexts. Due to the limited numbers of survey participants who reported having the experience of cyber-marriage, I supplement the discussion in my final section with a case study of cyber-marriage in the Tianya forum. The chapter concludes that there are common characteristics of online romance, but that computer-mediated relationships are also subject to the influence

of cultural differences. Before we proceed to the discussions, my survey participants' demographic details are provided below.

Participants' demographic background

The online survey invited 134 responses who identified themselves as native Chinese. 77.6% of the participants are from mainland China, 11.9% from Hong Kong, 7.5% from Taiwan and 3% from other countries. 63.4% are females, 36.6% are males. Over half of the participants (53.7%) are currently in a relationship. 70.1% of my participants are students, aged between 18 and 25. 59% of them were in the UK when they completed the survey, while 35.8% of the submissions are identified as being from China (including Taiwan and Hong Kong). This survey is also skewed towards a highly educated segment of the Chinese Internet population in which 46.3% have a university degree and 32.8% a postgraduate qualification. This is in sharp contrast to the CNNIC report dated January 2013 in which only 21.1% of the participants attained tertiary education. Nonetheless, the current sample concurs with the overall online population in which the young generation is the main driving force of the Internet in China. According to the CNNIC report, 79.7% of the Internet users are aged between 10 and 39. Due to the sampling concentration on students, I have collapsed most of the demographic categories into binary groups in order to have sufficient cases to conduct valid statistical tests. Despite the sample's homogenous demographic makeup, the survey sheds light on the Chinese cultural influence on the experience of online romance.

1. Chinese Internet users' perceptions and attitudes towards online romance

Question 4 of the survey asked participants to select statements that represent their understanding of online romance. 42.5% of participants chose the statement that "*online romance is a dream like form of play with fun and relaxation above all else, not to be taken too seriously or expect too much from it*". Equally significant numbers of participants (41%) adopt an instrumental approach to online romance. They perceive that "*in the dull and stressful everyday life, online romance is good for supplying emotional sustenance and spicing up the daily routine*". For those who chose more than one statement, these two statements are usually chosen together, suggesting a close association between the two. Only 20.9% of participants thought

"*online romance is no different from face-to-face initiated romantic relationships*". 14.9% concurred with the official discourse that "*online romance is equal to a love scam, a risky pursuit that should be avoided*". This finding is consistent with my participant observation in which play and emotional love are two key conceptual terms used to describe online romance by sceptical online daters and pragmatic fantasists.

A separate study in China involving students from 10 different universities yielded similar results in which 35.3% conceptualize online romance as a commitment and responsibility free relational game and 23.5% regard it as pure emotional love. 38% of the participants think it is possible to transfer the relationship offline (Wei et al., 2007). My results suggest a swing towards disassociation of online romance from conventional courtship with increasing emphasis on the emotional aspect of the relationship. In fact, the majority of my participants (56.7%) define the ideal outcome of online romance as the couple becoming each other's soul-mate, precluding any sexual relationship. This finding is in sharp contrast to Baker's (2002) study of online romance in which the notion of a successful computer-mediated relationship is understood as those cumulating in marriage or long-term relationship in which one partner relocates to stay with the other. In my study, only 23.9% of the participants share this notion of successful online romance. This finding suggests on one hand it is difficult to find a soul-mate in the offline everyday life, and on the other hand, reflects the conviction that cyberspace is the realm of emotion, ideal in fulfilling emotional needs, but less perfect in sustaining long-term relationships that require constant embodied interactions.

56.3% of participants living in China reported to have experienced online romance, significantly higher than those currently residing in the UK (35.4%). If online romance is indeed crucial in fulfilling online daters' unmet emotional needs and providing distraction from tedious everyday life (insights gained from my participant observation), it would make sense that those living in the China have a greater need to turn to online romance for therapeutic reasons than their UK counterparts. Participants who can afford to come to the UK to study are likely to come from wealthy families, and be more adventurous, outgoing and confident. They could also be expected to have fewer inhibitions in their love life, compared to those

living in China. A related finding that supports this argument is that participants in China are more likely to view online romance as source of solace, support and stimulation to spice up their everyday life, whereas their UK counterparts tend to perceive the relationships playfully.

Although many participants perceive online romance as a form of play, their desired outcome paradoxically showed that they are yearning for more than just being each other's casual playmate. As mentioned earlier, more than half of the participants wish to find their soul-mate through online romance and downplay their erotic impulses in the relationship. Although it could be the effect of social desirability as participants like to appear to be pursuing lofty spiritual love not being driven by shallow lust, it is however consistent with my observation online in which many Chinese netizens shared the conviction that online romance is a realm of pure emotions. Most of the students who place emphasis on emotional intimacy are living in the UK (65.75%). It might not be a surprise that gaining emotional intimacy and comfort is more important to participants in the UK because living independently in a foreign country presents them with greater challenges and "risks" due to the loss of security provided by their kinship network. Subsequently, they have a bigger need to find sanctuary and reconstruct their identity through intimate relationships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

Compared to non-student participants, students are more likely to define successful online romance as merely emotional, excluding any sexual interactions. While the emotional needs of students in the UK have been discussed above, the emphasis on emotional intimacy by students' in China could probably be due to the parental and school authorities' heavy sanctions against their sexual involvement as discussed in Chapter 2. Despite growing sexual involvement, especially among college students, premarital chastity remains the cultural ideal. The students' relatively young age could have also freed them from familial and social pressure to engage in serious courtship that leads to marriage. They have greater freedom to experiment with romantic relationships, as well as to focus more on their inner feelings for emotional satisfaction and self-reflexivity (Giddens, 1992)

In line with my observations online, participants in this survey are generally positive towards online romance, including those who perceive online romance as a form of play. It seems what they appreciate is the level playing field provided by online romance for Internet users to experience romantic love when in the face-to-face world of contemporary Chinese society people who have neither money nor an attractive physical appearance are usually excluded. A greater freedom felt online that allows daters to ignore moral or social constraints in their pursuit of love is also appreciated. Personal experience of online romance is found to be linked to this positive attitude. It seems that personal encounters may mitigate the impact of sensationalized news reports of online romance in the Chinese mass media. Participants who are married or in cohabitation are also found to possess more positive attitudes towards online romance. Informed by my participant observation, this could be because married couples or those in long-term cohabitating relationships might have a greater need for escapism and emotional comfort due to their greater responsibilities and moral obligations. They may also crave the excitement brought by passionate love that they may have lost long ago. As discussed in Chapter 4, many forum participants regard online romance as a handy solution for their emotional emptiness. So long as they confine the relationship online and keep it at the emotional level, this would allegedly have no or little impact on their primary relationship. The argument that having an online relationship with another person whom one never meets face-to-face is innocuous is actually a cross-cultural common excuse presented by many involved in online infidelity as seen in studies such as Mileham (2007), Underwood and Findlay (2004) and Whitty (2003b). However, as pointed out by Whitty (2003b), disclosing intimate details and bonding emotionally with others met online may constitute emotional betrayal because in romantic love mental exclusivity is no less important than sexual exclusivity. This sentiment is also shared by 56.72% of my survey participants in which they consider developing alternative emotional attachments with someone else met online is also an act of infidelity.

The survey findings substantiate the typology I drew in the previous chapter based on my participant observation and confirm that an instrumental approach to online romance is widespread. Considering online romance as a source of solace, emotional support and distraction, which could be approached playfully, is indeed

the dominant perception held by many Chinese netizens. In the next section, I examine how the term "Platonic" emotional love is used to refer to exclusively Internet-based relationships. I also consider its meanings and characteristics, and how it relates to the therapeutic functions mentioned earlier.

2. "Platonic" emotional love

As mentioned in the previous chapter "Platonic" love is one of the key conceptual terms in Chinese discourses of online romance. The term is frequently used together with the word "emotional" to describe exclusively Internet-based relationships. The essence of these relationships is the absence of actual or physical bodily interactions which make couples' inner feelings and emotions the central focus of their relationships. As seen in Chapter 4, those who call online romance "emotional love" make their argument based on the belief that within cyberspace, romance is at its purest emotional form, uncontaminated by earthly elements of everyday life. Their line of reasoning is very similar to Simmel's (1971) idea of sociability characterized by distance from the world beyond and the separation is central to the success of any social event:

> *"… men can complain both justly and unjustly of the superficiality of social intercourse. It is one of the most pregnant facts of mental life that, if we weld certain elements taken from the whole of being into a realm of their own, which is governed by its own laws and not by those of the whole, this realm, if completely cut off from the life of the whole, can display in its inner realization an empty nature suspended in the air; but then, often altered only by imponderables, precisely in this state of removal from all immediate reality, its deeper nature can appear more completely, more integrated and meaningful, than any attempt to comprehend it realistically and without taking distance" (p.139).*

What "Platonic" emotional love refers to here is online relationships of heterogeneous nature. It applies to romantic relationships, as well as those that occupy the grey area in between romance and friendship. Although the conventional understanding of Platonic relationship in the West implies a nonsexual relationship,

Chinese Internet users have broadened its meanings to include relationships with an erotic impulse, yet inconsumable because the couple are physically separated and often also due to moral or social constraints. "Platonic" emotional love could be deliberately sought by netizens. In other words, they become "Platonic" daters by choice. The nature of relationships of this kind is mostly casual with fleeting moments of love or mere infatuation. This is in direct opposition to those who become "Platonic" daters involuntarily as they accidently engulf themselves in an unintended online romance. Their relationships tend to be more intense, serious and relatively long lasting. The relating dyads are likely to experience struggle to contain their desire to meet in person, knowing that going offline will have negative consequences for both. Despite all the differences, one thing in common is the absence of worship for disembodiment. "Platonic" daters have no doubt about the importance of embodied interactions. Those who choose to forsake corporeal intimacy by deliberately confining the relationship within cyberspace do so for pragmatic reasons which will be discussed in the next section.

In my survey, the best demographic predictor of being a "Platonic" lover is education level. The results show that online "Platonic" lovers are more likely to be non-university degree holders which in China imply a disadvantaged background and lower social status. They have lesser means other than turning to the Internet for romance, intimacy, companionship, support and solace, seeking gratifications for what are lacking in their everyday life. So long as they "perform" the relationship strictly within cyberspace, their inhibitions in the offline world would be irrelevant. Exposure to everyday reality is likely to result in "*jian guang si*" in which the feelings of disappointment and disenchantment kill their passionate love online. By engaging in exclusively Internet-based relationships, "Platonic" online daters can better sustain their romantic play and its ensuing uplifting feelings which motivated them to go online in the first place. This explanation is not mere speculation as it is informed by the experience of one of my online informants, a male member of Love Apartment since 2007.

To disguise his identity, I will use AZ to represent him in the discussion. AZ disguised his actual occupation as a school teacher and used somebody else's photograph in his profile because he was worried that his activities on the site would

compromise his role model image for his students and be incompatible with his married status. He told me that so far he has had about 10 experiences of online cohabitation with different female members, mostly initiated by him, lasting from 6 months to just a few days. With just one exception, he mostly refrained from having any offline contact beyond the site with his female partners, "*I don't know and don't want to know their real name, address or telephone number*". He takes none of these relationships seriously, nor does he perceive them as romantic, "*what I am looking for is fun, nothing significant or meaningful, which means I am not going to expand these relationships into the real world, they are merely emotional*". His statement suggests that "emotional" is secondary to his life in the physical world in which he has established social roles to play and maintain. "*To be honest, I enjoy freedom and excitement in the online world. I am lacking of these in my life. I have no opportunity to pursue these needs due to work, family, finance, social norms and values and other constraints*". He perceived the site as a place where he can relax and unwind himself. "*When I am feeling tired from work and prosaic daily routine, I come here for relaxation. Perhaps here helps me to adjust to my everyday life*". The easy availability of distant intimacy from the site is liberating and entertaining to AZ. He light-heartedly enjoys the therapeutic functions of his online relationships which include a boosted sense of self and feelings of invigoration, but at the same time dismisses the significance of these relationships. The way AZ approaches his online relationships is typical among "Platonic" online daters. The primacy of "emotion" in relationships is nothing new. As pointed out in Chapter 2 socialist love has long emphasized seeking spiritual and personal fulfilment through communist revolution and Deng's depoliticization of private life also stressed emotional intimacy as a means for self-cultivation, rather than relying on mere material possessions. Since market reform, romantic love has become intertwined with consumer culture (Farrer, 2002) and it has had a profound negative impact on familial and social relationships (Yan, 2003; T. Zheng, 2008). The desire for pure affection, anything "emotional" as opposed to materialist or mercenary by some online daters is a reaction to their highly commodified and stressful quotidian existence. The resignation of some online daters to the fact that they cannot expand their relationship offline also leads some to glorify their emotional interactions in order to convince themselves and others that their emotional love online is a lofty pursuit.

In the next section, I will explore the tendency shown by many Chinese Internet users to foreground the differences between the online and the offline worlds and perceive them as two independent terrains when talking about online relationships. I postulate that netizens' dependence on online romance to fulfil their emotional needs can only be accomplished by such boundary separation.

3. Separating the online and offline world

It may seem inexplicable to western readers, but it is actually common to find personal ads in Chinese online forums in which authors specify that they are looking for a strictly "online" girlfriend or boyfriend. Wang and Lu's (2007) article about cyberdating also recognized that finding true love may not be the motivation for all cyberdaters as some are merely pursuing virtual relationships to fill in the emotional void they feel in the offline world. The exclusively Internet-based relationship is an understudied aspect of online relationships. The existing literature of online romance, especially studies based in western contexts, tends to focus on how these relationships gradually expand into the offline world. These studies also argue for the convergence of the online and offline world, replacing the online/offline conceptual dichotomy prominently emphasized in early Internet research (see for examples Baym, 1995b; Wellman, 1997; Jones, 1998; Rheingold, 2000). However, participants in my research appear reluctant to embrace the hybrid online and offline life when it comes to romantic relationships. The distinction between conventional online daters and "Platonic" online daters is that the latter see their online relationship as an end in itself, not as a means to find an actual partner in the offline world. To this end, "Platonic" daters deliberately separate the online and offline world, so they can have two parallel lives independent from one another.

In my online survey, 64.18% of the participants believe that it is possible to have a profound, genuine and fulfilling romantic relationship which is maintained exclusively online. 61.94% agreed with the statement that online and offline are two distinct and isolated realms and one should not confuse between the two. A staggering amount of participants (76.87%) agreed that confusing the two worlds is likely to have negative ramifications not only to oneself, but also to other loved ones. This result supports the findings of market research conducted in 2007 by IAC and

JWT cited in Chapter 4. However, older age groups (26 and above) and non-student participants in my survey tend to disagree with the statement that online and offline are two separated independent worlds, more than their younger age peers (18-25) and students. In other words, the more mature the participants are, the more able they are to perceive how online and offline life are inextricably linked and how online acts inevitably have impact on people's everyday life offline. Chinese Internet users' tendency to foreground the difference between the online and offline world may seem regressive, but the following discussion shows that it may actually be a strategic move for self-empowerment.

As seen in my participant observation, many netizens are sympathetic to those pragmatically pursuing "Platonic" emotional love online to redress their emotional voids and seeking solace because life in contemporary society is very stressful, especially for the less privileged. Not only is the transcendental experience of being in love uplifting, but being able to express the inner true-self candidly online and having one's feelings understood is also a boost to one's psychological wellbeing. These feel good effects are a crucial form of distraction that can be difficult to attain in offline relationships. The pleasure derived from these relationships online compensates for individuals' less satisfying everyday life. While showing appreciation of the attractions of online romance to one's emotional life, many are also simultaneously aware of the dangers of excessive dependence on the Internet and losing oneself to the romantic traps online. Similar arguments are presented by my survey participants. In the open ended question asking "*in your opinion, why would some people look for exclusively Internet-based relationships or romance*", half of the participants attribute it to the problem of emotional emptiness felt by many in their quotidian existence. Ease of self-disclosure online easily rekindles feelings of love and being understood. "Platonic" daters find sustenance in their relationship online and treat it as a convenient source of solace for their disappointing everyday life. These arguments indeed reflect "Platonic" daters' motivations as 64% of the participants identified in this study as "Platonic" daters reported to be driven by unmet emotional needs. The findings of my study correspond with Law and Peng's (2006) study of migrant workers in which they depend on their mobile phone to join online chatrooms for romantic liaisons. Some hope to develop face-to-face contacts, others are content with a virtual romance. A

female informant stressed that although she enjoyed chatting with others online, she rejected meeting invitations from men she chatted to online because of the perception that a relationship of this nature is not serious. Another female informant found comfort in those sweet words and heart warming exchanges online, yet called the whole experience an illusion, convinced that these relationships are unreliable. Law and Peng similarly concluded that "developing virtual relationships in the cyber world might provide them with a release from the problems of the real world…. provide them with the feeling that they are under fewer normative constraints…" (p.257).

My observation of participants' discussion online showed that maintaining a boundary between the online and offline world is a pragmatic move to improve one's everyday life. Using the Internet for escapism, to temporarily avoid miseries in everyday life, to seek solace and to compensate for emotional emptiness are common experiences not unique to Chinese Internet users, as seen in studies by Mileham (2007) and Shaw (1997). The ACE model developed by Young, Pistner, O'Mara and Buchanan (1999) also explicitly stresses how the Internet characteristics of accessibility, control and escape contribute to the development of Internet addiction. However, Chinese netizens' clear intention in seeking out this "Platonic" emotional love, yet showing no sign of Internet addiction and a clear awareness of the Internet's "hyperpersonal effect" make their experience exceptional. Furthermore purely online relationships, although not unheard of in western Internet literature, having such relationships in the context of romantic love is rare. For instance, Griffiths (1999) pointed out that there are three types of online relationship. Virtual online relationships involving people who never actually meet in person is one of them. However, the nature of relationship he referred to is a short lived casual cybersex relationship. In Wright's (2004) study of online relational maintenance strategies, a differentiation was made between exclusively Internet-based and primarily Internet-based relationships. The former category applies to mere online acquaintances met through participation in online communities. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in spite of Ben-Zeev's (2004) acknowledgement of "profound online only romantic relationships" he considers these to be incomplete and undesirable, making them categorically different from Chinese Internet users' "Platonic" emotional love.

The closest western literature that describes experiences resembling Chinese "Platonic" emotional love can be found in studies of teenagers' online relationships. Teenage girls in Clark's (1998) study deliberately avoided face-to-face meetings with boys they chatted to online because such meetings would take away the opportunity to experiment with power within heterosexual relationships through creative self-presentation. Despite the absence of embodied interactions, the teenagers' online dating was fulfilling, liberating and self-gratifying. Similarly, a study by Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor (2002) also yielded consistent findings where teens' online relationships tended to be short-lived and casual, and did not lead to meeting in person. A survey of 9 to 16 year olds conducted by the China Youth Social Service Centre also showed that although 57.8% admitted to making friends online, only 17.9% had met with their friend offline and the majority of them (68.7%) reported that they will never meet with any online friends in person (Li, 2009). These studies suggest a cross-cultural age cohort effect in which teenagers rely on online relationships to explore their identity for self-validation and to satisfy their compelling need for intimacy and companionship. Some relationships in the Second Life virtual world are close to Chinese netizens' experience of confining their relationships online. Boellstorff's (2008) ethnographic study's of Second Life documented cases where inworld "residents" refused to know the actual-world contact and identity of their online lovers. "Ignorance about the actual-world life of one's online partner could be pleasurable because it reinforced the gap between virtual and actual" (p.170), which allows residents the opportunity to explore what they cannot achieve in their first life.

As far as romantic relationships are concerned, segregating the online and offline worlds actually do couples a great service because romance itself represents an excursion into a realm outside the banal and uninspiring everyday life. Illouz (1997) suggested four boundaries (temporal, spatial, emotional and artifactual) that mark a symbolic space for interactions to become a romantic utopia, similar to other ritual ceremonies. This explains why it is easy for romance to happen during holidays or in a party, a special temporal and spatial setting that detaches a couple from the quotidian context. Romance is also often associated with consumer artefacts such as candles, wine, perfume, chocolates, roses, luxury dinners and hotels etc used

to signify and intensify the feelings of a romantic bond between a couple. This does not mean that romances do not happen in the terrain of everyday life but ritualization of romance increases its intensity to the fullest. Like other forms of social adventure, romance allows us to inject meanings and excitement into the otherwise prosaic daily routine (Illouz, 1998). What Illouz suggests is that "romance is, in fact, opposed to the everyday and that its utility to us lies in demonstrating what the everyday is not" (Redman, 2002:73).

As discussed in the previous chapter, online romance offers participants the opportunity to explore and re-experience the par excellence romantic love which is in decline (Illouz, 1997). This is made possible by the suspension of social reality and its various constraints, inhibitions, responsibilities and obligations that prevent lovers from losing themselves in romantic love. So long as their relationships take place within cyberspace, online daters would have greater room for self-immersion. The Internet provides its own distinct and self-contained temporal and spatial realm, independent from the embodied and geographical boundaries of offline everyday reality. All online daters need is a creative imagination, literature and rhetoric skills to discursively construct the emotional and artifactual boundaries for the romantic interactions to unfold. Online daters can easily engross themselves within that romantic utopia and the temporary suspension of social norms and moral constraints allow online daters to be even more adventurous. Exploration of forbidden love online provides intense emotion and excitement that dramatizes mundane everyday life. In my observation online, it is precisely the ease of detaching oneself from the everyday reality in online romance that concerned many participants, calling the whole affair unreal and illusory.

While Illouz concentrates on the terrain of romantic love, Weitman (1998) makes a similar argument but focuses instead on sexual life. Weitman argues that there exists a distinct realm of interpersonal affairs which she calls the socioerotic realm because the underlying logic that governs erotic relationships is the same as the logic of sociability.

"This realm entails a variety of rites, rituals, occasions, and relations, ranging from perfunctory social contacts (greetings, openings and closings,

etc.) at one end, to elaborate social ceremonies and erotic sexual rituals at the other end; that this realm is governed by its own distinct logic, which can be formulated in terms of a few general laws and their respective rules; that these laws and rules generate and sustain distinct practices (socioerotic rites) and experiences (socioerotic emotions), all of which involve the body to one degree or another, revolve around the production and experience of pleasurable experience, and consist for the most part of various and sundry rites of inclusion; finally, that it is these practices and attendant experiences that forge the social bonds that tie people to one another and to larger social formations" (p.96).

The socioerotic realm governed by its own rules and distinct logic, is a world separated from everyday life and overflowing with joys and pleasures. The significance of the socioerotic realm, according to Weitman, is that it provides people with memories of intimate bonds, attachments, belongings and the ensuing experience of hope, happiness and fulfilment. These therapeutic functions are akin to those provided by online romance and are deliberately sought by pragmatic fantasists. The feel good romantic utopia is the result of its containment within a separate realm and it can only be sustained as long as this distinct realm is not diluted with prosaic elements. As Weitman (1998) is dealing with erotic social interactions, the body plays a significant part in her socioerotic realm. For Chinese "Platonic" lovers who are content with "disembodied" intimacy, the body, although desirable, is not indispensable. Online romance provides an illusion of a better world, "which give people something to look forward to, to work for, to wait for, even to suffer for – in brief, something to live for" (Weitman, 1998:96). These relationships bolster and repair the worn-out self, so when "Platonic" daters return to their everyday life from their immersion in the romantic utopia online, they feel rejuvenated and happy as a result of their ability to retain the pleasurable experiences and memories of their extraordinary romantic encounters in cyberspace. Transferring online relationships offline is likely to end their desirable transcendental and captivating quality because everyday life would gradually colonize the divine realm and turn it into a prosaic part of everyday life, the same everyday life that they were trying to transcend in the first place by venturing online (Chin, 2011). Therefore, exclusively Internet-based relationships "can be interpreted as an act of resistance, strategically exploited by

some "Platonic" daters to oppose the encroachment of mundane life into their special realm of online affection. The emotional affinity needs to be placed in a realm of its own to sustain the utopian dimensions of the relationship with its dramatic, intense, and engrossing feelings" (ibid:411).

It should be clear by now that Chinese netizens are generally aware of the illusion the Internet is capable of inducing that gives online romance its enchanting and mystical quality. My participants are aspiring to strategically exploit this quality of online romance while not losing themselves in the virtual romantic utopia. They undoubtedly prioritize their everyday life in the offline world and instrumentally use their online relationships to improve the quality of their quotidian existence. The goal is not to escape and replace the everyday life in the offline world with the online utopia, but using the latter to enhance the former, to enrich one's life firmly grounded in the embodied world. This conclusion is similar to the argument presented by Snodgrass, Lacy, Dengah and Fagan (2011) in their article entitled "Enhancing one life rather than living two: Playing MMOs with offline friends". Their study of World of Warcraft players showed that playing the game with offline friends or family members not only reduced the risk of excessive play that compromised their offline lives but also enhanced players' sense of self-worth, esteem and their overall experience in the offline world. The finding of Wang and Yu's (2007) study of university students' online relationships in China also supports my inference. Participants in their study also showed no addiction to the Internet at the expense of face-to-face relationships. They prioritized the latter and perceived the former as complementary to their everyday life, helping to promote social wellbeing, but not a necessity. Therefore, it did not matter too much whether or not their online liaisons migrated to the offline world. Some students also made a conscious decision not to have any offline interactions with their online friends. Although the desired goal is to use the online to enhance the offline life, not all Internet users manage to achieve this ideal. Some fail in regulating a balance between the two, so their online relationships detract from rather than improve their offline lives, resulting in distress and anxiety when work, study or family life and responsibilities are ignored.

Compartmentalizing their online and offline lives is also an attempt by "Platonic" daters to minimize or avoid online acts from impinging on their offline primary life. These cautions illustrate their awareness that life within the virtual realm often easily crosses the boundary to infiltrate "real life". Their strategic use of online romance to compensate for their lack of emotional satisfaction in everyday life in itself reflects how the two worlds are inextricably linked. In fact, in my survey, no correlation was found between those who believe in the existence of strictly online romantic relationships and those who perceive online and offline as two distinct realms. Even among those identified as "Platonic" online daters, no correlation is found between them and the belief that online and offline are two independent realms and confusing the two is going to cause complications in one's life. Compared to non-"Platonic" online daters, "Platonic" daters do seem to believe more in the possibility of having a meaningful and profound romantic relationship which is maintained exclusively online. However, this association did not achieve statistical significance.

As pointed out by Redman (2002), the boundaries between romance, the socioerotic realm and everyday life are perhaps less rigid than is normally assumed. "Even when romance seeks to over-leap the boundaries of the ordinary it is insistently being pulled back towards them.… it may even be the case that the 'everyday' aspects of romance (its associations with the derivative, the mundane and the routine) may be steadily reclaiming and reigning in its 'oppositional' or utopian dimensions, making of it a cliché or a joke" (p.73). This is similar to the relationship between the online and offline world, distinguishable at first glance but inseparable when examined closely. In reality, Chinese netizens do not wholeheartedly believe that the online and offline are two independent worlds, but would choose to reinstate the online/offline dichotomy when it comes to using the romantic feelings induced online to benefit their everyday life offline. I would indeed argue that they are acutely aware of the intertwining between the online and offline worlds, perhaps much more than Internet users from other countries because of the state's pervasive and sophisticated system of Internet surveillance and censorship.

Maintaining a boundary between the online and offline world not only makes "Platonic" emotional love possible and desirable, but also offers participants

an opportunity to play with the relationship. Play relies on a realm of its own that is not part of the everyday reality (Huizinga, 1955) and cyberspace readily provides an imaginative terrain for play. Many netizens justify their playful approach to online relationships precisely because of cyberspace's split from offline reality. Although playing with online romance would not lead to immediate transformation of structural norms, it can be empowering to the self as players deconstruct the symbolic significance of the governing social orders and structural constraints.

4. Playing with love online

As seen in my participant observation and supported by my survey's findings, game/play is another key conceptual term in Chinese discourse of online romance. Treating online relationships as social gaming has the dual functions of warning online daters not to commit too easily to the relationship, or expect too much from it, and providing a license for relationship experimentation online where participants can indulge themselves in an abundance of carefree online intimacies. Turning online relationship into play implies that the relationship ought to be enjoyed as an intrinsic activity in itself, not as a means to find an offline date or long-term partner, because the significance of play lays precisely in the play itself (Caillois, 2001). Players play voluntarily for no other reason than simply enjoying the excitement and amusement play brings. Huizinga (1955) defined play as

> *"a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner"* (p.13).

This definition's emphasis on the separation between play and reality is especially germane to the discussion here. According to Huizinga, to play means stepping out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity with its own governing rules. Play is satisfying in itself, engrossing and captivating, complementing life in general. Without such separation, playing make-believe of a second reality would be difficult

and it is the rules that create and sustain the frame of play within certain limits of time and place (Caillois, 2001).

Whitty (2003a) also theorizes online relationships as a form of play. Play is about illusion, external to everyday reality. Play is fragile and ephemeral because it can only be sustained if players play by the rules and thereby keep its own frame alive (Whitty and Carr, 2006). Winnicott's (1971) notion of potential space, a safe place for play has frequently been used to conceptualize cyberspace (see for examples, Robins, 1995; Cooper and Sportolari, 1997; and Whitty, 2003a). Potential space is neither entirely real nor entirely a fantasy, but combines elements of both. It is a terrain between the inner self and the external world; outside the individual and yet not the external world (Whitty, 2003a; Whitty and Carr, 2006). In the psychodynamic view, play can promote the development of self and facilitate psychological growth and general health. Treating cyberspace as potential space implies that the Internet provides a safe place for users to experiment with their identities, improve self-esteem, increase self-acceptance and promote self-awareness. This indeed reflects the motivation of some "Platonic" daters who instrumentally turn to the Internet to promote their emotional wellbeing. But for sceptics of online romance, when using the term "play or game", they tend to downplay its psychological benefits, but focus instead on its spirit of non-instrumentality and inconsequentiality, which according to Simmel (1971), in his article about sociability, are the gaming principles that also govern most social events.

By treating relationships online as mere play, issues such as mutual trust, misrepresentation, lack of commitment and concern of "*jian guang si*" become less important, because play by nature is short lived and the only purpose is to have fun and enjoy oneself. The "ludus" way of loving, that is a casual and noncommittal game playing romantic relationship is nothing new as suggested in Lee's (1977) typology of styles of loving, but the Internet provides a context particularly suitable for this style of love. Participants of "ludic(rous)" Internet relationships often show "an utter lack of concern for depth, solemnity, seriousness, civility, and respect" (Waskul and Vannini, 2008: 243). The "only pretending" consciousness of play makes everyday moral ethics, virtues and manners less readily applicable to play (Huizinga, 1955) and "any contamination by ordinary life runs the risk of corrupting

and destroying its very nature" (Caillois, 2001: 43). A playful approach to online romance allows incongruous motives or interests to co-exist. In my study, play becomes the rhetorical answer for sceptics of online romance as it resolves the significance of their concerns, so they can conveniently enjoy its romantic ideals while at the same time cynically laughing at its triviality. So long as consensus is reached between couples to treat their relationships as play with the freedom to disengage at any time and dissociated from everyday reality, the light-hearted online ludus love would be protected from turning into a serious love affair. Otherwise a fun play for one person would be a heartbreaking experience for another.

Waskul and Vannini (2008) posit that "ludic(rous)" Internet sexual encounters are an act of rebellion against the social movement towards civilization of relationships focusing on mutual self-disclosure, empathy, respect, equality, interdependent love, self-realization and reflexivity. "Ludic(rous)" Internet sexual relationships "seem to reclaim the tensions, power imbalances, volatility, irrationality and unaccountable capriciousness that so many social institutions condemn" (p.258). This argument is very similar to my earlier argument that online romance allows participants to re-experience the waning idealistic model of romantic love due to the same civilization of emotions. Like "Platonic" online daters who benefit from their online relationships, players can also empower themselves through playing at the relationships. The playfulness of online romance minimizes the risk of failure, lightens the pain of rejection, and makes exploration or experimentation possible. The engrossment provides a form of escape or distraction from the mundane and often disappointing everyday realities. Online daters' playfulness may appear superfluous to sceptical outsiders, but it requires digital competency and emotional rhetoric to successfully manoeuvre between play and reality. In other words, playing at love online could be liberating, stimulating and transforming, if not at least entertaining and relaxing.

The relationship's designation as mere 'play' shields it from the influence of prevailing norms, social structures and orders governing serious romantic love affairs. This explains why transgressive love affairs are likely to be condoned if confined within cyberspace. Because within the realm of play, one can experience "simultaneous sublimation and dilution, in which the heavily freighted forces of

reality are felt only as from a distance, their weight fleeting in charm" (Simmel, 1971:140). A transgressive online relationship that expands into the offline would stop being play, hence needing to be regulated. Henricks (2006) brilliantly summarized Huizinga's work on play as "to play is to take on the world, to take it apart, and frequently to build it anew. So understood, play for Huizinga is a protest against determinism, a claim that humans need not merely endure existential conditions but can reform these according to their own desires and insights" (p185). Through play, players can exercise their agency, try to take control, defy and oppose the status quo. Although players are unable to directly challenge and immediately undermine the dominant ideologies, play nevertheless is a way for them to express themselves, to tell their stories, and form a community of support. As prominently argued by Scott (1990), symbolic resistance and defiance by society's underdogs should not be dismissed lightly. Furthermore, play may seem opposed to everyday reality, but it is also simultaneously part of it. The relationship between a society and the games it likes to play is reciprocal and mutually reflective of one another (Caillois, 2001). In other words, games affect the culture of the society as much as being affected by it.

