

# Sexual Assertiveness of Chinese Female College Students: A Qualitative Study

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**Abstract:** In the context of Chinese culture, women's sexual autonomy is essential but frequently overlooked. This study used a qualitative descriptive approach with a feminist lens to explore the sexual assertiveness of Chinese female college students. Data were collected from July 2020 to December 2020 through in-depth interviews with 20 female college students aged 18-24 years from 3 colleges in the southwest of China. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Four categories emerged from data analysis.

*Category 1: Being sexually assertive* (Sub-categories: Able to express sexual desire, Able to refuse unwanted sex, Able to inquire partner's sexual history, Able to negotiate condom use). *Category 2: Experiences of being sexually assertive* (Sub-categories: Ambivalence towards sexual expression, Harmless compromise on unwanted sex, Reassurance of fidelity, Consensus using condoms). *Category 3: Supports for enabling sexually assertive* (Sub-categories: Having sexual knowledge, Receiving parental sexual protection messages, Gaining lessons from unpleasant experience, Media exposure). *Category 4: Constraints of being sexually assertive* (Sub-categories: Endorsement of the sexual double standard, Concerns about partner's thoughts, Excessive alcohol drinking).

The findings are helpful for healthcare providers, including nurses, to understand the situation of sexual assertiveness among Chinese female college students. Findings also contribute to promoting sexual health interventions to enhance sexual assertiveness, including promoting comprehensive sexuality education, sexual protection messages communication with parents, decreasing anticipated partner's negative thoughts and reaction, coping with excessive alcohol drinking, and transformation of the sexual double standard.

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## Introduction

Sexual assertiveness (SA) has been recognized as an essential construct in the context of human sexuality.<sup>1</sup> It acts as a protective factor against sexual victimization, unwanted pregnancies, and STDs.<sup>1</sup> It is also a critical concept for understanding the sexual autonomy of females about their achievement of sexual satisfaction in a sexual relationship.<sup>2</sup>

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With its foundation of Confucianism, Traditional Chinese culture is regarded as a collectivist culture wherein interpersonal harmony

is highly desired while individual desires are secondary.<sup>3</sup> Under such a context with strict doctrines about unequal gender stratification and distribution of power and resources, females should be modest and submissive. In contrast, the male was expected to be responsible and gentlemanlike.<sup>4</sup> In sexual relationships, females are typically portrayed as passive, submissive, and sexually innocent.<sup>2, 4, 5</sup> Moreover, virginity and sexual restrictions are mainly imposed on females,<sup>6</sup> and they should also maintain fidelity toward their husbands.<sup>4</sup> These gender norms can contribute to marked power disparity within relationships, increasing vulnerability to coerced or forced sex.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, China's rapid socioeconomic transition and opening-up to the outside world have impacted the lives of young people over the past decades.<sup>5</sup> The internet and social media exposed different social norms and values that had influenced young people's sexual attitudes and behaviors.<sup>4</sup> Compared with the previous time, contemporary young people in China hold a more accepting attitude toward premarital sex and homosexuality.<sup>5</sup>

As data shown by China Statistical Yearbook 2020, more than 30.31 million college students in China. Among them, female college students accounted for 52.04%, more than 15 million.<sup>8</sup> Due to the lack of parental supervision and the reduction in study pressure, the college years become the time for commencing sexual activity.<sup>9</sup> Situated within the circumstance constantly impacted by different norms and values, how current Chinese female college students perform in sexual-related situations is of concern.

## Review of Literature

The recognition of the importance of sexual assertiveness in human sexuality has increased research interest since the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The concept of sexual assertiveness was first defined and conceptualized by Liss-Levinsohn et al., who stated that sexual assertiveness is the ability to

communicate clearly and openly about one's sexual needs and accept or refuse advances.<sup>10</sup> After decades of development, sexual assertiveness rests based on human rights to autonomy has become more accepted.<sup>11</sup> Ward et al.,<sup>12</sup> and Fletcher et al.<sup>13</sup> clarified that sexual assertiveness could be conceptualized as identifying one's sexual needs, wants, and desires and communicating these to a sexual partner. Sexual assertiveness is the ability to express one's feelings and will in a situation of unwanted sexual contact.<sup>14</sup>

