“The Experiences that We All Shared”: Understanding the Menstrual Experience of Chinese Female College Students through Social Ties

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Sociology

The Colorado College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

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December 2020

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INTRODUCTION

On August 28, 2020, a post with two screenshots of a Chinese shopping website went viral on Weibo, one of the most widely used social media in China. The first screenshot was a stack of package-free menstrual pads on sale. Advertised as “student pads customized for young girls,” the pads were sold for only 21.99 RMB[1] per 100 pads. In the second screenshot, a person expressed concern on the quality of these pads in the Review area, “how could anyone use these no-brand pads on their private parts?” Two purchasers simply replied, “life is difficult” and “I have my own struggles,” implying that these were the best they could afford.

The contentious post elicited a heated discussion online. Some expressed sympathy to the purchasers and empathized that no matter how much a woman earned, pads remained a large expense, while others countered that pads would not be a financial burden if women bought less boba tea, a popular drink among young people that cost about 20-30 RMB per cup. However, given that China was a country with a great gap of wealth—according to the prime minister Keqiang Li, more than 600 million people earned less than 1,000 RMB a month[2], and that was about 40% of China’s total population—using boba tea as a unit of currency was unimaginable for many women. While these women from financially disadvantaged families would

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[1] To create a sense of the value of 21.99 RMB, one could buy a Big Mac at McDonald’s in China with the money.

[2] According to Yang (2020), a monthly salary of 1,000 RMB “may not even be enough for a Beijing white-collar worker to pay for a month’s worth of lunch. A woman wanting to look good can only afford one dress from a Beijing mall. It is only enough to pay for a half-day excursion around the suburbs of Beijing for an entire family with kids. A monthly salary of 1,000 RMB is unimaginable to many people living in first- and second-tier cities.”

hesitate whether to spend money on hygiene products at all since those were not necessary for their families’ survival, others could afford to luxuriously evaluate the price of pads with the “junk drink.” Socioeconomic boundaries prevented women from different social classes from understanding each other’s situation.

The conversations soon shifted to another relevant topic, period shame. People’s consternation for finding out there were women suffering from the inaccessibility of hygiene products could be explained by the novelty of the discussion—this was the first time menstruation was brought to the table and thoroughly discussed in China. Menstruation was traditionally considered as an unspeakable topic (Zhao 2020). The open discussion over periods was thus viewed as breaking news. As the discussion progressed, people realized that menstruation had long been a taboo due to its connotated shame, and that was why the issue of menstruation poverty was not revealed until today, as a female netizen said, “just like how we put pads into opaque plastic bags to hide them from others at grocery stores, our society is also hiding the issue of menstruation poverty from the public because of period shame.”

Chinese menstruation shame was thus justifiably underexamined, and Chinese women’s experience of periods remained unheard. How did they experience menstruation in their lives? Did they have patterned experience? How did they experience period shame? What did they do in response? These were the questions awaiting to be explored. In this study, I focused on a specific group as my sample, female students at Chinese universities. By conducting in-depth interviews with seven of them, I studied the menstruation-related experience in these young women’s lives

to reveal what was unique about their menstrual experience in the context of contemporary Chinese society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background: Introducing Menstruation Shame and Menstruation Poverty

Whereas menstruation had long been an invisible and even taboo topic in Chinese society, it recently entered mainstream social discussion in the format of two frequently mentioned terms: *yue jing xiu chi* (“menstruation shame”) and *yue jing pin kun* (“menstruation poverty”). The two phenomena were not newly emerging, but they became widely known as they were identified by these names lately. The earliest record of *yue jing xiu chi* (“menstruation shame”) in Baidu, the most commonly used search engine in China, was a magazine article written in 2015, entitled “Menstruation Taboo: How does Our Culture Create Menstruation Shame.” *Yue jing pin kun* (“menstruation poverty”), on the other hand, did not appear until 2019, and most of the discussions then were about women in other countries, such as African ones. The term “menstruation poverty” referred to the difficulties of women getting access to hygiene products during periods due to economic hardship and outdated perceptions. Attention to Chinese women suffering from menstruation poverty was only drawn by the recent Weibo post introduced previously.

Menstruation poverty served as a trigger to the heated social discussion in China. The cheap package-free pads on sale made many people realize their overestimation of poor people’s living condition—that they could even hardly afford pads, which were believed to be “necessities” for women—and the controversial comment saying

“every woman should be able to afford pads since pads only cost a cup of boba tea” urged people to reflect whether all the women viewed the burden of hygiene product expense in the same way. In the discussion regarding the issue, a woman shared a personal story of attempting to use package-free pads while staying in a rural area in China. Getting used to using “proper” pads, she was reluctant to use the local package-free pads sold for 16 RMB per 100 pads, but when she reflected on the experience after learning about menstruation poverty, she was frustrated, “using the 16-cent pad was just an adventure for me, but it was life for many people” (Li and Luo 2020).

Besides the economic aspect, menstruation poverty was also characterized by menstruation shame. To understand menstruation poverty in the context of homeless women living on the road, Swain and Dey (2020) conducted in-depth interviews with thirty homeless women as well as five medical doctors in New Delhi. They revealed that these Indian women’s experience of menstruation formed a vicious cycle: as the economic constraints prevented them from accessing sanitary products, they adopted unhygienic practices during periods such as using dirty cloth as absorbents; the contaminants and the smells caused by the unsanitary practices would attract others’ gaze and comments, which made the women uncomfortable and ashamed, and as a result, they were urged to stay away from people to hide their menstruation status, which kept them away from seeking clean feminine products as well as proper education on periods. Similarly, Vora (2020) also indicated the obstructive role of stigma and shame on menstruation in preventing homeless women living in shelters

from actively asking for sanitary products. Conducting in-depth interviews with forty homeless women living in Bristol, UK, Vora found that many women expressed reluctance in asking shelter staff as they felt menstruation was a shameful subject. Even though some women verified that they could get the pads for sure if they asked, many of them still preferred to stick with toilet paper to avoid the embarrassing seeking process. It was thus understandable for the journalists Wentao Li and Danni Luo to claim that menstruation poverty was a “pseudo-proposition” since the actual problem of period shame lied behind the disguise. Even though clean hygiene products were provided for free, women without proper sex education still would not get access to them unless they overcome the psychological barrier that believed getting pads was shameful and unnecessary.