In his study of games as social encounters, Goffman (1961) also argues that it is a mistake to assume that games can be compartmentalized clearly and neatly from other parts of life. Just as the boundaries between the offline actual space and cyberspace are permeable, the border of games and ordinary life is not always apparent. When and where reality stops being reality, and play stops being play is not always obvious or undisputable, therefore each can have considerable influence on the other. For example, excessive playing of flirtatious relationships online can have negative effects on the primary relationship despite the idea that play would normally imply not having real and serious consequences in the wider world. In fact, according to Goffman, what makes the encounters fun is a selective connection to the world beyond. Too much separation may render the play trivial and boring, too little separation may discourage players' engrossment in the play. In summary, successful play is one where players themselves control the level of separation to achieve the right balance, simultaneously maintaining the sense of both connection and disconnection. However, ideal it may seem, only seasoned players would have the competency to negotiate between the two for maximum joy. Most would risk

turning pleasure into compulsion, enjoyment into obsession, relaxation into obligation.

In the next section, I compare my survey findings with other similar studies in China, and existing studies of online romance based in the western context. The objective of juxtaposing the experience of online romance in two different cultural contexts is to shed light on how cultural differences could shape the Internet experience. Although this is far from a like-for-like comparison as different samplings and methodologies used in each study may lead to variance, such rudimentary comparison should nevertheless contribute to our understanding of Chinese netizens' online romance. Most of the studies cited below have been referred to in my previous discussions or in the literature review.

5. Juxtaposition of Chinese and western experiences of online romance

5.1 Popularity of online romance

43.3% of my survey participants have experienced online romance and 79.1% of them know someone who fell in love with another met online. In an earlier study conducted by Chinese scholars involving students from 10 different universities in China, 18.4% of the students admitted to having one or more online lovers and 38% of them knew other classmates who had such experience (Wei et al., 2007). In a separate study of Chinese Internet users' courtship and marriage, 45.5% had used online dating and social networking sites to find their dates and 32.6% had developed romantic relationships online (Han, 2008). These findings suggest a continuous increase of online romance in China. In research involving western Internet users, the numbers of those who reported to have personally experienced online romance are relatively lower than their Chinese counterparts. In Parks and Floyd's (1996) study of newsgroup participants, 7.9% reported to have formed romantic relationships with others they first met on a newsgroup online. The numbers increased to 26.3% in a study involving online gamers (Parks and Roberts, 1998). In a similar study of online role playing gamers, Utz (2000) found that 24.5% of participants developed romantic relationships with someone first met online. The numbers of Internet users with such experience appears remain constant as seen in Whitty's (2004) survey of chatroom users in which 23% who participated reported to

have such experience. In a more recent study involving 1013 Australian adults who took part in a telephone survey, 78% had used the Internet and 13% of them reported to have formed online social relationships, with only 2.8% being romantic in nature (Hardie and Buzwell, 2006).

Despite the different methods used in the studies cited above which may account for some of the variation in numbers of online romance, the overall picture seems to suggest that online romance occurs in greater numbers among Chinese netizens. This is consistent with the IAC/JWT (2007) study that compared online activities between Chinese and American youths. The study showed that Chinese are more pronounced in embracing the digital life than their American counterparts. 80% of Chinese participants agreed that "digital technology is an essential part of how I live", compared with 68% of Americans. Being without Internet access for more than a day is reported to be a problem for 25% of Chinese participants, as opposed to 12% of Americans. Chinese participants are also more likely to experiment with their identities online than Americans with 66% of Chinese agreeing that "online interactions have broadened my sense of identity", compared to only 26% of Americans. The Internet also seems to play a greater role in Chinese participants' social life than Americans, as 77% of the former agreed that "the Internet helps me make friends", compared to only 30% of the latter. As much as 32% of Chinese participants admitted that the Internet has broadened their sex life compared to only 11% of Americans.

My survey shows that online romance could potentially happen to anyone as those who reported to have this experience are not different demographically from those without the experience. This is consistent with findings from Parks and Roberts' (1998) study in which there was no demographic distinction in terms of age, sex, marital status and education level between those who reported to have formed friendships, close friendships and romantic relationships online. Hardie and Buzwell's (2006) telephone survey of Australian adults also confirmed that online romance could happen to all age groups, gender, religious and political affiliations. With the growing daily dependence on the Internet, it is within expectation that the numbers of online relationships would continue to rise across the globe.

5.2 Duration and dissolution of online romance

Out of the 58 participants in my survey who reported to have the experience of online romance, 13 participants are currently in the relationship while the remaining referred to their past experience of online romance. For the 13 participants, their relationship has been going on from 2 weeks to 10 years (M= 83.08 weeks, SD= 148.68). For those whose relationship has ended, their relationship lasted from few days to 3 years (M=29.34 weeks, SD=37.80), most lasted for 3 months. Judging from the duration of the relationships before termination, it seems that the definition of online romance varies for individuals, some include casual infatuation as online romance and others have more rigorous definitions. Compared to Parks and Roberts' (1998) study of MOO (textual online game) users who developed romantic relationships with other players with an average duration of relationship for 12.47 months (SD=9.46), the relationships reported by my participants are relatively short-lived.

When asked about what caused the relationship dissolution, participants gave various reasons suggesting different levels of engagement. Some were much more serious than others. 3 participants stated that their online relationship has ended because they decided to move the relationship offline. 7 participants mentioned practical issues such as distance, family disapproval, financial, social and moral constraints ended their relationship. The realization that pursuing love online is a futile effort was the reason shared by 5 participants. Similarly, 4 participants suffered from disillusion after becoming aware of the discrepancies between their imagination and the reality. Although it may seem easier to meet like-minded others online than in the offline world (McKenna et al., 2002), for 4 participants in this study, this is not the case. They split with their online lover because of different values and incompatible personalities. Like those dating in the offline world, some participants ended their online relationship because they met someone better or lost interest. Some other casual reasons given by the participants included no longer being idle and lacking time to go online. For one participant, her online romance ended abruptly for no obvious reason. In summary, some online romance appeared rather insignificant to the participants, perhaps reflecting their "ludus style of love", treating their online romance as a game to be played when there is spare time.

5.3 Modes of contact

Most participants (81.03%) rely on instant messaging (IM) to maintain contact with their online lover. This is consistent with the general trend of Internet applications in China in which according to the CNNIC report dated January 2013, IM is the most popular Internet application used by 82.9% of Chinese online population. IM is particularly useful for socialization as it is easy to use, discrete, low cost and most importantly, its near synchronous nature enhances the sense of connectedness between couples compared to other forms of CMC. Pauley and Emmers-Sommer's (2007) study also showed that the most preferred mode of contact by online daters was synchronous text-based chat.

The next most frequently used medium of communication is mobile text messaging (48.28%), followed by phone conversations (37.93%). Both are seen as more personal and intimate than IM as obtaining one's online lover's private phone number in itself a signal of growing intimacy. 63.79% of the participants think that when the interactions shift from one form of contact in cyberspace to another in the offline world, it implies an increased level of commitment and trust. Similarly, several participants in Whitty and Gavin's (2001) study also emphasized the symbolic significance of a different medium of communication in reflecting the progression of the relationship. McKenna et al (2002) conducted a path analysis to establish the sequence of online relationship expansion from cyberspace to the offline world. Their results showed that online relationships typically progress from public settings to private contacts, such as email to real time chat, and gradually migrate to the offline world of exchanging letters, telephone conversations and eventually face-to-face meetings. Each stage represents a trade-off between personal control and greater intimacy.

Nearly two thirds of my survey participants have met with their online lover in person (62.07%). A similar percentage (57.9%) was reported in Parks and Roberts' (1998) study of MOO users. However, in Wildermuth and Vogl Bauer's (2007) study only 36% of online daters reported to have face-to-face interactions with their online partners. For 75.86% of my participants, their online romance happened incidentally (not deliberately sought after), and the majority of them (88.2%) met with their partner within 6 months of their first online liaison, a relatively longer

time than those who met through online dating sites. As users of dating sites aim to find dates offline, they tend to move offline more quickly and rely on their first face-to-face meeting to decide whether or not to continue the relationship, this "suggests that online daters do not want to waste time getting to know one another online" (Whitty and Carr, 2006:127). In Whitty's study of dating site users, 65% typically met their date within a week of their initial contact online and 11% met within a month (ibid).

For my survey participants, the decision to meet face-to-face was usually made after serious deliberation. Physical distance topped the list of issues of concern for 37.25% of my participants when they were considering meeting in person. Although most couples were from the same country, they were far apart from each other. A related concern is personal safety as travelling to a distant and unfamiliar location makes meeting up an even more risky adventure. Many participants hesitated to meet due to lack of self-confidence as 35.29% of them worry that they may disappoint their lover when they meet up, and 27.45% worry that their lover may fail to live up to their imagination. This concern over the discrepancy between expectation and reality is closely linked to the worry that the meeting itself may actually end the relationship, or spoil the good feelings and imagination each has toward one another. This is the phenomenon of "*jian guang si*" (perish upon seeing light) as discussed in the previous chapter. The next area of concern is family members' and offline friends' disapproval, suggesting a widespread public scepticism about online relationships in China. Wildermuth (2004) argues that stigmatizing discourse from offline social networks negatively shapes the online relationship participants' perception of themselves and this in turn lowers their relationship satisfaction. My observation online also showed that couples' feelings of disbelief or self-doubt about the existence and authenticity of their online relationship was very common. All these factors negatively affect their motivation to meet with their online lover in person.

5.4 The significance of physical appearance and online misrepresentation

Most of the research about online relationships emphasizes the minimized role of physical appearance in relationship formation due to the visual anonymity (Levine 2000; Merkle and Richardson 2000; McKenna et al 2002). However, this

may not apply to those who deliberately turn to the Internet to find dates. For users of online dating sites, physical attributes top the list of the attractive qualities they look for in potential partners, more important than shared interests, socio-economic status and personality (Whitty and Carr, 2006). In this study, 75% of those who met through dating or relationship sites knew how their partner looked liked prior to their first contact, compared to 25% of those who met on non-relational sites, such as discussion forums.

Participants of this survey also generally seem realistic in their expectations of how their lover looks as just above half of them (55.56%) have not changed their assessment of how their partner looks before and after their first face-to-face meeting. This could also mean that Chinese netizens are largely honest about their physical appearance when relating with others online. In fact, nearly two thirds of the participants (60.34%) said that they never misrepresent themselves in any way in the process of dating. Contrary to Cornwell and Lundgren's (2001) study of chatroom users in which age and physical attributes are most likely to be misrepresented online because it is not readily detectable, none of the participants in this study reported misrepresenting their age and only 5 participants reported misrepresenting their physical appearance. Even relationship status, the area most subject to misrepresentation involves only 8 participants (13.79%) in this study. The generally low level of misrepresentation reported here could be due to the absence of an explicit goal of attracting someone for a relationship since most of the participants met their lovers through non-relationship sites. Of course, low level of self-reported misrepresentation could also itself be a misrepresentation.

5.5 Levels of intimacy, idealization and satisfaction

Overall, the intimacy levels participants in this study achieved with their online lover are not particularly high. The mean scores they obtained on a scale measuring intimacy are 25.94, out of the total score of 42 with the higher scores meaning greater intimacy. While McKenna et al's (2002) research showed that females are more likely to describe their relationships as being significantly closer and deeper than men, this study showed neither significant gender differences, nor any differences across various demographic groups in terms of level of intimacy achieved. Even face-to-face meetings do not result in a significant change in the

couple's intimacy levels. Participants' initial online meeting places (through relationship sites or other online platforms) also have no correlation with their level of intimacy.

Walther's (1996) theory of hyperpersonal communication also does not seem to hold true for participants in this study, as their level of idealization toward their online lover is not high with only 5 participants (8.62%) perceiving their online lover as their ideal partner. Their lack of predisposition to idealize their online lover is however consistent with the realistic expectations they showed earlier towards their partner's looks. In terms of level of satisfaction, my participants again showed a moderate level of satisfaction. Although in total, 67.24% are satisfied with their online romance, only 5.17% are very satisfied, 24.14% satisfied and 37.93% moderately satisfied. 25.87% of the participants are dissatisfied with their online romance.

The two types of online romance partaken by Chinese netizens could account for the moderate scores reported by my participants here. When "Platonic" online daters' levels of intimacy, satisfaction, and idealization are compared with their counterparts who desire to expand their relationship offline, the results show that the former are more satisfied with their online romance and more likely to idealize their online partner, but achieve lower levels of intimacy than the latter. Non-"Platonic" online daters are frequently reminded to guard against the tendency to idealize their partners online because unrealistic expectations would risk ending the relationship when it moves offline. "Platonic" daters on the other hand, enjoy a greater leeway for idealization which also makes their relationship more satisfying, but less intimate because their relationship is confined within cyberspace.

5.6 Online self-disclosure

35 participants (60.34%) feel more confident to express themselves and disclose their private details to their lover in cyberspace compared to the offline world. However, this feeling of online empowerment does not always lead to frequent online self-disclosure as only 15 participants reported often sharing many of their private details online. Four participants reported that they will never share their private details and secrets online with their lover. While Merkle and Richardson

(2000), and Park, Jin and Jin (2011) argue that self-disclosure promotes relational intimacy, no significant correlation between the amount and speed of online self-disclosure, and intimacy level was found in this study. My participants also did not experience the ease and lightening speed of online self-disclosure as reported in other CMC studies, for example Cooper, McLoughlin and Campbell (2000) and McKenna et al (2002). It takes most of them three months after knowing their lover online to engage in such acts. This finding may not be a complete surprise because in a society with low and declining social trust (Yan, 2009; He, 2013), it makes sense that Chinese Internet users are reluctant to disclose themselves too much too soon. The awareness of the state's Internet surveillance may also play a part in restraining couples from revealing too many private details online.

The findings so far suggest that Chinese netizens possess a more rational and realistic approach towards online romance compared to their western counterparts. In terms of breadth and depth of a relationship, my participants' online romances appear broad but shallow, compared to western participants whose online romances seem more focussed and in-depth as reflected in their greater levels of intimacy, satisfaction, idealization and self-disclosure. This suggestion is consistent with Meng and Zuo's (2008) finding in which Chinese are more likely to chat with strangers online than their western counterparts. They paradoxically show no hesitation in compromising their privacy in exchange for greater connectivity and companionship online, but keep the relationships at arm's length.

5.7 Online infidelity

Question 6 of my survey listed six online behaviours for participants to choose which of these behaviours constitute an act of infidelity. Top of the list is having cybersex with others as 72.39% considered it cheating despite the absence of actual bodily interactions. This is followed by developing emotional attachments (56.72%) with others met online. Flirting with others online is seen by 45.52% of participants as cheating. Whilst 48.51% considered posting personal ads looking for partners to play the game of cyber-marriage as being unfaithful, only 28.36% consider posting personal ads for friendship as cheating. 23.13% rated visiting pornographic websites as betrayal. 17.91% of participants considered all of the above behaviours as infidelity, as opposed to 10.45% who classified none of the

above as betrayal. These results are generally in line with Whitty's (2003b) and (2005), Docan-Morgan and Docan's (2007) studies of online infidelity. The findings showed that women are more likely to be upset by online infidelity, but perceive online acts that do not involve particular individuals as less threatening are also in line with previous research.

In Hardie and Buzwell's (2006) study, significant numbers of those involved in online romance were found to be currently partnered in the offline world, and they concluded that "nearly half of the online romantics were cybercheaters" (p.11). Compared to this study, the self-confessed level of infidelity is not high. Only 6 out of 58 participants (11.32%) answered yes to the question of "have you ever engaged in online romance with others while having a committed relationship with another person in the actual world". Another 6 participants have no such experience but have had the experience of having more than one online lover at a time. However, I notice that of two participants who reported that they are currently in online relationships, one is already married whilst the other is in a relationship with someone met offline. In other words, they are engaging in online infidelity. A female participant who ended her online relationship because she got married did not report herself of having such experience. It seems some participants refuse to admit this socially undesirable behaviour or are simply unaware of their own double standard.

5.8 Sexual interactions

Compared to Underwood and Findlay's (2004) study involving mostly Americans, a significantly higher percentage of participants in this study reported having non-sexual online relationships. In the former study only 17% of the respondents said their online relationship was non-sexual as opposed to 41.38% reported in this study. However, 61.11% of my survey participants developed sexual relationships with their online partner following a face-to-face meeting, far more likely than the 38% of Underwood and Findlay's participants.

The sexual relationships reported by participants here referred mostly to physical offline sexual activities (91.67%). Only one participant reported to having cybersex with his lover and another participant experienced both online and offline sexual interactions with his lover. The lack of self-reported involvement in cybersex

could be the result of privacy concerns or the effect of social desirability in which participants refuse to associate themselves with this stigmatized act.

6. Experience of cyber-marriage / online cohabitation

Although most participants (56.7%) in this study know about the online act of cyber-marriage and/or online cohabitation, only 7 participants (5.2%) have personally engaged in these practices. Some participants met their "spouse" or partner online, others with someone they knew offline. Hence, having a cyber-marriage or online cohabitation could either be an expansion of participants' online relating, or an extension of courtship in the offline world. Due to the small numbers of participants involved, no conclusive remarks can be made about their demographic details.

The motivations for having cyber-marriage / online cohabitation depend largely on where participants met their partner. Just for fun and to enjoy the benefits given to married couples in the game world are likely to be the reasons given by those who met while playing online games. Other more serious reasons such as to strengthen the relationship and to show commitment to each other were given by participants who met in other online platforms or in the offline world. Similarly, the meanings or significance of such acts vary depending on the initial motivations. To one participant, it means nothing, except fun. For others, some reported feeling of empowerment, but others the opposite. Due to the brief answers provided by participants, it is difficult to gain a full understanding. To provide further insight into this phenomenon, a case study is included here. This is the real life story between Yao and Benyu, who first met online in the Tianya forum on 26 December 2006. Benyu (born in 1985), is four years younger than Yao, and they are now legally married with a daughter.

In less than 6 months of online relating, Yao and Benyu got "married" in Tianya. It began with Yao making a public proposal to Benyu in the cyber-marriage forum and she replied yes. A "marriage certificate" was issued on Yao's initiated post the next day (26 April 2007). At the time of writing (February 2013), their cyber-marriage post remains active and it has so far attracted 92,867 visits and

accumulated 2577 replies. However, most of the replies are actually from Yao and Benyu as they regularly answer each other's messages posted on the forum. Both have vowed to continue writing on the post forever or until Tianya goes out of business. The couple regards the post as their second home, virtual but real, and whoever posts a message is metaphorically treated as their guest. As the post spans across nearly six years, not many have the patience to start reading the post from the beginning. Participants who are new to the post often show confusion as they are not sure whether the content of the post refers to an actual conjugal life or simply a make-believe marital relationship. Benyu appears particularly annoyed by those who assume them to be crazy for playing at cyber-marriage. For instance on 22 October 2009, Limingqian de kongju wrote:

> *Ridiculous, what is this? Be realistic, stop being silly. Is the Internet going to replace the real world? It seems likely in your case.*

Yao simply replied that "*the Internet is not going to replace the reality, it only provides a platform to meet and get to know one another.*" Benyu replied "*please read the whole post before you express your opinion*". For those who followed the post from the beginning, all were amazed and praised the couple's commitment to true-love and wished them well. On 7 November 2009, Sankoutu compared their online romance with her own experience in which she wrote:

> *I feel content if I could keep my online romance for three months, but how many of these relationships within cyberspace can last for more than a month? Three months for me is already very challenging. Your relationship of three years is unbelievable, please treasure it. I wish both of you happy forever.*

Yao replied that "*everyone has their own stories. You only see our happy ending, but not the struggles behind. We had to endure countless separations at the beginning; it is not an easy journey. But now when I look back, everything is worthwhile*". Their post has served as an encouragement for others who share their experiences of being involved in a distant online romance. From meeting online to cyber-marriage, to eventual face-to-face meetings, relocation and cohabitation that later lead to actual marriage, giving birth to a girl, and baby growing up to be a toddler, the progression

of their online romance is laid bare in the forum for anyone interested to witness and comment on.

Although Yao and Benyu's cyber-marriage was held prior to any face-to-face meeting, they nevertheless had arranged for such a meeting and they frequently talked on the phone and used webcam when chatting online. They first met in person on 26 July 2007 and the meeting went very well. In the first two years, their posts were mostly flirtatious in nature. They also vividly manifested feelings of insecurity, Benyu particularly. In November 2008, Yao relocated to live with Benyu. Their subsequent online interactions reflected their relationship status as they began to talk about the everyday life of work, house chores and arguments. They became legally married on 4 August 2009. Their marriage certificate and photos on the wedding day were posted online. Since their marriage, relationships with the parents-in-law also formed part of their conversation online. On 9 March 2010, Yao announced online that Benyu was pregnant. He shared the development of the foetus until labour and their anxious anticipation of becoming parents and the baby girl's photo online. Their baby was initially looked after by Yao's parents in Shanghai, while both of them continued to live and work in Ningbo. In April 2011, the couple moved to Shanghai and lived with Yao's parents. While appreciating the opportunity of staying at home to look after her baby girl, Benyu was also desperate to find a new job. It was only in April 2012, that Benyu was re-employed.

Yao and Benyu's experience of cyber-marriage is exceptional as most cyber-married couples either stop writing on their marriage post (analogous to coming back to the virtual home) or apply for "divorce" not long after their cyber-marriage. Yao and Benyu not only continue to play along and eventually turned the play into reality, they also continue to share part of their conjugal life online. In fact, Tiezhihun, the Tianya forum's administrator who issued them the cyber-marriage certificate in 2007 commented on 4 July 2012 that

> *Five years now, among all those couples to whom I've issued Tianya marriages certificate, both of you are the happiest couple I know in real life. I am very glad to participate and witness your fulfilling marital life. I wish both of you good luck and will keep following both of you and your baby :)*

Their motivation to get married in Tianya was to make a public declaration of commitment to one another. The virtual marriage co-authored by both also gave them a sense of tangibility and relationship stability. This was particularly important at the initial stage of their relationship when they were physically apart. They publicly shared their arguments online and apologized to one another online. They were on the brink of ending the relationship several times. Quarrels continue regularly even after marriage and in a heated dispute, Benyu even tore apart their legal marriage certificate. Their determination to continue writing their relationship online appears to function as a reminder to themselves that they have been through many struggles to make their marriage a reality and should never forget the sacrifices each has made for the other. In a more recent message dated 16 April 2012, Yao reflected that

> *This is definitely not an easy journey, separated and reunited. Even after marriage, we often have quarrels and the thorny issue of mother and daughter-in-law relationship! In between them two is really bad. Now life is much better, baby girl is adorable, wife getting back to work, in a better mood, calmer and family relationship is becoming more harmonious.*

On 24 June 2012, Benyu wrote that she revisited the first few pages of their Tianya post to re-experience the romantic feelings. But she finds it difficult to keep reading because

> *I can't bear my old self. He was watching a football match next to me, and I was reading the post, kicking him from time to time … I was very emotional at that time, now that we are husband and wife, we seldom have any sweet talks. Every day we go to work together and come home together, and then look after baby, rarely have the opportunity to be apart…*

Benyu's message suggests a sense of realization of how far they have come together. The couple is proud of what they have been able to achieve together. As a reader following this post, I occasionally had a strange feeling like a voyeur peeping into their private family life and they are like reality show participants who live their life

in public. Nevertheless, I understand the positive effect that online publication has had on the maintenance of their relationship. They take comfort in the well-wishes given to them online and the textualization of their emotions has facilitated their self-reflection. In summary, cyber-marriage although an online play and assumed by many to be a manifestation of ludus style of love, can be meaningful and transforming, depending on the individuals. Online games provide a more elaborate domain for playing marriage. Players can experience the usual rites of dating, marriage, even raising children and divorce online. Certain websites allow same-sex cyber-marriage and the practice of polygamy in the spirit of play. These cyber-transgressions may on one hand seem to challenge the social mores, but ultimately could be said to reflect the traditional ideal of getting married and therefore reinforce the marriage institution.

Conclusion

Chinese cultural influence on the conduct of relationships online can be seen most vividly on participants' deliberate making of the distinction between their online and online life and their awareness of the limits of such separation. The demarcation of the two realms is manifested in participants' perceptions of online romance as a mere play for fun and a source of emotional distraction and solace. The online and offline conceptual dichotomy, which at first glance may seem regressive, is actually a strategic move by participants to use the Internet to enhance their offline quotidian existence and to limit the impacts of online activities on their offline life. This in effect reflects their fundamental understanding that the online and offline world are inextricably linked.

"Emotion" is crucial in Chinese discourse of online romance and the key characteristic of Chinese Internet users' online romance is its emphasis on emotional satisfaction and glorification of emotional love over material and bodily love. "Platonic" online daters involve themselves in exclusively Internet-based relationships, motivated by emotional fulfilment more than corporeal intimacy. Although "Platonic" emotional love in Chinese online discourse encompasses online relationships of heterogeneous nature, the term does not however imply a worship of Cartesian disembodiment. "Platonic" online daters give up embodied interactions

(some willingly but some not) by confining their relationship online in exchange for sustained emotional highs, romantic intensity and emotional sustenance. In other words, it is an attempt to resist the ordinarization of their heightened affection because becoming part of everyday life, would compromise its charms, mythical feelings and transcendental quality. Those involuntarily becoming "Platonic" online daters contain their desire for physical intimacy by convincing themselves that their emotional relationship is a lofty pursuit.

Cyberspace is particularly apt for promoting ludus styles of loving. To play with an online relationship is to experience the satisfaction of controlling it for self-amusement. Those who "play" with online romance also treat the relationship independently from everyday reality because play takes place within its own distinct spatial and temporal frame. The relationship is consumed and appreciated for the fun and distractions it brings that help players to temporarily escape their tiresome and stressful everyday life. By calling their online relationships just play, the relationship and its impacts are made insignificant which also renders the prevailing social norms, conventions, ethics and morality irrelevant. In other words, playing at love online can also be interpreted as an act of resistance or "a rebellion of consciousness against the forms and forces of the world" (Henricks, 2006:208), in which players deconstruct the seriousness of everyday reality and show their defiance against the status quo in search for self-transformation. The therapeutic value of online romance lies in providing online daters a realm for distraction, to fantasize, to play, and to work on their emotional life to promote greater wellbeing and to enhance the quality of their quotidian existence.

Overall, although online romance appears to happen more frequently among Chinese netizens than their western counterparts, the relationships reported by my participants are relatively short-lived, reflecting their predominantly inconsequential nature. In terms of level of intimacy and satisfaction, Chinese online daters enjoy less than their western counterparts are able to achieve. They are also less likely to idealize their partner and misrepresent themselves online. These discrepancies could be due to Chinese Internet users' different pursuit of online romance, either exclusively Internet-based or a combination of online and offline interactions. Although my participants also reported feeling more confident to express and reveal

themselves online, self-disclosure online does not happen easily. In summary, my participants' experiences of online romance may be broader, but they are not as deep as those reported in the existing studies involving western Internet users. However, my survey also yields similar findings concerning the role of physical appearance in online romance and the list of online activities that constitute infidelity. Like western online daters, Chinese also attribute symbolic meanings to different media of communication and believe that a change of communication methods from online public settings to private communication and eventually offline interactions signals a growing intimacy and commitment between the couple. In summary, there are common characteristics of online romance in the two cultural contexts, but the relationships are also subject to the influence of local circumstances. The case study of cyber-marriage lucidly illustrates the empowerment potential of the Internet. In the next chapter, I will draw on my participants' personal narratives of online romance to further examine the issue of power at individual level and the relationship between agency and structure.

6 Narrating online romance: Empowering and disempowering experiences

To understand the wider significance of the Internet in influencing Chinese users' love lives, this chapter focuses on the issue of Internet empowerment (or lack of it). In the context of my study, this relates to the research question of how online romance might be seen to reproduce and/or challenge cultural norms and familial traditions governing courtship in Chinese society. This involves examining the extent to which my participants are able to overcome structural challenges and defy normative sanctions by strategically making use of the Internet to achieve their desired choice of love life. An overview of relational norms and social conventions in the discourse of romantic love in contemporary China is provided in Chapter 2. The following discussion is based on four of my participants' narratives of online romance. I recruited Zhou and Nakai through the online survey. Chengyin and Lin posted their experiences of online romance in the Tianya and Renren relationships forums. After reading their posts, I contacted them and they agreed to participate in the study.

Each narrative is presented and analyzed under the title of the participant's name. In my analysis, attention is paid not just to what my participants said, but how and why they said what they said. This level of analysis sheds light on the larger socio-cultural contexts in which the narratives are embedded. It allows me to identify the underlying cultural assumptions, resources and common sense participants draw on to make sense of their own experiences and their subject positions (Riessman, 1993). What follows next is a cross-case analysis in which I identify two key subjective factors that influence the empowerment and liberatory potentials of the Internet in netizens' pursuit of romantic love and affirm the thesis of "the rich get richer" Internet experience. The chapter concludes by drawing on Giddens' (1984) structuration theory that aims to transcend the dualism of agency and structure by highlighting the reproduction of social structures in the moment of agency (the production of actions). Before I go on to present my participants' narratives, it is

important to begin by examining the key theoretical concepts used in this discussion: power, empowerment and agency.

Lukes (1974) defines power as "A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests" (p.27), in either overt or covert manner. Similarly, Castells (2009) defines power as "the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favour the empowered actor's will, interests, and values" (p.10). Power over another agent is in fact the most common understanding of the term. However this is only a partial definition of power as it excludes the transformative dimension of power in allowing agents to achieve desired or intended outcomes beyond the limit of power as a structural quality that leads to social inequalities (Giddens, 1979). Although Lukes (2005) concentrates on power as domination in his three-dimensional view of power, he nevertheless acknowledged that power is a dispositional concept and can also be used positively to benefit others. Acknowledging power as operating at three different levels, Thompson (2007) offers the most comprehensive definition of power as (a) disposition at psychological level, (b) institutionalized ideas and social practices at discursive level, and (c) hierarchical relations at structural level. Power at personal level refers to individuals' capacities or "power to" achieve his/her desired ends, a source for self-emancipation. It is an attribute that everyone has the potential to develop, and does not involve a relationship of domination. This level of power shows that power is not necessarily oppressive, exercised at the expense of another social actor's interests. Power at discursive level draws on Foucault's notion of power which reproducing itself through language use and taken-for-granted cultural assumptions. At structural level, power relates to individuals' social position alongside various dimensions such as class, race, gender, age and sexuality that has an impact on their social mobility (Thompson, 2007). The unequal distribution of economic, political and cultural resources allows minority groups of people to be dominant over the majority of others.

Empowerment is not "something that can be done 'to' people or 'for' people" (Rowlands, 1998: 30). To empower someone is to enable the person to help themselves to master their own life, in other words, to develop power and become a

self-directed autonomous individual. The concept of empowerment illustrates that power is not a zero-sum entity but generative in nature (Thompson, 2007). Empowerment encourages the exercise of agency, referring to the capability of acting, "being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs" (Giddens, 1984:14). Corresponding to the different levels of power, empowerment can also occur at the same three levels. For instance, in T. Zheng's (2008) study of Chinese rural migrant bar hostesses, commodification of women's bodies and romance "are transformed from a denigration of female virtue into a route to empowerment" (p.459). Empowerment in Zheng's study refers strictly to power at personal level. Through hostessing, rural migrant women are able to achieve financial independence and shake off their rural status through conspicuous consumption. Hostesses defy social norms and redefine gender equality in their economic exchange with their clients. Their rational control over intimacies challenges the dominant gender discourse of women as emotional beings and men as rational. However, at the structural level, hostesses have reinforced women's sexual objectification and jeopardized women's social position. Furthermore, their "brand of feminism is based on a capitalist 'ethic' of enlightened self-interest, which prevents them from large-scale collective action to defend their rights" (p.468). Hostesses' economic success is not able to improve their socio-cultural status and the social stigma associated with their job becomes their lifelong liability even after they stop working.

The notion of power I am concerned with when conducting this narrative study is power at the personal level. More specifically, the degree of autonomy my participants have in taking control of their own love life, and how successfully they use the Internet for personal empowerment. Based on these four narratives, it seems that the effect of Internet empowerment varies as it is contingent upon individuals' characteristics and different life circumstances. This finding is consistent with McKenna, Green and Gleason's (2002) study in which shy and socially inept individuals who tend to express their true-self online as opposed to in the face-to-face context are more likely to enjoy the social benefit of their online relationships. Personality differences also affect individuals' use of the Internet in terms of preference for particular functions or purposes (Wang, Jackson, Zhang and Su, 2012). In this study, attitudes towards social norms and ownership of agency emerge as the

two key subjective characteristics mediating the empowerment potential of the Internet. My participants showed different levels of identification with normative expectations, therefore reacted differently, either conforming, transgressing or negotiating with structural norms. They also made different claims of responsibility when accounting for what happened to their online romance. Empowerment is found to be difficult for Chengyin and Lin who seem inclined to deny their personal accountability in their love affairs. It appears that only those who acknowledge their agency, recognizing their capability to make decisions for themselves, therefore to be responsible for their own actions, like Zhou and Nakai, can more readily empower themselves with the Internet as their tool.