Most previous studies related to sexual assertiveness focused on exploring the level and influencing factors using quantitative methods.<sup>1</sup> Regarding the qualitative lens, López-Alvarado et al. explored the beliefs, views, and ideas about sexual assertiveness in Latino emerging adult females.<sup>15</sup> The findings highlighted the influence of gender role schemata on sexual assertiveness in the Latin American culture, in which taking the initiative towards sexual intercourse is seen as a "male duty." Also, focusing on Latino culture, another study offered insights into perspectives on condom use assertiveness.<sup>16</sup> The findings showed that although participants acknowledged the influence of *marianismo* on women's behaviors, many women reported that they could perform sexually assertively with condom use to keep healthy.<sup>16</sup> Another study focused on a sample of American college students,<sup>17</sup> and investigated the effects on students' levels of sexual assertiveness as one of the results of taking a course on this. Participants proclaimed that the relationship with their partner impacted their sexual assertiveness except for the course's influence. If the partner they dated was comfortable with or had a long and stable relationship, they are more sexually assertive.<sup>17</sup>

As to the influencing factors, a study reviewed that sexual assertiveness seems to be the outcome of developmental processes, and it is a result of a combination of several aspects.<sup>1</sup> Among these, cultural determination is vital. In general, most cultures differ in terms of the social expectations for males and females concerning their sexual

manners.<sup>18</sup> In Asia and the Pacific region, female virginity until marriage is still highly valued in most countries, contributing to the stigma surrounding the sexual activity of young unmarried women.<sup>7</sup> In addition, studies conducted in Viet Nam and Thailand showed that traditional gender roles impact young women's ability to negotiate safe and consensual sex, including requesting condom use or refusing unwanted sex.<sup>7</sup>

In China, the traditional gender roles defined men as the powerful and controlling gender, and a woman's fate was determined by her father, husband, and son.<sup>19</sup> Despite the substantial changes in Chinese society in the last few decades, gender equality has improved, particularly in education and the workplace. However, traditional gender role expectations still exist when it comes to sexual relationships.<sup>19</sup> In a recent study that examined the association between female sexual assertiveness and sexual satisfaction with a sample of Hong Kong Chinese couples, women reported more conservative behaviors related to female sexual initiation and refusal than their partners.<sup>2</sup> It is consistent with stereotyped gender expectations of men's active and women's passive roles in sexual behavior in the Chinese context.<sup>2</sup>

A feminist perspective could add conceptual richness to this gender and sexuality topic when considering the gender role expectations about sexual manners. Feminist theory examines women's experiences of gender inequality, considering the influence of power, privilege, oppression, and inequities within gendered institutions.<sup>20</sup> According to feminist scholars, gender inequality is socially and culturally constructed and can be changed.<sup>21</sup> Since there are stereotyped gender expectations of women and men's roles in sexual relationships in the Chinese context, using a feminist perspective lens in this study helped understand how female college students experienced sexual assertiveness and how their sexuality is constructed within Chinese culture.

There has been emerging sexuality research in China, and sexual minority groups, sexual and reproductive health knowledge, and adolescent behaviors were focused.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, evidence

about female sexual autonomy in heterosexual relationships is still limited. In addition, studies on sexually-related topics using qualitative approaches are scarce, as open discussion about sex in mainland China is still taboo. Given that sexual assertiveness involves the complex psychological process of making decisions in the dilemma of sexual situations, using a qualitative method might yield more rich information about the perception and experience of sexual assertiveness among the targeted population.

Through reviewing previous studies, to our knowledge, no study has explored sexual assertiveness among Chinese female college students from a qualitative lens. This population group is one of the representatives of the new generation situated in Chinese patriarchal society while undergoing a social-economic transformation. Understanding their perception and how they experience sexual situations could offer a glimpse of current young females' sexual agency in China.

## **Study Aim**

To explore Chinese female college students' perceptions of sexual assertiveness and their experience of being sexually assertive

## **Methods**

**Study design:** This study reports the findings of a qualitative descriptive approach employed as part of a larger project which utilized a convergent mixed-method design to explore the situation of sexual assertiveness among Chinese female college students. The qualitative descriptive method offers a comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events.<sup>23</sup> It could answer essential questions about the nature or shape of phenomena that focus on discovering the nature of the specific events under study through a "straight description."<sup>23</sup> This approach was well suited in this study to explore Chinese female college students' perceptions and experiences regarding sexual assertiveness.

**Study setting and participants:** This study was conducted in three government colleges in a province of southwest China. Purposive and snowball sampling was used to recruit informants from targeted colleges. The inclusion criteria of the participants were: 1) Chinese nationality; 2) enrolled as full-time undergraduate students studying in Chinese colleges during the period of data collection; 3) aged between 18–24 years old; 4) female students who identify themselves as having a heterosexual orientation; 5) once had or currently have a boyfriend, and 6) willing to share their experience of sexual assertiveness. The sample size was reached when data saturation occurred, and no new information was generated.