With this understanding of menstruation poverty, the slogan of “rejecting period shame” was adopted by feminist activists in China. Recently on campuses of Chinese universities, a movement called “Stand by Her” was prevalent with the aim of reducing period shaming (May and Chien 2020). The idea was to set small boxes for “shared” hygiene products in public female restrooms on campus. When a woman forgot to take hygiene products with her when her period came, she could take a pad from the box; when she had an extra pad later, she was expected to put one back so that others could benefit from it. The movement was celebrated campus-wide as it offered an open platform that gave an opportunity for female college students to help each other out of menstrual embarrassment.

Menstruation Shame: The Social and Ideological Aspect

In her theoretic discussion over purity and contamination, Douglas (1966) pointed out that the contemporary understanding of dirtiness was disguised by hygienics; the origin of the concept “filthiness” should be traced back to primitive society, where it was defined as falling out of certain order. Society would naturally repel objects or notions that did not fit into the existing classification, and the isolation was justified as long as the excluded was labeled as dirty to imply the purity of the current hegemony. Therefore, in patriarchal cultures, menstruation was righteously identified as a source of filthiness to force women into the lower hierarchy. For example, menstruating women were not allowed to cook for their husbands since the food would be contaminated and make the men sick, and menstrual blood was believed to be “dangerous to a man.” Menstruation, grouped with fluids of sex, childbirth, corpse, and enemy, was classified as poisonous pollutant that was both psychologically disgusting and physically harmful (Douglas 1966).

This notion, though somewhat weakened, persisted into contemporary life. Christoforou (2018) revealed through in-depth interviews with twenty Greek Cypriot women that contemporary Cypriot society still held the belief that the menstruating body was dangerous and ominous and thus should be kept away from vulnerable people such as pregnant women and the newborn. Likewise, through interviews, focus group discussions, and participant diaries with secondary school-aged young women, MacLean, Hearle, and Ruwanpura (2019) pointed out the acknowledged belief in the danger of menstruation in Kenya. Women on periods were not allowed to go to church and even vegetable plantation because they would cause chaos to people and plants

there. The same pattern could also be found in China. According to Xie and Zhang (2020) in their online lecture, women in some rural areas in China today were excluded from religious and local rituals during menstruation due to its impurity and even infectiousness—a parallel with COVID-19 was employed since both required quarantine to prevent the threat to health from spreading.

Montgomery (1974) established her research of men’s role in creating such menstrual taboos upon a concept called “vagina envy.” Vaginal envy was the idea that men felt envy for female sexual organs and their functions of pregnancy and childbearing. Based on such premise, Montgomery analyzed ethnographic accounts of forty-four societies obtained from the Human Relations Area Files, and as she assigned menstrual taboo scores to each society based on observed types of taboo, she found a strong quantitative correlation between men’s participation in reproduction rituals and restrictions on menstruating women across multiple cultures. In other words, men played an active role in influencing social taboos associated with menstruation, though the impact could be either negative or positive depending on their ways of participation.

Women, on the other hand, were excluded and silenced during the creation of the taboos for them, yet they passively absorbed the humiliating ideas and took them personally. In Garg, Sharma, and Sahay’s (2020) interview and focus group discussion-based study, the researchers examined the menstruation experience of women lived in an urban Indian slum. After overcoming the reluctance of “a culture of silence surrounds menarche,” the Indian women revealed their affirmation to the

widely acknowledged taboos about menstruation, such as its dirtiness, its incompatibility with intercourse, and the supposed shame and embarrassment around the topic. Similarly, Duby, Katz, Musara, and Nabukeera (2020) explored the same questions by conducting interviews and focus group discussions with women in Sub Saharan Africa. These women also expressed disgust and embarrassment when they had to touch their menstrual blood or meet with medical personnel during menstruation. In their interviews, the influence of men’s attitude towards menstruation on these women’s perception of it was also observed; when the women talked about men’s willingness to used condoms for intercourse only during menses, their aversion towards their own periods was further reinforced.

China was not an exception. Shame on menstruation among women was carried on from generation to generation under the domination of Confucianism, which encouraged everyone to establish internal shame and humbleness to constrain oneself in his or her own identity. Euphemism for menstruation was constantly changing but never absent: the frequently used phrases for the last generation were *dao mei le* (“had a bad luck”) and *lai shi le* (“the thing has come”); about ten years ago, the trend was *na ge* (“that”) or *li jia* (“regular days off”); the most popular nickname for young women today was *da yi ma* (“auntie”). Feminine hygiene products underwent a similar disguising process and became objects that could be neither publicly taken out nor talked about. To examine the government advertising regulations in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan by analyzing advertising statutes released by authoritative institutions in the three regions, Gao (2005), a scholar of marketing,

brought up a category of “socially sensitive products” that covered feminine hygiene products—along with tobacco, alcohol, medical products, and contraceptive products—and this term was employed by specific statutes of authorities in Mainland China, if not as blatant in the other two regions. These products failed to satisfy the acknowledged “decent and ethical” principle and thus could not be advertised during specific times on television.