1. Four personal narratives of online romance

The personal narratives of online romance presented here are non-Platonic in nature, in other words, participants desired to extend the relationship offline. All participants, except Chengyin, had met with their lover face-to-face. One of the ramifications of going offline is the decreasing level of individual control over their relationship as they are subjected to the greater influence of normative sanctions should they transgress the "proper" conduct of courtship, or fail to conform with cultural expectations. In other words, when the relationship is or intended to be re-embedded in the offline world, social and cultural constraints become a salient factor that couples can no longer simply ignore. Chengyin's narrative illustrates this problem most vividly.

1.1 Chengyin's story of parental interference

Chengyin, born in 1990, is a high school graduate living in Shanghai with her family. She met her boyfriend Hua in an online chatroom in 2007. He is two years younger than her and a university student living away from his family in Hebei, a northern province. Hua ended the relationship just before their second anniversary in 2010 under pressure from his father who was strongly against their relationship. She resented his parents' intervention and at the same time felt very afraid of their intimidation. She was also extremely disappointed at Hua's timidity in submitting himself to the will of his father, a local party official, feeling deeply hurt and yet powerless to challenge.

Prior to the termination of their relationship, they frequently spoke on the phone late at night after most family members had gone to bed. Following one occasion in which Hua used his father's phone to call Chengyin, their online romance was subsequently discovered by Hua's father. Despite a warning to stop the relationship, they managed to continue dating secretly for a year. Hua and Chengyin had arranged for their first meeting in October 2010 during a national holiday, but the plan had to be cancelled because Hua was summoned by his father to go home. At home, he was beaten by his father because of his defiance and Hua's father also threatened to "pay a visit" to Chengyin's parents to warn them to keep her away from Hua and even to get the police to arrest her.

Throughout her narrative, Chengyin uses many rhetorical questions to emphasize how unfairly she feels she has been treated which also crucially reflect her sense of powerlessness to intervene. For instance,

Why can't a couple who love each other be together? Why do his family still live in such a feudal system?

Online romance, a term I never thought of before, but it happened to me, and I really was in love, what can I do?

Why does no one believe that we are genuinely in love? Only we both knew it. For two years, we depended on each other every day. Why was our relationship disapproved of?

I don't expect much. Why do they treat me like this? It is not fair, really unjust to me. This is the first time I loved someone wholeheartedly, but why treat me so cruel? It hurts very much. Why force us to separate? Why treat us so cruel?

Chengyin's narrative also reveals her ambivalent attitude towards the relationship. On one hand, she emphasizes how much they love each other, but on the other hand, she anticipates their separation one day because, in her own words, "*I know I am not a good match for Hua, lack of background, but I never dream of*

marrying him". The following excerpts explain what Chengyin means by not a good match and her ambivalent feelings.

> *Right, you are an outstanding university student; your grandad was a respectable war hero. Your mother is a teacher and your father is a state official. Yes, a decent and reputable family background. While I am just a high school graduate, average family, average appearance, everything is average. True, I am not up to your standard. You said you don't mind, but I do. I also know that your parents will not approve our relationship.*

> *This is the reality, I can't do much about it. But I never expected to be with you forever… As I said before, my life is destined to be incomplete.*

> *I know it is impossible for us to be together forever. As I told you, I planned to date with you until the age of 26, after that, I will marry someone, so my parents can stop worrying about me. If you find someone else before I am 26, I will leave.*

> *Honey, I really love you very much. But I know, one day I will have to leave you. You once naively said that you want to be with me forever. I replied that it isn't easy; there are many practical challenges to overcome.*

Therefore, Chengyin's fury and disappointment lies not so much in the termination of the relationship, but the way it was ended abruptly forced by Hua's father before they even had the chance to meet up. Her experience shows that compatibility of background is indeed important in the eyes of most parents when considering their children's choice of mate. Even Chengyin herself accepted that their difference in background made them less than an ideal match. According to Hua, the other reason his parents opposed their relationship was because he was still studying, implying that their relationship risked negatively affecting his study.

Chengyin did not tell her parents about the relationship with Hua because

> *My family is wary of online romance. I don't have the courage to tell anyone.*

> *Furthermore, we will not be able to get married anyway, so there is no need to tell them. If they know, they will also forbid our relationship because of his parents' disapproval, we will not have a happy ending.*

Her reply reflects the problematic perception of online romance held by many parents. She also said that *"I don't understand why online romance tends to be negated by others from the very beginning"*, implying that because her relationship with Hua was an online romance this played a part in Hua's parents' disapproval. Chengyin's answer also sheds light on the conventional wisdom that successful courtship requires parental approval from both sides. Anticipating a negative reception from her family, Chengyin kept the relationship secret from her family, therefore also feeling isolated and vulnerable. Posting her story online in a relationship forum became the only option to have her voice heard. This is also how I came to know her after reading her post.

Hua explained that he had no choice but to end their relationship because he was worried that his father may cause trouble for Chengyin and her family. Chengyin was indeed very worried about the threat.

> *His father warned that if we insist on continuing the relationship, he will fly to Shanghai to talk to my parents. I can't upset my parents and let them be humiliated.*

> *..... if he (Hua's father) really comes to confront my parents, they will be insulted. They will know I am not only having an online romance, but also creating trouble, they will be really mad. I am really sorry to my parents, I can't hurt them anymore. I have a big extended family. If this incident is exposed, it will shame my parents, not me.*

Chengyin felt that she was guilty on two counts; being involved in an online romance and jeopardizing harmonious family relationships. Her immediate worry was that exposure of her online romance would dishonour her parents' reputation in the context of her extended family. Strong words were used as Chengyin vented her anger towards Hua's father, for instance, calling him a monster, tormenting her and

making her live in hell. Her feelings of frustration and anger towards Hua's parents were however mixed with fear.

> *I was shocked to know that his father had discovered everything about me; where I came from, where I am living now, even my family background, very terrifying.*

> *I don't want to leave him, but I have to. I am mortified by his parents' threat. I don't know when he is really going to come here. I am living in fear everyday worrying about what they are going to do next.*

The amount of information about her that Hua's father was able to unearth was frightening to her. Chengyin seems convinced that this knowledge about her and her family rendered them vulnerable to harassment from Hua's father. Her concern and fear is not unfounded because state officials' corruption and abuse of power is a widespread social problem. According to the 2012 China public opinion survey by Pew Research Center, 50% of the participants considered official corruption as one of the very big problems to the society, up from 39% in the previous survey conducted in 2008 and just second to the issue of rising consumer prices. Although Chengyin knows that her relationship with Hua clearly did not constitute a crime, she was worried that Hua's father would really use his state affiliation to mobilize the police to put her and her family in trouble.

In her online post, Chengyin openly reproached Hua's family's feudal beliefs and practices, repeatedly questioning the legitimacy of Hua's father's actions as she considers freedom to love to be a right that they are entitled to.

> *I don't understand why there are still parents who spy on their children's phone conversation records… he is already an adult, why are they constraining his basic rights?*

> *I don't understand why his parents treated us this way. We are both adults, we will be responsible for our own choices, why restrain our rights to choose?*

Every aspect of his life is being determined by his parents, he never has the freedom as an adult to decide for himself.

He is the first from the family to go to university and has outstanding performance, therefore shoulders all his family hopes and expectations. He is submissive and timid, probably because he is very used to his parents' control.

She relies on the discourse of rights to contest the ways Hua and their relationship were treated, asking again and again how could Hua's parents infringe their rights and freedom. Despite being rights conscious, knowing her rights has not empowered Chengyin to counter the oppression. Perhaps this is not a surprise at all in a country where human rights violation is nothing new.

In our exchanges, she mentions the word "parents" 58 times, comparing Hua's parents unfavourably to her parents who respect her freedom and choice. However, the influence of parents on children's choice of love manifested itself equally well on Hua and Chengyin, albeit in different ways. Chengyin condemns Hua's timidity in submitting himself to his parents' authoritative demands, while referring to her own compliance as a benign form of caring for her parents' feelings, a filial virtue. Both forms of obedience, one based on coercion, the other on consensus, are not essentially different. The entanglement of romantic love and family relationships is especially prominent in kinship based societies. As pointed out by Parsons, when the kinship system is strong, romantic love and marriages are likely to be subjected to family interference, affection between the couple becomes the secondary consideration. This is because in closely-knit interdependent societies "any considerable range of affective spontaneity would tend to impinge on the status and interests of too many others, with disequilibriating consequences for the system as a whole" (quoted in Macfarlane, 1987:138).

A close examination of Chengyin's narrative also shows a change of accountability. At the beginning, Chengyin laid her blame on Hua for forsaking her, but she gradually turned to his parents' interference. A strong sense of resentment was especially directed at his father. In the end, she attributes her sorrowful

experience to destiny which she and Hua are both helpless to change. Her self-defeating narrative reflects her tendency to regard most of the events that happened to her in life as beyond her control. Even falling in love with Hua is conceived as the working of karmic force. Without it, the relationship would be impossible because of her initial disbelief in online romance, lack of romantic aspiration and their age gap. Chengyin's concern about being older than Hua, although only by two years, reflects the social convention for women to partner with older men. This way of making sense of one's online romance is rather common, as described in Chapter 4. As she denies her own agency to intervene and make any change to the affair, she logically perceives herself as the victim in which power is inflicted upon her. Therefore, the responsibility over the resolution of the relationship lies squarely in Hua and Hua's father, not her. She told me that after their relationship was exposed, Hua's parents kept calling her for a week. When I asked what they said, she replied that "*I was too afraid to answer those calls. I know they basically wanted me to stop talking to Hua*". This could have been her opportunity to intervene, to act for herself and to account for their relationship but Chengyin felt incapable and had no courage to reason or at least engage in conversation with Hua's parents.

Chengyin's tendency towards self-victimization may not be a surprise considering her low self-esteem as seen in the way she compares herself unfavourably to Hua in terms of education, cultural, socio-economic status and family background. She also takes a marginal identity by describing herself in the following way.

> *I have a strange personality, or perhaps I am autistic. I always close the curtains in my room, I don't like sunshine. I often look at the sky in a quiet place, sometimes doing so all day.*

Her self-image also plays a part in conveying the significance of her relationship with Hua. She also describes Hua in a similar way, suggesting that the two lonely individuals were glad to have met and they found comfort from each other.

> *I don't understand why can't we keep the relationship even just as friends? They are a feudal family, very strict with him, therefore he doesn't like to talk,*

keeps everything to himself, except with several close friends.

Like him, I seldom talk to others. Perhaps we both feel lonely so we ended up together.

Chengyin has no doubt that the Internet has improved her social life in general, but has neither empowered her nor Hua in fighting for their love. Despite initially feeling betrayed by Hua, Chengyin later shows sympathy with him as he has to endure an authoritative parenting style, has his freedom severely curtailed, and is under tremendous pressure to succeed. She laments over many parents' paternalism and materialism, which she thinks compromise their children's pursuit of romantic love. Although their financial dependence on the family have limited their actions, another crucial factor appeared to be their level of identification with the tradition of filial piety that lead to their conformity to parental influence in one way or another. Chengyin's lack of agency also makes empowerment easier said than done for her.

Contrary to Chengyin, Zhou's experience of online romance is positive and empowering. Romantic love does not dominate Zhou's narrative, instead he tends to talk about how he embarked on a journey of self-discovery through the experiences of online relationships in general.

1.2 Zhou's journey of self-development through strategic use of the Internet

Zhou, born in 1988, was a master's degree university student in the UK at the time when the interview was conducted in 2010. He is from a Shanghai suburb, the only child in his family, and appears to have had a privileged upbringing from an affluent family. In his own words, his parents are open-minded and liberal in their parenting style. They always respected his choices and allowed him freedom to explore romantic love, for which he is grateful. He has two experiences of online romance which happened whilst he was in the UK. He met the two women while playing online games. They are also from China but were living in the UK. The first online romance was regarded as insignificant because their first face-to-face meeting made him realize that she "*has an erratic personality which couldn't be detected online*". He nevertheless kept in touch with her, but only online, until she began to date another man. His second online lover is his current girlfriend but they are in a

distant relationship because she went back to China after they were six months into their relationship, which included a brief period of cohabitation.

The way Zhou talks about the initiation of his relationship with his current girlfriend is insightful as if there was some kind of mysterious force that made it a destiny for both to be together.

> *We played the game together for a long time, but seldom talked to each other. I also wonder why and how we ended up together. When I met her in person, I felt much better with her offline than in the online world. So we are still together until now.*

> *Last time when I went back to China for holiday, I've met with her parents. The meeting went very well, they are happy with me.*

Zhou told me that he never thought it would be possible to transfer his online relationship offline, "*I only thought that having a companion online is quite good. I didn't think seriously of having a future together*". His low-expectations of online romance have saved him from disappointment and helped him to cope with the discrepancies felt between reality and the imagination. This explains why he was not devastated after the disappointing offline meeting with his first online lover and separated amicably a year later after she found a new love. Unlike Chengyin, Zhou has parental approval from both sides. The family's blessing on their relationship became one of the factors that contributed to Zhou's overall positive and encouraging experience of online romance.

The way Zhou makes sense of online relationships shows that he attributes individual agency over the success or failure of online relationships, rather than perceiving them as determined by the medium.

> *The prospect of relationships initiated online has nothing to do with the Internet. The Internet is only a medium.*

> *I know others who have had similar experiences like mine, but not many can keep the relationship for more than a year, many failed to overcome the discrepancies between online and offline.*

When I asked him what are the factors contributing to the successful maintenance of the relationship with his current girlfriend, he indeed replied that he had modest expectations of her before they actually met in person. They did not even exchange photos prior to the meeting. In everyday life, they were also able to tolerate each other's differences well. No explicit mention of the role of the Internet was made.

In response to my question of "in comparison to offline interactions, has the Internet made you feel freer and less constrained", Zhou said he definitely feels less inhibited when interacting online. He has the freedom to behave in ways that he would not normally do in everyday life. I wondered if the freedom he experienced in cyberspace translated itself to improve the level of freedom he has in everyday life, or on the contrary, had the debilitating effect of increasing his discontent or at least making him more aware of the level of constraint he has to put up with in the offline world. Zhou told me that "*when I first gained Internet access, I felt extremely excited and free. I lost all concerns of social decorum and norms in face-to-face contexts.*" But gradually this freedom he had online turned into a problem or burden for him.

> *I became more and more self-centred, deviating further away from social realities. I felt lost in the tension between online freedom and offline restrictions. I reacted by avoiding social interactions with others in the offline world… but having to live independently abroad forced me to reposition myself, to grow up, to have a new way of life, gradually becoming more confident socially.*

Perhaps, because of his family background, he often has the means to act on his own free will, therefore he seems to appreciate the freedom afforded by the Internet less than those subject to parental control and coming from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. His defiance of norms online only resulted in feelings of unease, guilt and alienation. Zhou later turned to the Internet to practise his social skills and to engage with others socially in accordance with norms and social

conventions, instead of ignoring them. Eventually he learned to control his own behaviour when online and mastered the skill of staying in control of Internet use.

> *I still very much like the freedom online, but I have learned to restrain myself, and do not experience it as a form of constraint that compromises my personal liberty. In this process of transformation, I consider the freedom afforded by the Internet as having a positive impact on me. It helped me to learn a new attitude towards life…Now my attitude towards life online is akin to what Confucius called "congxin suoyu buyuju" (从心所欲不逾距).*

The Confucian saying he cites means feeling free to act as one wishes within the boundary of established rules and norms. This saying reflects orthodox Confucianism's rejection of unbounded freedom. Individuals' interests and desires must be subsumed under the rule of social orders. To achieve this state of mind, individuals have to embrace genuine moral commitment to social norms and regulations, hence "harmonize" their individual desires with the approved standards of behaviour. By successfully assimilating the normative practices, beliefs and norms into his definition of subjectivity, Zhou regulates himself to behave in line with social conventions and normative expectations when going online. He found comfort in solving the conflict between being able to act as he wishes and complying with social norms. Zhou also regards himself as a modern and free subject, and considers the influence of traditions on his way of life as rather limited. But my conversation with him suggested otherwise. For instance, he agreed with the importance of marrying someone from a similar family background as it helps to maintain the stability of the family. He also told me that he never did anything online which would seriously challenge the social mores or moral standards. It became apparent to me that the "acts of unrestrained freedom" he mentioned in his early Internet experiences were only minor acts of disinhibition.

Since he mastered the skill of self-control, Zhou was able to benefit more from his online social interactions. He actively used the Internet as a tool for self-development and exploration as he said, *"I like life online because I treat it as an experiment platform. I believe that the more experiences I gain, the better it benefits me in life."* Overall, the significance of online romance to Zhou *"lays not in the*

relationship itself, but the experience of it. I believe the experience is helpful in setting a reasonable level of expectations in committed relationship." Zhou actively takes control of his own experiences, stressing the need to take a rational and pragmatic approach to the Internet. He is one of the 41% of my online survey participants who perceived online romance as an important and convenient source for obtaining emotional solace, providing helpful distraction from stressful and frustrating everyday life. When asked to comment on this attitude, he said that embracing this attitude would benefit netizens as the Internet can be used to provide opportunity for experimentation or exploration of different ways of life. However, Zhou is also critically aware of the double-edge sword of the Internet, as he argued that over dependence on the Internet can be debilitating because *"we can leave cyberspace and live without it, but we can't disconnect ourselves from the physical world"*. This remark reflects the significance he attaches to staying in control and prioritizing the face-to-face world.

Zhou also repeatedly stressed the importance of seeing the connection between the online and offline world. Referring to exclusively online Platonic love, Zhou said he understands the attractions of falling in love with someone never met before, *"but I believe that when the relationship progresses to a certain level, it is necessary to relate it with the offline world. Mere emotional love is not going to last long"*. His acute awareness of the intertwining between the two domains also arguably makes it harder for him to transgress moral boundaries and social regulations. He has successfully aligned himself with the governing norms, therefore becoming unaware of the omnipresent influence of tradition on shaping his attitudes, actions and subjectivity. Although he feels free, his freedom prevails only within the boundaries of established rules, regulations and normative expectations. This notion of freedom is in fact crucial for the Chinese state to maintain a "harmonious society". When individuals' perceived sense of liberty is in sync with the governing norms, it contributes to the maintenance of social order, and reinforces, rather than undermines the interests of the ruling power.

Zhou's changing experience with the Internet from negative to positive is not unique, and LaRose et al. (2001) attribute this change of the Internet's social effect to the amount of Internet experiences. Drawing on the psychological concept of self-

efficacy, they explain that novices may simply lack competence to use the Internet efficiently as a social resource to solve problems they encounter. On the other hand, competent users develop a higher sense of mastery, and are able to control the Internet better and are therefore more ready to enjoy its social benefits. Self-efficacy refers to the "ability to achieve desired results. Perceived self-efficacy includes beliefs about one's ability or competence to bring about intended results" (Oxford Reference Online). Improved self-efficacy positively impacts on individuals' self-esteem and self-confidence, providing individuals with a sense of control and mastery in life, also promoting learning and skills acquisition (Turkle, 1997). Therefore, self-efficacy can be understood as a form of power at personal level and crucial for empowerment and the exercise of agency. After the initial feeling of stress resulting from the loss of self-control induced by the unruly freedom felt online, Zhou eventually learned to stay in command and harmonized his online acts with the offline norms which were the origin of the tension bothering him. He also uses the Internet strategically as a tool for empowerment through social experimentation and self-development. While Chengyin blamed Hua and his father for the dissolution of their relationship, Zhou claimed full responsibility for the outcomes of his two online romances.

What follows next are Lin's disappointing experiences, a serial online dater who is convinced that the Internet cannot support genuine romantic love. It becomes clear that not everyone is able to benefit equally well from the Internet's afforded freedom and opportunities. Only netizens who recognize their agency and desire self-control are in a better position to empower themselves through the Internet.

1.3 Lin's disillusion with online romance

Born in 1989, Lin was a final year university student in Heilongjiang when I conducted the interview with him. Although living in a dormitory, Lin's family home was not far from the university. Also a game player, Lin met his first online lover while playing games. As she lived not far from Heilongjinag, they met in person after three months of online liaison. The relationship ended following the face-to-face meeting, a vivid example of the phenomenon of "*jian guang si*" (perish upon seeing light) discussed in Chapter 4. Lin told me that prior to the meeting, his main concern was the disparity between reality and imagination and it proved that he

was right to worry about this. The meeting made him realize that she was not really in love with him but he insisted that she did not deliberately deceive him, merely confused her own feelings towards him as love. He also wondered if had he not hurried into meeting face-to-face with her, their relationship could have survived longer.

He later continued to develop several online relationships, so many to the extent that he cannot remember the exact number. These relationships were neither serious nor intense as he said, *"since the first heartbreaking experience, I often had online relationships, until it became meaningless and insignificant. I am convinced that it is not easy for online romances to succeed"*. It seems that the undesirable outcome of Lin's first endeavour of courting a woman met online has had a profound impact on his attitudes and approaches towards his later online relationships. He became sceptical and cynical of online romance and perhaps because of a self-fulfilling prophecy, all his subsequent relationships were shallow and playful in nature. He initially took personal accountability for his disappointing online relationships but later suggested it is the limitation of the Internet as it fails to reflect reality, facilitates misrepresentations, and fosters misconceptions.

> *I think online romance does not suit me… I don't know about others… perhaps there are successful ones. I've encountered some successful examples shared by others online, but I have not seen any in real life… Successful examples are very few in comparison with failed attempts, just like stars in the sky, too many to count. Who can really infuse genuine emotion when typing on the keyboard??? Perhaps only silly people like me …* (referring to his first online romance)

Convinced that no one is serious in online romance, except "silly people" like him, he realigns himself with the perceived majority, seeking casual relationships in his online encounters.

Lin also considers himself a shy person, not very good at expressing himself in the face-to-face context. When asked has his participation in these online relationships improved his social skills, he told me quite the opposite. Instead of

being more socially skilled, he sometimes feels more anxious when dealing with others face-to-face.

> *In the online world, I am sociable and likable, but in the offline world, I have to speak, unlike writing in cyberspace. I am not able to express myself well in the context of the offline world… online is online, reality is reality, I may have confidence in cyberspace but when offline I am still the nervous me.*

It seems apparent that Lin makes a distinction between the online and offline world in which the former is the opposite of reality. He accounts for the different experiences he has online and offline as reflecting the separation of the two domains. Instead of strategically making use of the Internet to transfer his desirable online self offline and turning it into a social reality, Lin lets the divergences he experienced become the basis that perpetuates the dichotomy of the online and offline world. His failure to use the Internet to improve his social skills offline is taken as an indication of how the online world is far from reality. Unlike Zhou, Lin insists that the Internet can only satisfy emotional needs, and provide an outlet to release tensions but cannot provide solutions to offline problems "*to really solve the problem, you have to return to the reality*". This conviction appears to have hindered him from using the Internet for self-improvement and empowerment as it implies that online feeling of empowerment is not real empowerment.

Lin said he never takes advantage of the Internet to engage in identity play or behaving indiscriminately when online, *"I remain the same person in cyberspace, I never lost my inhibitions when online"*. Lin's conformity to social norms shows his reverence for normative sanctions. No surprise that when asked has the Internet in any way made him feel liberated or empowered, he said no, despite promiscuously dating a number of women online. The reason given was these relationships were only for fun, as a distraction, neither significant nor meaningful. With regards to the influence of courtship traditions on the Chinese younger generation, Lin argues that "*although family concepts and relationship norms are passed on from generation to generation, they are also changing from one generation to the next*". While he acknowledges the changing nature of traditions, Lin is not the avant-garde leading the social transformation. While enjoying the emotional stimulation from his serial

online relationships, Lin also stresses the importance of prioritizing the offline world. Good self-discipline and control are needed to avoid being overwhelmed by online life. Lin is certainly sceptical of the Internet's claim of self-transformation and is less optimistic about the empowering and liberating potential of the Internet than Zhou.

Among the four narratives in this study, Nakai's story is the most inspiring, even though her first experience of online romance was as disappointing as Lin's. Nakai's narrative also shows how technological artefacts interact with situational factors and individual characteristics to yield different outcomes along the continuum of empowering at one end and disempowering on the other end.

1.4 Nakai's self-exploration through the Internet

Like Zhou, Nakai's overall experience with the Internet is positive and empowering. Residing in Inner Mongolia, Nakai aged 24 in 2010, worked as an administrator at a careers service centre. In the past, she had developed relationships with five different men she met online. Referring back to her survey responses, I noticed that she was currently in a relationship with someone met online, therefore I began by asking her to talk about that recent relationship. She replied that

> *I met my current partner through a colleague's recommendation. We first contacted each other online and because of the distance, we rely on the Internet to keep in touch. I am not sure whether this counts as online romance or not.*

The last sentence shows that the terms "online romance" in Chinese is an ambiguous concept and different people may have different interpretations of what counts as online romance, as discussed in Chapter 4. She continued to say

> *There is something I am not sure whether it is necessary to tell you. My current partner is a woman. My previous partners were all men. I don't know if this is going to have an impact on your research?*

After assuring her that a homosexual relationship is no different from heterosexual relationship in my study, I invited her to talk more about this relationship. She told

me that her colleague passed her QQ (Chinese domestic online instant messaging) contact number to Mei. Mei contacted her online and their relationship developed as they chatted regularly. Mei came to visit her after three months of online liaison and their first face-to-face meeting functioned to affirm and consolidate their romantic relationship. Nakai said,

> *I think I really fell in love with her after we actually met. I went to the airport to fetch her and we talked on the phone while trying to look for each other. When I finally saw her, I knew I was in love. I think this is love at the first sight~~ haha*

Mei later relocated to Inner Mongolia to be with Nakai, but moved back after four months because the job she had there was not suitable. However, Mei planned to move to Inner Mongolia again in 2011.

When asked if she had deliberately suppressed her true sexual orientation in the past, she replied that she only realized that she also loves women after she met Mei. She said "*perhaps I am bi-sexual*". Mei was her colleague's offline friend of two years. Since they became romantically involved, her colleague was apologetic as she did not know that she had a homoerotic impulse and regretted making the introduction which was initially intended to be merely a social relationship. This homosexual relationship has been hidden from Nakai's parents because she anticipated their strong reaction and prohibition. However, she is determined that when Mei returns in 2011, she is going to move out of her parents' home to live with Mei, but will not confess the nature of their relationship to her parents. Mei is a year younger than Nakai, and according to Nakai, she was "*born a lesbian. She always loved women and has dated several women in the past*". Nakai on the other hand, realized and accepted her sexuality after meeting Mei. However, it was not really Mei who transformed Nakai from heterosexual to homosexual. Nakai told me that

> *When I was in high school and university, I admired two female fellow classmates. But I was not sure whether this feeling was friendship or romantic love. Furthermore, at that time, I was not convinced that it is possible for two females to be together. I thought this only happened in TV*

drama, unrealistic, so I did not do anything. After I started work, I began to contemplate the idea of dating with woman. I knew a lesbian, she confided to me that she likes to be with me, but I had no feelings towards her, so I refused. Perhaps the way I explain is a bit confusing. Previously, I was not clear whether or not I really like women, because I had not tried it, so was uncertain about my true feelings.

After being in relationship with Mei, Nakai realized that a homosexual relationship suited her better than a relationship with the opposite sex. "*I love her very much, much more than any of my ex-lovers. I want to be with her regardless of family's disapproval*". Most of her friends know that she is in love with Mei and none of them were too surprised, and were mostly supportive. The main challenge she encounters, like so many other homosexuals in China, is to ask for her family's acceptance. She nevertheless said that "*I think I am a self-centred person, as long as I like it, I will just do it, don't care about what others think of me, let the feelings rule*."

Her initial doubt on the feasibility of same-sex relationships is understandable in a society that exercises compulsory heterosexuality. Although she previously did not act upon her homoerotic impulse, her interest in same-sex love remained and it later facilitated the acceptance of her own sexuality. When asked if she felt confused and struggled to come to terms with her own sexuality, she replied "*no struggle at all, I felt as natural as loving a man*". When talking about the role of the Internet in her self-identification with a marginal sexual identity, she replied that

I have been researching online to learn more about lesbianism, especially since I met Mei. It enhanced my understanding of the community, clarified my doubts, knowing that it is possible for females to develop romantic relationships and live together gave me lots of courage.

The exposure to homosexual cultures online convinced her that there is nothing wrong or abnormal about same-sex love. Interacting with other female same-sex couples gave her assurance and encouraged her to live the life she desires. Narrative is one of the resources we turn to for self-understanding and construction of the self

(Elliott, 2005). Through narrative, individuals reconfigure the present and reinterpret the past in order to present a coherent and integrated sense of self. When Nakai narrates her current relationship with Mei, she relates it with her past experience of sexual curiosities with women. By so doing, the same-sex relationship does not constitute a break in her sexual identity. Her continuous sense of self could have led to the smooth transition from cross-sex love to same-sex love.

Talking about her first online romance, Nakai said it was her first love, the most memorable experience of all, but also the most hurtful. They met in the Tianya forum in 2006 when she was 20, and had just started at university. They lived far away from each other but Nakai was confident that "*as long as two persons are really in love, all problems can be solved*". She looked forward to visiting him during holidays and was prepared to relocate to Fujian to be with him after graduation. He was also a student, but soon to graduate from university. Sadly, Nakai later found out that he already had a girlfriend offline and was not serious in their relationship. After the relationship was over she continued to develop several other cross-sex online romances. The longest relationship lasted for a year, the shortest only for a month. She met almost all of her lovers through discussion forums. When I asked was she serious in these relationships, she replied

> *Hard to say, I was once serious in all these relationships, but how long my seriousness lasted varies. I was serious throughout some of the relationships, but there were also others which I was serious to begin with but after I became aware that the relationships have no future prospect, I treated them as play.*

This flexibly adjustable level of seriousness indicates her pragmatic approach towards online romance. When the relationship is not likely to deliver the ideal outcome, she turns it into play. By doing so, she can enjoy the distractions brought by the relationships while minimizing the risk of getting hurt. She also did not seem to be disappointed by these short-lived online love affairs, arguably because of her contention that over relying on the Internet for solace can be debilitating. *"Long-term indulgence in cyberspace will result in loss of confidence in real life, having difficulties to communicate with others face-to-face."*

She enjoys developing relationships with others online because as an introvert, she seldom chats with others. The Internet not only increases her opportunity to engage in communication with others on a deeper emotional level, but also allows greater control of her self-presentation. She does not normally use a webcam when chatting online because of the worry that her average looks maybe off putting. Her second motivation for developing online relationships is they are good *"when feeling bored. They can be used for recreation"*. These relationships although not profound love, can still temporarily *"satisfy the need of being loved and care for."* In fact she admitted that she once dated two or three different men online at once. But these relationships were short-lived and she was exhausted from trying to maintain all these relationships. When asked did she consider herself cheating, she replied that these relationships were just play, so faithfulness was not relevant. Nakai contended that only online romance that stood the test of offline reality can be called genuine love and deserves to be committed. Online romance in itself is just a temporary outlet for emotional stimulation and infatuation, or for one to indulge in casual love affairs. Despite her dismissive view of online romance, she nevertheless insists that having online romance is not bad because

> *it brings about emotional satisfaction, good for adjusting one's mood. What is most important is not to be too serious and let oneself delve too deep into the relationship, otherwise, one risks breaking one's own heart.*

While her initial experiences of online romance were similar to Lin, Nakai's overall experiences of the Internet and online romance in particular were more beneficial to her self-construction than Lin's. She was not only able to explore and affirm the other side of her sexuality, but also improved her social skills online. Nakai's self-confidence may not be particularly high, but she has a strong sense of capability in overcoming challenges and life adversities, corresponding with her proclamation of being a "self-centred person". Her determination to live with Mei, to pursue her own choice of life is perhaps the most vivid example of the exercise of agency. The way she describes her transitions and identification with the marginalized sexual identity is surprisingly smooth, unlike many reported accounts of internal struggle and self-rejection. Familial traditions and social norms might be

a constraining force for Nakai, but she is not afraid of the obstacles. As a self-determining person, she is adept at looking for resources and support online, therefore has the means to empower herself in living her choice of same-sex love.