**Ethical Considerations:** Study approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee, Faculty of Nursing, Chiang Mai University (study code: 2020-FULL009). All participants were informed about the purpose, process, methods of this research, and possible risks and benefits to participating in this research. Participants had opportunities to ask questions, refuse questions, and withdraw study participation at any time. All participants signed a volunteer research agreement form before participation and permitted audio-recording of interviews. Code numbers and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

**Data collection:** Data were collected between July 2020 to December 2020 by the principal investigator (PI), who received skills training in qualitative data collection and analysis. Coordinators who manage students' affairs from each college were in charge of recruitment advertisement distribution. The advertisement of recruiting interviewees went to the online group of students in each setting. The inclusion criteria of this study were clarified on the recruitment advertisements, followed by PI's *Wechat* QR codes. Female college students willing to join the interview could scan the QR codes and add friends with PI through *WeChat*. Then PI communicated with participants and identified the convenient time and place to conduct the interviews face to face. Safety, privacy, comfort, and convenience were considered in selecting the interview location: 17 were conducted in colleges, three were at the local public café chosen by the participants. Interview times ranged from 60–120 minutes, and interviews were conducted until no new information was forthcoming. Participants were given opportunities to ask questions or provide additional information at the end of the interview. An interview guide was used to provide direction to PI to conduct the in-depth interview with the participants. The guide consisted of five open-ended questions generated from a literature review (see Table 1).

**Table 1** Interview guideline

**Item Questions**

- 1 Being a Chinese female college student, how do you think about being sexually assertive?
- 2 Have you ever have wanted sex with your partner?
  - a If so, who begins the sexual initiation? Why and how you or your partner initiate sex? Then what happened?
  - b Have you ever ask your partner about his sexual history? If so, why and how do you ask him? Then what happened?
  - c Have you ever express using condom? If so, why and how do you express that? Then what happened?
- 3 Have you ever experienced unwanted sex with your partner?
  - a If so, have you refused that? And why?
  - b How do you refuse the unwanted sex? Then what happened?
  - c Have you ever refused to have sex with your partner if he refuses to use a condom? Then what happened?
- 4 Being Chinese female college student, what do you think can enable you to be sexually assertive?
- 5 Being Chinese female college student, what are the obstacles to being sexually assertive?

**Data analysis:** Reflexive thematic analysis captured patterns (“themes”) across the datasets.<sup>24</sup> This approach aims to provide a coherent and compelling interpretation of the data and offers flexibility and variability in theoretical and analytic scope.<sup>24</sup> The analysis process started from data familiarization, which involves reading and rereading data, “noticing” interesting features, making notes, and attaching pithy and clear labels to “chunks” of data. Similar codes were collated with the associated data into coherent clusters about a particular aspect of the dataset. Theme mapping was used to organize the codes, explore potential themes and their relationships, all relevant to the research question. Finally, the themes were revised and defined. The translated transcripts were verified by a bilingual expert, then reviewed by the research supervisor. An analytical map was used to address to answer the “what,” “how” and “why” regarding the experience of sexual assertiveness among participants. Guided by the perspective of the feminist lens, when analyzing why participants hold and exhibit some degree of compromised attitudes and behaviors in sexual situations which need sexual assertiveness, the influence of power and inequities within gendered context was considered.

**Table 2** Participants’ characteristics (N = 20)

Characteristics	Number
Age(years) (mean = 20.9, SD=1.71, Range = 18–24 years)	
18–20	8
21–24	12
Class ranking	
Freshman	3
Sophomore	5
Junior	8
Senior (Fourth year)	3
Senior (Fifth year)	1
Current relationship status	
Single	5
In a committed dating relationship	15

**Rigor and Trustworthiness:** The strategies of trustworthiness explained by Lincoln and Guba were used in this study.<sup>25</sup> *Credibility* was achieved through a reflexive journal during the study to identify any influential preconceptions or ideas. Member checking was conducted through three participants in this study. *Transferability* was established by providing a thick description of data relevant to the background and participants. *Dependability* and *confirmability* were demonstrated through an audit trail. A research supervisor was then able to evaluate the processes and products of the study to decide whether the data supported the findings, interpretations, and conclusions.

**Quality Appraisal:** We followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies (COREQ) to report the quality of this study.<sup>26</sup>

## Findings

A total of 20 participants were included. Their mean age was  $20.9 \pm 1.71$  years old, eight of the participants were junior, 15 were in a committed dating relationship for their current relationship status, and half had sex intercourse (see **Table 2**). Findings were divided into four categories as described below and in **Table 3**:

**Table 2** Participants' characteristics (N = 20) (Cont.)

Characteristics	Number
Major	
Nursing	4
Preventive medicine	3
Chinese education	2
Health laboratory technology	2
Medicine	2
Food nutrition and detection	1
Labor and social security	1
Drug quality and safety	1
Foreign language	1
Finance	1
Hospitality administration and management	1
Insurance	1
Whether having sex intercourse	
Yes	10
No	10