A recent attempt to challenge the taboos and shame on menstruation and feminine hygiene products in China was the promotion of tampons (Mou, Yin, and Wang 2019). Conducting content analysis on the promotion post of the *Femme* brand, the first domestic tampon brand in China, Mou et al. examined the female images portraited. Given that pads were the norms of hygiene products for most Chinese women, the introduction of tampons to the market required extra appeals to health benefits and trendiness. In the promotion posts, women struggled to be both successful professionals in their careers and primary care providers at homes, demonstrating a mixed gender role that yielded to gender oppression yet also challenged the patriarchal norms to some extent (Mou et al. 2019). Either way, the emergence of feminine hygiene product advertisements in mass media such as WeChat served as an insignificant yet proactive response to the censorship imposed on television advertising and an attempt to break the long-lasting shame on menstruation.

In her theoretic writing, McHugh (2020) dissected this period shame and its consequences using shame theory. She indicated that the sense of inadequacy that the

shame generated made women avoid social contact, which left them with negative feelings such as loneliness and powerlessness. The more women avoided talking about shame, the more shame unraveled their social connections with others. Therefore, she argued that menstrual talk served as a form of resistance against the stressful shame. In opposite to “menstrual moaning,” referring to women’s negative conversations complaining about the discomfort and moodiness of menstruation, positive communication was encouraged as it actively allowed women to pull each other out of the swamp of menstrual taboos. McHugh’s findings identified the critical role of interpersonal connections in getting rid of shame in menstruation.

Social Ties: Challenging the Taboos with Communications

Many sociologists had studied the significance of interpersonal connections. For example, Granovetter (1973) proposed a theory of social ties that emphasized the significance of weak ties. He suggested that strong ties, usually characterized by family and close friends, were composed among people who were similar to each other. They held common knowledge in similar aspects, and they were unlikely to know about things that were unfamiliar to each other. If people stuck with strong ties only, they were blocked from new information and thus were likely to be trapped in a deadlock of stereotypes. By contrast, weak ties, referred to relationships with infrequent or no contact and without close emotional connections, functioned as bridges and provided people with access to various resources.

Friedkin (1982) further developed on this point and argued that holding weak ties suggested having a lot of potential helpers and a high probability of receiving helpful

assistance. However, helping others was not a spontaneous action. Most of the time, people needed motivation to provide help. In their study of information seeking and providing process of employees at a global computer manufacturer, Constant, Sproull, and Kiesler (1996) drew attention to the significance of reciprocity after analyzing survey and observational data. They noted that constant information exchange among information providers and information seekers resulted in a norm of generalized reciprocity. Weak ties among people enabled the exchange of help. On the other hand, people were motivated to help through weak ties if they believed helping others contributed to their identity (Shamir 1991). In the computer manufacturer scenario, Constant et al. (1996) also pointed out that the information providers were willing to help since this demonstrated their technical expertise and reinforced their identity as experts.

Beyond weak ties, another type of social ties that was even weaker also played a significant role, namely imagined ties. Imagined ties were characterized by virtual connections established by one’s imagination and thus were not immediately tangible and accessible. (Kanno and Norton 2003). According to Wenger (1998), this social imagination was “a process of expanding oneself by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves,” and it challenged the common approach of establishing relationships and communities through direct engagement and provided an alternative to forming more generalized social ties. For example, in a study of bilingual students’ identities, Kanno (2000) conducted in-depth interviews with four Japanese teenage returnees and revealed that though they spent most of their

life in English-speaking countries, the students insisted to be identified as Japanese. In this context, Japan was not a physical community but instead an imagined one, and the students identified their belongingness to the community regardless since they believed they shared the identity label of “Japaneseness” with other Japanese. The concept of imagined ties constructed based on imagined communities enabled people to enhance the understanding of their identities.

To summarize, taboos on menstruation were historical and persisted into contemporary societies all over the world. Women today were trained to take the humiliation personally and spontaneously feel ashamed for their periods. As a result, they isolated themselves to hide the source of shame from others. Social ties were expected to play a role in breaking the isolation. Compared to strong ties with family and close friends, weak ties were valued as bridges to richer communications. In addition, imagined ties with a broader community were also helpful in terms of broadening people’s vision of their identities. In this study, social ties were employed as a theoretical framework to understand Chinese young women’s experience of menstruation. The application of this framework allowed me to examine their menstrual experience through the lens of interpersonal interactions. In terms of the sample of the study, female college students were selected since they were the young generation growing up with shame education yet currently living in a time when the society began to have a consciousness of period shame. Therefore, this study focused on this specific group and examined the following research questions:

(1) How have female students at Chinese universities experienced menstruation

in their lives?

(2) How do female students at Chinese universities interact through social ties in their menstrual experiences?

METHODS

The analysis was based on in-depth interviews conducted with seven female students who attended Chinese universities. Convenience sampling was employed for participant recruitment. I first recruited through my personal weak ties, specifically by asking my middle school classmates, high school classmates, and friends in college to recommend someone who was currently attending a Chinese university for me, and then I used their social networks to reach out to “friends of the friend.” I got in touch with eight respondents who were willing to be interviewed with respect to their experience of menstruation yet was “ghosted” by one, so seven interviews were eventually conducted (Sackett 2020).

The seven respondents provided a relatively high diversity in terms of their social background (see Table 1). Two of them were grown up in Beijing, one of the most developed cities in China; two were from Xi’an, Shaanxi Province, a city that developed rapidly in the past decade and was classified as one of the fifteen new first-tier cities in 2019; the rest three were from relatively small and less developed cities that were classified as second- or third-tier in China. Their self-reported monthly household income matched their hometowns’ stage of development, following the pattern that families in more developed cities had higher income. Most of the respondents’ parents had at least college education though of different types—either

of a university or a junior college. Their occupations were well-diversified as there were civil servants, employees of institutions or companies, a merchant of small business, a worker, as well as retirees in the sample.