2. Cross-case analysis: Putting the potential of Internet empowerment in perspective

Zhou and Nakai present narratives of online romance that are progressive in nature as they resulted in greater self-awareness, understanding and development. These are in sharp contrast to Chengyin and Lin's experience of online romance in which the Internet has failed to empower them in their pursuit of romantic love and self-development. All participants however in some ways show that their involvement in online romance is related to their less sociable personality and lack of social skills, supporting the argument that the Internet helps to enrich users' social lives and improve their interpersonal skills. Nevertheless, my participants are also at the same time wary of the risks of Internet addiction and stress the importance of prioritizing offline life and face-to-face relationships. Knowing how and when to draw the line between the online and offline world represents yet another form of competence acquired through the accumulation of digital literacy and constant self-reflection. The pragmatic and playful approach to online romance I documented in Chapter 4 can also be seen in Zhou, Lin and Nakai's narratives.

To understand the intersection between online and offline lives, Bakardjieva (2005) included her participants' social-biographical situations in her analysis, which include demographic details such as family background, living arrangements, job, skills, education level, relationship status and political affiliations. These individuals' circumstances are shown to have impact on their Internet use, online experiences and meanings. The study highlighted the contingent nature of the Internet experience and its impacts on individuals' lives. In my study, participants' living arrangements, whether or not they are the only child in the family, their gender, family background, financial status, personality differences such as level of self-esteem and freedom they enjoy, acknowledgement of agency and attitude towards norms are examples of subjective factors that affected their Internet experience and particularly its empowerment potential. Based on my participants' narratives, the two key

personality differences that crucially affect their ability to use the Internet to empower themselves are their level of identification with norms and acknowledgment of agency. This finding is similar to Rowlands' (1998) research in Honduras on female empowerment in which she also identified self-confidence, self-esteem, sense of agency, sense of self in a wider context and dignity as core elements to facilitate empowerment.

Only those who recognize their own agency and account for their own actions, like self-determining Nakai and Zhou, are more adept at strategically using the Internet for empowerment, subsequently leading to self-improvement and development. Empowerment is difficult or indeed futile for those who tend to attribute whatever happened to them to others, presenting themselves as passive victims who are powerless to do anything, or convinced that there is nothing they can possibly do to intervene. Those who identify themselves strongly with norms and rely on traditions to define their subjectivity tend to conform to normative expectations and act accordingly to avoid sanctions. Chengyin although disagreeing with the courtship norm of background compatibility that discouraged her relationship with Hua, resigned to the norm eventually as the potential punishment for defying the ban imposed by Hua's father was too severe for her to bear. Nakai on the other hand, is resolute in rejecting Confucian familial traditions and societal heterosexual norms in the name of love and personal happiness. Norms, social conventions and traditions are examples of structural forces that constrain individual agency, but as pointed out by Giddens (1979) structure also grants actors ontological security, facilitating their exercise of agency by providing them with tacit knowledge and resources to draw upon in the moment of acting. Zhou's narrative in fact shows that social structures can be both constraining and enabling.

The greater freedom Zhou experienced online was initially a cause for celebration but was later perceived as debilitating because it created inner tension resulting from the dissonance of his attitude and behaviour online and offline. Zhou eventually learnt the skills of self-control and readjusted or adapted his behaviours online so they are in line with the prevailing social norms. The Confucian saying he cited suggests that he is content with his regulated freedom, freedom bounded within the structure of social order. He acts in accordance with traditions and normative

expectations but this conformity has not been felt as compromising his agency. In the language of Lukes' (1974) three-dimensional view of power, Zhou might be conceived as a victim of false consciousness, unaware of his real interests and unable to recognize the structural influence on his actions and subjectivity. The third dimension of power centres on exposing how those in power create and sustain internal constraints that restrict the choices of those dominated and undermine their reasoning process by shaping their interests, desires and beliefs. In short, how false consciousness as a mechanism of domination prevents subjects from living authentically and exercising their autonomy to make rational judgment (Lukes, 2005). Lukes' three-dimensional view enriches studies of power beyond active and observable forms of power seen in decision making and agenda setting to the securing of consent to domination via manipulation of reasons to induce compliance. Despite the problematic evaluative notion of false consciousness and real interests, Lukes is right to call attention on how power can mislead or distort knowledge, and through ideological positioning of individuals sustain the structural domination (Haugaard, 2002).

An alternative interpretation that does not deny Zhou's agency would be his commitment to comply with social norms is a genuine reflection of his agreement with the normative ideas and conducts, perhaps because those norms serve his purposes. As suggested by Giddens (1979), acceptance of norms could also be an outcome of an actor's rational calculation and the serious consequences of transgression may propel him/her into conformity. For example, choosing a partner based on a shared standard had spared Zhou from the stress of conflict with his parents and gives him a greater sense of autonomy in deciding for himself. Swidler (2001) also argues against the notion of internalization in conceptualizing the influence of culture on individuals' actions. In her study of the middle class culture of romantic love in America, many of her participants behave inconsistently with their beliefs or values in the public context as they are aware of the prevailing semiotic codes that define their action. This reflects their symbolic capacities developed to deal with the external contexts of institutional life. She concluded that it is "more common, for culture to influence action from the outside in" (p.179), than inside out through internalization of cultural norms.

Another example of how structure can enable actors is the passing of The Marriage Law in 1950 which outlawed arranged and forced marriage, and granted the right of freedom to love for Chinese citizens. This legally protected right provides younger generations a legitimate discursive resource to oppose families' interference of their choice of partner as seen in the way Chengyin protested against intervention from Hua's father. Although recourse to the right discourse may not guarantee individuals' entitlement to romantic love, the legal structure nevertheless allows citizens to make valid claims to personal liberty and to have reasonable expectations of privacy and respect to their choice of private life. Chengyin attributed her failure in online romance to Hua and his father. Her low self-esteem and confidence discouraged her from acknowledging her own capacity to intervene. Without claim to agency the empowering potential of the Internet can hardly be realized. Her lack of social supports also adds to the feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness.

The narratives from Nakai and Zhou appear to support the thesis of "the rich get richer". "That is, the Internet may be more beneficial to individuals to the extent they can leverage its opportunities to enhance their everyday social lives. Those who are already effective in using social resources in the world are likely to be well positioned to take advantage of a powerful new technology like the Internet" (Kraut et al. 2002:69). Their privileged family backgrounds, considerably high levels of freedom and autonomy gives Nakai and Zhou an advantage to access resources and know where to look for support online when needed to empower themselves. Successful empowerment reinforced further their self-confidence and autonomy. Nakai and Zhou are also skilful at finding room to manoeuvre when encountering obstacles or complications and know how to negotiate with norms and traditions. Nakai's same-sex relationship is particularly problematic in the mainstream heterosexual society. But her self-determining characteristics encouraged self-acceptance of her sexuality and empowered her to confront challenges ahead. Her belief in the right to live her choice of life and her capability to realize it helps her to strategically make use of the Internet and readily benefit from its empowering potential. The Internet connects her to lesbian communities online and provides her with reassurance and support in her pursuit of same-sex love. However, it is also important to note the fact that lesbian relationships are implicitly condoned in

Chinese society, subjected to less social discrimination and scrutiny compared to male homosexual relationships (Sang, 2003). This may have also played a part in encouraging Nakai's transgression. Male homosexual relationship is regarded as intolerable because it interferes with the filial piety duty of procreation to continue the family lineage. Knowing that she has a younger brother to fulfil the role of continuing the family lineage would ease her parents' rejection and could have also emboldened her to pursue her homoerotic impulse.

Lin not only failed to benefit from the Internet in self-empowerment, his Internet social experience is also debilitating as it increased his level of anxiety when engaging in face-to-face interactions. His argument that "*to really solve the problem, you have to return to the reality*" seems germane to his negative experience of the Internet. Because he perceived the positive affects he experienced online (for example, becoming socially desirable and able to transgress social norms) as not real change, he denied the possibility that these positive Internet experiences can be transferred offline and turned into social reality. This is in sharp contrast to how Zhou was able to use the Internet for self-experimentation and to practice and resolve social problems confronting him offline. Turkle (2011) explicates the difference between acting out and working through to account for these contradictory Internet experiences. Acting out involves repeated online expression of existing problems in one's everyday life without critical reflection aiming to overcome the problems. In working through, the Internet and online life are used as a platform to confront the existing problems one faces, to rehearse and to find solutions (p.214).

My participants' narratives also show that the Internet can both challenge and reproduce familial traditions and courtship norms online. In China's cyberspace, there is no lack of contextual cues to remind netizens to exercise self-restraint due the country's pervasive Internet surveillance and censorship. The government measures of Internet control have the impact of reinforcing social conventions and normative expectations online. Furthermore, as pointed out by Mantovani (1996), "social context is not something outside or above people; it is both around and inside them, an integral part of their identity" (p.106). Therefore "we cannot clearly separate the actor from the situation. The interaction is so close that the actor-in-

situation is defined precisely by the way in which he exploits opportunities" according to the individual's competences and goals (p.17). This accounts for the diverse experiences of Internet use reported by different individuals. Mantovani also contended that the relationship between contexts and individuals is two-way. Contexts influence individuals' actions but are also constructed by their interventions. In other words, social structure and contextual norms reproduce themselves in actions; hence are able to perpetuate their influence in society. This argument is indeed the essence of Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration which highlights the interdependence between agency and structure.

Giddens (1979) argues that social systems facilitate agency by allowing actors to draw upon available knowledge, rules and resources when interacting with others, thereby at the same time also reconstituting these structural properties and leading to "*the fundamentally recursive character of social life*" (p69). In other words, social structures and institutions are simultaneously the outcome of action and the medium used by actors in their production of actions (see figure below). Also aiming to transcend the dichotomy of agency and structure, Barnes (2000) argues that the so called structure is not externally imposed upon individuals but inter-subjectively constituted, sustained and reinforced by individuals in their everyday interaction with others. Because human beings are social creatures, agency is necessarily collective, rather than individual. Absolute autonomy would only result in chaos and anarchy, therefore action like behaviour, is both chosen and caused. Social constraints exist because members of the society place upon each other normative sanctions in their actions and interactions. In this study, with the support of lesbian communities online, Nakai is able to resist the enactment of normative practices and withdraw her contribution to the maintenance of the heterosexual norm. Zhou and Lin found comfort and security in being able to act consistently online and offline. Their actions extend the influence of normative sanctions and social norms into cyberspace and thereby reproduce the social structures online.

Structuration: Production of action and reproduction of systems

Netizens' pursuit of freedom in romantic love ← Agency   Structure → Familial tradition, courtship norms

Reproduction of structural properties through individuals' actions in which the former also simultaneously enable and constrain the latter.
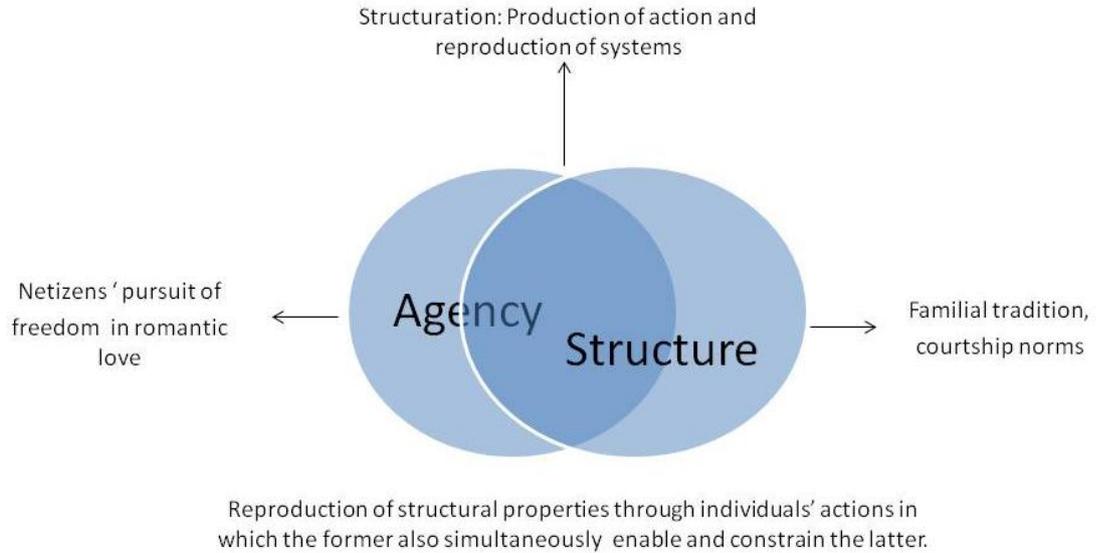
Giddens (1984) Structuration Theory

Giddens' agents are surprisingly rational, active, well informed, in control and have the power to act. Although he is right to emphasize the importance of agency, he has failed to acknowledge that there is a "danger of romanticizing agency" as the exercise of agency in one way would simultaneously foreclose other choices in another way (Constable, 2003:147). For example, in Constable's study, women marrying foreigners for the purpose of upward mobility may have represented an expression of agency, but their marriage decision would require them to migrate to a new country which resulted in social isolation, vulnerability to abuse and discrimination, yet having no immediately available support network when needed. In other words, the benefits of exercising agency have temporal and spatial limitation. In Chengyin's case, it is neither in her nor Hua's best interests in the long-run should they exercise their agency to pursue their forbidden love. Not appearing to exercise agency can also ironically serve self-interests as seen in Chao's (2005) study of women's marriage strategies in a village in China. Some of the rural women who eloped with men were reluctant to claim agency. They played along with the dominant discourse that warned against the hazard of female agency and presented themselves as helpless victims, who are either kidnapped by their lovers or forcefully detained by their own parents when they come home for a visit. The shortage of women for marriage has become their bargaining power to negotiate for favourable marriage terms. Giddens has not adequately accounted for this passive form of agency too.

Undoubtedly online romance enables individuals to easily explore romantic love, provides them with a wider pool of potential mates, enhances social skills and facilitates self-presentation, but this personal level of empowerment is inadequate if what one desires is cultural change at societal level. Power from within (at psychological level), although an important starting point for empowerment, "liberating people from within" is not sufficient to fight against structural power aiming for social transformation because "liberation is a felt transformation not a structural change" (Dant, 2003:159). Empowerment regardless of its level is a long-term process "and may require an open-ended approach with unpredictable and inconclusive outcomes" (Rowlands, 1998:27). In other words, there is no guarantee that the effect of empowerment would be long lasting as any outcomes achieved are subject to change and require constant renewal of effort. To conclude, the question of whether engaging in online relationships helps to liberate and empower participants in their pursuit of romantic love or private relationships is a question that has no simple and definite answer. Although my study focuses on the impact of individuals' personalities on Internet empowerment, this is by no means underestimating the influence of the individual's situational circumstances on mediating their Internet experiences. After all, individuals' preferences and characteristics are also the product of their particular life-history and socio-cultural background. The Internet interacts differently with each subjective factor; hence empowering or disempowering individuals to various extents. As much as allowing users an opportunity to challenge or transgress normative standards, the Internet also simultaneously helps users to reproduce normative structures online. The issues of social conventions, courtship norms and familial traditions become particularly salient when online romance couples expand their relationships into the offline world, especially when the relationship does not conform to normative expectations. This is when symbolic defiance and resistance are no longer sufficient and greater levels of empowerment beyond the personal level are required to deal with the social sanctions for transgression.

Since structural properties of social systems and "institutions do indeed 'result' from human agency" (Giddens, 1979:95), empowerment at larger community level would logically facilitate social transformation. In China's ongoing socio-political changes, the Internet plays a crucial role in accelerating the

transformation. However, the Internet is not only the friend of dissidents and social activists, it is also effectively used by the authorities. The Internet is particularly helpful in the deployment of governmentality which Foucault (1988a) refers to as governing through individuals' rationalities and freedom with the appearance of self-governance. It is a modern mode of governance whereby free individuals are enlisted into policing themselves and willingly comply without feeling the effects of power imposed upon them. In the next chapter, I will examine power relations at discursive and structural levels. My objective is again not to paint a simple account of whether the Internet empowers or disempowers users but to provide insight into the in-betweeness of users' experiences which show struggle and negotiation involving individuals, their family and the party-state.

7 Governing self-governance: A Foucaultian analysis of four narratives of online romance

Premised on my participants' own narratives of their online relationships, this chapter aims to extend the discussion to the macro level of power and resistance between the communist party-state and Chinese society. The reform era marked not only the privatization of aspects of the economy, but also the re-privatization of private life. However, to think that the party-state has completely retreated from policing the love lives of the citizens, as seen in the popular belief that contemporary Chinese society is sexually open and liberated (AFP, Shanghai, 2003), is to overlook the roles of the ruling authority in helping citizens to sustain this liberal image of the society. Foucault's (1988a) notion of governmentality provides a useful framework to explain how this can be accomplished. Governmentality is the contact point between the technologies of domination and technologies of the self. It represents a modern mode of governance negotiating between the two opposing technologies, and appeals to the individuals' rights but at the same time serves the interests of the ruling authority (Crampton, 2003). Therefore, through governmentality, individuals are simultaneously being empowered and disempowered in their relationship with the state.

This chapter begins with a discussion of technologies of domination illustrated via Chengyin's narrative. It highlights the power struggle between individuals, their parents or family and the party-state. The second part of the chapter introduces Foucault's (1988a) idea of technologies of the self, a project of self-mastery to author one's life or regulate it by one's own means and interests. Confession and self-writing are the two practices of the self particularly relevant in our present day. Among all narratives collected, Nakai's case is most indicative of the deployment of technologies of the self. In governmentality, we witness the fusion of the two forms of technologies, which highlight the open ended nature of power most vividly. To make my case, I turn to the narratives of Zhou and Lin, I also refer to the government's family planning policy, enactment of the Marriage Law, state

sponsored revival of Confucianism, the language of protection of minors in Internet control, self-censorship and self-regulation as examples of the working of governmentality. Foucault's notion of governmentality meticulously exposes how power in modern societies functions implicitly by co-opting subjective individuals' preferences and capacities into the boundary of the state (Jeffreys and Sigley, 2009). This chapter concludes that the deliberation of the working of governmentality concurs with my previous chapter's discussion of the interdependency between agency and structure. It again emphasizes the dynamics of power relations and explains the seemingly contradictory impacts of the Internet on individuals' freedom and efforts to empower themselves at both micro and macro levels of politics.

1. Technologies of domination: Chengyin

Unlike the power of a monarchy led by a king, Foucault (1991) argues that power in contemporary society is dispersed and beyond the state apparatuses. His notion of power focuses on how it is exercised discursively, rather than through direct violent repression. What he refers to as technologies of domination consist of structural institutions and institutionalized discourses that legitimize certain actions and knowledge, define norms, ideals and standards of conduct that submit individuals to domination and objectify their subjectivities (Foucault, 1988a). Discourse becomes the battle field where the dominant ideology is contested with alternative meanings in everyday life. Conceptualizing power as merely a negative force of prohibition ignores the productive aspect of power because "what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse" (Foucault, 1991:61).

While the sovereign showed his power through the right to kill and right of seizure, the new form of power requires the reverse role of fostering life. This life-administering power concentrates on the bodies of individuals, developing life to optimize the productive body. The consequences are a growing state interest in studying the population and an explosion of subjugating techniques to control bodies and the population as a whole in accordance with political and economic requirements. Foucault called this bio-power, and argued that it functions more

efficiently than power in juridical and negative forms (Foucault, 1991:262). Therefore technologies of domination consist of the amalgam of disciplinary apparatuses, not confined only to laws and prison institutions, but also operating through schools, families, media, and health institutions etc. The aim is to produce a "docile body", a body that can be analyzed, manipulated, trained, used, transformed and improved to better serve the authorities. "Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (Foucault, 1991: 182). Chengyin's experience illustrates most vividly the subjugation to technologies of domination. Her narrative sheds light on the impact of power in shaping an individual's subjectivity and life experiences.

The functioning of technologies of domination in Chengyin's case can be seen in four areas. Firstly, through the language Chengyin uses to describe herself that reflects her subordinated social position at the structural level. Secondly, while some children contest parental interference into their romantic love life, there are also children who willingly follow their parents' advice when conducting their love affair. Thirdly, how parental dislike or suspicion towards online romance is arguably the result of a state sponsored smear campaign against online relationships. Finally, the threat from Hua's father to harass her family and arrest her illustrates the extent of power abuse among officialdom and social injustice at grassroots level.

Chengyin defines her own identity primarily based on her family background. She perceives herself as inferior to Hua because of her less impressive family background, compared to Hua's "politically correct" family status which lies in his parents' state affiliation and his grandfather's status as a former soldier. Working in the public sector opens up channels of networking or political connection that can be harnessed for one's own interests, from gaining access to scarce resources, promotion, business opportunities to school placement or employment for one's child and much more (Zhang, 2011). These political privileges are highly valued in the competitive society.

In China, children's academic success has always been most parents' priority and having a child who excels at school is the family's pride. This is particularly true for those occupying the lower end of the socio-economic ladder as it provides a hope

for upward social mobility. The way Chengyin feels about herself also shows that she embraces the societal expectation that success at school is equivalent to success in life. This is consistent with the findings of Hansen and Pang (2010) in their study of rural young people who see a sharp divide between those who go on to further study and those who left school to work after the compulsory nine years of study. Higher education is associated with prestige and status, and it has become the key criterion "for how to define different groups of young people, as a marker of success versus failure" (p.49). Chengyin's lack of academic achievement and government alliance through family relations puts her at a social disadvantage and reinforces her sense of low self-esteem. She accepts that she is not the ideal choice for Hua because of his perceived social superiority. Status similarity is indeed crucial just as it has always been in traditional China based on the principle of "one door matches another door" (Croll, 1978). In today's China, marriages of educational homogamy have become the norm (Zang, 2011). In summary, Chengyin's self-deficit language reproduces and perpetuates the status quo of the cultural ideals and social hierarchy.

The implementation of family planning policy since the late 1970s, has limited most families to have only one child. It was introduced to address the problems of shortage in national resources and infrastructure. To promote the policy to the public, it was framed as improving the quality of family life and enhancing sexual satisfaction within marriage (Evans, 2002). Although children born under the policy benefit from their families' undivided love and resources, they also carry high expectations to succeed as the future prospects of the entire family lies upon them. Hua's father seems afraid that Hua's romantic involvement with Chengyin will affect his study, put his future in jeopardy, and hence undermine the family's stability and outlook. Hua's father's paternalistic parenting style is unsurprisingly common. The family planning policy contributes to an aging population and rampant sex-selective abortion due to the traditional preference for a boy which is also causing serious gender imbalance. Despite widespread calls to relax the policy, the party-state shows no sign of concession. Limiting the birth rate not only helps to ease the pressure on the state, but most crucially has the long-term benefit of increasing the quality of the population as families can concentrate their resources to nurture their offspring. Hence, this generates quality docile bodies that constitute a useful national asset for the state.

Marriage based on personal choice rather than arranged by the parents has been advocated by liberal activists as early as the 1850s during the Taiping Rebellion in China (Baker, 1979). For contemporary Chinese youth, love became the new moral ethic that can be used to justify their behaviours, especially when it comes to sexual relations (Farrer, 2002). The party-state's policies of personal fulfilment through intimate bonds, late marriage with fewer births benefits young people on one hand, but also introduces new restrictions affecting especially young people who are considered too young to date and marry (Friedman, 2010). To promote family stability, the Marriage Law stipulates that the legal marital age is 22 for males and 20 for females. This relatively late approved age for marriage created the social problem of so called "premature love", referring to those who date before the age of 18 (Farrer, 2006). When Hua confided to Chengyin, he was only 16 and she was 18. Their young age undermined their defiance, and the discourse of rights Chengyin relied on could in fact hardly be used to support her argument. Even by the time they broke up, Hua was only 18 which, in the eyes of the law, is still less than a full grown adult and in need of parental supervision. Furthermore, as pointed out by Zhao (2011), entry into adulthood for many Chinese parents is not dictated by children's age but their attainment of financial independence and property ownership. So it seems that freedom of romantic love is not actually an inviolable right, but more akin to a privilege that has to be earned and negotiated with the parents.

As discussed in Chapter 4, online romance is usually framed negatively in Chinese domestic mass media, intended to be used as a cautionary tale to warn parents against the dangers of the Internet in corrupting young minds. Since the transition to a market economy, the party-state has made many retreats from directly interfering in citizens' private lives, but adolescents as a cohort of the population remain under the state's firm grip largely because the future of the country lies in the quality of this young generation (Evans, 1997). They have to be closely monitored, trained and educated in order to foster a positive and "politically correct" outlook that contributes to nation building. Knowing that adolescents and students' exposure to the Internet is inevitable and yet difficult to control, the party-state resorts to creating an unfavourable discourse about online romance as inherently problematic for the young who are not mature enough to handle romantic love and sexual

behaviour. The aim is to create a moral panic or anxiety among parents which can be used to justify the state interventions simply as responding to public concern. Even Chengyin admitted that her parents are disapproving of online romance. Hua's parents also regard Hua's involvement with Chengyin as another example illustrating the problems of online romance.

Finally, rooted against the backdrop of an authoritarian state that is frequently reported to employ extrajudicial measures to "disappear" or "silence" those considered as troublemakers (Chan, 2012), intimidation from Hua's father is experienced by Chengyin as a real threat that cannot be ignored. Power from the dominant patriarchal authority with access to the state's apparatuses is formidable, and made submission the only option for both young lovers. Confucian patriarchy may have lost its political and cultural hegemony since the May Fourth Movement in 1919, but within the family realm, its legacy remains prevalent as many contemporary Chinese families are still structured around the traditional hierarchical relationship based on the principles of age, gender and generation or seniority (Baker, 1979). The power of the paternalistic patriarch may have been tamed, gender equality may have been improved, but women and the young continue to occupy a subordinated position in private and public life (Stacey, 1983). In recent decades, the CCP has also instrumentalized Confucian tradition to promote the cultural ideal of harmonious relationships and to lend itself cultural legitimacy, meanwhile also to co-opt the family institution into serving its ruling interests (Erwin, 2000). The state sponsored revival of Confucianism further encouraged the restoration of Confucian familial traditions and the family institution re-emerged as another form of structural force shaping individuals' subjectivity and life much more profoundly than the state's direct intervention during the revolution (Erwin, 2000). Keeping family together and fostering harmonious family relationships is cost saving too for the state as family members turn to each other for security and wellbeing, instead of relying on the state's limited welfare provision.

Foucault's early inquiries focused primarily on technologies of domination, exposing the disciplinary apparatuses that repress individuals in their institutionalized life. From about 1978, Foucault became interested in the technologies of the self that allow individuals to construct their own subjectivities, to

become an autonomous being who authors his/her life as "works of art" (Danaher, Schirato and Webb, 2000). Nakai's experience will be used to illustrate the significance of technologies of the self in helping her to resist domination and live an authentic life directed by herself.

2. Technologies of the self: Nakai

Foucault's notion of technologies of the self is based on the ancient Greeks' principle of life, "to be concerned with oneself" (Foucault, 1991:361). It comprises of practices "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and a way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1988a:18). Instead of assuming there is an inner true-self waiting to be discovered, Foucault is concerned with the lifelong process of self-construction, focusing on those techniques that can be used to shape, transform, invent and reinvent the self. Although Foucault (1988b) finally acknowledged the active process of subject constitution, he also stressed that the practices of the self through which the subject constitutes himself "are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture, his society and his social group" (p.11). In other words, individuals are not completely free in the process of self-creation, and there are limits to the possibilities of subjectivity. The aim of pursuing technologies of the self is to master the art of living an authentic life in an existentialist sense. According to Oxford Reference Online, in existential philosophy, authenticity refers to an aspiration of leading ideally an autonomous life by actively taking control of one's own life, and being a self-determining subject. With high levels of self-awareness and self-reflection, individuals would not be compelled to act uncritically and would be capable of resisting public or social identities and roles imposed involuntarily upon them.

The imperative to express the true-self appears to have historical connection with the rise of a romantic conception of the self under the influence of Martin Luther in which there was a social "movement that downgraded *sincerity* – the matching of the self to social conventions – in favour of *authenticity* – the assertion

of the self against the perceived constraints of social conventions" (King, 2008:118). The Internet provides an excellent platform for individuals to explore their true-self often hidden from their daily social interactions with others (Bargh et al., 2002). Putting true-self into practice in everyday life promotes wellbeing because the individual can become more truly him/herself (Rogers, 1951). The ability to reveal one's true-self and gaining other's recognition online is the first step in identity demarginalization by which McKenna and Bargh (1998) mean making the hidden true-self a social reality. Nakai reaffirmed the other side of her sexuality, unexplored previously, in her relationship with Mei. The online lesbian community provided her with important emotional support and gave her confidence in her homosexual relationship. It seems other people's disclosure of their hidden sexuality online is not only a means for self-help and therapy, but can also empower others who are in a similar situation. Learning about other's homosexual relationships "normalized" Nakai's homoerotic impulse, leading to a struggle-free self-acceptance.

Although Nakai lacked the courage to come out to her parents, she has made it clear that she would not subjugate her self-interest to that of the family as she subscribed to the new morality of love, or "let the feelings rule". Nakai's narrative paints an image of a self-directing person with a strong and robust sense of individuality, but without the confessional self-writing culture online, she would not have been able to learn from other women's experience of same-sex love which was crucial for her self-empowerment. In fact, according to Foucault (1991) confession and self-writing are two examples of training to work on the self. Confession was introduced by Christianity based on the idea of self-renunciation. The ritual of confession warrants the speaker a sense of redemption and purification as he/she is unburdened of the wrongdoings. Confession is a normalizing practice as "your confessions are assessed in terms of what is normal and what is not so that you may receive the proper, authentic treatment or punishment" (Crampton, 2003:97). In confession, subjects are formed through the production of truth about oneself, and subsequently normalized, regulated and directed by the authorities to whom the subject confesses (Foucault, 1991).

There are now plenty of opportunities to perform secular confession in both public and private settings, from reality TV shows, radio call-in programmes,

counselling sessions, to websites created deliberately for confession. The act of public self-disclosure now seems thrilling for so many in the culture of authenticity. Many no longer perceive revelations as the effect of power but an act of liberation, and some are "gratified by a certain public exposure" as if "being seen means that they are not insignificant or alone" (Turkle, 2011:263). In cyberspace, "the distribution of confessional possibilities has never been greater" (Crampton, 2003:102). The perceived anonymous setting facilitates and encourages the acts of self-revelation. Self-writing too is germane to the Internet's culture of self-broadcast either in the form of blog posts, microblogging, on discussion forums, social networking sites or in private communications. Writing about oneself and assuming it will be read by others minimizes the danger of solitude and helps to put the inner impulses under one's control, crucial for cultivation of the self (Foucault, 2000). The epistolary practice of recounting one's ordinary day, although perhaps seeming insignificant, in the Greek words of Seneca, this practice of "reviewing one's day" has its merits. The reciprocity of gaze and examination allows inspection of oneself and one's everyday actions, measured against the ideal technique of living (ibid).

Most confessions in cyberspace, take the form of self-writing, aiming for self-production and transformation, instead of normalization of the self. It is a process of becoming a reflexive and ethical subject, in order to enjoy oneself and lead a fulfilling life. Rather than renunciation of oneself to set free the inner true-self, self-writing produces or brings into existence the self (Crampton, 2003). Writing for oneself or others about oneself encourages self-reflection, attaining truth about oneself which is essential for the "aesthetics of existence". Members of the lesbian community with whom Nakai became acquainted wrote about themselves, reaffirming their marginalized sexual identity, resisting others' discriminating remarks and supporting each other to become authentic beings. The act of Nakai writing and sharing about herself and her experiences with me also constitutes an act of self-writing and part of her reflexive work on identity construction. Nakai's autonomous sense of self is consistent with her claim of being a self-centred person. It encouraged her exercise of agency and empowered her to defy heterosexual normalization.

In the *History of Sexuality* volume 1, Foucault argues that western societies, from at least the Middle Ages onwards, have relied on confession for the production of truth, including the problematic truth of sex (Foucault, 1998). Since the emergence of the Christian practice of penance for the desires of the flesh, the West has "become a singularly confessing society" (Foucault, 1998:59). Confession has expanded from religious life to medicine, criminal justice, education, family and private relationships. Confessional self-writing online maybe experienced as liberating but its ramifications on one's privacy cannot be underestimated. Self-disclosure online increases our visibility or exposure, renders us vulnerable to exploitation by businesses and state surveillance. Commenting on many critics' emphasis on overcoming the digital divide and computerization of most work in contemporary society, Porter (2000) argues many have failed to realize that it is in the interest of power to make computers as accessible as possible and as thoroughly integrated into the society as possible. Because computer technology "is the avatar of disciplinarity - a perfectly disciplined body that also manufactures disciplined bodies - and within the logic of disciplinarity, its advantages (e.g., docility, efficiency, regularity, surveillance) are enormous, self-evident, and material" (p.74).