**Table 3** Categories and sub-categories arising from the data

Categories	Sub-categories
1. Being sexually assertive	1.1 Able to express sexual desire 1.2 Able to refuse unwanted sex 1.3 Able to inquire partner's sexual history 1.4 Able to negotiate condom use
2. Experiences of being sexually assertive	2.1 Ambivalence towards sexual expression 2.2 Harmless compromise on unwanted sex 2.3 Reassurance of fidelity 2.4 Consensus using condoms
3. Supports for enabling sexually assertive	3.1 Having sexual knowledge 3.2 Receiving parental sexual protection messages 3.3 Gaining lessons from unpleasant experience 3.4 Media exposure
4. Constraints of being sexually assertive	4.1 Endorsement of sexual double standard 4.2 Concerns about partner's thoughts 4.3 Excessive alcohol drinking

**Category 1: Being sexually assertive**

Participants mentioned that to be sexually assertive, they should convey their sexual desire to their partner and reject unwanted sex. Moreover, to practice safer sex, inquiring about a partner's sexual history, especially related to high-risk sexual behaviors and negotiating condom use was considered necessary.

**Sub-category 1.1: Able to express sexual desire.**

Some participants affirmed that it is not shameful to express their sexual desires. They can actively convey their desire for sex and sexual preferences.

*"Females can express their sexual desire and preferences in the sexual process, such as using what kind of postures, what kind of occasions.*

*For example, some people like ‘cosplay,’ and they can express it to their partners.” (P9)*

*“I think we can be proactive in expressing our sexual desire. For example, ‘I want to kiss you, hug you, I want to have some intimate behavior with you.’...In romantic relationships, only when we express our own ideas can we have a better understanding with each other.” (P13)*

**Sub-category 1.2: Able to refuse unwanted sex.** Participants expressed that sex should be consensual. They should have the ability to turn down undesirable sex or forced sex to protect themselves from negative consequences.

*“We should be able to make our own decisions, by which I mean we can refuse our partners if we don’t want to have sex, since it may hurt you if you compromise. And it hurts you not only physically but psychologically as well, doesn’t it?” (p15)*

*“The ability to refuse what we don’t want is important. It’s a way to protect ourselves, and in my opinion, forced sex is so wrong. Sex behavior should be voluntary. Otherwise, even if one person is forced, it is a negative experience.” (p2)*

**Sub-category 1.3: Able to inquire about a partner’s sexual history.** Some participants said that they should be responsible for communicating with their partners about past sexual experiences to keep themselves healthy.

*“We (women) should inquire about the sexual history of our partner to confirm he is free of STDs and other sexual problems before we have sex...we should be responsible for our sexual health as well as our partners.” (p6)*

*“Even though wearing condoms can prevent STDs to a large extent, it’s still necessary to*

*know about partner’s sexual histories. Good sexual health should be the prerequisite for having sex.” (p15)*

**Sub-category 1.4: Able to negotiate condom**

**use.** Participants declared their crucial role of condom negotiation instead of pleasing their sexual partners. They were not ready to become pregnant and raise a baby. Condoms can also prevent them from contracting STDs.

*“It is necessary to use condoms when having sex... since I’m not prepared yet to take good care of a baby, I will avoid it at the very beginning... In addition, a condom can prevent STDs including AIDS.” (p11)*

*“Instead of taking birth control pills, I will ask him to wear condoms... wearing a condom is a good way to protect myself. Moreover, if we are not ready to have children, I think we should take precautions.” (p13)*

**Category 2: Experiences of being sexually assertive**

Participants agreed that expressing sexual desire was not shameful, but they tended not to express their sexual desire openly. When participants did not feel like having sex when their partners desired this, women were likely to agree as long as they were not forced. Participants claimed the reason for knowing the sexual history of their partners was to confirm their partners’ fidelity. A consensus was generally reached with partners to prevent pregnancy.

**Sub-category 2.1: Ambivalence towards sexual expression.** Participants admitted their right as females to express sexual desire. However, they still wanted men to initiate sex which they believed could prove their partners’ love and masculinity. And this prevented the participants from being defined as “indecent.”

*“It’s better that man makes the first move. If I need to take the initiative to start sexual behaviors, I will suppose the man doesn’t love me... I hope the man I love shows me his desire to want to have sex with me.”* (p1)

*“As females, we can express sexual desires, but how to say... in our country, it seems that females should be conservative, especially in sexual relationships. If you are too straightforward to express your needs in that aspect [sex], you will be labeled as bad. So I hope he can be more active than me.”* (p18)

*“I’m a woman after all. I think others would judge me. They would think me very indecent if I actively want sex. I would make a bad impression, and people would gossip and look down upon me. So in my view, the man should initiate sex behavior.”* (p7)

**Sub-category 2.2: Harmless compromise on unwanted sex.** Some participants said they would cooperate and engage in sexual behavior to please their partners on the premise that they would not get hurt. Otherwise, they would directly refuse or stop the process once they felt hurt.