For data analysis, I transcribed the interviews and used NVIVO to code them in Chinese. The coding scheme was composed of 21 codes, and among them, “parents’ attitude,” “mutual help,” “*zhongkao*/*gaokao*,” and “opinions on menstruation poverty” were the foci of analysis in this study. I translated the quotes used in the Findings section.

Interviewing as a method was criticized by some sociologists such as Jerolmack and Khan (2015) since verbal accounts of people were usually a poor predictor of their actual behaviors, so interviews should not be considered to possess great reliability. However, this method was employed in this study due to its major benefit of “reveal[ing] emotional dimensions of social experience that are not often evident in behavior” (Lamont and Swidler 2014). This was particularly significant to the research questions of this study that concerned about Chinese young women’s experience of menstruation. Given that there was an unwritten rule in Chinese society that it was shameful to talk about periods or reveal feminine hygiene products publicly, ethnographical observation of the women’s behaviors in the public sphere would not be sufficient in understanding their purposefully hidden experience as well as their psychological activities during the experience. Interviewing, by contrast, was able to reveal the internal events.

Admittedly, there were a few limitations of this study. In terms of the sample,

besides the small sample size (N=7) that connotated the low generalizability of the findings, the respondents were not diverse enough with regard to their social and financial background. While I expected to find respondents at the extremes in order to demonstrate a wider spectrum—specifically those from either extremely affluent or impoverished family background—it was both difficult and inappropriate to recruit with such criteria. Besides, though face-to-face interviewing was the ideal, all the interviews were conducted through video calls on WeChat due to the concern of the pandemic. Therefore, it was likely that the research partnership was underdeveloped ahead of the interviews, and the respondents might not feel comfortable revealing their experience and feelings to me thoroughly at least at the beginning.

On the other hand, the data collection was advantaged by my identity as a young Chinese woman. This high similarity to my respondents, who were also Chinese women at my age, allowed me to gain trust and openness from them easily. While menstruation-related experience was hard to be revealed to a male researcher, they would not feel pressured to do so with a female researcher like me. Their acceptance of me as a listener also derived from their belief in the possession of common knowledge among us; as a Chinese grown up in the same cultural context as they did, I had the same general knowledge of menstruation in Chinese society, such as the euphemistic nicknames of periods and the brands of feminine hygiene products. In this case, my identity gave me quick access to the respondents’ concealed experience and allowed me to have space to explore richer details.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents

Respondent	*Age*	*Year in School*	*Hometown*	*Monthly Expense*	*Parents' Highest Education (Father/Mother)*	*Parents' Occupation (Father/Mother)*	*Monthly Household Income*
Anna	21	4th of Bachelor	Beijing (first tier)[3]	¥1,200	Bachelor/Junior college	Civil servant/Retired	¥20,000
Belle	21	4th of Bachelor	Beijing (first tier)	¥1,000	Junior college/Junior college	Factory manager/Accountant	¥30,000-40,000
Caroline	33	2nd of Master	Jilin (third tier)	¥2,000-3,000	High school/Bachelor	Retired/Public institution staff	¥6,000
Daisy	24	2nd of Master	Hebei (second tier)	¥4,000	Bachelor/Junior college	Artist/Primary school teacher	¥5,000-6,000
Ellen	27	2nd of PhD	Henan (third tier)	¥2,000	Technical secondary school/ Technical secondary school	Merchant/Worker	¥8,000-10,000
Flora	20	3rd of Bachelor	Shaanxi (new first tier)	¥2,000	Master/Bachelor	Company manager/Accountant	¥20,000
Gabby	20	3rd of Bachelor	Shaanxi (new first tier)	¥2,000	Bachelor/Junior college	Engineer/State-owned company manager	Unknown

[3] The tiers of cities in China were classified based on in-store sales data of 170 mainstream consumption brands, netizens' behavioral data provided by 18 leading internet companies, and big data of the cities. With the criteria such as clustering of commercial resources, diversity of people's lifestyle, and plasticity of future development, the 337 cities were classified into six tiers: first, new-first, second, third, fourth, and fifth (*Baidu Baike* 2020). Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen were the four first-tier cities as they were the most economically developed. Other provincial capitals generally belonged to the second or third tier. Third tier and below were considered as underdeveloped. New-first-tier cities were the ones rapidly developed in the past few years and went beyond the standard of second tier yet did not reach the economic level of the four first-tier cities.

FINDINGS

Though menstruation was considered as a highly private issue in Chinese society, all seven respondents had their menstruation-related experience closely associated with interactions with others: family, teachers, friends, classmates, and even strangers. On the one hand, these interactions shaped the young women’s understanding of menstruation in various ways—either promoting shame on the topic or helping break the taboo—on the other hand, their experience of periods, in turn, facilitated constructing interpersonal connections with others at some point. In terms of different types of social ties’ role on the young women’s menstrual experiences so far, strong ties with family established the keynote of their shame on menstruation. Social ties with female peers formed intimacy through shared experience and enabled the exchange of information that was hard to publicize. In a broader context, as they generated a sense of connection with strangers who had the same cultural background of being female in China, the imagined ties helped them understand social issues such as menstruation poverty and also alleviate menstruation shame.

Strong Ties with Family: First Lesson from Moms of Menstruation Shame

Talking about the first time they learned about the concept of menstruation, most respondents recalled their mothers’ explanation and attitude, and on purpose or not, this ironically became their introduction to menstruation shame. Understatement of the menstrual mechanism was a common practice among the mothers according to the respondents. For example, when Caroline first learned about periods from her mother, she was in the 3rd grade, and her mother only told her “don’t worry” without providing a further explanation:

> My mother didn’t explain why there was such a phenomenon, but she said every woman would have this as soon as they reached a certain age. She said, “when you grow up to

> my age, you will have this too, so don’t be afraid.” I was shocked at the time because I had never seen this before. I unconsciously assumed that people would bleed only when they were injured. But my mother just said don’t worry.