Candid and open discussion of one's private life online and the formation of online communities may have felt like a freedom from social constraints and an opportunity to redefine the boundaries of norms, but it is also a convenient means for the state to have a glimpse into citizens' lives and to understand their subjectivities without appearing to encroach the private life of citizens. Appropriate interventions can then be planned and implemented when necessary. In other words, far from providing a means of escaping disciplinary power, the Internet has actually expanded the disciplinary practice of surveillance, and at the same time extended the communication capacity of Internet users, utterly reconfiguring the power relations in contemporary networked society. (For more discussion on how the ICTs have benefited the state in their governance and compromised users' liberty and power, the reader is referred to Hindman, 2009 and Morozov, 2011). This example shows that technologies of the self are not the antithesis of technologies of domination. Syntheses of the two are increasingly being used to govern modern liberal subjects. This reflects Foucault's idea of governmentality, power that is "built upon a premise of freedom" (Miller and Rose, 2008: 9), made possible by the new conception of

subjects as autonomous, rational, literate and responsible individuals (p18). This new form of power operates across domains (public, private, personal, social, cultural, political and economic), and relies on the 'non-state' apparatuses "to conduct conduct" (p14). Zhou and Lin's experience is used to shed light on the functioning of governmentality that has the potential to both empower and disempower citizens.

3. Governmentality: Zhou and Lin

To make governance from a distance possible, citizens have to first be educated to monitor and discipline themselves, to take personal responsibility in their actions in the name of self-regulation (Lemke, 2002). The state appeals to citizens' rights, duties and obligations, capitalizes on their desire for self-advancement and personal fulfilment in turning citizens into one of its resources to achieve economic efficiency and fulfil state policies (Miller and Rose, 2008). The study of governmentality, therefore involves examining and tracing the functioning of an assemblage, consisting of alliances between various authorities and non-state agents that make the state appear benign and liberal, and analyzing the underpinning political rationalities of tacit governance.

Just as in liberal democratic countries, authoritarian measures are also adopted often in the name of anti-terrorism or for reasons of national security, the Chinese authoritative party-state has since the market reform and opening policies in 1978 begun to adopt a more liberal governance model. It represents "a reconfigured version of 'scientific social engineering and socialist planning' combined with neo-liberal strategies of 'governing from a distance' through the development of new technologies of the self" (Jeffreys and Sigley, 2009:2). Reformists in the CCP were convinced that Mao's administration based on technologies of domination and a centrally planned economy has resulted in weak individual subjectivity, passivity, dependence, lack of creativity and morale. A market economy is needed to create a competitive environment that is conducive for the development of superior subjectivity and efficient enterprises much needed for China's modernization (ibid). Many also regret the destruction inflicted on the family institution during the height of the Cultural Revolution instigated by Mao, and the party-state has since adopted a pro-family approach. Reconceptualizing the family as the "cell of the society", the

state is resolute in protecting and strengthening the family institution (Sigley, 2006; Evans, 1997). While the state has stopped policing the family and increased self-governance of the private realm, naming the family as the basic unit of society suggests that the family institution has been recruited by the state to help maintain social stability and contribute to nation building which in turn enhances the regime's legitimacy.

Effective functioning of governmentality depends on subjects who acquire desirable attributes of autonomy, responsibility, self-regulation and are driven by liberal rationalities in their actions (Lemke, 2002). Zhou demonstrates these attributes very well. He is autonomous and motivated by the rhetoric of self-advancement with an emphasis on quality of life. He understands and exercises his rights and entitlements, and also performs his obligations and responsibilities. His higher education and privileged upbringing equipped him with practical knowledge, skills, literacy and competencies to make rational personal choices and earned his parental confidence that he will exercise his freedom in a responsible way. In other words, he constitutes the ideal subject that can be trusted for realizing self-regulation. Based on Zhou's own account, his relationship with his parents can be described as harmonious and happy. To his parents, Zhou is a well-behaved, independent and reliable young man. They trust him to conduct his everyday life thousands of miles away from the family in a disciplined and responsible manner even without direct supervision. Zhou shows gratitude that his parents are liberal, supportive and respectful of his autonomy and freedom, unlike other traditional paternalistic and controlling parents. However, the freedom he enjoys largely rests upon his self-refrain from transgressing the social norms and identification with his parents' values which spare him from parental intervention. Aligning one's self-interests and life in accordance with the aspirations of the authority or directions desirable by the authority so that "individuals can be governed through their freedom to choose" is the strength of governmentality (Miller and Rose, 2008:82).

Zhou's competency in self-discipline and regulation eliminated his risk of Internet addiction that so many of his generation in China are reported to have suffered. The petite disinhibition that he initially experienced when he first went online, although nothing close to anarchic, caused him anxiety and insecurity that

could only be redressed by re-mooring himself in a social context where individuals monitor each other's action and impose constraints on each other. The brief transgression taught him to become a more responsible person, knowing how to enjoy and regulate his freedom. It shows the importance of structure and norms in ensuring ontological security. Therefore, it is important not to simply dismiss Zhou as an unenlightened subject manipulated by the normative ideology. Identification with traditional symbols or practices can be "part of the internally referential set of social relations" (Giddens 1991:150), a reflexive personal choice, rather than forced or false consciousness.

Zhou's harmonious existence with the social structures rendered the influence of traditions and norms invisible to him as it has became a natural part of his subjectivity. Referring to the previous chapter's discussion of how production of agency also simultaneously reproduces structure, it becomes clear that "power is not so much a matter of imposing constraints upon citizens as of 'making up' citizens capable of bearing a kind of regulated freedom. Personal autonomy is not the antithesis of political power, but a key term in its exercise, the more so because most individuals are not merely the subjects of power but play a part in its operations" (Miller and Rose, 2008: 53-54). The state has long appealed to cultural norms, moral values and traditions to govern the society, a useful device for the exercise of governmentality. As suggested by Thompson (1995), traditions not only provide an interpretative framework for us to make sense of the world, to define our subjectivities, and offer a normative guide for actions and beliefs, they also lend legitimacy to power and authority. Traditions can be manipulated into becoming ideological when they are used to establish or sustain power relations and serve the interests of the powerful, yet appear benign and populist in orientation. Chapter 2 documented the revival of Confucianism sponsored by the party-state since the 1990s and how Confucian values serve the interests of the authority. The resurgence of interest in Confucianism is well received at the grassroots level suggesting that many Chinese are now taking pride in their traditions, and with the global rise of China, enjoying a new found sense of cultural superiority. When dissident Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010, the Chinese government condemned and refused to recognize the award. An association under the Ministry of Culture in China introduced instead a new "Confucius Peace Prize" to counter the

imposition of the western notion of "peace" which was said to be incompatible with the Chinese context. Making Confucianism the distinctive and defining characteristic of Chinese culture evidently showed how tradition can be and has been manipulated and instumentalized by those in power to advance their interests (Gross, 1992).

Lin reported far less empowering Internet experiences when compared to Zhou. However, both cases illuminate the working of governmentality. Lin's narrative seems to me intended to be received as displaying a critical mind towards the Internet that sets himself apart from most of his peers who risk becoming the victims the Internet delusion. His reasoning is perfectly in tune with the line of arguments presented by the state. Although I have no way to verify whether he formed his opinion independently or under the influence of the state's propaganda, his lack of reflexivity in his norm conforming actions and opinions suggested to me a lack of autonomy. His account sheds light on the broader issue of how the CCP is able to engineer public support often through the "use of moral arguments of cultural regulation" (Lagerkvist, 2009).

Lin is certainly not alone nor in the minority in siding with government policies on the issue of Internet regulation. For instance, harsher regulation of Internet cafés met no resistance either from owners or youth patrons following a tragic fire in an Internet café in May 2002. The regulation was enacted as a response to health and safety issues and many parents' concerns for the wellbeing of their children. The implementation of government policies or new laws becomes effortless when societal norms are in line with the legislation (Lagerkvist, 2009). The issue of Internet control has not bothered Lin personally because he has stayed clear from politics and uses the Internet mainly for entertainment and socialization.

In June 2010, the Chinese authorities issued the first White Paper on the Internet, in which they highlighted the Internet's impact on minors, the largest online age group:

The Internet is playing an increasingly important role in the development of minors. Meanwhile, online pornographic, illegal and harmful information is seriously damaging the physical and psychological health of young people,

*and this has become recognized as a prominent issue of public concern. The Chinese government attaches great importance to online safety for minors, and has always prioritized the protection of minors in the overall work of Internet information security programs. **The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors stipulates that the state shall take measures to prevent minors from overindulging in the Internet…***

The White Paper laid a legitimate foundation for the party-state to control the Internet in the name of "the protection of minors". The power to administer and protect the lives of minors and adolescents on whom the future of the country lies, is a manifestation of a form of biopower. Biopower replaces the power of death with life fostering power. It refers to knowledge, practices, discourse, technologies deployed to discipline the bodies and life of individuals which would result in a productive population that is also easy for the state to regulate (Foucault, 1991). The age cohort of adolescents have always been subjected to heavy state scrutiny (Evans, 1997) precisely because their bodies are most malleable to the "extortion of its forces", that result not only in "the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility", but also "its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls" (Foucault, 1991: 262).

After cultivating a public consensus that the Internet has harmful effects, is full of vulgar contents and people who prey on the vulnerable, one sure way to garner public support in Internet control and regulation, especially among parents, is to problematize the issue as compromising minors' safety. Online relationships, as discussed in Chapter 4 are indirectly regulated through the mass media's mostly negative representations, playing into the parental fear of the Internet's degenerative effect on children. The result is the perpetuation of a critical attitude towards the Internet in general and towards online relationships in particular. An example of a successful problematization of online relationships is the widespread public call for government intervention to ban the once controversial cyber-marriage game (McLaren 2007). Even among rebellious youths, some have appealed to the school authorities for guidance and advice when dealing with online relationships (Wei et al., 2007). The paternalistic role of the state is not only uncontested, but appears needed by the public who expect and demand protection. Sigley (2006) is right to

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warn that any calls for the government to police citizens' personal affairs is a step backward as it legitimizes the state's encroachment into the private realm in the name of maintaining social order, public morality and protecting the family institution. This can have devastating implications on personal liberties and privacy. It also shows that governmentality is "as much about what we do to ourselves as what is done to us" (Danaher et al, 2000). It is a process of self-formation that we can intervene and negotiate with, but the freedom we have rests upon a foundation of constraints that we consciously or unconsciously subscribe to (Madsen, 2000).

The party-state also appeals to the exercise of self-censorship on the part of netizens and self-regulation by Internet service providers to control and monitor online communication because building and maintaining a "civilized Internet culture" is good for everyone and is everyone's responsibility (Yang 2009). This is arguably the most effective control mechanism as it shifts the responsibility of policing speech from the state to individuals and industry players. However, this form of self-governance is not based on the liberal assumption of free autonomous subjects managing their own actions, but functions through fear and intimidation for prosecution or revoking of business licenses. Lagerkvist (2010) also suggests other possible explanations of Chinese society's passive deference to the state's control of freedom of expression. Firstly, although the term "harmony" is increasingly being used by Chinese Internet users to ridicule the state's arbitrary and opaque Internet censorship, the Party-state's call for maintaining a harmonious society is not without grassroots support due to the widespread fear of turmoil that China has experienced numerous times in the past. Secondly, the astonishing economic growth delivered by the party-state has increased public tolerance so long as their standards of living improve. Nathan (2003) also argues that there is a psychological tendency for many in China to convince themselves that their acceptance of the communist regime is voluntary. There is indeed still a strong sense of "Maostalgia" especially among the older generation to worship his statue and pay tribute to his mummified body (Ferguson, 2012).

Another example of the practice of governmentality is the passing of the Marriage Law 1950 by the party-state. When the law was enacted it was perceived by many rural peasants as an attack on Confucian familial tradition, aiming to

destroy the family institution. In reality, the law modernized and strengthened the age-old institution via its emphasis on conjugal love, affection and emotional intimacy between spouses. From the state's perspective, marital satisfaction contributes to harmonious family relationships which would boost labour productivity and facilitate the building of a strong and modern Chinese nation (Friedman, 2010). The law liberated many unhappily married individuals who were the victims of feudal Confucian familial practices. The promotion of romantic love, free choice of spouse, gender equality and women's right to file for divorce and inheritance, provided a powerful rights discourse for the younger generation to counter their parents' intervention in their marriage as seen in Chengyin's case. However, the same law also has the adverse effect of discriminating against other forms of relationship models or singlehood, and strengthening the marriage institution that subordinates women in the domestic sphere.

As discussed in Chapter 2, marriage is still perceived by many in China as the ideal end of courtship and marrying is inevitable as a universal law of nature. Only heterosexual married couples are said to be able to provide the optimum environment for reproducing a quality child informed by the science of eugenics (McMillan 2006). Especially in rural villages, there is no choice to remain single. Not getting married is perceived as personal failure and raises suspicions of abnormality in the eyes of other fellow villagers (Ma and Cheng, 2005). Women migrant workers studied by Ma and Cheng willingly return home after several years of working in cities to have a marriage arranged by their parents. They consider it a practical and safer solution for their marriage need. Marrying men from villages close to their natal family also allows them to fulfil their filial piety duty. The aspiration for marriage can also be seen among the youngsters who are far from marital ages as they often address their lovers as husband / wife, some even partake in cyber-marriage.

As intimate relationships are integrated "into a larger national project of social transformation and modernization" through the Marriage Law and family planning policy that aimed to foster "a disciplined and high-quality community of Chinese citizens", it becomes imperative for the government to monitor sexual conduct and relations between the sexes (Friedman, 2010: 158). All sexual

relationships outside the monogamous heterosexual marital unit were deemed illicit and subject to either criminal or administrative sanctions or, if not applicable, to moral condemnation (Sigley, 2006; Evans, 1997). McMillan's (2006) study challenges the widespread argument that China is now opened up to sex, or undergoing a sexual revolution. The prevailing sexual ideology in China which is cast as natural science is "marked by deep conservatism, moralizing and intolerance of difference" (p.1). Similarly, Erwin (2000) argues that the opening and proliferation of sexual discourse in China since the 1980s does not represent the end of state policing of citizens' private lives and greater freedom for citizens, instead "it may point to the construction of new subjectivities and notions of modernity that themselves implicate new forms of power" (p.148). This is precisely the rationality of neoliberalism as pointed out by Lemke (2002) who drawing on Foucault's governmentality argued "that the so-called retreat of the state is in fact a prolongation of government: neoliberalism is not the end but a transformation of politics that restructures the power relations in society" (p.58).

Before concluding this chapter, it is however important to point out the limitations of Foucault's notion of governmentality. As pointed out by Walters (2012), governmentality tends to portray an appearance of overly coherent and smooth governance, paying no or less attention on complexities ensuing from the implementation of governing policies. Governmentality falls short in stressing that as a technique of governance, it can also work towards the authorities' disadvantage. Scott's (1990) theory of infrapolitics and hidden transcripts provide an excellent explication on how the dominant discourse can haunt the authorities when used by the opposition. Infrapolitics represents an unobtrusive realm of political struggle engaged by subaltern groups, characterized by feigned conformity which "is in large part by design- a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power" (Scott,1990: 183). The notion of hidden transcripts gives voice to subordinates' agency. It explains how discursive and symbolic resistance that happens discreetly among those dominated can lead to open defiance. Rather than substitute discontent through the catharsis effect that displaces and relieves social tensions, hidden transcripts are often a precondition for direct confrontation. Scott (1990) brilliantly argues that using the terms of the dominant ideology in the course of political struggle is a good tactic. Observing the rules set by the dominant, even if the

objective is to undermine them, reassures the dominant that the subordinate groups are not aiming to overthrown their power. "The plasticity of any would-be hegemonic ideology which must, by definition, make a claim to serve the real interests of subordinate groups, provide antagonists with political resources in the form of political claims that are legitimized by the ideology" (p.95).

This is particularly true in China in which the language of rule of law has been used frequently by dissidents and activists to criticize the party-state who first deployed the terms but only paid lip service to its commitment to judicial reform. Citizens' constitutionally protected rights, such as freedom of expression is often infringed by the state. The situation in China is also complicated by the tendency of many Chinese to conflate right with privilege, hence the debate of who deserves it and who does not (Yan, 2010). The notion that every human being has inviolable basic rights given at birth is absent in Chinese society. In its place is the state-centred notion of rights which allows the state to define what rights each individual can legitimately claim. Rights are effectively granted by the party-state and unprotected by an independent judiciary system (Nathan, 1986 cited in Pei 2000). However, so long as the party-state's claim to power lies in their ability to serve the people, represent their interests and deliver public promises, authorities are subjecting themselves to legitimate criticism and are held accountable when they fail to fulfil their duties and pledges.

Infrapolitics is particular relevant in China because direct confrontation with the party-state is a dangerous political pursuit. Disguised forms of activism help activists to evade detection and to minimize the risks of retaliation. Nevertheless, Scott (1990) has not lost sight of the problem of long-term public performance of conformity. Invisible political challenges can in effect ratify the social ideologies of the dominant and reinforce their privileged position. This again highlights the unsettling nature of power struggle. With a similar interest to Scott in studying the "weapons of the weak", Hanchard (2006) theorizes everyday life resistance of subaltern groups that occupy the grey area in between micro and macro-politics as coagulate politics. It refers to individuals' momentary exertion of influence to correct or amend unfair situations they encounter. It "might be better characterized as self-mobilization – literally, a mobilization of the self, in order to address situations of

inequality" despite being in a position of subordination (p.38). Coagulate politics are undertaken individually without aiming for collective mobilization but are crucial for "survival of common people" (p.44). These acts of resistance are flexible, safe and convenient to partake in, therefore sustainable in a long-term campaign of attrition and are no less effective in their effort of self-preservation than organized collective defiance. In summary, governmentality may be more readily applicable to middle class liberal political struggle, but is less so to the working-class everyday political battle for survival.

Conclusion

This chapter draws heavily on Foucault's notion of power, technologies of domination, technologies of the self and governmentality to show that the operation of power in today's society is dynamic, open, and endless. In governmentality, "coercion and consensus are reformulated as means of government among others" and the source of power lies in the rational guiding of free subjects (Lemke, 2002:52). If technologies of the self is understood as the counter force to the technologies of domination, governmentality puts the individual subject back in to the dominant power relation because if "there is no power without resistance, it would appear that there is also no resistance without power" (Crampton, 2003:81). This discussion of governmentality continues the previous chapter's argument of the interdependence between agency and structure, highlighting the duality of structure, how it constrains as well as enables agency (Giddens, 1979). The reproduction of structure through agency shows that the power struggle can never be concluded.

My participants' experiences of online romance shed light on the roles of the Internet in their efforts to exercise their rights in the private domain, against parental interferences as well as the state's politicization of their private life. The Internet has potential to both empower and disempower netizens. As a tool, it is not just used by the subaltern group, but also by the dominant power holder. Cyberspace has become a new battle field in which the war on freedom on both micro and macro levels is fought. This chapter again focuses on the in-betweeness of Chinese Internet users' experiences to yield greater insight into the open ended nature of power struggles.

The revival of Confucianism tapped into the mass appeal of cultural traditions, the birth control or family planning policy was sold to the public as enhancing marital satisfaction and the enactment of the Marriage Law protecting individual rights to freedom of love. All these government efforts promote the image of the party-state as serving the interests of the people. But beneath the surface is the cultivation of quality free individuals who are good at self-discipline and governance. These are examples of governmentality functioning without robbing individuals' agency by harmonizing their aspirations with the state's ideologies and directions, so that they seem to be compatible and allow the state to claim it is representative of the people. As opposed to ruling through violent repression, this form of governance can help to advance the state's agenda much more effectively while appearing liberal, respecting citizens' rights and freedom. China presents a pragmatic hybrid form of governing technologies characterized by a combination of "socialist-neoliberal (or perhaps 'neo-Leninist') form of political rationality, one that is both authoritarian in a familiar political and technocratic sense and yet also seeks to govern certain subjects through their own autonomy" (Jeffreys and Sigley, 2009: 2).

Conclusion

This research has explored the influence of Chinese culture in shaping the Internet experience of falling in love online, and how the latter also impacts on the former. The study is situated within the wider socio-cultural context of today's China characterized by competing ideals and norms of different social groups and their power relationships with the state. Since the post-Mao reforms that marked the beginning of official relaxation of many restrictions on citizens' private lives, conflicts of interest between the individuals and the collectives, either the communist party-state or family, have always remained contentious. Although many conflicting demands are accommodated by society, tensions remain as there is no reconciliation of the underlying differences. The powerful state, not held in check by any institutional organizations, coupled with individuals' preoccupation with wealth creation, growing individualization of the society, lack of trust and social security make the stress of everyday life in this bitterly competitive society difficult to bear for many. My objective has been to understand the roles of the Internet in this uniquely Chinese context and its significance to netizens' freedom in private love affairs.

As discussed in Chapter 4, exclusively Internet-based online romance has special meanings and is vital to many Chinese Internet users. "Platonic" emotional love is often used to refer to these relationships online. This is in fact the definition of online romance for some. Others think that online romance should ideally be confined within cyberspace not only to minimize its impact on offline life, but crucially to preserve its engrossing divine-like quality which will be diluted by everyday life worldly concerns if expanded into the offline world. I argue that the prominence of exclusively Internet-based online romance in China is closely linked to the society's mercenary orientation, pragmatic attitude and highly-pressured daily existence which is worsened by a spiritual void left by the end of Marxist hegemony and the party-state's atheist ideology. It results in a sense of inner emptiness for many, hence beginning to long for a richer emotional life that also serves as a distraction from daily miseries. The "pragmatic fantasist" is the key character in exclusively Internet-based online romances. They approach online relationships

instrumentally, aiming to find sustenance in these relationships of distant intimacy, making them the source of emotional stimulation and solace. Some of these relationships grow in intensity over time and become meaningful to the couples. Others remain shallow but are nevertheless appreciated for the good fantasies and reinvigoration provided that ease participants' tense and mundane everyday lives, while being weightless and risk free.

I use the term "romantic realists" to label those who consider online romance as not essentially different from romantic relationships initiated face-to-face. They follow the western trajectory of online romance in defining successful online romance as cumulating in marriage and long long-term relationships in the offline world. They tend to use phrases such as *yuanfen* (destiny) and *jian guang si* (perish upon seeing light) when talking about online romance, and lament over love devoid of embodied presence because of the physical distance between the couple. Unlike the romantic realists, "sceptics" of online romance have serious doubts about the feasibility and authenticity of online romance. They argue that those who attempt to transfer online romance offline are confusing play with reality. Understanding online romance as a form of play is in fact rather common among netizens. Sceptics often cite the problem of virtuality and *jian guang si* to justify their disbelief. They urge online daters not to expect too much from the relationship, just play along and have fun. Like the pragmatic fantasist who enjoys "Platonic" emotional love for its therapeutic function, the sceptic also treats the online relationship as an end in itself, appreciating it for the immersion and excitement it brings. Both are aware that the enchantment of online romance is underpinned by the virtuality of cyberspace which is paradoxically a problem for those who desire to materialize their relationship offline, but presents an opportunity for "Platonic" online daters and those playing at love online. As pointed out by Hine (2005), the Internet's functions and meanings do indeed vary from individuals to individuals because its risks and opportunities are perceived differently in relation to each individual's concerns and needs.

Chinese Internet users' fixation on exclusively Internet-based online romance that sets their experience apart from most western online daters, who are more likely to understand online romance as having the ultimate aim of moving offline, provide answer to the first research question of **how does culture influence the ways**

Chinese Internet users conduct romantic relationships online? The status quo of contemporary Chinese society has led to the persistent making of the online and offline dichotomy in private relationships. To pursue "Platonic" emotional love and play with relationships online, netizens are motivated to conceptually re-enact the boundary between the two, so that they can have two parallel lives independent from one another. In Chapter 5, I argue that confining online romance within cyberspace can also be interpreted as an act of defiance against the ordinarization of romantic love. Exclusively Internet-based online romances help lovers to sustain their heightened affection by insulating lovers from the social realities and tedious everyday life, therefore creating a perfect condition for lovers to re-experience the stereotypical myth of romantic love as an all-consuming and transcendental encounter contained within its own bubble. Transferring online romance offline is likely to end its captivating qualities, hence *jian guang si*. This leads to the prioritization of emotional fulfilment and glorification of emotional love as opposed to physical love. Although in my study emotional intimacy has emerged as pivotal to Chinese netizens, this however does not imply that sexual satisfaction is unimportant. The Internet has also enriched users' sexual lives, provided them a safe platform for sexual experimentations and facilitated the formation of communities among disenfranchised sexual minorities.

The value of my research lies in acknowledging the significance of Chinese Internet users' making of the distinction between the online and offline world. One of my contributions to the literature of online relationships comes from my recognition of the meanings of exclusively Internet-based online romance from the perspective of participants. This is an area of online relationships that has not been adequately studied previously. Rather than simply discounting their preoccupation with boundary differentiation as regressive or premature understanding, I have explored the nature of these relationships and identified functions served by such demarcation. My finding and argument of Chinese users' deliberate separation of online and offline lives is echoed in Herold and Marolt (2011). The book argues "that the Internet in China is a separate 'space' in which individuals and institutions emerge and interact. While offline and online spaces are connected and influence each other, the Chinese Internet is more than merely a technological or media extension of offline Chinese society" (Herold and Marolt 2011, back cover). In

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future, China may just follow the western trajectory of the Internet diffusion in which it gradually lost its initial sense as "a project with a distinct set of protocols separate from our daily lives" and became an integral part of everyday routine (Lovink, 2012:2). Children born with the Internet embedded in their life may no longer perceive and make the differentiation. However, the current state of intentional separation could persist well into the future. So long as Chinese society remains conservative and moralistic, hence restraining individuals' life choices, sexual freedom and relationship experimentation, maintaining the boundaries will be likely to remain as the easiest and most attractive way for netizens to explore and play with taboos with minimum ramifications in their lives.

Play is another key conceptual term examined in Chapter 5. Similar to romance, play also relies on a domain of its own that is outside everyday reality. Without such separation, playing make-believe wish fulfilment would be difficult (Huizinga, 1955). Chinese Internet users justify their playful approach to relationships online precisely because of their virtual nature and parting from offline reality. Cyberspace readily provides an imaginative terrain for self-experimentation and relationship exploration. The designation of play not only allows incongruous motives to co-exist, but also makes prevailing normative expectations, social mores, issues of morality and ethics irrelevant. In the spirit of non-instrumentality and inconsequentiality, players deconstruct the symbolic significance of social systems and practices, such as having same-sex cyber-marriage. Playing at relationships online could be more than entertaining and stimulating because it encourages players to be creative and exercise their agency. The other contribution of my research lies in broadening the concept of play used in the theorization of online relationships. Drawing on my participants' metaphorical use of the term "play", I have explored how a playful approach to online relationships can potentially empower netizens and even lead to self-transformation. To use Sutton-Smith's (2001) seven rhetorics he identified as underpinning the various play theories, the way "play" is used in my research has moved beyond the psychodynamic rhetoric of progress or development to the rhetoric of power at personal level.

While recognizing the Internet's potential to facilitate Internet users' resistance against normative discourse and social structures governing private

relationships, I have never stopped pondering the question of whether the feelings of liberation and empowerment experienced online could be merely a "simulation" or "hallucination" of resistance which is repressive in nature. To what extent could online transgression undermine and transform the existing social structures? Hence, the second research question asked *how might online romance be seen to reproduce, extend, and/or challenge the Confucian tradition governing social and familial practices, and the communist party-state's ideologies*? In Chapter 6, I examined four personal narratives of online romance in an attempt to answer this question. The ways my participants struggle and negotiate room for manoeuvre when confronted with conflicting demands of intimacy and greater autonomy on one hand, family intervention and the state's regulations through the discourse of public morality and cultural traditions on the other hand, are very insightful as they shed light on the relationship between agency and structure.

The narrative studies showed that the Internet has the effects of both reinforcing existing structural norms and helping users to defy normative constraints. I relied on Giddens' (1984) structuration theory to account for these seemingly contradictory findings. Giddens rightly points out that social structures have the effects of both enabling and restraining the exercise of agency. In their everyday social interactions, actors draw on social structures in the production of actions, and hence reproduce the structural properties of existing social systems. On the personal level, the Internet empowers or disempowers individuals to various extents depending on their circumstances. In this study, individuals' attitudes towards normative expectations and ownership of agency emerged as the two key subjective factors that affect the empowerment and liberatory potentials of the Internet in Chinese netizens' pursuit of romantic love. Overall, my findings supported the thesis of "the rich get richer" Internet experience. Only Internet users who acknowledge their capacity to act, to make change and take accountability for their own lived experiences are more ready to benefit from the Internet's empowerment potential. They are also more likely to negotiate, instead of uncritically comply with the structural norms. Self-determining individuals like Zhou and Nakai in my narrative studies, are adept at using the Internet as a resource to work through their problems and search for solutions to their daily hardships. This is in sharp contrast to Lin who is not convinced that the Internet can help to solve real life problems. The positive

experiences he had online are felt merely as a temporary escape that does nothing to ease or overcome adversities faced in everyday life.

Social transformation is a gradual process that requires greater levels of empowerment beyond the individual. In Chapter 7, I explored the political implication of my narrative studies, examining the society's power relations with the communist state. In fact, China provides an excellent example showing "how intimate bonds are simultaneously fostered by and channelled into changing modes and forms of state power" (Friedman, 2010:166). The CCP has also embraced the digital media in their changing governance model. I have drawn on Foucault's (1988a) governmentality to show how the party-state has combined both technologies of domination and technologies of the self in their governance. This is when the rhetoric of self-regulation that is premised on individual choice, rights, liberty and responsibilities paradoxically cultivates citizens who are accustomed to self-discipline and content with a kind of regulated freedom. Nevertheless, the party-state can also be handicapped by their own declaration of commitment to citizens' rights and subject themselves to legitimate public scrutiny. It shows that power relations and "conflicts never end; they simply pause through temporary agreements and unstable contracts" that are constantly under review and change from time to time (Castells, 2009:14). Although Giddens (1987) had previously criticized Foucault's history as downplaying agency, his later work on technologies of the self and governmentality appear to me not only to have redressed the problem, but also provide a more realistic view on agency and power than Giddens. In fact, governmentality presents an argument that is not much different from Structuration Theory, albeit with different emphasis. Despite the former being optimistic and the latter being pessimistic, both have come to the same conviction that power is productive, dynamic and contingent. Agents are ultimately responsible for the recursive social hierarchies and structural power relations.

The original contributions of this study are claimed on the basis of its focus on the roles of cultural tradition and the issue of power in Chinese Internet users' experience of online romance. I presented an account of how they deal with cultural contradictions and tensions in their pursuit of romantic love and personal happiness. Ironically, in the process of making sense of these uncertainties, they also create

more paradoxes. However, not only are they able to cope with the ambivalence, they also actively take control and make use of it. Examples include:

- In the Chinese discourse of online romance, the term "Platonic" is used to refer to online relationships where the participants do not meet. The absence of actual bodily interactions renders the relationships emotional in nature. However, in addition to describing an intense emotional bond, "Platonic" online romance can also apply to couples with sexual desire which is not acted out physically.

- Online romance as pursued by pragmatic fantasist epitomizes Giddens' (1992) pure relationship with its self-reflexivity, but also features the quintessential elements of romantic love that would supposedly be replaced by the therapeutic ethos of pure relationship and confluent love. Pragmatic fantasists on one hand are in search of romantic aspiration through strictly online relationships, and on the other hand instrumentally use the positive affects gained online to inject an emotional high into their offline everyday life.

- Despite many Chinese netizens' insistence on making sense of online romance through the online and offline dichotomy, it is vital to emphasize that they are ultimately aware that their online and offline lives are inextricably linked. Their desire to use online romance to improve and enrich their everyday life in itself shows their acknowledgement of the connection between the two realms. This selective differentiation of online and offline shows that the boundary drawn is contingent and unstable as Internet users redefine it in relation to their individual and cultural circumstances.

- Foucault's model of neoliberal governmentality is also now being used by the authoritarian Chinese state to continue its politicization of intimate personal relationships without appearing encroaching citizens' private life. The language of rule of law is used as often by the party-state as by social activists.

Chinese Internet users are pragmatic and good at play for existential purposes. Kane (2005) forcefully argues that a play ethic is crucial for life in the contemporary

demanding world saturated with uncertainties, complexities and risks. "Living as a player is precisely about embracing ambiguity, revelling in paradox, yet being energized by that knowledge" and transforming it into creative imagination (p.55).

My study is not to be mistaken as an iconoclastic attack on traditions and institutional establishments with human emancipation as the ultimate goal. Although normative aspects of tradition can be restraining to individuals, traditions also provide guidance and meanings to our existence and give order to society. Agency understood as the ability of individuals to make their own decisions and to be responsible for their own actions implies that being conservative, living traditional ways of life can be an individual's choice that deserves to be respected so long as these individuals do not impose their own standards on others. Shils (1981) rightly points out that even "emancipation is also a tradition" (p.312), so are reasons, rationalization and scientific knowledge "a tradition accepted with the same unquestioning confidence" (p22). As suggested by Giddens (1991), "appeals to traditional symbols or practices can themselves be reflexively organised and are part of the internally referential set of social relations", not necessarily an external constraint in opposition to individuals' actions (p.150). Furthermore, the rewards associated with compliance can logically propel individuals to comply which may not necessarily reflect their moral commitment to the standard of norms. Shils (1981) also made a similar argument that even in the most traditional society, human beings do not blindly follow traditions. Their actions are rational, often motivated by anticipated gratification from the realization of normative expectations.