*“If we haven’t had sex for a while, I will agree to have sex even though I don’t want to. I try to consider his feelings and I want him to be happy. However, sometimes my body was not ready. I felt uncomfortable in the process, I would stop him in the process.”* (p1)

*“If he really craves sex when I’m not in mood, I will agree cause I don’t want to let him down. But when I feel it goes against my will, I won’t accept it to please him by making myself upset... It can’t be forced or hurtful to me.”* (p12)

*“Sometimes, when I felt tired and didn’t want to have sex, I would tell him. However, I wouldn’t say no if I’m just a little bit reluctant. I mean I’d accept it when I’m not extremely unwilling to do that, as long as it doesn’t hurt me.”* (p20)

**Sub-category 2.3: Reassurance of fidelity.**

Most participants pointed out that they asked about their partner’s sexual history to reflect their partner’s sexual morality. They want to be assured of fidelity in the relationship and that their partner is not only dating for sex.

*“I asked him about his sexual history because I’m afraid that he is that kind of immoral person who was dating only for sex, not for love. If he dates females only to satisfy his sexual desire, I’m afraid he would treat me in this way.”* (p8)

*“I asked him, ‘have you had a girlfriend before?’ I think I need to know my partner well. What if he is a terrible person who has had many casual relationships? If he is that kind of guy, I won’t stay with him any longer.”* (p14)

**Sub-category 2.4: Consensus using condoms.**

Most participants expressed that they had reached a consensus with their boyfriends in using condoms. The primary goal is to avoid pregnancy, and the second, is to prevent STDs.

*“We use condoms mainly to prevent pregnancy because I don’t want pregnancy to interrupt my studies, and I’m also not mentally prepared to be a mother at this age. Another reason is to prevent STDs. It’s the most effective way to prevent it.”* (p1)

*“Both of us have reached an agreement that we don’t want to have children. He never said that he wouldn’t want to wear condoms.”* (p15)

*“He would buy condoms voluntarily. There is no need for me to ask him to do that, we get a consensus that we must use it. We used condoms mainly for preventing pregnancy.” (p20)*

#### **Category 3: Supports for enabling sexually assertive**

Participants revealed that as female college students, having sexual knowledge, receiving parental guidance on sexual protection, gaining lessons from unpleasant sexual experiences and exposure to online media can help them become sexually assertive.

**Sub-category 3.1: Having sexual knowledge.** Broadening sexual knowledge could support female college students in enabling sexual assertiveness. Gaining sexual knowledge raised their awareness of the use of condoms to prevent pregnancy, STDs and refusal to undesirable and unforced sex as well.

*“We learned from the lectures and classes that condom use is effective to prevent the spread of STDs...The more we learn, the stronger the awareness about using condoms.” (p5)*

*“Before gaining sexual knowledge, we think taking pills is ok, well now I know that some pills are greatly harmful to our health. In addition, condom use is effective to prevent both pregnancy and STDs. So, I may insist on using condoms during future sexual behavior.” (p6)*

*“We wouldn’t know it was wrong when a boy touched a girl’s breast, let alone say ‘no’ to him. Only when the teacher informed us of the wrongness of that behavior did we learn we could refuse.” (p12)*

**Sub-category 3.2: Receiving parental sexual protection messages.** Some participants mentioned that parental messages on sexual protection could assist them in assertively rejecting unwanted sex and using condoms.

*“My mother told me if some boy harassed me, don’t be too tough to reject him directly, because he might do something extreme to hurt me. I can say no to him in a polite way. But I must refuse what I don’t want. I should be firm with my refusal.” (p8)*

*“My mother told me that I should protect myself... She told me that if my boyfriend wants to do something intimate with me, I should ask him to use a condom.” (p9)*

**Sub-category 3.3: Gaining lessons from unpleasant experiences.** The participant who experienced unwanted sex pointed out that an unpleasant memory had made her more sexually assertive in her next relationship. In addition, participants also gained lessons from their friends’ unpleasant sex experiences.

*“My previous unpleasant experience forces me to be more cautious about sex. I’ve learned how to act in the same situation...That experience helped me to make decisions about whether to have sex, and we have the right to say no [to unwanted sex].” (p1)*

*“A friend of mine regretted that she hadn’t denied a boyfriend’s request to have sex... She was fooled by his persuasive words and lost her virginity. It makes me more cautious concerning sex. I’m more likely to turn down a boyfriend’s request for having sex.” (p4)*

#### **Sub-category 3.4: Media exposure.**

Participants recognized that an increasing number of people began to show their concern on gender issues nowadays online, and this information had encouraged their sexual assertiveness. In addition, negative social news has also increased their awareness of using condoms and rejecting undesirable sex behaviors.