Though Caroline expressed her concern of whether menstruation implied injuries when her mother explained, her mother did not address the problem but simply reiterated the comfort, which did not effectively console Caroline as her doubt remained.

Likewise, when the 8-year-old Gabby saw used pads and sheets with blood on them, she turned to her mother yet only got some difficult terms as the answer, “I knew about the idea as my mom told me each woman would have such a time every month to ‘metabolize.’ She used the similarly professional terms and didn’t really care if I got it or not.” Employing abstruse words could be regarded as an escape from meticulous explanation which the mothers were uncomfortable to provide, and presumably, several mothers believed that the children would know the process naturally as they grew up. For example, Anna’s parents had never actively told her about menstruation, so she did not know about it until 5th grade when her swimming teacher introduced the “special period” to the girls. Anna talked about her family’s attitude:

> I was the late one (to know about menstruation). Maybe because my parents were relatively conventional, they did not reveal this to me too early. And I was not a sensitive person either, so I didn’t notice this thing until very late...My family didn’t seem to take this issue seriously, like they never bought me books or told me such things expressly, as if I would know very naturally. It was not avoidance; they just thought it was not necessary to talk about it closely.

Due to her parents’ passive principle of not teaching her relevant knowledge, Anna remained ignorant of menstruation during primary school. Unlike other respondents who had their first lessons from their mothers, Anna’s first lesson of menstruation was from her middle school male classmates’ jokes around it:

> They not only joked about periods, but also about sex. I remember [a male classmate]

> laughed all the time when the guys were joking. He just kept laughing. So disgusting...I did not understand then why would they laugh like that...but I still felt they laughed obscenely.

Observing her male classmates’ reaction to the jokes, she interpreted menstruation as filthy, so when she recalled her primary school peers who did not joke around the concept at all, she described them as “pure”:

> I grew up in the residential compound for military families, and my primary school was in the compound too. That was also why I knew about that so late—children living in the compound were all very pure. They never talked about or joked around periods in primary school. Really really pure...Everyone had their parents talk about it a bit, got it, and done. No extra jokes or comments.

According to Anna, it was not that the children did not *know* about menstruation that made them “pure” as she said all of them had heard about it from their parents more or less. Instead, it was their lack of ridiculing reactions that contrasted with her middle school classmates and thus impressed her. Periods were not inherently dirty and shameful, but her middle school classmates’ jokes and indecent reactions imposed a connotation of filthiness on the concept, which justified the cultivation of shame on menstruation.

The lack of education through strong ties seemed to be a major cause. However, direct teaching from mothers did not guarantee the absence of menstruation shame. On the contrary, some respondents reported that their mothers actively taught them to conceal the topic and hide hygiene products. For example, Gabby revealed her mother’s instruction for her when she was in middle school:

> It was a common practice to hide the pad in the sleeve. My mom also said so to me. She said, ‘it is your personal privacy; you shouldn’t take it out brazenly and let people around you knew about it.’ I don’t think it matters as much now, but she, and also most families then, would tell their kids that this was not something that could get on the table.

Before she had access to information from other sources as she grew up, her mother was the sole authority. Though her mother used plausible reasoning of protecting “personal privacy,”

she trained Gabby to view menstruation as unpresentable and thus shameful.

On the other hand, the mothers’ inappropriate attitude while talking about periods would also teach the children to feel ashamed though implicitly. Daisy, for example, explained that her shyness of taking out pads in front of her male classmates during primary school came from the attitude of her mother, “when my mom told me about periods at first, she gave me the impression that this should be a secret thing, so I naturally thought, ‘okay, this shouldn’t be known by the boys.’” Though her mother did not explicitly tell Daisy to feel ashamed—as mentioned before, she comforted Daisy that menstruation was a normal process—her tone conveyed the message instead.

Through strategies such as avoiding providing a clear explanation, actively teaching how to conceal pads, and employing a furtive attitude, strong ties with mothers mostly functioned as a source of menstruation shame in the young women’s menstrual experience. This stigma was passed on from the mothers’ generation to the daughters’ through the first female physiology lesson within the family. The daughters’ initial understanding of menstruation was shaped as parallel to their mothers’ and persisted into their secondary education period until they began to actively form weak ties with their female peers through shared anecdotal experiences related to periods.

Social Ties with Female Peers: The Experiences that “We” All Shared

Going through the respondents’ narratives, some stories alike appeared across interviews. In other words, the respondents’ menstruation-related experiences revealed some patterned interpersonal events shared among young females at their age. These experiences were characterized by interactions with people around them. While some were with their close

friends and roommates with whom they had strong ties, more often the interactions occurred with unfamiliar classmates through weak ties.

Exchange of Hygiene Products through Social Ties

When I asked for an embarrassing experience because of periods, Anna answered, “the most embarrassing experience was the one that we all shared: period comes in class.” I then asked her what she meant by “we all shared.” She asked a question in reply, “didn’t you have such experience? All my roommates and friends have had this experience.”

Anna was basically correct; though not all respondents revealed the exact experience of having periods while in class, they all shared similar dilemmas in which they realized they were on periods yet could not go to the restroom and put on a hygiene product immediately, usually because they did not have one in hand and had to ask from people around. The respondents usually referred to the processes of being helped out as well as helping others out as “normal.” Caroline, for example, summarized her experience of receiving a pad from her roommate in class and concluded, “I feel that this is very normal, and there’s nothing to elaborate.” Ellen also stressed the normality of the helping process when she tangentially introduced her aunt’s request for a pad once and commented, “I think that was a pretty normal thing.”