I also have no intention to present myself as an enlightened intellectual who has a meta gaze overseeing others from the top, capable to dispel the mystifications that baffle others because of their deficiencies. Gouldner (1979) described this notion of self-proclaimed iconoclasm as the culture of critical discourse that risks patronizing participants, fails to resonate with their everyday life experiences and inadequately recognizes their agency. My immediate challenge is to present a balanced account of Chinese Internet users' online relationships that takes into consideration the structural inequalities and wider socio-political climate of the society that limits their choices, but also inspires creativities and new opportunities without demeaning their strategic actions for survival as mere calculative moves.

The Internet is the freest media in China and its impacts on netizens' public and private lives are much more profound than in liberal democratic countries. The Internet widens the discursive space for stories to be told and heard on a global scale. The ability to tell their own stories and make their feelings known is in itself central to empowerment (Thompson, 2007). I am less pessimistic about Chinese users' enthusiastic embrace of digital communication compared to Turkle (2011) who shares her concerns of the depletion of human relationships in the era of digital technologies in her latest book "Alone together". Speaking based on my encounters with Chinese netizens, many of them constantly emphasized the importance of face-to-face relationships and showed an acute awareness of what the Internet cannot do in maintenance of human relationships. This could be partly due to the Confucian cultural legacy that stresses interpersonal relationships. The party-state's ongoing campaign of fighting against Internet addiction, especially among the young can also be said to have contributed to the public vigilance of avoiding over dependence and immersion in the online world. However, there is a risk that Chinese may follow the same path that worries Turkle in the future due to the growing individualization of the society. Pragmatic fantasists' utilitarian approach to relationships online can be a cause for concern because "there is the risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed – and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing" (Turkle, 2011:154). When we become accustomed to playing responsibility free relationships, having low expectations of each other, while exploiting each other for easy intimacy online, relationships in the face-to-face world are likely to appear overwhelmingly demanding (ibid). Although pragmatic fantasists' intention is to exploit the adrenaline rush the Internet provides to enhance their mundane and stressful everyday life, in the long run it might actually discourage some of them from embarking on change that will really improve their quality of life and quotidian existence. As eloquently pointed out by Turkle, mere escapism to cyberspace without critical reflection only subdues discontent, risks debilitating individuals' self and life in the physical world.

Greater insight into the phenomenon could be gained with enhanced samples in terms of size and background diversity. In my research, I do not differentiate my participants' ethnic backgrounds. Although the Han ethnicity makes up 91.5% of the

People's Republic of China, there are 55 officially recognized ethnic minorities observing different cultural norms, religious beliefs and customs. Therefore, my account based on a largely homogenous demographic makeup of participants may not be readily applicable to some segments of China's Internet population. The limited numbers of participants in my narrative studies also rules out meaningful comparison between males and females to investigate gender differences in negotiation strategies and approaches to online romance. Furthermore, these participants are in their early to mid 20s, a phase of life preoccupied with romantic love, yet young and lacking financial independence. Their experiences of online romance are likely to be different from middle-age persons who have dissimilar and perhaps greater concerns in life that inevitably shape their experience of online romance. The research design should ideally distinguish between participants whose online romance has been terminated and those still ongoing. Follow-up studies ought to be planned for the latter on regular intervals. This would allow assessment to be carried out on how participants' attitudes, aspirations and expectations change with time. Another area of interest would be to interview parents about their opinion of online romance, especially those whose children have dated or married someone met online. Inclusion of parents' perspectives on the issue would improve our understanding of the roles the Internet plays in China's changing courtship culture and practices. Due to limited resources available, these options are not currently being pursued.

Despite its limitations, I hope the quality of my research will be judged based on its credibility, which Glaser and Strauss (1967) used to mean "believable". It refers to trustworthy findings that reflect participants' experiences yet do not foreclose other alternative readings of the data collected. Overall, my research contributes to the existing literature of online relationships by introducing the influence of culture, and broadens the China Internet literature beyond its concentration on the level of macro-politics. Personally, what I have learned the most in the process of my research is the realization that there are many possibilities in human relationships. The account presented here is provisional and suggestive because of the changing nature of technologies, the open nature of human relationships and the byzantine state of social realities in China, the "land of contradictions" (Burger, 2012:1). My study is indeed enriched by the fluidity,

complexities, tensions and ambiguities permeating the society. Judging on how much China has changed within the three decades of economic reform, there are reasons to be optimistic about the future. Despite the party-state's desire to keep control and often rein in to denounce what they considered as immoral or uncivilized practices that undermine public order and socialist values, the rising consciousness of citizenship and reform in private life (as well as public life) once started is difficult to hold back. Finally, I like to conclude by reiterate the two key points of my thesis: (1) the influence of culture on Chinese Internet users' romantic relationships online manifests itself in the form of contradictory desires and practices, as seen in the strategic separation of online and offline life; (2) the Internet reproduces as well as challenges the status quo of familial traditions, norms and governing ideologies. It empowers and disempowers users to various extents as its impact is contingent upon individuals' personalities and life circumstances.

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NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY

FINDING LOVE ONLINE

Hello,

Do you go online regularly? And have you made friends with many others online? Have you ever experienced online romance? What about the experience of cyber-marriage or online cohabitation? Have something to say about this social phenomenon? If yes, please take part in this survey to share with me your opinion and/or personal experience of online romance.

I am a PhD student at Nottingham Trent University in the UK. I have personally experienced online romance before, and since then it has remained as my key research interest. This survey aims to study Chinese people's online romance, attitudes towards online romance, and its cultural characteristics and meanings to individuals.

Data collected here will be kept confidential and will be presented in the report anonymously.

I would be most grateful if you could take part in this online survey. As a token of appreciation, participants will stand a chance to win a cash prize RMB 300 or equivalent value in other currencies payable via PayPal. Please kindly invite others you know to take part in this survey as well. Thank you very much.

P/S: Participants have to be Chinese, aged 18 or above and voluntarily take part in this survey.

( ) Proceed to next page

Answer required for questions with * mark.

Section 1: General attitudes towards online romance

1. Have you personally experienced online romance?
   - (   ) Yes
   - (   ) No *(Please proceed to Question 3)*

2. How many experiences of online romance(s) have you had so far?
   - (   ) 1   (   ) 6
   - (   ) 2   (   ) 7
   - (   ) 3   (   ) 8
   - (   ) 4   (   ) 9
   - (   ) 5   (   ) 10
   - (   ) If more than 10, please specify:_____

3. Do you know someone who began a romantic relationship with their online friends?
   (*i.e. relatives, friends, classmates, colleagues, neighbours*)

   - (   ) Yes
   - (   ) No

4. Which of the following represent(s) your perception and/or views on online romance? (*Multiple choice*)
   - (   ) Online romance is no different from face-to-face initiated romantic relationships.
   - (   ) Online romance is a dream like form of play with fun and relaxation above all else, not to be taken too seriously or expect too much from it.
   - (   ) In the dull and stressful everyday life, online romance is good for supplying emotional sustenance and spicing up the daily routine.
   - (   ) Online romance is equal to a love scam, a risky pursuit that should be avoided.
   - (   ) Others, *please specify:* _____

5. Based on your understanding of online romance, how would you define an ideal outcome for an online romance? (*Please choose one*)
   - (   ) Online romance is a fraud, it is almost impossible to have a good ending.
   - (   ) Becoming each other's soul mate in a nonsexual relationship, but all interactions are confined exclusively in cyberspace.
   - (   ) Becoming each other's soul mate in a nonsexual relationship in both the online and offline world.

(   ) Becoming each other's soul mate and sexual partner, but all interactions are confined exclusively in cyberspace.

(   ) Becoming each other's soul mate and sexual partner in both the online and offline world.

(   ) Becoming each other's playmate, exclusively online and fun-oriented where commitments and responsibilities are not required.

(   ) Becoming each other's playmate in both the online and offline world, fun-oriented where commitments and responsibilities are not required.

(   ) Becoming long-term partner in the offline world.

(   ) Becoming long-term partner in the offline world, cumulating in marriage and having children.

(   ) Others, *please specify:* _____

6. Which of the following online behaviors would you consider constitute cheating on an existing relationship partner in the actual world? (***Multiple choice***)

(   ) Developing emotional attachments with others online

(   ) Flirting with others online

(   ) Having cybersex or other sexual activities with others online

(   ) Visiting pornographic websites

(   ) Posting personal ads online

(   ) Posting ads looking for a cyber-marriage partner / online cohabitation partner

(   ) All of the above

(   ) None of the above

Following are series of statements about online romance. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement from Strongly agree (SA), Agree (A), Moderately agree (MA), to Moderately disagree (MD), Disagree (D), Strongly disagree (SD), or No reply / Don't know (NR).

No.		SA	A	MA	MD	D	SD	NR
7.	People who turn to the Internet for romantic encounters are lonely and physically less attractive, therefore not able to find a romantic partner offline.							
8.	Online romance and offline romance has no essential difference; both depend on *yuanfen* (destiny / fate).							

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9.	Online romance is much more challenging than conventional face-to-face initiated romance, therefore rarely has a happy ending.							
10.	Online relationships can provide more spiritual and emotional fulfilment than face-to-face initiated relationships.							
11.	People who seek online romance are playful with love and are mainly looking for casual infatuation.							
12.	Online romance can be empowering because it allows those who are not physically attractive and or wealthy to consume romantic relationships using their creativity, rhetoric and literature skills.							
13.	Online romance can be liberating because it can transcend temporal and spatial restrictions, and social constraints, increasing individuals' autonomy in romantic pursuit.							
14.	Online and offline are two distinct and independent realms, one should not confuse between the two.							
15.	Confusing online with offline life is likely to have negative ramifications to oneself, partner, family, friends and others.							

16. Do you think it is possible to have a genuine, profound and fulfilling romantic relationship which is maintained exclusively online?

(   ) Absolutely yes
(   ) Yes
(   ) Maybe yes
 (   ) Maybe not
(   ) No
(   ) Absolutely not
(   ) Don't know / Not sure

17. In your opinion, why would some people look for exclusively Internet-based romantic relationships?

_____

_____

_____

Section 2: Cyber-marriage or online cohabitation

---

18. Have you personally experienced cyber-marriage or online cohabitation?

    (   ) Yes for cyber marriage

    (   ) Yes for online cohabitation

    (   ) Yes for both cyber-marriage and online cohabitation

    (   ) No, but I know about cyber-marriage and online cohabitation. ***(Please proceed to Section C.)***

    (   ) I know nothing about cyber-marriage and online cohabitation. ***(Please proceed to Section C.)***

19. How many experiences of cyber marriage and/or online cohabitation you have had?

    (   ) 1   (   ) 6

    (   ) 2   (   ) 7

    (   ) 3   (   ) 8

    (   ) 4   (   ) 9

    (   ) 5   (   ) 10

    (   ) If more than 10, *please specify*:_____

20. Before the cyber-marriage and/or online cohabitation, how did you meet your "online spouse(s)" or "partner(s)"?

    (   ) Online

    (   ) Offline

    (   ) Some online, some offline

21. Please specify on which site(s) you have your cyber-marriage(s) or cohabitation(s)? *e.g. Tianya Wedding Hall, Love Apartment*

_____

22. What are the reason(s) to engage in cyber-marriages and/or online cohabitations? ***(Multiple choice)***

    (   ) Out of curiosity

    (   ) Fun play

    (   ) To strengthen the relationship.

    (   ) To show commitment and give public recognition to each other.

(   ) Many of my friends are doing it.

(   ) To enjoy the benefits provided exclusively for married couples in the particular online community.

(   ) Other, *please specify*: _____

23. What does/did your cyber-marriage and/or online cohabitation mean to you? Has it in anyway made you feel liberated and increased your autonomy? Or the opposite?

_____

_____

_____

Section 3: Experience of Online Romance

This section relates to your current or previous online romance. If you have more than one experience of online romance, please note that the following questions refer to only ONE particular relationship, either your current, or most recent or most memorable online romance. **For those without any online romance experience, please proceed to Section 4.**

24. Are you currently involved in an online romantic relationship?

(   ) Yes

(   ) No **(*Please proceed to Question 27*)**

25. How long you have been in this romantic relationship? *i.e. years, months,*

_____

26. What is the future prospect of the relationship?

(   ) Great growth potential, but only in the online world.

(   ) Great growth potential and I am confident that it will be extended offline.

(   ) A little potential of growth in the online world, might be better if we could expand the relationship offline.

(   ) A little potential of growth in the online world, might be even worse if we try to expand the relationship offline.

(   ) A little potential of growth in both worlds.

(   ) Not going to last long.

(   ) Not sure.

Please proceed to Question 29

27. How long did your previous online romance last? *i.e. years, weeks,*
_____

28. How and why did the relationship end?
_____
_____
_____

29. Where does/did your partner come from?

      (   ) Mainland China
      (   ) Taiwan
      (   ) Hong Kong
      (   ) Macau
      (   ) Other, *please specify*: _____

30. How did your online romance develop and where did you first meet each other?

    (   ) We met through relationship, matrimony sites, or through personal ads (*e.g. renren, jiayuan, baihe*). Please specify the site:_____

    (   ) We met incidentally *(e.g. through participation in online forum, while playing online game, in chat room)*. From online friend to gradually became online lover. Please specify the site: _____

31. When you had first contact with your partner, did you know what he/she looked like?
    (   ) Yes
    (   ) No

32. Prior to face-to-face meeting, what was your impression of your online partner's physical appearance?
    (   ) I didn't know what my partner looked like
    (   ) Very good looking
    (   ) Good looking
    (   ) Above average looks
    (   ) Average looks
    (   ) Less than average looks

33. After having met in person, how would you describe your online partner's physical appearance?
    (   ) We have not met in person
    (   ) Very good looking
    (   ) Good looking

(   ) Above average looks

(   ) Average looks

(   ) Less than average looks

34. Have you misrepresented yourself in any of the following aspects to make yourself more desirable to your partner? *(**Multiple choice**)*

    (   ) Age

    (   ) Physical attributes / looks

    (   ) Interests / hobbies

    (   ) Personality

    (   ) Education qualification

    (   ) Occupation

    (   ) Income

    (   ) Relationship status

    (   ) No, I never misrepresented myself in anyway. *(**Pls proceed to Question 36**)*

    (   ) Others, *please specify*:_____

35. You gradually revealed or are going to reveal your actual identity to your partner after the relationship became/becomes stable.

    (   ) Yes

    (   ) Maybe

    (   ) No

    (   ) No need to be honest online

36. How closely does/did your online partner resemble your ideal partner?

    (   ) He/She is my ideal partner.

    (   ) He/She is close to be my ideal partner.

    (   ) He/She possess few attributes of my ideal partner.

    (   ) He/She is far from being my ideal partner.

37. How satisfied are/were you in the online romance?

    (   ) Very satisfied

    (   ) Satisfied

    (   ) Moderately satisfied

    (   ) Moderately dissatisfied

    (   ) Dissatisfied

    (   ) Very dissatisfied

38. How serious are/were you in the online romance?

    (   ) Very serious and committed, considering/considered marriage, or relocation to be together.

    (   ) Committed to gradually expand the relationship into offline world.

    (   ) Very serious and committed, striving/strived to maintain the relationship, but the relationship is confined within cyberspaceo.

    (   ) Trying/tried to continue the relationship exclusively online.

    (   ) Little seriousness and commitment

(   ) Although I have tried to be serious, I failed to convince myself and give any commitment.

(   ) Online romance should be commitment free.

39. Have you met with your online lover face-to-face?

(   ) Yes

(   ) No, but may meet in future **(Please proceed to Question 41)**

(   ) No, will never meet **(Please proceed to Question 42)**

40. How long did you communicate online before meeting in person?
i.e. years, months, weeks

_____

41. What are the main considerations or worries when you planned or are planning to meet your partner in person? Please choose **THREE** from the following that represent your primary concerns.

(   ) Geographical distance

(   ) High expenses (*i.e. transportation, accommodation, food, gifts, leisure activities*)

(   ) Afraid that we will be unable to escape the fate of '*jian guang si*'.

(   ) Have no spare time or enough annual leave.

(   ) Personal safety

(   ) Worry that he/she may disappoint you due to the high discrepancy between the imagination and reality.

(   ) Lack of parents, family members and friends' support and/or approval.

(   ) Lack of self-confidence, afraid that you may cause disappointment to him/her.

(   ) Feeling of disbelief, not convinced that the relationship is genuine and really exists.

(   ) Others, *please specify*:_____

42. What are your most frequently used modes of contact to stay in touch with him/her? *(**Multiple choice**)*

(   ) Email

(   ) Instant messaging   (*e.g. QQ, MSN*)

(   )Writing message on his/her blog or homepage on social networking sites

(   ) SMS text messaging

(   ) Telephone call

(   ) Internet phone call

(   ) Video call via webcam online

(   ) Video call via mobile phone

   ( ) Face-to-face meeting
   ( ) Others, *please specify*:_____

43. Do you agree that when the interaction shifts from one form of contact in cyberspace to another in the offline world, it signals an increased level of commitment and intimacy?
   ( ) Yes
   ( ) No
   ( ) Not necessarily
   ( ) Not sure / Don't know

The following questions relate to level of intimacy in your online relationship. Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the statements provided from Strongly agree (SA), Agree (A), Moderately agree (MA), Moderately disagree (MD), Disagree (D), Strongly disagree (SD), or No reply / Don't know (NR).

No.		SA	A	MA	MD	D	SD	NR
44.	I know my partner very well in terms of his/her personality traits, preferences, inner feelings, values and beliefs.							
45.	The two of us depend on each other and have great influence on each other.							
46.	I feel emotionally distant from him/her.							
47	Our communication ranges over a wide variety of topics.							
48.	We communicate openly and directly, share each other's problems, intimate details and secrets.							
49.	We don't have any mutual friends in the online or offline world.							
50.	We have developed the ability to read between the lines of each other's messages to figure out what is really on each other's mind.							

51. I feel empowered online as I'm more confident to express myself and confide in him/her almost anything in cyberspace compared to the offline world.

(   ) Yes, and I often shared with him/her many of my private details and secrets online.

(   ) Yes, but I seldom share with him/her any of my private details and secrets online.

(   ) No, but I nevertheless have shared with him/her many of my private details and secrets online.

(   ) No, and I will never share with him/her many of my private details and secrets online. *(Please proceed to Question 53)*

52. How long did it take to disclose your intimate details or secrets to your partner since your first online contact with him/her? *i.e. years, months, weeks,*

_____

The following two questions ask about sensitive issues in relationships, should you feel the questions intrusive, please choose the option 'NO REPLY'.

53. Do you have any sexual interactions with your online partner?

(   ) Yes, within cyberspace.

(   ) Yes, in the offline world.

(   ) Yes, in both online and offline worlds.

(   ) No, but I do not exclude the possibility that it might happen in the future in both worlds.

(   ) No, but might happen within cyberspace in the future.

(   ) No, but might happen in the offline world in the future.

(   ) No, and we will never have any sexual interactions in the future.

(   ) No reply

54. Have you ever engaged in online romance with others while having a committed relationship with another person in the actual world?

(   ) Yes

(   ) No

(   ) No, but I have had more than one online lovers at a time

(   ) No reply

Section 4: About You

55. Sex:
        (   ) Male
        (   ) Female

56. Age:
        (   ) 18-25
        (   ) 26-35
        (   ) 36-45
        (   ) 46-55
        (   ) 56-65
        (   ) 66 and above

57. Origin:
        (   ) Mainland China
        (   ) Taiwan
        (   ) Hong Kong
        (   ) Macau
        (   ) Other

58. Highest education:
        (   ) Primary and below
        (   ) Lower secondary
        (   ) Upper secondary
        (   ) Under graduate (ie: Certificate, Diploma)
        (   ) University graduate
        (   ) Master's degree
        (   ) PhD

59. Occupation:
        (   ) Professional
        (   ) Senior management
        (   ) Middle management
        (   ) Junior management
        (   ) Civil servant
        (   ) General worker
        (   ) Agriculture
        (   ) Self-employed
        (   ) Freelancer
        (   ) Unemployed
        (   ) Retired
        (   ) Student
        (   ) Homemaker
        (   ) Others, *please specify*:_____

60. Please indicate your current relationship status in the actual world.
   - (   ) Married
   - (   ) Cohabitation
   - (   ) In courtship (met in the offline world)
   - (   ) In long distance relationship(met in the offline world)
   - (   ) In courtship (met in the online world)
   - (   ) In long distance exclusively online relationship
   - (   ) Divorced / separated
   - (   ) Widow/ widower
   - (   ) Single

61. *Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this survey. To take part in the lucky draw for winning RMB 300 or the equivalent value in other currencies, please provide your email address here:*

   _____

Would you be interested to take part in an interview? Participants must have personal experience of online romance, or cyber-marriage or online cohabitation. The interview will be conducted via telephone or email. As a token of appreciation, there will be a cash prize lucky draw worth of RMB 380 to be won and payable via PayPal. Those interested please provide your

62. Name: _____
63. Telephone:_____
64. Email:_____

If you have any queries or comments pertaining to this study, please email me at Yann.Chin@ntu.ac.uk or Yann0403@gmail.com . Thank you.

End

(   ) Submit

NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY

网络情愿

作 者 ： Yann. L. CHIN

嗨大家好，

你是否常上网聊天，在网上认识了一些朋友？网恋过，或正在网恋？有过网婚或网上同居的经历？对于这方面有话想说，有感触？那就欢迎你坦诚相见，参与调查。

本人是英国 Nottingham Trent 大学的博士生。我自己也曾网恋过，对这个课题深感兴趣。现在专研华裔网恋的特征和华裔对网恋的看法，以及网恋对当事人的意义等。

本次调查所收集的资料会被保密，研究报告也会以匿名的方式呈现。

希望大家百忙中抽一点时间参与这项调查。为表谢意，参与者将有机会赢取 1 份 300 元人民币或相同价额的现金奖，奖金以 PayPal 形式 支付。也快邀请你身边的人一起参与吧！感激万分！

欲知更多详情，或有任何意见欢迎电邮联络我 （yann.chin@ntu.ac.uk 或 yann0403@gmail.com）。

谢谢。

钱燕羚

注意：参与者必须是华裔，18 岁或以上，自愿参与此研究。

1．对网恋的一般看法

1．你是否有网恋的经验？
    （   ）有
    （   ）没有 （请略过第 2 题，回答第 3 题）

2．你有过多少次的网恋？
    （   ）1   （   ）6
    （   ）2   （   ）7
    （   ）3   （   ）8
    （   ）4   （   ）9
    （   ）5   （   ）10
    （   ）若超过 10 次，请列明＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

3．是否认识一些和网友网恋的人（如亲戚朋友、同学、同事、邻居等）？
    （   ）是
    （   ）不是

4．以下哪项反映出你对网恋的见解？ （可多选）
    （   ）网恋和在现实生活里相识而相恋的爱情一样，没太大的分别。
    （   ）一场游戏，一场梦，开心就好，不该对网恋太认真和要求太多。
    （   ）在乏味和充满挫折的日常生活里，网恋是很好的精神寄托，让人感到慰藉，也为生活添色彩。
    （   ）网恋就等于爱情骗局， 容易被骗财骗色,最好避免。
    （   ）其他，请列明＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

5．依据你对网恋的了解和看法，你认为最理想的网恋结果是：（请选一）
    （   ）网恋是骗人的，几乎不可能有好结果。
    （   ）俩人成为纯知己好友，但一切交流与联系都只局限于网络里。
    （   ）俩人成为网络里和现实生活里的纯知己好友。
    （   ）俩人成为知己好友兼性爱伴侣，但一切交流与联系都只局限于网络里。
    （   ）俩人成为网络里和现实生活里的知己好友 兼性爱伴侣。
    （   ）俩人成为只局限于网络里的玩乐伴侣，一起寻欢作乐，无需承诺与责任。

   （ ）两人成为网络里和现实生活里的玩乐伴侣，一起寻欢作乐，无需承诺与责任。

   （ ）两人成为现实生活中的长期伴侣。

   （ ）两人成为现实生活中的长期伴侣，并最后结为夫妻，生儿育女。

   （ ）其他，请列明＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

6. 以下哪项在网络里的行为，你认为是对现实生活里的伴侣构成背叛和不忠的行为？（可多选）

   （ ）与网友互生情愫

   （ ）与他人在网上打情骂俏

   （ ）在网上通过文字或视频与他人有性行为

   （ ）游览色情网页

   （ ）在网上刊登交友广告

   （ ）在网上刊登征婚（网婚）/ 寻找网上同居室友广告

   （ ）以上皆是

   （ ）以上皆不是

以下有一系列对网恋的说法，请选出你对这些说法的态度。

		非常同意	同意	有点同意	有点不同意	不同意	非常不同意	不知道
7.	在网上寻找伴侣的人，一般都是寂寞和外表欠佳，所以无法在现实生活里找到对象的一群。							
8.	网恋和现实生活里结识而相恋的爱情本质上没太大的分别，一样要靠缘分。							
9.	网恋比现实生活里相识的恋爱困难很多，所以很少有甜蜜美满的结果。							
10.	相比于现实生活里的恋爱，网恋更能提供心灵和精神上的满足。							

11.	网恋的人都是玩玩而已，要的只是短暂的激情。							
12.	网恋可提升个人的竞争能力，让非俊男美女，或家境一般的人靠自己的创意，才智和书写能力去吸引他人，享受浪漫恋情。							
13.	网恋可让人超越时空限制，社会的约束，大大提升个人的求爱自主权。							
14.	网络世界和线下的现实生活是两个完全不同，并独立的领域，应该分明界限。							
15.	把网络世界和现实生活混乱了，会对自身、伴侣、家人、朋友等其他人产生不良的影响和后果。							

16. 你认为是否可能存在诚恳深挚，让人满足和愉悦，但却完全只局限于网络里的恋爱？

     （   ）肯定能

     （   ）能

     （   ）也许能

     （   ）也许不能

     （   ）不能

     （   ）肯定不能

     （   ）不知道 / 不确定

17. 你认为，为什么一些人会寻找完全只局限于网络里的感情或恋爱呢？

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

２．网婚和网上同居

18. 你是否有网婚或网上同居的经历？

（　　　）有过网婚

（　　　）有过网上同居

（　　　）有过网婚和网上同居

（　　　）皆没有，但我知道什么是网婚和网上同居（请略过这部分的问题，直接回答第 3 部分，第 24 题起。）

（　　）我不知道什么是网婚和网上同居（请略过这部分的问题，直接回答第 3 部分，第 24 题起。）

19. 你有过多少次的网婚或网上同居的经验？

（　　　）1	（　　　）6	
（　　　）2	（　　　）7	
（　　　）3	（　　　）8	
（　　　）4	（　　　）9	
（　　　）5	（　　　）10	

（　　　）若超过 10 次，请列明＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

20. 网婚或网上同居之前，你是怎样认识对方的呢？

（　　　）网上

（　　　）在现实生活里已认识

（　　　）网上和现实生活里认识的都有

21. 请列出你在哪个网站里有过网婚或网上同居？如天涯婚礼堂，爱情公寓，梦幻西游网络游戏等。

＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

22. 你网婚或网上同居的理由是：（可多选）

（　　　）好奇试试

（　　　）开心玩玩

(   ) 增进感情

(   ) 互相承诺，公开给彼此老公老婆的名分

(   ) 身边很多朋友都网婚或网上同居

(   ) 在网络社区里，网婚夫妻或同居者有很多好处

(   ) 其他，请列明＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

23. 请说说网婚或网上同居对你的意义。是否让你感觉更自由、解放和更有自主效力？或相反的让你感觉更无奈和被约束？

＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿
＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿
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＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

3．网恋的经历

以下的问题是有关你过往或正在进行的网恋。若你有多过一次的网恋，请选其中一次来作答。这可以是你最近期的网恋，或让你印想最深刻的一次。**没有网恋经验者请略过这部分的问题，直接回答第 4 部分，第 55 题起。**

24. 你是否正在网恋中？

(   ) 是

(   ) 不是（请略过 25-26 题，直接回答第 27 题）

25. 网恋多久了呢？（如 3 个月，或 1 年 6 个月，或 2 星期）

＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

26. 这段网恋前景如何？

(   ) 很有成长和继续发展的机会，不过只可局限于网络世界里。

(   ) 很有成长和继续发展的机会，并有信心会走出网络，发展到现生活里。

(   ) 在网络世界里，只有少许的成长和发展机会。若能走出网络，发展机会反而比较大。

( ) 在网络世界里，还有少许的成长和发展机会；一但离开网络就可能见光即死。

( ) 在网络和现实生活里，都只有些许的成长和发展机会。

( ) 恐怕持续不了多久。

( ) 不确定。

（请略过 27-28 题，直接回答第 29 题）

27. 你那次的网恋维持了多久？（如 3 个月，或 1 年 6 个月，或 2 星期

_____

28. 什么原因导致网恋结束？

_____
_____
_____
_____

29.你的网恋对象来自哪？

( ) 中国大陆

( ) 台湾

( ) 香港

( ) 澳门

( ) 其他，请列明_____

30. 你和他/她的网恋是如何开始的呢？在哪个网站相遇？

( ) 我们是通过交友，婚嫁网，或刊登交友启示而认识的（如人人网，51.com, 佳缘，百合）。

( ) 在网上偶然相遇（如通过论坛，网络游戏，聊天室等），从网友开始，慢慢变成网恋。请列出网站名称：

_____

31. 你第一次和对方联系时，是否知道他/她外貌如何？

( ) 知道

( ) 不知道

32．在还没亲身见面之前，你印象中的他/她外貌如何？

        （   ）我不知道，也没去幻想他/她长的怎样
        （   ）非常好看
        （   ）好看
        （   ）平均以上的好看
        （   ）普通一般
        （   ）平均以下

33. 见过面之后，你又会如何形容他/她的外貌？

        （   ）我们不曾见过面
        （   ）非常好看
        （   ）好看
        （   ）平均以上的好看
        （   ）普通一般
        （   ）平均以下

34．你是否曾隐瞒以下各项以让自己更具吸引力？（可多选）

        （   ）年龄
        （   ）体形样貌
        （   ）兴趣爱好
        （   ）个性
        （   ）教育程度
        （   ）职业
        （   ）收入
        （   ）感情状况
        （   ）其他，请列明＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿
        （   ）我不曾隐瞒或欺骗他，完全坦白。（请略过第 35 题，直接回答第 36 题）

35. 当感情稳定后，你是否会渐渐向对方坦白，并说出真相。

        （   ）是
        （   ）也许会
        （   ）没有／不会
        （   ）没必要，网络里无须太真实

36.对方距离你理想伴侣的标准有多远？

（　　　　）他/她就是我的理想伴侣
（　　　　）他/她接近我理想伴侣的标准
（　　　　）他/她只具有少许我理想伴侣的条件
（　　　　）他/她离我理想伴侣的标准很远

37.概括来说，你对这网恋有多满意？

（　　　　）非常满意
（　　　　）满意
（　　　　）有点满意
（　　　　）有点不满意
（　　　　）不满意
（　　　　）非常不满意

38. 网恋中的你有多认真？

（　　　　）非常认真投入，全心付出，考虑过结婚，或为他/她而迁居。
（　　　　）认真投入，努力地将网恋扩展到现实生活里。
（　　　　）非常认真投入，全心全意地去维护和发展感情，但只会将恋情局限在网络里。
（　　　　）认真地去延续感情，但只会将恋情局限在网络里。
（　　　　）只有些许的认真和一点投入。
（　　　　）尝试过去认真，但就是无法太投入和给于承诺。
（　　　　）网恋本来就不需要承诺。

39. 你是否和网恋的他/她亲身见过面？

（　　　　）有
（　　　　）没有,但也许将来会见面（请略过第 40 题, 直接作答第 41 题）
（　　　　）没有，永远都不打算见面（请略过 40-41 题, 直接作答第 42 题）

40. 在网络里联系多久后你们才见面？（如 3 个月，1 年 6 个月，或 2 星期）

（　　　　）年后　（　　　　）月后　（　　　　）星期后

41. 当你打算和对方见面时，你会有何顾虑？请在以下选项中选出你认为最大的 3 个顾虑，若选'其他'，请列明。

（　　　　）俩人之间的地理距离。
（　　　　）消费过高，如住宿、交通、餐饮、礼物、消遣活动等。
（　　　　）害怕逃不过见光死的命运。
（　　　　）没有足够的时间或假期。
（　　　　）个人安全问题。
（　　　　）害怕想象和现实距离太大，担心对方会让自己失望。
（　　　　）父母，家人或朋友的反对或不支持。
（　　　　）对自己没信心，害怕会让他/她失望。
（　　　　）感觉不真实，难以说服自己这网恋是真实存在的。
（　　　　）其他，请列明＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

42. 以下哪一项是你和他/她最常使用的联络方式？（可多选）

（　　　　）电子邮件
（　　　　）即时聊天 （如 QQ, MSN）
（　　　　）在他/她空间，网页，或部落格留言
（　　　　）手机短讯
（　　　　）电话聊天
（　　　　）网络电话聊天
（　　　　）网络视频
（　　　　）手机视频通讯
（　　　　）亲身见面
（　　　　）其他，请列明＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