*“I read some articles by bloggers. They make me believe that expressing my sexual desire is not shameful, that it is normal that everyone has sexual desire. Thanks to those bloggers, I won’t feel ashamed for talking about sex or expressing sexual desire.”* (p1)

*“You can see in some negative news that some people get infected with STDs, even AIDS, because they had sex with carriers. When we fall in love with someone, we should have the awareness to protect ourselves, such as using condoms.”* (p13)

*“When there was news such as a husband killing his wife, or females were sexually assaulted, it would produce heated debate on gender issues. Some female bloggers advocated that we females should protect ourselves and have the right to defend our own rights. I think it influences me. That is, if I face unwanted sex, I should refuse it.”* (p15)

#### **Category 4: Constraints of being sexually assertive**

Endorsement of a sexual double standard and concerns about a partner’s thoughts and reactions are the two main obstacles to being assertive in sexual relationships. In addition, excessive alcohol drinking also acts as a barrier.

**Sub-category 4.1: Endorsement of sexual double standard.** Influenced by Chinese traditional perceptions, participants mentioned a double standard among males and females regarding sexual relationships. Males are usually expected to be active, while females should be reserved. If females take the initiative to have sex, they will be regarded as indecent.

*“I feel like ‘girls should be obedient is a conventional practice...Our parents hold the opinion that when we’re in a relationship, boys*

*are supposed to be more active, while girls need to act shy. We often hear them say ‘You’re a boy, come on!’ and ‘You’re a girl, so you should be more reserved’.”* (p4)

*“I have been influenced by education like the ideology of Confucius, poems like Guan Ju which is about men’s desire for beautiful women, in which they promoted the idea that a lady should be conservative. So, I’m more inclined not to express wanting sex.”* (p7)

*“It’s the traditional perception that females should be reserved. If a female takes the initiative to have sex, she will be regarded as slutty.”* (p8)

**Sub-category 4.2: Concerns about partner’s thoughts.** Some participants acknowledged that when communicating with a partner about their feelings, they were concerned about their partner’s thoughts and reactions. Out of love and desire to maintain relationships, female college students feel more hesitant to reject unwanted sex, convey a desire for sex, or ask their partner always to use a condom.

*“I’ve never actively talked about sex-related topics or took the initiative to have sex with him. I was afraid he would think that I have had the sexual experience before and regard me as casual... I’m afraid he may think I’m kind of a slutty female.”* (p3)

*“In fact, I meant to refuse, but I failed. Why? Because I cared about his feelings...I was afraid that he would be unhappy if I refused to have sex with him.”* (p7)

*“I agree that he could do it without a condom until the ‘crucial moment’ as it’s uncomfortable for him to use it all the time. It’s all because I love him, so I want to be considerate of him.”* (p1)

**Sub-category 4.3: Excessive alcohol drinking.**

Participants have formed the notion from their own experiences, the news and people around, including their friends, that drinking prevents females from being assertive in a sexual relationship, particularly when rejecting unwanted sex.

*“Drinking alcohol reduces our ability to refuse unwanted sex. It can weaken people’s willpower. Even though a girl wants to refuse what she unwanted, once she has already lost her consciousness, how could she refuse that?” (p1)*

*“I was drunk before, and I didn’t have any self-control while drunk... If some bad guys try to rape you, you may not have the strength to resist.” (p15)*

## Discussion

The findings of this study provide an understanding of sexual assertiveness among Chinese female college students. For example, participants believed that female college students should be equipped with abilities involving sexual expression, rejecting unwanted sex, communicating about their partner’s sexual history, and negotiating condom use. Findings are consistent with previous studies about the primary elements of sexual assertiveness developed from American young female samples.<sup>11, 27</sup>

Perceiving sexual desire as one basic desire, some participants declared that women should have the ability to convey their sexual expression. A dyadic study among Chinese couples showed that a higher frequency of female sexual initiation was associated with greater sexual satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> About the ability to reject unwanted sex, participants explained that unwanted sex not only makes the sex experience unpleasant, but it may also hurt females both psychologically and physically. Sexual assertiveness serves as a salient mechanism of sexual victimization

prevention,<sup>28</sup> and the ability to refuse unwanted sex may play a key role in protecting females. In addition, to prevent STDs and unplanned pregnancy, the ability to inquire about a partner’s sexual history and negotiate condom use is essential. This finding is similar to a previous study, in which the awareness of protection for pregnancy and STDs is the vital component of sexual assertiveness among college students.<sup>17</sup>