Anna talked about the experience of borrowing pads in class shared by her roommate and her:

> [In my case,] I had to reach out to girls only; guys sitting in front of me wouldn’t work. The seats were really crowded, and all my actions could be seen by the professor. But I had no other choice; I had to keep quietly asking around...My roommate had the same experience as well. Also came in class, also forgot to bring pads. But she was lucky since I had pads with me, so I just gave one to her.

In the embarrassing and urgent situations, both Anna and her roommate laid their hope on

their female peers. While her roommate was able to gain support from her through strong ties, Anna relied on her classmates whom she did not know well. However, they both believed that their female peers would lend a helping hand as long as they had a pad with them, and both Anna and her roommate were indeed helped out eventually.

Belle’s story dealt with the same trouble. Once during her summer internship, she suddenly realized she was on period:

> This happened many times, so I was pretty composed. I told another intern about this. Her period was just about to finish, so she was still taking some pads with her. She didn’t say anything and just passed one to me. After we had dinner as a team, she accompanied me to the convenience store and bought some pads.

Like Anna, Belle also held the belief that other females, regardless of whether they knew her well, would emphasize her plight and provide help as much as they could since they understood how that felt. Though she was risking her sense of shame as she revealed a private fact that she was menstruating to an almost stranger, she had sufficient trust in her colleague’s understanding. The weak ties among them allowed her to have a source of support in the emergent situation, but it was their shared gender identity that motivated her colleague to help. As Gabby claimed that “people would love to help because everyone would encounter this situation at some point,” two significant points were identified: the commonality of pad exchange experience and women’s motivation of helping each other. Having periods coming without holding a pad was undoubtedly a high-probability event, and women were all likely to encounter the case in which they had to ask around for a lash-up. As they understood the anxiety for being in such a situation as well as the gratitude for being helped out, they were willing to lend a helping hand to others in a menstrual crisis. A network of mutual help was thus established among young women today.

Talking about their experience of exchanging hygiene products, the diction for debt was frequently employed: borrowing/lending (*jie* in Chinese). The requests for pads that these young women made or received were usually “can you lend me a pad?” It was merely a convention to say so, and a return was not expected. For example, Gabby shared her frustrating experience of being “borrowed” frequently during primary school:

> Because my mom was concerned if my period would suddenly come, she always put one or two pads in my backpack. All the girls in my class knew that, so when they were on periods and forgot to take pads with them, they would lend from me. Gradually I was like a small shop as everyone came lend from me. But a pad was like tissue paper. I couldn’t ask them to return, right? Sometimes I would run out of pads when I needed them myself, then I would have to borrow from my teachers, which I didn’t have to do originally.

She further explained her feelings:

> I didn’t feel awkward (for borrowing pads from teachers), but I felt that I owed them a favor. Should I return a pad or not? I didn’t like others to owe me, but was it appropriate for me to owe my teachers? I didn’t want to owe others, but not everyone thought in this way; they seemed okay with owing me.

To Gabby’s understanding, an emotional debt, if not a physical one, was set in exchange for a pad lent out. She regarded herself as a lender when she gave pads to her classmates and felt being owed for not having anything in return. When she got pads from her teachers, she became a borrower but hesitated to pay the “debt” back as she was not ever paid back. In her understanding, all the debts were maintained and accumulated, which annoyed her as she hoped for an even situation.

However, Belle provided an alternative interpretation of the borrowing/lending process:

> I wouldn’t (think about returning a pad when I said “lend me a pad”). Because this was like you got one from others one day, and you will lend it to others at some point eventually. After all, people did this really often since many people don’t have regular periods. So I think this exchange among women is totally comprehensible. Even though you really want to pay it back, the other person would feel embarrassed. Not embarrassed, just unnecessary. At least this is how I get along with my friends. No returning.

In contrast with Gabby, Belle interpreted the idea of mutual help in a broader sense—if everyone could lend out a pad when there was someone in need, then all the women were helping one another. This understanding allowed her as well as other young women to feel connected to their female peers around.

Zhongkao and *Gaokao*: Seeking for Solutions with Friends

Another menstruation-related experience shared by the respondents was avoiding periods from important test dates. Facing the two most competitive exams in Chinese students’ educational career—namely *zhongkao*, the high school entrance exam, and *gaokao*, the college entrance exam—the young women could not help feeling more anxious than their male counterparts; in addition to the academic stress that all the students had, female students also needed to worry about whether their periods, if overlapped with test days, would negatively influence their performance on the exams. Anna, for example, revealed that while she was too stressed about the *zhongkao* during 9th grade, her periods became a mess as she kept menstruating for four months before the exam:

> I didn’t only worry about the exam; I also worried about [my menstrual disorder], which was caused by the pressure of the exam. I originally thought, “please don’t let my period came before test days, especially not on those days,” but I didn’t expect it consistently came for four months! Seriously? ...My best friend was normally concerning whether her period would come [on the test days], and I was worrying whether mine would stop. But generally our concerns were the same, so we often complained about it together and comforted each other.

Even though Anna and her best friend did not have identical menstrual conditions, they had a similar concern for periods’ impact on the exam, so they could understand each other’s feelings and provided emotional support to each other. Though complaining and comforting would not actually solve the problem, at least they served as a vent for each other’s psychological stress.

Though Anna’s menstrual disorder was unique, her anxiety was common to many other respondents. Daisy, for example, was also concerned about being on period during the exams, and she even sought medical assistance to adjust her periods:

> My auntie (nickname of menstruation) was really painful every time, so my mom and I were both worried that “what if it came on the day of *gaokao*?” I heard people said that they could bring the period forward by injecting progesterone. If it came before the exam, I wouldn’t be bothered on the test day, and I can thus focus on the exam. I took the injection before the *gaokao* because I was really nervous.