43. 你是否同意只有当俩人的交流从网上扩展到现实生活中去，才会意味着俩人的感情越来越好，越来越熟络或亲密？

（　　　　）同意
（　　　　）不同意
（　　　　）未必是
（　　　　）不确定/不知道

以下的句子反映网恋中俩人的熟络和亲密程度。请选出你对每个句子的同意或不同意程度。

		非常同意	同意	有点同意	有点不同意	不同意	非常不同意	不知道
44.	我对他/她非常了解，清楚他的脾性，喜好，内心感受，想法和价值观。							
45.	我们俩互相依靠对方，对彼此有很大的影响力。							
46.	我感觉与他/她有很大的心灵距离。							
47.	我们的谈话内容非常广，有说不完的话题。							
48.	我们对彼此坦诚和直接，互相分担各自的烦恼，分享秘密。							
49.	网络里或现实生活里，我们都没有共同的朋友。							
50.	我们都能轻易的领悟或察觉对方的言外之意，看出彼此的心中话。							

51. 和现实生活相比，在网络里我更有勇气表现自我，对他/她倾诉和吐露几乎任何一切。

（　　　）是，我经常在网络里和他/她分享秘密，吐露我的个人隐私。

（　　　）是，**不过我不常**在网络里和他/她分享秘密，吐露我的个人隐私。

（　　　）不是，不过我还是曾在网络里和他/她分享秘密，吐露我的个人隐私。

（　　　）不是，**我也一定不会**在网络里和他/她分享秘密，吐露我的个人隐私。（请略过 52 题, 直接作答第 53 题）

52. 网上认识多久后，你就开始对他/她吐露自己的个人隐私、秘密？（如 3 个月，或 1 年 6 个月，或 2 星期）

_____

以下 2 个问题有点敏感，如果回答时让你感觉不适，请选择'无可奉告'。抱歉！

53. 你是否与对方有过性关系？

　　　（　　　）有，在网络里。
　　　（　　　）有，在现实生活里。
　　　（　　　）网络里和现实生活里都有。
　　　（　　　）没有，**但不排除将来会和他有网络和现实生活里性关系的可能性。**
　　　（　　　）没有，但将来也许会和他有网络性爱，**但不会有现实生活里的性关系。**
　　　（　　　）没有，但将来也许会和他有现实生活里的性关系，**但不会有网络性爱。**
　　　（　　　）没有，**将来也肯定不会发生任何性关系。**
　　　（　　　）无可奉告

54. 你是否曾与现实伴侣相处或谈恋爱的同时，又与他人网恋的经历？

　　　（　　　）有
　　　（　　　）没有
　　　（　　　）没有，但曾同一时间里与多过一人网恋
　　　（　　　）无可奉告

> ### 4．关于你

55. 性别

　　　（　　　）男
　　　（　　　）女

56. 年龄

    （   ）18-25
    （   ）26-35
    （   ）36-45
    （   ）46-55
    （   ）56-65
    （   ）66 岁或以上

57. 来自

    （   ）中国大陆
    （   ）台湾
    （   ）香港
    （   ）澳门
    （   ）其他，请列明

    _____

58. 教育程度

    （   ）小学及以下
    （   ）初中
    （   ）高中/职高/中专
    （   ）大专
    （   ）学士 / 本科
    （   ）硕士
    （   ）博士

59. 以下哪项最好地描述了您目前的在职状况？

    （   ）专业人士
    （   ）高层管理人员
    （   ）中层管理人员
    （   ）初级管理人员
    （   ）公务员
    （   ）一般雇员
    （   ）农业
    （   ）自雇从商
    （   ）自由业者
    （   ）无业或待业
    （   ）退休
    （   ）学生
    （   ）家庭工作者
    （   ）其他，请列明_____

60．你现实生活里的感情状况是：

（　　）已婚

（　　）同居

（　　）恋爱中（俩人在现实生活里结识）

（　　）在谈远距离恋爱 （俩人在现实生活里结识）

（　　）恋爱中，俩人在网上认识

（　　）在谈远距离网恋

（　　）离异

（　　）丧偶

（　　）单身

非常谢谢你宝贵的时间和意见。欲参与幸运抽奖赢取 300 元人民币或相同价额的现金，请留下电邮地址：

_____

你是否愿意接受我更深入的访谈？**受访者必须有网恋，或网婚/网上同居的经历**，可选择已电话或电邮的方式进行访谈。为表谢意，受访者将有机会赢取 380 元人民币或相同价额的现金奖，以 **PayPal** 支付。有意者请留下：

你的姓名：

_____

你的电话号码：

_____

你的电邮地址：

_____

若有任何疑问或意见，欢迎电邮我 yann.chin@ntu.ac.uk 或 yann0403@gmail.com 。

谢谢 。

Introduction

This is the statistical analysis of the results of my online survey. Discussions based and on the findings will be presented in a separate document. The online survey was published on my3q.com, a Hong Kong based site which supports Chinese survey. Data collection began on 7 May 2010 and lasted for three months. A pilot study was conducted to test the questionnaire before posting it online for participation. The pilot study consists of five males and five females who represent the prospective participants. I know five of them online from the websites where I conducted my participant observations, the remaining were random encounters in a university library in Sheffield. The pilot study helped to correct mainly vocabularies use and grammar mistakes but overlooked other mistakes in the options provided. The mistakes only became obvious during the data analysis. It was mainly the result of trying to accommodate the questionnaire to two groups of participants; those who are currently in an online relationship and those who referred to their past experience of online relationship. Nevertheless, as it happened to only two questions, the impact is relatively minor.

The online survey aimed to explore Chinese people's perceptions and personal experience of online relationships, also to verify the conclusions drawn based on my participant observations and to understand how Chinese people's online relationships different characteristically from online relationships of their western counterparts. The questionnaire is divided into four sections, consists of 60 questions in total. Section 1 aims to measure the popularity of online romance, respondents' attitudes toward online romance, perceptions of online romance and online infidelity. Section 2 explores the phenomenon of cyber-marriage and online cohabitation. Participants without such experience are asked to proceed to Section 3 which focuses on personal experience of online romance. Non-online daters are asked to ignore Section 3 and answer demographic questions in the final section. The questionnaire is deliberately designed not to begin with demographic questions in order to secure respondents' interests by first asking questions directly related to the research topic and salient to the respondents.

To recruit participants, I began to publicise my survey at the three websites where I conducted my participant observations. But this strategy did not work well for different reasons which will be detailed next. Since March 2010, Love Apartment reconfigured its structure for obvious commercial reasons which somewhat discourage interactions among members unless one willing to pay. Under the new system, as a free standard member, if I would like to contact others who are also free members, I have to pay for each initial contact with them. If not, the recipient of my message will not be able to read my message, unless they willing to pay to read the message which is seldom happen. As a result, I can only contact members with premium membership who can read my message and also have the privilege to contact other free members without require them to pay for reading their message.

The site has also stopped operating its discussion forum recently. All these changes have seriously impeded my effort to recruit participants.

Tianya BBS is the second site where I conducted my participant observation. Since early 2010, I started to experience difficulty to access the site. The connection to the site becomes very unstable, if not inaccessible most of the time. Initially I thought that the site might have been shut down by the Chinese government, probably because of carrying critical remarks of the state in its discussion forum. But after contacting others I met on the site, I realised that this access problem seems to occur only to overseas users, other members residing in China have no such problem. I have reported this problem to the site administrator, but the problem persists.

The third site I studied is renren.com, the Chinese equivalent of Facebook. To publicise my survey, I posted message that contains the link to my survey in two related forums. One caters for university students, dealing with research and study matters; the second is a relationship forum. However, I soon realised that both posts were being taken down by the forum moderators without any explanation and notice. I later tried to invite other members' to participate in my survey by leaving message on their "wall". I found these members from posts discussing online romance and this strategy indeed seems to generate responses. However, the next time when I tried to do the same, I was being barred from leaving any message containing the link to my survey. The pop up window suggested that my message was being treated as unsolicited advertising spam. The restriction was so stringent that even when I tried to contact those who are my "friends" using private email on the site, I was still being blocked from sending the messages. This restriction seems to me unfair and arbitrary imposed because I had come across advertising messages containing links to other commercial sites for several times in the discussion forums.

To solve the problem, I started to look for participants within the university. I spent a day looking through the university's internal message system to identify Chinese students based on their name and send them a message containing the link to my survey. It was only through this method that I began to see improvement on the response rate. As the sample consists mostly of university students living in the UK, this inevitably has an impact on the results of my survey. In an attempt to balance the sample makeup, I intensified my effort to recruit more Chinese participants who are currently residing in China by venturing to other Chinese domestic social sites.

Participants' demographic details

The online survey invited 134 responses. The criteria for participation are native Chinese speakers who are Internet users. Although the study focuses primarily on Internet users from China, I did not specify this requirement in the introduction letter in order to increase the response rate. Nevertheless, 77.6% of the participants are from China, 7.5% from Taiwan, 11.9% from Hong Kong and only 3% from other

countries. 63.4% of the participants are females, compared to 36.6% of the males. Over half of the participants (53.7%) are currently in relationship.

Since most responses are generated through university's internal messaging system, it might not be a surprise that 70.1% of my participants are students, aged between 18 and 25. Only 29.9% aged between 26 and above. This survey is also skewed towards highly educated Chinese online users in which 46.3% have university degree and 32.8% with postgraduate qualification. This is in sharp contrast to CNNIC latest report dated June 2010 in which only 11.3% of the wangmins have university degree and above. This demographic makeup seriously limits the type of statistical tests that I can conduct for meaningful comparisons. Nonetheless, the current sample is not radically different from the Chinese wangmins population as according to the CNNIC report, 58% of the wangmins aged between 10 and 29, 28% aged between 30 and 39, and about one third of them are students.

From the IP address of the participants, 59% of them are currently residing in the UK, 35.8% of the submissions are identified from China, including Taiwan and Hong Kong. Hence, the results cannot be generalized to the Chinese online population. It is also not feasible for me to have a representative sample for the 420 million Chinese wangmins. As a result of having a largely homogenous group in terms of demographic background, I have to collapse most of the demographic categories into binary groups in order to have sufficient cases for statistical analysis. The study nevertheless provides some useful insights into Chinese discourse of online relationships, albeit the limitation.

Popularity of online romance in China

43.3% of the participants have had the experience of online romance, 56.7% without the experience. Significant percentage of the participants (79.1%) knew someone who falls in love with another met online, compared to only 20.9% who answered no to this question. The result suggests that online romance is reasonably common among Chinese wangmins. For those who have personal experience of online romance, the mean for the numbers of such experience is 2.11(SD=1.437).

A Chi-square test for independence samples (with Yates Continuity Correction) indicated no significant relationship between knowing someone who has/had online romance and personal involvement in online romance, x^2 (1, n=134) = 1.26, p=.26, phi= .12. To explore the potential impact of the participants' psychical location (through IP address) on their experience of online romance, I first conducted a Chi-square test (with Yates Continuity Correction) for those in residing China and in the UK. There appear to have a significant association between participants' psychical location and the likelihood to have personal experience of online romance, x^2 (1, n=127) = 4.452, p=.035, phi= .204.

IP Address * Experience of Online Romance Crosstabulation			Experience of OL romance		
			Yes	No	Total
IP Address	China	Count	27	21	48
		% within IP Address	56.3%	43.8%	100.0%
		% within Experience of OL romance	49.1%	29.2%	37.8%
		% of Total	21.3%	16.5%	37.8%
	UK	Count	28	51	79
		% within IP Address	35.4%	64.6%	100.0%
		% within Experience of OL romance	50.9%	70.8%	62.2%
		% of Total	22.0%	40.2%	62.2%
Total		Count	55	72	127
		% within IP Address	43.3%	56.7%	100.0%
		% within Experience of OL romance	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	43.3%	56.7%	100.0%

From the table above it seems that 56.3% of those physically in China have experienced online romance, significantly higher than those residing in the UK (35.4%). This is contrary to my prior assumption that Chinese who are living in the UK might exhibit more opened and liberated behaviour due to the cultural influence, and hence more likely to have online romance experience. However, based on the phi value, the relationship that exists is relatively weak. A separate Chi-square test (with Yates Continuity Correction) also indicated no significant association between knowing someone who has/had online romance and participants' location, x^2 (1, n=127) = .845, p=.358, phi= .101.

Demographic profiles of online daters

To understand how people who have the experience of online romance demographically differed from those without the experience, logistic regression was conducted. The model contains seven independent variables (physical location, gender, age, origin/nationality, education level, occupation and relationship status). To carry out the test, I have collapsed all the variables into dichotomous categories. The full model containing all predictors achieved statistically significant, x^2 (7, N=127) = 15.496, P< .05. Although the model was able to distinguish between participants who have the experience from those without, the predictive power was rather weak. The model as a whole explained only between 11.5% (Cox and Snell R square) and 15.4% (Nagelkerke R square) of the variability, and correctly classified 66.1% of cases, a slight improvement from 56.7% when the predictor variables are not included in the model.

As shown in the following table, none of the independent variables made a unique statistically significant contribution to the model. The strongest predictor was gender

(p=.053), follow by relationship status (p=.054). The statistical significant for IP address (p=.263) was far greater than the acceptable level of p< .05. This and the previous test results suggested that although 58.96% of my current sample consists of Chinese residing in the UK and only slightly above one third (35.82%) are from China, participants' physical location do not seem to have serious impact on the results.

The possible reasons for the weak predictive power of the model could be due to absent of interval variables and unrepresentative sample that is especially restricted in terms of age, education and occupation, consist mostly of relatively highly educated students in their early 20s.

Logistic Regression Predicting Likelihood of Having Online Romance Experience

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig./ p	Exp(B)	95% C.I.for EXP(B) Lower	Upper
IP (China, UK)	.630	.564	1.250	1	.263	1.878	.622	5.667
Relationship Status (In relationship, not in relationship)	.794	.412	3.722	1	.054	2.212	.987	4.957
Age (18-25, 26 and above)	-.633	.570	1.232	1	.267	.531	.174	1.623
Gender (Male, Female)	.822	.424	3.749	1	.053	2.274	.990	5.224
Origin (Mainland China, others)	.432	.542	.636	1	.425	1.541	.532	4.462
Occupation Status (Student, non-student)	-.270	.710	.145	1	.703	.763	.190	3.070
Education (Below university degree, university degree & above)	-.246	.539	.208	1	.649	.782	.272	2.248
Constant	-1.052	.880	1.429	1	.232	.349		

To investigate further the correlation between gender and relationship status to the experience of online romance, two separate Chi-square tests for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction) have been conducted. The result showed that there is no significant association between gender and experience of online romance x^2 (1, n=134) = 3.669, p=.055, phi= .181, although in this study male participants appeared more likely to experience online romance (55.1%) than female participants (36.5%).

In terms of correlation between relationship status and the experience of online romance, Chi-square tests also indicated no relationship between the two variables x^2 (1, n=134) = 3.481, p=.062, phi=- .176. In other words, result showed that online romance could potentially happen to anyone as those who reported to have this experience are not different demographically from those without the experience. Most participants' partners come from within the same country, only 2 participants from China, 2 from Taiwan and 1 from Hong Kong dated someone from other countries.

Duration and dissolution of online romance

Out of the 58 participants who have the experience of online romance, only 13 is currently engaging in an ongoing online relationship, 45 participants are referring to their past experience of online relationship when answering the questions.

For current online daters, the duration of their relationship ranges from less than 2 weeks to 10 years (M= 83.08 weeks, SD= 148.68). For those whose online relationship have ended, the relationships lasted from few days to 3 years (M=29.34, SD=37.80), with the mode of 3 months.

Question 28 asks those participants whose relationship has ended, what caused the relationships ended and how. Only 37 participants answered this open-ended question, and the answers provided were mostly brief.

5 participants realised that pursuing love online is a waste of time and impractical. 4 participants mentioned it was physical distance that ended the relationships. Similarly, 3 participants ended their relationship because of practical obstacles such as family disproval, financial, social and moral constraints.

4 participants ended the relationships when they realised that the reality is not as they imagined. Same numbers of participants terminated the relationship because of different values and incompatible personalities. Busy and lack of online time became the reason for relationships dissolution for 3 participants. Feeling tired and loss of interest or excitement, found someone better were reasons for 6 participants to terminate their relationship. For one participant, her online romance ended just by itself for no obvious reason.

2 participants ended the relationship after they discovered that their online lover has already married, 1 participant has no choice but to end the relationship after being discovered by his wife. A female participant ended the relationship because she gets married. 3 participants stated that their online relationship has ended because they decided to move the relationship offline.

Regular modes of contact

Most of the participants (81.03%) rely on instant messaging as their regular mode of contact; this is follow by text messaging on mobile phone (48.28%) and phone conversation (37.93%). Only 6 participants (10.34%) use email regularly to contact their lovers, equal numbers of participants met with their lover face-to-face regularly. 7 participants use online video conferencing facilities to stay in touch with their lover.

Chinese *wangmins*' perceptions of online romance

Question 4 is a multiple response question, asks which of the statements provided represent participants' perceptions of online romance. 42.5% of participants perceive online romance as just a form of play, a dream like encounter in which happiness and enjoyment are the priorities. Players should not take online relationship too seriously or expect too much from it. The second largest answer given by the participants (41%) understand online romance as an effective means to gain solace and emotional support, especially when feeling down or frustrated due to the everyday setbacks and pressure of all sorts. To these participants, online romance adds meanings and significance to the otherwise banal and prosaic everyday life. Only 20.9% of participants perceive online romance as not essentially different from romantic relationships initiated face-to-face. 14.9% equate online romance as love scam, a risky act that should be avoided.

To explore the possibility of correlation between gender and relationship status of the participants and their perceptions of online romance, I again turn to Chi-square tests for independence (with Yates Continuity Correction, except for education level). It appears no relationships among gender, relationship status and education level with the two main perceptions of online romance. However, students (48.9%) seem to be more likely than non-students (28.2%) to perceive online romance as a dream like form of play, phi= -.19l. Those residing in China tend to view online romance as a source of emotional support and solace, phi= -.207, whereas their UK counterparts are more likely to conceive the relationship online as a form of play, phi=.237.

	Play and Dream	**Emotional solace**
Gender	X^2 (1, N=133)= .297, p=.586	X^2 (1, N=133)= 1.396, p=.237
Relationship Status	X^2 (1, N=133)= .687, p=.407	X^2 (1, N=133)= .000, p= 1.000
Students vs Non-students	X^2 (1, N=133)= 4.028, p=.045	X^2 (1, N=133)= .842, p=.359
UK vs China	X^2 (1, N=133)=6.115, p=.013	X^2 (1, N=133)= 4.572, p=.032
Three education levels	X^2 (2, N=133)= 2.490, p=.288	X^2 (2, N=133)= 3.795, p=.150

The ideal outcome of online romance

By asking respondents what is their notion of an ideal ending of an online romance, I would be able to gain insight into the nature of online romance as understand by Chinese wangmins, whether it is a sexual or nonsexual relationship, confine within cyberspace or gradually extend into the offline world.

In overall, the result showed that 56.7% of the participants conceived online romance as a nonsexual relationship in which the couple ideally becoming each other soul

mate. 33.6% ideally want to limit the relationship exclusively within cyberspace while 23.1% like to materialise the relationship by expanding the interactions into the offline world. Only 23.9% defined successful online romance as relationship that cumulating in marriage and long-term courtship in the offline world.

Ideal Outcomes	Frequency	Percent
1 Impossible to have good ending	7	5.2
2 Online soul mate	45	**33.6**
3 On and Offline soul mate	31	**23.1**
4 Online sex and soul mate	2	1.5
5 Online and Offline sex and soul mate	4	3.0
6 Online playmate	6	4.5
7 On and Offline playmate	2	1.5
8 Offline long-term partner	8	**6.0**
9 Married and have children offline	24	**17.9**
10 others	5	3.7
Total	134	100.0

Chi-square test (with Yates Continuity Correction) showed a significant correlation between students and perception of ideal online romance as mere emotional relationship, x^2 (1, n=114) = 8.663, p=.003, phi = -.296. No significant difference was found for non-students.

Occupation Status * Ideal Relationship Crosstabulation

			Ideal Relationship		
			Emotional relationship	Emotional and sexual relationship	Total
Occupation Status	Non-student	Count	16	19	35
		% within Occupation Status	45.7%	54.3%	100.0%
		% within Ideal Relationship	21.1%	50.0%	30.7%
		% of Total	14.0%	16.7%	30.7%
	Student	Count	60	19	79
		% within Occupation Status	75.9%	24.1%	100.0%
		% within Ideal Relationship	78.9%	50.0%	69.3%
		% of Total	52.6%	16.7%	69.3%
Total		Count	76	38	114
		% within Occupation Status	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
		% within Ideal Relationship	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%

In terms of association between relationship status and the sexual and emotional dimension of a successful online romance, Chi-square test indicated a strong association between participants in courtship and single with emphasis only on the emotional dimension when define a successful online romance. This is in opposite to the participants who are married or in cohabitation in which they are slightly more likely to emphasize both emotional and sexual dimensions, x^2 (2, n=114) = 9.978, p=.007, Cramer's V= .296. However, participants' notions of successful online romance were not in any way link to their gender, physical location and education level.

Relationship status * Ideal Relationship Crosstabulation

			Ideal Relationship		Total
			Emotional relationship	Emotional and sexual relationship	
Relationship status	Married and Cohabitation	Count	8	12	20
		% within Relationship status	40.0%	60.0%	100.0%
		% within Ideal Relationship	10.5%	31.6%	17.5%
		% of Total	7.0%	10.5%	17.5%
	In courtship	Count	27	15	42
		% within Relationship status	64.3%	35.7%	100.0%
		% within Ideal Relationship	35.5%	39.5%	36.8%
		% of Total	23.7%	13.2%	36.8%
	Single	Count	41	11	52
		% within Relationship status	78.8%	21.2%	100.0%
		% within Ideal Relationship	53.9%	28.9%	45.6%
		% of Total	36.0%	9.6%	45.6%
Total		Count	76	38	114
		% within Relationship status	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
		% within Ideal Relationship	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%

Attitude towards online romance

To measure participants' attitude towards online romance, I have constructed my own scale based on the findings of my participant observation. The scale consists of seven items with a Cronbach alpha coefficient reported of .632 which is below the acceptable level of .7 (DeVellis, 2003, cited in Pallant, 2007). To improve the internal consistency of the scale, two items have been removed which are statements "online romance is much more challenging than conventional face-to-face initiated romance, therefore rarely can achieve the desire outcome as the latter" and "online relationships can provide more emotional satisfaction than face-to-face initiated

relationships". With only five items in the scale, Pallant (2007) argues that it may be more appropriate to report the mean inter-item correlation for the items. In this case, the value is .261 which is within the acceptable range of .2 to .4 (Briggs and Cheek, 1986, cited in ibid).

Overall, participants in this study have relatively positive attitude towards online romance as in average they collectively score above 15 out of the total scores of 30 (M=18.45, SD=4.76). High scores imply more positive attitude towards online romance. To examine whether prior experience of online romance affects participants' attitude towards online romance, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the attitude scores for those with and without the experience. There was a significant difference in scores for the two groups of participants. Those with experience of an online romance score higher (M=20.12, SD= 4.91) than those without the experience (M=17.17, SD=4.26), t = 3.72, p=.000 (2-tailed). The magnitude of differences in the means was moderate (mean difference= 2.95, 95% CI: -1.80 to 1.87, eta squared = .095).

The same test has been carried out to compare the scores of participants who are physically located in China and those in the UK. Result showed no significant difference in scores for those residing in China (M=19.23, SD= 5.28) and UK (M=17.66, SD= 4.23), t = -1.85, p=.067 (2-tailed). There also appeared to have no difference between males (M=18.57, SD=5.38) and females (M=18.38, SD=4.40), t= .227, p= .82 (2-tailed) in terms of the attitude scores obtain from the scale.

T-test showed significant difference between participants who perceive online romance as a form of play and those who do not. The mean scores for the former is 17.26 (SD=4.02) lower than the latter M=19.36, SD=5.12 t= -2.64, p=.009 (equal variances not assumed). The magnitude of differences in the mean was small (mean difference= 2.43, 95% CI: -1.80 to 1.87, eta squared = .05). No Significant difference was also found between those who perceive online romance as an important source of emotional solace and those who do not. The mean score for the former is 19.25 (SD=4.24), whereas for the latter M=17.9, SD=5.08, t= 1.62, p=.107.

I have recoded the participants into three groups of relationship status- married or cohabitation, in courtship and single in order to conduct one-way ANOVA test to explore the association if any between relationship statuses and participants' attitude towards online romance. Strictly speaking the result showed no significant difference for the three groups: F (2, 131) = 2.98, p= .054, the alpha value is slightly above the required cut-off .05. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean scores for Group 1 (Married or cohabitation) is 20.68 (SD=3.41), significantly different from the other two groups. Group 2 (in courtship) (M=18, SD=4.54) and Group 3 (single) (M=18.02, SD=5.17) did not differ significantly from each other.

Are married or cohabitating participants have more favourable attitude towards online romance than those in relationship and single? To answer this question, I turn

to planned comparisons one-way ANOVA test. The result showed that there was a significant difference at the $p < .05$ level for Group 1 and the other two groups: $F (1, 131) = 5.96$, $p= .016$. However, it is important to point out that despite reaching statistical significance, the effect size calculating using eta squared is 0.04, a small effect according to Cohen's (1988) classification (cited in Pallant, 2007).

The 5 items that make up the scale were subject to principal component analysis (PCA). Prior to the test, the suitability of data for factor analysis was assessed. Correlation Matrix showed that most have coefficients of 0.3 and above. The Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin value was .657, exceeding the recommended value of .6 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance. The PCA extracted 2 components with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 41.31% and 23.02% of the variance respectively. The two-components solution explained 64.33% of the variance in total. Oblimin rotation was performed for interpretation. Both components showed a number of strong loadings with coefficients .6 and above. All variables load substantially on only one component. Component 1 was labelled as increased agency, describing how online relationships could empower participants in their romantic pursuit. Component 2 labelled as negative affect and the desire to disprove the bias perceptions that online daters are likely to be lonely losers and/or casual daters. The two components are positively correlated at .239.

	Component Matrix		Pattern Matrix		Structure Matrix	
	Component		Component		Component	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
Transcend constraints	.702	-.440	.845	-.089	.824	.113
Other attractions	.693	-.405	.815	-.061	.801	.134
No essential differences	.739	-.087	.641	.254	.702	.407
Casual daters	.546	.628	.016	.828	.214	.832
Lonely loser	.498	.626	-.021	.805	.172	.800

The online and offline world

Almost two third of the participants (61.94%) agreed with Question 14 statement "Online and offline are two distinct and independent realms, one should not confuse between the two". 35.07% disagreed and 4 participants answered don't know. In the next question "Confusing online with offline life is likely to have negative ramifications not only to oneself, but also others, such as partners, family members and friends", a staggering percentage of the participants (76.87%) agreed with it, only 21.64% disagreed and 2 participants answered don't know.

Spearman rho showed a positive correlation between Question 14 and 15, $r= .491$, $n=134$, $p= .000$. This allows me to combine the scores of both questions and conducts Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient to explore the correlation

between this variable with various demographic groups. As seen in the following table, only age groups and occupation status showed statistically significance correlation to the variable. It seems that older age group and non-students are more likely to disagree with the statement that online and offline are two distinct independent worlds. The correlation is nevertheless small.

Groups	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male & Female	.028	.747
In relationship & not in relationship	.168	.052
Students & Non-students	-.206	**.017**
Mainland China & Other locations	.048	.581
Below university degree & university degree and above	.037	.673
28-25 & 26 and above	.186	**.031**

Exclusively Internet-based romantic relationship

64.2% of participants answered yes to Question 16 asking that "do you think it is possible to have genuine, profound and fulfilling romantic relationship with someone which is maintained exclusively online?" Only 22.3% said no and 13.4% answered don't know to this question.

I previously assumed that there would be a correlation between this question and Question 14 in which those who believe in the existence of purely online romantic relationship is likely to perceive online and offline world as two distinct independent worlds. The relationship between the two was investigated using Spearman's rho. However, contrary to my assumption, it appears to have no significant correlation between the two variables, rho= .105, n=134, p = .228.

From Q38, Q39 and Q43, I have identified 25 cases which can be categorised as exclusively Internet-based relationships. Instead of asking participants directly whether they are having or have had an exclusively Internet based relationship, I decided to infer from these three questions whether or not participants can be categorised as involving in this type of relationship. The decision was made based on the fact that people are more likely to say that they belong to this group due to the factor of social desirability. Question 38 asks about participants' level of seriousness in the relationships. While some who claim that they are/were serious in the relationship and try to materialise it offline, other who are/were equally serious in their relationships want to confine their relationship online. Question 39 asks have they met with their online lover in person. For those who have not, some said they may meet in the future, some said they will never meet. Question 43 asks, "Do you

agree that when the interaction shifts from one form of contact in cyberspace to another in the offline world, it signal an increased level of commitment and intimacy?" Those engaging/engaged in exclusively Internet-based relationships are likely to answer no or not necessary to this question.

This way to identify participants might not be very accurate, but it does provide a better indication than relying on self-report as the concept of having exclusively Internet-based relationship in itself is ambiguous. Some define it as relationship that is strictly online, but allow phone conversation and text messaging; others preclude not only face-to-face meeting, but also phone conversation and text messaging; some even to the extent of withholding each other offline identities and contact details. Question 42 asks what are the most frequently used media when respondent contacts his/her partner. The data showed that most of the of the exclusively Internet-based group (84%) use instant messaging to contact their online lover. This is follow by sms text messaging (48%), telephone conversation (36%), online video call (12%), writing on his/her blog or social networking sites and email (8%). Overall, their modes of contact do not differ from their counterparts who move their online relationship offline.

To examine the possible difference of attitude towards online romance between those who are identified as having exclusive Internet-based relationships and those who are not, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the scores obtained by the two groups. There was indeed a significant difference in scores for the two groups of participants. Exclusively Internet-based group (M=19, SD= 5.54) appears less positive towards online romance when compared to their counterparts who do/did not confine their relationship online (M=21.70, SD=3.64), t = 2.17, p=.035 (2-tailed). The magnitude of differences in the means was moderate (mean difference= 2.7, 95% CI: -1.80 to 1.87, eta squared = .08). Exclusively Internet-based group scores less from the scale measuring attitude towards online romance because the five items that make up the scale are designed based on the premise of "conventional" online romance. In other words, online relationships that are predicted or assumed to gradually expand into the offline world. This finding supports the categorisation of these 25 cases as engaging/engaged in exclusively Internet- based online romance.

Logistic regression was conducted to explore how those identified as having / had exclusively Internet based relationship demographically differed from those having / had conventional online romance. In other words, what are the demographic factors that most likely to predict the likelihood of involving in exclusive Internet-based online romance. The model consists of seven independent variables (physical location, gender, age, origin/nationality, education level, occupation and relationship status). To carry out the test, I have collapsed all the variables into dichotomous categories. The full model containing all predictors was statistically significant, x^2(7, N=52) = 14.321, p< .05, the model as a whole explained between 24.1% (Cox and Snell R square) and 32.2% (Nagelkerke R square) of the variability, and correctly

classified 71.2% of cases compared to only 55.8% when the predictor variables are not included in the model.

As shown in the following table, the only independent variable that made a unique statistically significant contribution to the model was education (p=.029). The result suggests a negative correlation between education level and the likelihood of involving in exclusively Internet-based online romance. For those who have university degree and above, they are less likely to be found having/had exclusively Internet-based relationships than their counterparts who do not have the university degree.

Variables in the Equation							95% C.I.for EXP(B)	
	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	Lower	Upper
IP Address	.568	.919	.382	1	.537	1.764	.291	10.679
Relationship Status	-.174	.776	.050	1	.823	.840	.184	3.843
Gender	.624	.758	.677	1	.411	1.865	.422	8.240
Age	.099	1.078	.008	1	.927	1.105	.133	9.143
Origin	21.605	16683.892	.000	1	.999	2415980415.263	.000	.
Occupation Status	2.091	1.251	2.792	1	.095	8.091	.696	94.012
Education level	-2.228	1.022	4.752	1	.029	.108	.015	.799
Constant	-21.814	16683.892	.000	1	.999	.000		

After combining the scores for Question 14 and Question 15, Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was performed to explore the relationship between this variable and the types of online romance (exclusively online or not). The result showed no significant correlation between the two variables, r= -.107, n=134, p= .438. This is an unexpected finding as I previously assumed that those engaging/engaged in exclusively Internet-based relationship are more likely to agree with the two statements, hence have higher scores than their counterparts.

Chi-square test was later conducted to assess the relationship between the types of online romance and the belief in the existence of merely online meaningful relationships (Question 16). The result showed failure in meeting the minimum count assumption and no significant association between the two variables, x^2 (2, n=55) = 2.807, p= .246. However, the crosstabulation table below suggests that although not statistically significant, those engaging/engaged in exclusively Internet-based relationships seem to believe more in the existence of profound romantic relationships which are maintained exclusively online.