However, higher levels of perception do not necessarily translate into sexual assertiveness in practice.<sup>2</sup> When it comes to practice, most participants expressed that they still prefer males to initiate sex to show their love. Besides, being influenced by traditional norms may cause females who express sexual desire to be labeled unchaste. To avoid being judged by others, participants behaved sexually conservatively even though they admitted their rights of sexual expression. This finding is consistent with a previous study that in Latino culture, females are often held back from initiating sex regardless of their desire to comply with the image of chastity and protect their reputation.<sup>15</sup> In terms of unwanted sex, participants presented that they would compromise on it to please their partner even though they feel tired or uncomfortable. As explained by Lee,<sup>29</sup> women engage in unwanted sex because they tend to take more responsibility for maintaining the relationship and try to provide what their partner wants. However, the findings also showed the boundary for female college students to accept unwanted sex with no harm. Although participants treasure the relationship with their partners, they still prioritize their safety over pleasing boyfriends.

Regarding sexual communication with partners, unlike previous studies that emphasized HIV-risk information identification,<sup>27, 30</sup> participants in this study admitted that they inquired about their partner’s sexual history due to moral consideration.

Female college students took their partner's sexual history as a reference for the current relationship. If their partner has a history of hookup or dating only for sex, they will consider stopping the relationship. As to condom use, participants presented that the primary intention of using condoms is to avoid pregnancy. In the Chinese context, premarital pregnancy is discouraged, especially in the collegiate period, since it will break students' reputations.<sup>31</sup> This may partly explain why most participants in the current study expressed that they had reached a consensus with their partners in using condoms.

Regarding the supports for enabling female college students to be sexually assertive, having sexual knowledge is an important facilitator, especially on condom use. Participants acknowledged that only by getting sexual-related knowledge can they have the assertiveness to avoid risky behaviors. Furthermore, receiving sexual protection messages from parents was recognized as another critical support. Studies demonstrated that the parent is one of the main persons to whom teenagers and young adults discuss sexual issues, and the influence of their sexual communication depends on the content.<sup>32-34</sup> In Fletcher et al.'s study,<sup>13</sup> parents' relational messages positively impact females' sexual assertiveness. In another study,<sup>15</sup> females expressed that the information they had received that a woman should be submissive and not control her own sex life negatively affected their interaction with their partner. Moreover, female students could gain lessons from their own or friends' previous unpleasant sex experiences that promoted them to deal with the same dilemma in future relationships.

As the final support of being sexually assertive, participants indicated that they got some encouragement from *Weibo* and *WeChat* public accounts. New media formats have emerged in China in recent years, and these media provide platforms for various voices, including sexual liberation,<sup>22</sup> which positively affects females' sexual

expression and discussion. This finding is inconsistent with previous studies that females' media consumption predicted lower sexual assertiveness.<sup>12, 35</sup> This may explain that media exposure to females' sexual scripts depends on the content the media conveys. Those who endorse the gendered sexual scripts in media are less unlikely to perform assertively in a sexual relationship.<sup>35</sup>

Regarding the barriers of being sexually assertive, one crucial aspect is the endorsement of sexual double standards. Individuals develop gender role expectations mainly through social learning, such as acquiring from parents and school education, observing behaviors from others, and being exposed to media and the sociocultural environment.<sup>19</sup> In the current study, participants presented that they get the idea of sexual double standard mainly from their parents and school education like the ideology of Confucius, that females should be conservative in sexual relationships. Influenced by the traditional culture, men are primarily expected to initiate sexual behaviors in the Chinese context, while women are expected to exhibit less sexual agency and autonomy than men.<sup>36</sup> In this study, female students demonstrated hesitation in their sexual expressions according to the inherent gender hierarchy and power imbalances in intimate relationships. Influenced by sexual norms that females should be the receiver rather than initiators, most participants are reluctant to commence desired sex. It verifies that the traditional gender role of female submissiveness in sexual interaction is persistent in China.<sup>4</sup>

As another constraint of being sexually assertive, most participants said they feel hesitant to reject their partner's request for sex due to love. They also behave reserved to convey sexual desire in fear of their partner reading them as indecent. Consistent with the previous study, females expressed concerns about their partner's negative thoughts and reactions if they plan to break the conventional

‘silent’ scripts for women.<sup>15</sup> Finally, excessive alcohol drinking is another obstacle for rejecting undesirable sex by weakening female students’ willpower, losing consciousness, and weakening their strength. The current finding is similar to previous studies that alcohol use can interfere with people’s sexual decision-making, and that more alcohol use was negatively associated with sexual assertiveness.<sup>37, 38</sup>

### **Limitations**

In this study, all participants studied in three colleges located in one of the Southwest provinces of China, the findings do not represent other districts of China. Further study from different backgrounds and living outside of this area may offer an alternative understanding of sexual assertiveness.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Nursing Practice**

This study contributes to an understanding of sexual assertiveness among Chinese female college students. The findings highlight that even though current female college students were aware of autonomy in sexual relationships, they still hold an ambivalent attitude towards sexual expression, unwanted sex refusal, and condom use. From a feminist perspective, within a Chinese context of gendered embodiment and sexual hierarchy constructed by social and cultural norms in which women should be passive and submissive, female college students’ assertiveness in heterosexual relationships is compromised.