Due to her great concern on the possible overlapping of her period and the *gaokao* days, Daisy and her mother actively gathered information from people around, trying to find out solutions for avoiding the conflict. As a result, they learned about a medical solution and employed it before the exam. The strategies such as injecting progesterone were passed on among anxious female students and their parents, and an informational web was also observed to be constructed through close contact between students and their parents. Gabby claimed that before the *gaokao*, her mother and her formed a four-people support group with one of her classmates and her mother in which they exchanged folk prescriptions that were believed to have an impact on the periods:

> We talked about verifying the strategy I’ve heard before *zhongkao*: eating agaric, which would postpone the periods. The other strategy was to drink soy milk, which would bring the periods forward. I didn’t think any of these would work though they definitely have some scientific basis for influencing hormones, but simply talking about these gave all of us some comfort.

While effective strategies of controlling periods were necessary for solving the problem, mutual social support among people who shared the same concern was also essential in relieving the anxiety.

Introducing Tampons to Friends: Acceptance and Rejecting Taboos

In terms of preference on feminine hygiene product consumption, pads were still a norm

among the respondents given that no one except Flora used tampons. Belle told her reasons for rejecting tampons:

> I’ve talked about tampons with my mom. I don’t think she really understood, but she told me girls shouldn’t use tampons before their hymen was ruptured. She said so, but I’ve read posts online and also talked to my roommates. I don’t think it really matters. The reason I don’t use it is not my mom’s opinion but instead, I was just afraid of inserting something into my body.

Belle’s mother’s opinion represented the common bias against tampon constructed by patriarchy: male genital organ should be the first and only object that got into a female body. Yet Belle did not accept this belief as she communicated with her roommates, who used tampons themselves and thus denied the idea based on their experience. They kept recommending tampons to Belle and shared their psychological process of accepting tampons at first:

> They told me it felt good...they did not use it either at the beginning of college. I remember one of my roommates said she was also afraid at first, but she tried once and succeeded. She thought it was very convenient because you didn’t have to change it frequently once you put it on. I remember she said it was cleaner and safer than pads too.

Though Belle did not accept tampons for now since she was still afraid of the processes of inserting the tampon into her body and pulling it out, her communication with her friends at least helped her understand that tampons were not harmful and forbidden as her mother claimed so—given that in addition to hearing her friends’ positive experiences with tampons, Belle also studied the vaginal structure of female bodies with her friends and came up with the conclusion that “at least we are sure that [tampon] wouldn’t do any harm to female bodies.”

Flora served as a successful case of accepting tampons because of her friend’s recommendation. At first, she was stuck in Belle’s stage as well but overcame the psychological barriers with her friend’s encouragement:

> I was used to using pads. Like some friends around me, I thought inserting something into my body was horrible at first. I was a virgin without any sex experience, so using tampons made me even more nervous as I didn’t even know where to insert. But I had a friend who was a medical student, she constantly recommended tampons to me, “go try it, just try it once. It feels really good.” It took a lot of time for me to succeed for the first time, and it also took a while to get used to it. But I’m happy using it now and want to recommend it to my friends.

Flora was introduced to tampons through her relationship with her friends, and her acceptance of tampons, in turn, reinforced this relationship as they had the exclusive experience of using tampons. On the other hand, as soon as she had a positive experience with tampons, she wanted to recommend them to her other friends in order to share her pleasant feelings. The consumption of hygiene products, like other menstruation-related experiences, promoted intimacy among the young women through the exchange of information and sharing of their personal experiences with one another.

Imagined Ties with Other Chinese Women: Understanding Menstruation Poverty and Alleviating Menstruation Shame

Like how strong and weak ties with the young women’s female peers enabled interactions in their menstruation experience, imagined ties with other Chinese women also helped the respondents move beyond being isolated because of feeling ashamed. However, instead of having physical contact with other women and thus having direct informational and material communications, relationships characterized by imagined ties were not tangible but influenced the respondents more in the perceptional level. In this case, when menstruation jumped out from their personal experience and was placed into broader social issues, the respondents expressed concern for Chinese women as an entirety, and this depersonalization of periods helped the respondents reduce menstruation shame. In response to the recent news of package-free pads, the respondents addressed their opinions over the controversial

comment, “everyone should be able to afford the expense of pads every month if they could all drink one less cup of boba tea.” Their attitude reflected their understanding of the issue of menstruation poverty, which revealed the difficulties of women from disadvantaged socioeconomic status in accessing hygiene products during periods. Flora, for example, criticized this viewpoint for being indifferent and showed great understanding in package-free pads’ consumers’ situation:

> When we have money to buy [pads], we think that “why not eat the meat porridge?” But what if there are families still struggling for food, and you ask them to spend money on pads? Definitely pads are not necessities and are naturally cut off from living budget... [The expense on pads] is only the money for several cups of boba tea for us, but for many people, this is their living expenses for days and probably even more...People saying this are living not-bad lives, but there are a lot more poor people struggling in China that we don’t know.

The phrase “why not eat the meat porridge” was a Chinese idiom that described people for not understanding others’ situations. The origin of the phrase was an ancient Chinese emperor who, knowing his people could not even afford rice, asked his servants, “why don’t they have meat porridge if they couldn’t eat rice?” Flora used the idiom here to condemn the boba tea comment for judging from a financially privileged position and assuming everyone could afford to evaluate hygiene products in the same way. Likewise, Ellen showed sympathy for women who could not afford fair price pads and confessed that she was shocked when she learned about the package-free pads:

> I think it is inconceivable because I think it is already *now*. I mean, it makes sense in my grandma’s time. I’ve heard my grandma said that when she was young, she used a cloth pocket in which you could fill cotton. But I think it has been decades since then, but there are still people who couldn’t afford pads. This is definitely miserable...If they couldn’t afford pads, they wouldn’t have access to boba tea. Then how would they save money from boba tea to buy pads?