Types of Online Romance * Belief in Profound Online Relationship Crosstabulation

			Belief in Profound Online Relationship			
			Yes	No	Don't Know	Total
Types of Online Romance	Not in exclusively online relationship	Count	18	8	4	30
		% within Types of Online Romance	60.0%	26.7%	13.3%	100.0%
		% within Belief in Profound Online Relationship	47.4%	66.7%	80.0%	54.5%
		% of Total	32.7%	14.5%	7.3%	54.5%
	Exclusively online relationship	Count	20	4	1	25
		% within Types of Online Romance	80.0%	16.0%	4.0%	100.0%
		% within Belief in Profound Online Relationship	52.6%	33.3%	20.0%	45.5%
		% of Total	36.4%	7.3%	1.8%	45.5%
Total		Count	38	12	5	55
		% within Types of Online Romance	69.1%	21.8%	9.1%	100.0%
		% within Belief in Profound Online Relationship	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total	69.1%	21.8%	9.1%	100.0%

Factors of consideration when planning for face-to-face meeting

Question 41 is a multiple response question that asks participants about their considerations when planning for their first face-to-face meeting. For those who had met their partner in person or plan to do so in the future, the issue that concerns them the most is physical distance between the two (37.25%). This is follow by a lack of self-confidence that many worry that they may disappoint their partner (35.29%). 31.37% worry about what most Chinese online daters call the phenomenon of "jian guang si" which will be discussed in detail later. Equal percentage of participants (27.45%) concern about their personal safety and what if their lover do not appear to match with their imagination. 21.57% mind that their decision is/was not supported by their parents, other family members and friends. Same numbers of participants suffer from a feeling of disbelief and cast doubt on the authenticity of their online relationship.

Face-to-face meeting and online meeting places

Nearly two third of the participants have met with their online lover in person (62.07%). For the 22 participants who have not, 12 said that they may meet face-to-face with their lover in the future, 7 participants will never meet with their online

lover, the remaining are missing data. It could also happen due to the fact that the relationships have ended before they have the chance to meet face-to-face. Three participants did not answer this question.

Out of the 8 participants who met through relationships site, 5 have met in person with their online lover within 6 months of their first online contact. The other 3 participants considered meeting with their online lovers in the future. Out of the 44 who met through non-relationship sites, 29 have had face-to-face meeting with their partner. 9 participants said they may meet with their partner in the future, 6 participants said they will never consider meeting with their partner.

Frequency table showed that most of the participants (88.2%) met with their partner within 6 months since their first online liaison. The 4 participants who took longer than 6 months to meet with their lover offline met their lover through non-relationship sites. It takes two of them 1 year, one participant 18 months, another participant three years to finally met in person. T-test was conducted to compare the duration of online contacts prior to meeting in person between participants who met through relationship sites and those met through non-relationships sites. There was no significant difference between the two groups, t (30) = -.921, p= .364, but the magnitude of differences in the mean showed that for the group who met through relationship sites, their face-to-face meeting took place significantly more sooner than their counterparts, M=10.8 weeks (SD=9.52) compared to M=24.07 week (SD=31.56). The result failed to achieved statistical significant is probably due to the small sample size for the group met through relationship sites (N=5), as opposed to non-relationship sites (N=29).

Online meeting places and the significance of physical appearance

Most of the participants in this study met their lover through non-relationship sites. Put differently, the relationships are/were not deliberately sought after by the participants. Only 8 out of the 58 who have the experience of online romance met their lover through relationship sites, including social networking sites.

Previous research of dating websites showed that physical attractiveness remains important for users of online dating service (Whitty & Carr, 2006; Rosen et al. 2008). Due to the insufficient number of cases (less than 5 frequencies in one cell), I am not able to conduct valid Chi-Square test to assess the association between meeting place and the importance of partner's physical appearance. In other words, to verify the role of physical attractiveness for participants in this study who met through dating or relationship sites. However the frequency table showed that 75% of those met through relationship sites know how their partner looks liked during their first contact, compared to only 25% of those met in other online domains. Most relationship sites encourage members to upload their photos as it helps to improve the response rate. On the other hand, members of other websites such as discussion forum, online game and chat rooms do not see it necessary to upload their actual photos.

Participants were asked to rate their partner's physical appearance prior to their first face-to-face meeting. The only participant who rated his/her partner as very good looking met through relationship site. 37.5% of participants rated their partners as average looking, 25% above average, 25% good looking and one participant (12.5%) answered don't know to this question as his/her never imagine how the partner looks liked. The only participant who rated his/her partner's look as less than average met the lover through non-relationship site. 22.73% of this group of participants never imagine how their partner looks liked, same percentage of participants considered their partner good looking, 15.91% above average, and 36.36% described their partner as having average look. Overall, the two groups do not differ radically in terms of the self-assessment of their partner's look. However, this finding is not subject to statistical analysis, so we cannot be certain that whether this finding has statistical significance.

Out of the 36 participants who rated their partners before and after face-to-face meeting, most of them (55.56%) have not change their assessment of their partner's look after the meeting. 19.44% think their partner looks better than they initially thought, 25% are the opposite in which they have overestimated their partner's physical attractiveness.

Online misrepresentation

Nearly two third of the participants (60.34%) said that they never misrepresent themselves in any way when dealing with their partner. We cannot be certain that whether this is accurate response or bias due to social desirability factor. The area that subject to the most misrepresentation by participants in this study is relationship status (13.79%) and follow by income (8.62%) and physical appearance (8.62%). None of the participants misrepresent their age, an area most susceptible to misrepresentation. Four participants have misrepresented their personality when relating with their partner.

Areas of misrepresentation	Frequency	Percentage (out of 58)
Age	0	0
Physical Appearance	5	8.62
Interests / Hobbies	2	3.45
Personality	4	6.90
Education Level	1	1.72

Occupation	3	5.17
Income	5	8.62
Relationship Status	8	13.79
Never misrepresent in any way	35	60.34

For those who have misrepresented themselves, 41.18% said they gradually revealed/ are going to gradually reveal their actual identity to their partner after the relationship became/ becoming stable and closer, 35.29% answered may be yes to this question. Four participants answered no, and three of them said there is no need to be honest in cyberspace.

A Chi-Square test was conducted to explore the relationship between those who perceive online romance as a form of play and whether or not they misrepresent themselves online. The result showed that there is no association between the two variables (with Yates Continuity Correction), x^2 (1, n=52) = 2.36, p=.125, phi=- .260. Perceiving online romance as a form of play does not predisposed participants to misrepresent themselves online.

Levels of idealization and satisfaction

Most participants either perceive their lover as closes to their ideal partner or possess little attributes of their ideal partner. Only 5 participants perceive their online lover as their ideal partner.

Idealization in the online romance

	Frequency	Percentage
Is my ideal partner	5	8.62
Close to	21	36.21
Possess few attributes of my ideal partner	22	37.93
Far from it	6	10.34

Level of idealization was found to be strongly correlated to level of satisfaction, rho= .632, n=54, p < .0005, higher level of idealization is associated with higher level of satisfaction.

The relationship between level of idealization and intimacy level was investigated using Spearman rho. Contrary to my prior assumption, there was a moderate negative correlation between the two variables, rho = -.458, n= 54, p=.001. High level of intimacy associates with reduced level of idealization in the way participants perceive their online lover.

Same test was performed to assess the correlation between level of idealization and attitude towards online romance. Unexpected moderate negative correlation was found between the two variables, rho = -.475, n= 54, p <.0005. The more positive a participant's attitude towards online romance, the less likely the participant perceives his/her online lover as the ideal partner.

In terms of level of satisfaction, most of the participants are satisfied with their online romance (67.24%), only 25.87% of the participants are dissatisfied with their relationship.

Satisfaction in the online romance		
	Frequency	Percentage
Very satisfied	3	5.17
Satisfied	14	24.14
Moderately satisfied	22	37.93
Moderately dissatisfied	11	18.97
Dissatisfied	2	3.45
Very dissatisfied	2	3.45

The relationship between satisfaction and intimacy level was investigated using Spearman rho. Again to my surprise, there was a moderate negative correlation between the two variables, rho = -.463, n= 54, p=.001. Participants' high level of intimacy is associates with reduced level of satisfaction about their online romance.

Spearman rho was also used to test the relationship between satisfaction and attitude towards online romance. Again there was a moderate negative correlation between the two variable, rho = -.345, n=54, p= .011. The more positive a participant is towards online romance the lower the level of satisfaction his/her enjoys in the relationship.

The relationship between the two scales measuring intimacy level and attitude towards online romance was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity were met. The result showed a strong correlation between the two variables, r=.656, n= 54, p < .0005. Level of intimacy helps to explain 43.03% of the variance in respondents' attitude towards online romance.

Due to having only 8 participants who have met their partner through relationship sites in comparison to 44 who met through non-relationship sites, my initial intention to test the correlation between the online meeting places and the level of idealization and satisfaction become impossible as I would have violate the test assumption of minimum cases. Same problem happened for correlation test between the types of online romance and participants' level of satisfaction and idealization. More samples are needed to allow for statistical analysis.

Intimacy scale

I constructed the scale to measure the intimacy level achieved by couples by referring to Parks and Floyd's (1996) relational development scale designed to measure the online relationships formed by newsgroup members. The intimacy scale used in this study consists of seven items, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient reported of .796, showing a relatively good internal consistency.

In average, the participants score 25.94 (SD=6.78) out of 42 in the total. High scores signify greater level of intimacy. T-tests were conducted to compare the scores of females and males; participants who are in relationship and those who are not; students and non-student participants; participants from Mainland China and other locations; exclusively Internet-based online daters (Platonic online daters) and online daters who move their relationship offline; participants who met through relationship sites and those who are not; those who had met in person and those who have not. The results showed that there were no significant differences in the scores for all these groups.

Groups	Mean	Standard Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Males	25.32	7.39	-.625	52	.535
Females	26.48	6.29			
In relationships	25.83	5.38	.146 (equal variances not assumed)	25.18	.885
Not in relationships	26.16	8.98			
Students	25.77	5.89	.212	52	.833
Non-students	26.17	7.96			
Mainland China	26.17	7.06	-.678	52	.501
Other locations	24.17	3.76			
Platonic online daters	25.50	8.10	.539	51	.592
Non-Platonic online daters	26.52	5.60			
Met through relationship sites	26.29	5.02	-.015	48	.988
Other online meeting places	26.33	6.67			
Met face-to-face	26.86	5.54	1.20	51	.235
Without face-to-face meeting	24.50	8.71			

A two-way between groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of age and education on level of intimacy. Subjects were divided into two age groups, 18 to 25, 26 and above; and three education levels, below university degree, university degree and postgraduate qualification. The interaction effect between age and education group was not statistically significance, $F (2, 48) = .92$, p= .405. The main effect for both age, $F (1, 48) = .001$, p= .976 and education $F (2, 48) = .731$, p=.487 were also not statistically significance. In other words, the two age groups and three education groups do not differ in terms of level of intimacy achieved with their online lover. There was also no significant difference in the effect of education on intimacy scores for the two age groups.

The 7 items of the intimacy scale were subject to principal component analysis (PCA). Prior to the test, the suitability of data for factor analysis was assessed. Correlation Matrix showed that most have coefficients of 0.3 and above. The Kaiser-Meyer-Oklin value was .737, exceeding the recommended value of .6 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance. However the sample size of 54 is considered too small for factor analysis (Pallant, 2007). Nevertheless, I proceed with the analysis as my main objective is to explore the relationships among the variables. However, it is important to note that with this small sample the factors that emerge may not be reliable (Bryman and Cramer, 2009).

The PCA extracted 3 components with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 46.627%, 14.595%, 14.331% of the variance respectively. An inspection of the scree plot suggests two components instead. This is supported by Pattern Matrix that showed Component 3 consists only one item with coefficient above .3. The two-component solution explained 61.221% of the variance collectively. Oblimin rotation was performed for interpretation. Both components showing a number of strong loadings (.4 and above), and most variables (except one) loading substantially on only one component. Component 1 was labelled as mutual understanding and dependence. It includes the breadth and depth of the communication which result in mutual understanding and dependence. Component 2 labelled as connectedness, includes the subjective feeling connection and network of connection that can be measured by number of mutual friends. The two components are positively correlated at .317.

	Component Matrix		Pattern Matrix		Structure Matrix	
	Component		Component		Component	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
Interdependent, have great influence on each other	.826	-.378	**.948**	-.171	.894	.129
Know him/her very well	.844	-.212	**.869**	.003	.870	.278
Variety of communications topics	.698	-.216	**.741**	-.039	.729	.196
We can read each other minds	.812	.039	**.697**	.251	.777	.472
Open and direct communication, sharing problems and intimate details	.676	.254	.455	.436	.592	.580

Emotionally distant	.454	.737	-.017	**.871**	.258	.865
No mutual friends in online or offline world	.243	.423	-.025	**.495**	.132	.487

Online self-disclosure

Question 51 asks about participants' experience of online self-disclosure and whether they feel empowered to reveal themselves online. 15 participants indeed feel more confident to reveal themselves in cyberspace and often share their private details and secrets with their lover online. 20 participants although feel more confident in expressing themselves online compared to the offline world, they nevertheless seldom disclose their secrets and private details to their online lover. 14 participants do not particularly feel empower online but nonetheless has occasionally shared their private details with their online lovers. 4 participants do not feel empower online and said they will never reveal their private information and secrets to their online lover.

Chi-square tests were conducted to explore the correlation if any between various demographic groups and whether they often or rarely/never self-disclose online. The results showed that none of the groups differed significantly in their likelihood for self-revelation online. In other words, there are no correlations between gender, relationship status, age, education level, participants' location, occupation status and the likelihood of self-disclosure online (Chi-square tests for age groups failed to meet the assumption of minimum expected cell frequency). Online meeting places and types of online romance also have no significant correlation with the tendency of online self-disclosure.

Groups	**N**	**df**	**Chi-Square X^2** (Yates Continuity Correction, except relationship status)	**P** **Sig. (2-tailed)**
Gender	53	1	.188	.665
Relationships status	53	2	.467	.792
Age groups*	53	1	.734	.392
Education	53	1	1.131	.288
IP address	50	1	.099	.753
Students vs Non-students	53	1	.120	.729
Platonic vs Non-Platonic love	53	1	.000	1.000
Online meeting places	50	1	.007	.933

For those who did disclose themselves online with their lover, the act of self-revelation happened from 1 week up to 1 year after couples first met online. Mean is 14.68 weeks (SD=15.94) with the median of 11 weeks and mode is three months (12.9 weeks). Series of independent-samples t-test were conducted to compare the speed of online self-disclosure between various demographic groups, initial online meeting places and types of online romance. As seen from the following table, there were no significant differences in scores for the groups compared here.

Groups	Mean	Standard Deviation	df	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male	13.17	16.19	38	-.536	.595
Female	15.91	16.00			
In relationships	17.03	17.06	38	-1.289	.205
Not in relationships	10.29	13.05			
18-25	11.73	13.58	38	-1.625	.112
26 and above	20.14	18.92			
Mainland China	15.43	16.27	38	-1.057	.297
Other locations	5.33	6.66			
Met through relationship sites	6.00	6.40	38	-.1.313	.197
Other online meeting places	15.91	16.55			
Non-Platonic online daters	14.23	16.50	38	-.995	.847
Platonic online daters	15.22	15.68			

A one-way between groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of education level on the speed of online self-disclosure. Participants were divided into three groups according to their education level (below university degree, university degree and postgraduate). There was no statistically significant difference among these three groups, $F (2, 37) = .515$, p= .602.

The relationship between intimacy scores and the speed of online self-disclosure was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. There was a weak negative correlation between the two variables, r= -.28, n=40 which however do not proven to be statistically significance, p= .08.

Online infidelity and sexual interactions

Question 6 listed six online behaviours for participants to choose which of these behaviours constitute the act of infidelity. Among the list, having cybersex with other is considered by most (72.39%) as betrayal. This is follow by developing emotional attachment (56.72%) with others met online. Flirting with other online is seen by 45.52% of participants as cheating. Whilst 48.51% considered posting personal ad looking for partner to engage in cyber-marriage or online cohabitation is being unfaithful, only 28.36% consider posting personal ad for friendship as cheating. 23.13% rated visiting pornographic website as betrayal. In overall, 17.91% of participants considered all of the above behaviours as infidelity, in opposition to 10.45% who classified none of the above as betrayal.

Chi-square test (with Yates Continuity Correction) indicated statistically significance association exists between females and the tendency to perceive most of the online acts as betrayal except visiting pornographic sites. In other words, men in overall seem more tolerate with online infidelity than women. Although the Chi-square test conducted has failed to meet the required cut-off level of p=<.05, x^2 (2, n=133) = 5.704, p=.058, Cramer's V=.207, it is interesting to note that only 10.24% male participants considered all of these as betrayal, compared to 21.2% of females; and 16.7% of the former classified none of these behaviours as constituting infidelity, while only 5.9% of the latter think so.

	Continuity Correction	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	df	Phi	Female	Male
Developing emotional attachment	6.390	.011	1	-.235	65.9%	41.7%
Flirting	5.573	.018	1	-.220	54.1%	31.3%
Cybersex	5.009	.025	1	-.212	80.0%	60.4%
Visit porno sites	1.318	.251	1	-.118	27.1%	16.7%
Friendship ads	6.168	.013	1	-.233	36.5%	14.6%
Cyber-marriage or online cohabitation ads	8.263	.004	1	-.265	58.8%	31.3%

Chi-square tests were also performed to explore the association between perceiving these online acts as betrayal and other demographic profiles, such as relationship status, education level, origin and physical location. The results showed no association at all whether participants are single, in relationship, married / cohabitation, with or without university degree, or postgraduate qualification, from Mainland China or other Chinese societies, physically residing in China or in the UK with the likelihood to perceive any of these acts as betrayal. However, in terms of age groups and the act of placing friendship ads online, Chi-square test showed that X^2 (1, n=133) = 4.255, p= .039, phi=.197. Older age group (26 and above) is less likely to perceive the act of placing friendship ad online as cheating. Statistically

significant associations also exist between perceiving most of these online acts as cheating and occupation status, except visiting pornographic sites and placing online friendship acts. Like females, students seem to have stricter standard of faithfulness compared to non-students.

	Continuity Correction	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	df	Phi	Students	Non-students
Developing emotional attachment	4.959	.026	1	-.210	63.8%	41%
Flirting	5.961	.015	1	-.228	53.2%	28.2%
Cybersex	8.861	.003	1	-.277	80.9%	53.8%
Visit porno sites	2.616	.106	1	-.160	27.7%	12.8%
Friendship ads	2.359	.125	1	-.151	33%	17.9%
Cyber-marriage or online cohabitation ads	4.489	.034	1	-.200	55.3%	33.3%

Question 54 is designed to measure participants' experience of online infidelity. 6 out of 58 participants (11.32%) answered yes to the question of "have you ever engaged in online romance with other while having a committed relationship with another person in the actual world". Two third of the participants (67.24%) answered no, another 6 participants have no such experience but have had the experience of having more than one online lover at a time. Remaining participants chose no reply for this question. Due to having only 6 participants admitted to have the experience of online infidelity, all Chi-square tests conducted to explore the relationships between this act of self-confessed online infidelity and demographic profiles have violated the assumption of "minimum expected cell frequency". If ignore the violation of assumption, only age group achieved statistically significant association. It seems that older age group (26 and above) are more likely than the 18-25 age group to confess their experiences of online infidelity both in terms of having secondary relationship online and multiple online lovers.

Groups	Df	Chi-Square X^2	P Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender	3	1.464	.691
Relationships status	3	4.924	.177
Age groups	3	9.499	.023
Education	3	1.335	.721
Locations	3	7.537	.057

Question 53 asks "do you have any sexual interaction with your online partner", 24 participants (41.38%) reported have had sexual interactions with their online lover. Equal numbers of participants reported to have non-sexual online relationships. 6 participants chose "no comment" as their answer for this question, the remaining 4 participants did not respond to the question. The sexual relationship reported by participants here referred mostly exclusively to physical offline sexual activities (91.67%). Only one participant reported to had cybersex with his lover and another participant experienced both online and offline sexual interactions with his lover. Among the 24 who have non-sexual relationship, 7 do not deny the possibility of developing sexual liaison with their online lover in the future. The remaining either will never have any sexual interaction with their online lover or the relationship has ended in the past before it becomes sexual.

To explore the difference between various demographic groups and the likelihood of self-confess in sexual involvements, Chi-square tests have been conducted to compare gender, age group, country of origin, physical location, education level, occupation and relationship status. The results showed that I did not meet the assumption of "minimum expected cell frequency" in all these tests (even though I have recoded the data into fewer categories). Even if the assumption is met, none of the tests showed statistically significant difference between the groups. However, it is worthy to note that those residing in the UK do appear to be more likely to confess about their sexual involvements with their online lover than their counterparts living in China. The former seem more likely to be sexually engaged with their online lover than the latter (48% compared to 38.5%). For those without sexual interaction, 20% of those residing in the UK said they may develop sexual interaction with their lover in the future, compared to only 7.7% of those living in China. 38.5% of them also said they will never have any sexual relationship with their lover compared to 28% of the UK counterparts. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the results are not statistically proven to be significant.

Physical Location * Sexual Interactions Crosstabulation

			Sexual Interactions				Total
			Yes	No, maybe in the future	No, will never have it	No comment	
Physical Location	UK	Count	12	5	7	1	25
		% within Physical Location	48.0%	20.0%	28.0%	4.0%	100.0%
		% within Sexual Interactions	54.5%	71.4%	41.2%	20.0%	49.0%
		% of Total	23.5%	9.8%	13.7%	2.0%	49.0%
	China	Count	10	2	10	4	26
		% within Physical Location	38.5%	7.7%	38.5%	15.4%	100.0%
		% within Sexual Interactions	45.5%	28.6%	58.8%	80.0%	51.0%
		% of Total	19.6%	3.9%	19.6%	7.8%	51.0%

Total	Count	22	7	17	5	51
	% within Physical Location	43.1%	13.7%	33.3%	9.8%	100.0%
	% within Sexual Interactions	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	43.1%	13.7%	33.3%	9.8%	100.0%

Chi-square test was also conducted to explore the association between face-to-face meeting and sexual involvements with online lover. Although the result showed failure in meeting the minimum frequency assumption, but the association between face-to-face meeting and reported sexual interactions seem apparent. Almost all who reported to have sexual relationship with their online lover have met in person, except for one participant.

Sexual Interactions * Face-to-Face Meeting Crosstabulation

				FTF Meeting		
				Yes	No	Total
Sexual Interactions	Yes	Count		23	1	24
		% within Sexual Interactions		95.8%	4.2%	100.0%
		% within FTF Meeting		63.9%	5.6%	44.4%
		% of Total		42.6%	1.9%	44.4%
	No	Count		8	16	24
		% within Sexual Interactions		33.3%	66.7%	100.0%
		% within FTF Meeting		22.2%	88.9%	44.4%
		% of Total		14.8%	29.6%	44.4%
	No comment	Count		5	1	6
		% within Sexual Interactions		83.3%	16.7%	100.0%
		% within FTF Meeting		13.9%	5.6%	11.1%
		% of Total		9.3%	1.9%	11.1%
Total		Count		36	18	54
		% within Sexual Interactions		66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
		% within FTF Meeting		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
		% of Total		66.7%	33.3%	100.0%

Experience of cyber-marriage marriage and/or online cohabitation (Q18-Q23)

Out of 134 participants only 7 participants completed this session. 5 participants have personally experienced cyber-marriage, 1 online cohabitation, another participant had both of these experiences. Nevertheless, above half of the participants (56.7%) though not personally involve, knew about these online practices, compared to 38.1% who never heard of neither cyber-marriage nor online-cohabitation.

In average, each participant have 2 of these experiences (SD=1.16), most of them (4 participants) met their "spouse" online, one participant met her online spouse in the actual world, another two participants met their "spouse" online as well as offline. For those who met their spouse online, half of them met through online game world, the other half through Tianya discussion forum.

Among the reasons given for participating in these activities are just for fun, to strengthen the relationship, showing commitment to each other and enjoying the benefits provided exclusively to the married couples in the online game world. In terms of the meanings of these online experiences, two participants feel empowered, another two feel the opposite. It does not mean anything other than fun for one participant. Due to the short answers provided by the participants, I could not elaborate in further detail.

As a result of the limited cases I am not able to conducted valid chi-square tests to explore the demographic makeup of those engaged in these activities. The following table only showed the demographic details of those 7 participants who have involved in these online activities. Greater sample size is needed for further analysis.

Demographic details	Freq
Male	3
Female	4
Non-student	5
Student	2
Not in relationship	2
In relationship	5
Below university degree	1
University degree and above	6
18-25	5
26 and above	2

I nevertheless conducted series of independent-samples T-tests to compare the numbers of such experiences with gender, relationship status, education, age and occupation status. There were no significant differences for these groups, except for gender. Mean for males is 3 (SD=1), females (M=1.25, SD=0.5); t (5) = 3.09, p=.027. The magnitude of difference, or effect size was large with eta squared =0.6563. The rest of the test results are showed in the following table.

Groups	Mean	Standard Deviation	df	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
In relationships	2	1.225	5	0	1
Not in relationships	2	1.414			
18-25	1.80	0.837	1.13	-.453(equal variance not assumed)	0.722
26 and above	2.50	2.121			
Non-student	2.20	1.304	5	0.692	0.52
Student	1.50	0.707			
Below university degree	2	-	5	0	1
University degree and above	2	1.265			

Summary of findings

1. 43.3% of participants have had the experience of online romance. Out of the 58 participants who have the experience of online romance, only 13 is currently engaging in an ongoing online relationship, 45 participants are referring to their past experience of online relationship when answering the questions. 75.86% of them met their online lover through non-relationship sites.

2. Significant percentage of the participants (79.1%) knew someone who falls in love with another met online. There appear to be no peer influence at work here, as knowing someone who has had an online romance is not associated with personal experience of online romance.

3. 56.3% of those physically in China have experienced online romance, significantly higher than those currently residing in the UK (35.4%).

4. Result showed that online romance could potentially happen to anyone as those who reported to have this experience are not different demographically from those without the experience.

5. Most participants' partner comes from within the same country.

6. For current online daters, the duration of their relationship ranges from less than 2 weeks to 10 years (M= 83.08 weeks, SD= 148.68). For those whose online relationship have ended, the relationships lasted from few days to 3 years (M=29.34, SD=37.80), with the mode of 3 months.

7. Most of the participants (81.03%) rely on instant messaging as their regular

mode of contact; this is follow by text messaging on mobile phone (48.28%) and phone conversation (37.93%).

8. 42.5% of participants perceive online romance as just a form of play, a dream like encounter in which happiness and enjoyment are the priorities. 41% understand online romance as an effective means to gain solace and emotional support.

9. Students (48.9%) seem to be more likely than non-students (28.2%) to perceive online romance as a dream like form of play. Those residing in China tend to view online romance as a source of emotional support and solace, whereas their UK counterparts are more likely to conceive the relationship online as a form of play.

10. 56.7% of the participants conceived online romance as a nonsexual relationship in which the couple ideally becoming each other soul mate. Only 23.9% defined successful online romance as relationship that cumulating in marriage and long-term courtship in the offline world.

11. A significant correlation between students and perception of ideal online romance as mere emotional relationship. No significant difference was found for non-students.

12. A strong association between participants in courtship and single with emphasis only on the emotional dimension when define a successful online romance. This is in opposite to the participants who are married or in cohabitation in which they are slightly more likely to emphasize both emotional and sexual dimensions.

13. Overall, participants in this study have relatively positive attitude towards online romance.

14. Those with personal experience of an online romance are more positive in their attitudes towards online romance than those without the experience.

15. Married or cohabitating participants have more favourable attitude towards online romance than those in relationship and single.

16. Factors analysis on the scale measuring attitude towards online romance yield two components. Component 1 was labelled as increased agency, describing how online relationships could empower participants in their romantic pursuit. Component 2 labelled as negative affect and the desire to disprove the bias perceptions that online daters are likely to be lonely losers and/or casual daters.

17. 61.94% agreed with the statement "Online and offline are two distinct and independent realms, one should not confuse between the two".

18. 76.87% agreed with the statement "Confusing online with offline life is likely to have negative ramifications not only to oneself, but also others, such

as partners, family members and friends".

19. Older age group (26 and above) and non-students are more likely to disagree with the ideas that online and offline are two distinct independent worlds, and confusing the two would have negative consequences.

20. 64.2% of participants think it is possible to have genuine, profound and fulfilling romantic relationship with someone which is maintained exclusively online. Believing in the existence of this type of online relationships is however not related to whether the participants perceive online and offline world as two distinct independent worlds.

21. 25 participants in this study are identified as Platonic online daters who engaged/ engaging in exclusively Internet-based relationships. They appear less positive towards online romance when compared to their counterparts who do/did not confine their relationship online.

22. Those who have university degree and above are less likely to be found having/had exclusively Internet-based relationships than their counterparts who do not have university degree qualification.

23. When compared to non-Platonic online daters, Platonic online daters do not appear to agree more with the idea that online and offline are two distinct independent worlds, and confusing the two would have negative consequences. They only marginally believe more in the existence of profound romantic relationships which are maintained exclusively online.

24. Physical distance, lack of self-confidence and the inevitable fate of "jian guang si" are most concerned factors when participants planning for their first face-to-face meeting.

25. Nearly two third of the participants have met with their online lover in person (62.07%). Most of the participants (88.2%) met with their partner within 6 months since their first online liaison. Although not statistically significance, those who met through relationship sites tend to have face-to-face meeting sooner than their counterparts who met in other online platforms.

26. Physical appearance of the lover seems to have a greater impact for those who met through relationship sites than their counterparts who met in other online platforms.

27. Nearly two third of the participants (60.34%) said that they never misrepresent themselves in any way when dealing with their partner.

28. Perceiving online romance as a form of play does not predisposed participants to misrepresent themselves online.

29. Most participants either perceive their lover as closes to their ideal partner or possess little attributes of their ideal partner.

30. High level of intimacy associates with reduced level of idealization in the way participants perceive their online lover.

31. The more positive a participant's attitude towards online romance, the less likely the participant perceives his/her online lover as the ideal partner.

32. Most of the participants (67.24%) are satisfied with their online romance.

33. Level of idealization was found to be strongly correlated to level of satisfaction.

34. Participants' high level of intimacy is associates with reduced level of satisfaction about their online romance.

35. The more positive a participant is towards online romance the lower the level of satisfaction his/her enjoys in the relationship.

36. There is a strong correlation between the two scales measuring intimacy level and attitude towards online romance.

37. In average, participants score 25.94 (SD=6.78) out of the total 42 in the scale measuring online intimacy. High scores signify greater level of intimacy.

38. Intimacy level is not associated in any way with participants' demographic profiles, types of online romance, initial online meeting places and whether or not participants have met in person.

39. Factors analysis on the scale measuring participants' intimacy level yield two components. Component 1 was labelled as mutual understanding and dependence. It includes the breadth and depth of the communication which result in mutual understanding and dependence. Component 2 labelled as connectedness, includes the subjective feeling connection and network of connection that can be measured by number of mutual friends.

40. Most participants engaged in the acts of self-disclosure online, but not everyone feel empowered and confident to share their private details and secrets online with their lovers.

41. For those who did disclose themselves online with their lover, the act of self-revelation happened from 1 week up to 1 year after couples first met online. Mean is 14.68 weeks (SD=15.94) with the median of 11 weeks and mode is three months (12.9 weeks).

42. The acts of self-revelation and the speed of online self-disclosure are not in any way associated with participants' demographic profiles, initial online meeting places and types of online romance.

43. Having cybersex with other is considered by most (72.39%) as cheating. This is follow by developing emotional attachment (56.72%) with others met

online; posting personal ad looking for partner to engage in cyber-marriage or online cohabitation (48.51%); flirting with other online (45.52%); posting personal ad for friendship as cheating (28.36%); visiting pornographic website (23.13%).

44. Men in overall seem more tolerate with online infidelity than women.

45. Older age group (26 and above) is less likely to perceive the act of placing friendship ad online as cheating.

46. Like females, students seem to have stricter standard of faithfulness compared to non-students. Only visiting pornographic sites and placing online friendship acts failed to achieve statistically significant association.

47. 11.32% of participants admitted to have engaged in online romance with other while having a committed relationship with another person in the actual world. Equal numbers of participants have no such experience but have had the experience of having more than one online lover at a time.

48. 41.38% of participant reported have had sexual interactions with their online lover. The sexual relationship reported by participants here referred mostly exclusively to physical offline sexual activities (91.67%). Only two males participants reported to had cybersex with their lover.

49. Although not statistically significance, those residing in the UK appear to be more likely to confess about their sexual involvements with their online lover than their counterparts living in China.

50. Only 7 participants (5.2%) have personally experienced cyber-marriage and/or online cohabitation. However, above half of the participants (56.7%) though not personally involve, knew about these online practices.

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