The findings could help nurses and other health providers promote Chinese female college students’ safety and empowerment in sexual interactions. Targeted interventions to improve sexual assertiveness should include promoting comprehensive sexuality education and communication with parents about sexual protection messages. In addition, tactics should decrease the anticipated

partner’s negative reaction when negotiating safer sex, coping with excessive alcohol drinking. In addition, the transformation of traditional sexual norms about gender ideology emphasized that females’ being passive in sexual expression need to be considered.

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## ความกล้าแสดงออกสิทธิทางเพศของนักศึกษาหญิงชาวจีน: การศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพ

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**บทคัดย่อ:** ความเป็นอิสระทางเพศของหญิงชาวจีนเป็นสิ่งที่มีความสำคัญแต่มักจะถูกมองข้าม การศึกษาครั้งนี้เป็นการวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพแบบพรรณนาโดยใช้มุมมองสตอรีนิยม เพื่อค้นหาความกล้าแสดงออกสิทธิทางเพศของนักศึกษาหญิงชาวจีน เก็บรวบรวมข้อมูลในเดือนกรกฎาคม 2563 ถึงเดือนธันวาคม 2563 โดยการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกนักศึกษาหญิงจำนวน 20 คน อายุ 18-24 ปี จากวิทยาลัยสามแห่งในเขตตะวันตกเฉียงใต้ของประเทศไทย วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลโดยใช้การวิเคราะห์แก่นสาระ

ผลการศึกษาสามารถจัดกลุ่มได้เป็น 4 ประเด็นหลัก ประกอบด้วย 1) การมีความกล้าแสดงออกสิทธิทางเพศ ประกอบด้วย สามารถแสดงออกถึงความต้องการทางเพศ สามารถปฏิเสธการมีเพศสัมพันธ์ที่ไม่ต้องการ สามารถสอบถามประวัติทางเพศของคู่รัก และสามารถต่อรองการใช้ถุงยางอนามัย 2) ประสบการณ์เกี่ยวกับความกล้าแสดงออกสิทธิทางเพศ ประกอบด้วย ความสับสนต่อการแสดงออกทางเพศ การประนีประนอมเกี่ยวกับการมีเพศสัมพันธ์ที่ไม่ต้องการ ความมั่นใจในความชื่อสัตย์ของคู่รัก และการตกลงร่วมกันในการใช้ถุงยางอนามัย 3) การสนับสนุนให้มีความสามารถในการกล้าแสดงออกสิทธิทางเพศ ประกอบด้วย การได้รับความรู้เกี่ยวกับเพศ การได้รับการสื่อสารเกี่ยวกับการปกป้องทางเพศจากผู้ปกครอง การได้รับบทเรียนจากประสบการณ์ที่ไม่พึงพอใจ และการเปิดรับสื่อ และ 4) ข้อจำกัดของความมีความสามารถในการกล้าแสดงออกสิทธิทางเพศ ประกอบด้วย การยอมรับค่านิยมสองมาตรฐานทางเพศ ความกังวลเกี่ยวกับความรู้สึกนึกคิดของคู่รัก และการรีบแอลกอฮอล์ที่มากเกินไป

ผลการศึกษานี้เป็นประโยชน์สำหรับผู้ให้บริการทางสุขภาพรวมทั้งพยาบาล ซึ่งจะช่วยให้เข้าใจสถานการณ์เกี่ยวกับความกล้าแสดงออกสิทธิทางเพศของนักศึกษาหญิงชาวจีน รวมทั้งสามารถนำผลการศึกษาที่ได้มาใช้ในการส่งเสริมกิจกรรมด้านสุขภาพทางเพศเพื่อเพิ่มความกล้าแสดงออกสิทธิทางเพศ โดยการส่งเสริมเรื่องเพศศึกษา การสื่อสารเรื่องการปกป้องทางเพศกับผู้ปกครอง การลดความกังวลเกี่ยวกับความรู้สึกนึกคิดและปฏิกริยาในด้านลบของคู่รัก ปรับเปลี่ยนพฤติกรรมการดื่มแอลกอฮอล์ และปรับเปลี่ยนมุมมองเกี่ยวกับสองมาตรฐานทางเพศ

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