While the respondents regarded their own experience of unable to get a pad when periods came as “embarrassing,” Ellen referred to poor women’s situation as “miserable”; her

sympathetic concern for women who could not afford pads reduced her shame on the lack-of-pads situation. Both Flora and Ellen emphasized with women who could only buy extremely cheap pads even though they were living affluent life themselves. The sense of connection they had with the female strangers allowed them to depersonalize menstruation and interpret the topic in a broader social context.

Gabby also mentioned the “meat porridge” idiom in her review of the controversial comment online:

> I think this opinion is very unemphatic, like “why not eat the meat porridge.” ...This is something that the whole society should work together to make a progress, so why should we compromise our boba tea for pads? We should be able to drink boba tea and also use pads; consuming pads should not be something that lowers our living standard.

Unlike Flora and Ellen, Gabby did not specifically refer to women with lower socioeconomic status, yet she considered all the women as an entirety as she used collective pronoun throughout. By stating the ideal world in which women could all use pads without sacrificing their boba tea, Gabby blamed society for not ensuring cheap pads that every woman could afford. As she was concerned for all the women’s right of using affordable hygiene products, her imagined ties with them made her have an insight into social justice beyond her original horizon of menstruation that was limited to her own experiences.

Besides the discussion over menstruation poverty, another hot topic related to periods was the movement of the “mutual help box” prevalent in Chinese universities. Anna praised the movement as “progressive”:

> I think this is very good, because first of all, it will reduce females’ shame on menstruation... It is a relief to women’s psychological pressure (of taking pads out publicly). As the box of shared pads could be placed above board, it is saying that this thing can be treated openly and is acceptable. It is a natural thing. Especially when young children see this and ask their moms what it is, and when their moms explain it for them, they would know this is a normal and natural phenomenon of women. Also, the moms

> wouldn’t be like my parents, “you don’t need to know. You will understand naturally when you grow up.”

Though Anna did not receive sufficient sex education from her parents, this movement urged her to think of sex education for the next generation. In the scenario she depicted, girls could learn about menstruation without cultivating shame of it. While Anna wanted to prevent other young women from having the same experience as hers of feeling ashamed for periods, she faced her own menstruation shame directly, which made her destigmatize the concept gradually at the same time.

Discussing the recent social issues involved menstruation, the respondents appeared considerate as they conceived themselves in other women’s situations and spoke from their point of view. Though those women were strangers to the respondents, the young women remained empathetic regardless because they were all women living against the same cultural background. This sense of connection, though established in different ways, allowed them to have a broader perspective on an originally private issue. As a result, they had a rather macroscopic picture of the current social scene regarding menstruation poverty. On the other hand, as they viewed menstruation as less personal and more of a social problem, they were gradually destigmatizing the concept.

DISCUSSION

The respondents’ experience of menstruation was closely associated with their social ties. On the one hand, their experience was shaped by their connections with people around; on the other hand, menstruation served as a bridge that the young women used to establish or reinforce interpersonal relationships with others. Specifically speaking, strong ties with mothers played a significant role in shaping the respondents’ experience, and they usually

functioned in a negative way that led to menstruation shame, while social ties with female peers as well as imagined ties with female strangers who lived against the same cultural background were constructed and strengthened through shared experience and empathy in others’ situations.

As menstruation was believed to be shameful, females were expected to keep it to themselves, especially avoiding public occasions where men were present. Yet the more they interacted with others in their menstrual experiences, the more open the topic became, and the less shame they felt since the shame came from hiding. Thus, social ties that enabled interactions were very important. This study suggested that strong ties, weak ties, and imagined ties had multiple roles in Chinese women’s menstrual experiences. First, they served as bridges that allowed women to step out from the confined box of shame and go beyond by involving others in their personal experience. Second, social ties were also functioned as sources of help. The help existed in different forms, ranging from offering a pad at a crisis, providing emotional support and helpful information, to participating in social discussions and movements to fight against menstruation poverty and shame for women who were suffering. Third, social ties further converted to the motivation of helping others. Either because the women had been or were expected to be helped by others through any type of social ties, or because of their shared identity as Chinese females, these women were willing to lend a helping hand to one another. Understanding Chinese young women’s experience through the lens of social ties, this research suggested an alternative approach of studying menstrual experience in addition to the emphasis on shame employed by the majority of existing literature.

My positionality made me felt that I was an integral part of this study—not only as a researcher, but as a Chinese young woman who constructed weak ties with the respondents during the interviews. For both them and me, the experience of walking through their menstrual lives so far became a part of our shared menstruation-related experience. On the other hand, urging them to talk about their periods openly to an almost stranger was also a process of destigmatization for them. Within their stories and during the interviewing, the dual process proceeded simultaneously.

While most of the existing menstrual shame literature revealed the shame held by women in various cultures, the researchers rarely took another step forward after digging the shame out and explored how women strived to challenge the hegemony of menstruation shame despite how mild the resistance might be. This study went beyond merely revealing period shame and implied how to cope with the effect of shame. The findings suggested an approach to reduce shame on periods: to bring the topic to the table. If concealing was the root of shame, then making it public would be the solution. The recent movement of boxes for “shared” pads in public restrooms at Chinese universities was on the track, and organizations for public welfare were expected to follow the same principle of advertising openly for “rejecting menstruation shame.” This study demonstrated the effort of the current young generation in stepping away from period shaming through social ties; future studies could keep track of the progress and evaluate the experience of future generations through an evolving perspective.

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