EMBODYING THE EXEMPLARY GENDER IDEAL: THE LIVES OF CHINA'S PRIVILEGED DAUGHTERS

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Abstract

Designed as an integral part of China's national modernisation programme, the One Child Policy was launched simultaneously with the economic reform in 1979. As a result of these policy changes, Chinese people live with tensions between multiple contending or even oppositional ideologies, including the official advocacy of socialist values, the revival of Confucianism and a neoliberal emphasis on individual success. The ideological departure from Mao's China, has had a mixed impact on women. Those born in the 1980s, the first only child generation, have grown into adulthood during China's socio-economic transformation and have reached a pivotal time of life, establishing career, marriage and parenthood, now with the possibility of having two children. This thesis explores the lives of well-educated urban Chinese women born in the 1980s, who are largely the beneficiaries of the policy changes of the post-Mao era. Raised to embody the ideals of a modern Chinese nation, their experiences and life trajectories are distinct from those of previous generations. Nevertheless, gender equality has been compromised under the economic reform and by the party-state's promotion of traditional family values to maintain social stability. By exploring the lives of privileged women, gender inequality is thrown into sharp relief. Based on semi-structured interviews with thirty-one women, and eleven of their male peers, I explore gendered attitudes to and experiences of marriage, reproductive choices, career and aspirations for a good life. In particular, I examine the contradictory effects of neoliberal techniques deployed by an authoritarian regime on these women's striving for success in urban China. I argue that, paradoxically, these women's individualistic determination to succeed has led them onto the path of conformity by pursuing exemplary norms which fit into the party-state's agenda. Those Chinese women who resist normative patterns of life are a minority facing an uphill struggle.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
LIST OF FIGURES	8
LIST OF TABLES	9
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	10
AUTHOR'S DECLARATION	12
CHAPTER 1	13
INTRODUCTION	13
Why Privileged Daughters?	18
Privileged through Urban Birth	18
Privileged through Higher Education	19
Privileged as the Rising Middle Class	21
CHAPTER 2	25
WOMEN, FAMILY AND THE NATION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA	25
Gendered Consequences of the Reform	27
Gendered Consequences of the One-Child Policy	28
'Well-educated' Daughters	30
Neoliheral Governance and the Middle-class Subject	31

De-politicising Class under the Reform	34
The Revitalisation of the Chinese Family	37
Contextualising Well-educated Chinese Women	41
Gender in China	43
CHAPTER 3	50
RESEARCHING CHINA'S LUCKY GENERATION: THE POST 80S	50
Research Approach	51
Research Sample and Recruitment	53
The Choice of Cities	56
In the Field	59
Gaining Informed Consent	62
Characteristics of Participants	64
Reflections on the Interview	70
Time, Space and Noise: Interviewing in Contemporary Chinese Cities	74
The Presence of Others during Interviews	75
Creative Approaches in My Research	81
Activism in the Field?	82
Transcribing, Translation and Analysis	84
CHAPTER 4	88
PREMARITAL ABORTION, WHAT IS THE HARM? THE RESPONSIBILISATION OF	
WOMEN'S PREGNANCY AMONG CHINA'S 'PRIVILEGED' DAUGHTERS	88
The Silenced Lesson: Sex Education	90
The Under-Discussed Reality: Premarital Sex	96

Women as Tension Bearers	98
Abortion in Contemporary China	100
Damaging the Reproductive Body	102
Women as 'Devalued Property'	103
The Implications of Sexual Double Standards	105
Abortion: A Responsible Choice	109
Conclusion	113
CHAPTER 5	116
THE RIGHT TIME FOR CHILDBIRTH: THE NATURALISATION OF MOTHERHOOD	
WITHIN MARRIAGE	116
Motherhood: A Choice or a Duty?	117
Conjugal Family: The Site for Reproduction	120
Timing Motherhood under Intensified Pressure	124
Tension in the Family Business: Who Decides What?	138
Conclusion	156
CHAPTER 6	159
THE GENDERED CONSTRUCTION OF EXEMPLARY MIDDLE-CLASS IDENTITY: THE	<u> </u>
HEGEMONY OF CHENGGONG (SUCCESS)	159
Embodying the high suzhi middle-class ideal	159
Securing Her 'Value' through Paid Work	161
Displaying her 'Value' through Lifestyle	167
Negotiating love and class	171
The Masculine Ideal	176

The Feminine Ideal	179
She is too Kaifang Because of her Job!	184
Performing her Gender for Love	188
Performing Sajiao	193
Romantic Love Localised	195
Conclusion	196
CHAPTER 7	198
REALITY BITES: GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF MARRIAGE AND WORK	198
The Making of a Good Wife and Daughter-in-law	198
Being a Successful Mother	210
Being a Mother of Success	212
Split Female Subjectivity	216
The Gendered Reality in the Workplace	220
The Weaker Sex	230
The Cost of Maternity	231
Consolidating Male-Centred Space	236
Conclusion	239
CHAPTER 8	241
APPENDIX	253
Appendix A Information sheet for female participants	253
Appendix B Information sheet for male participants	257
Appendix C Vignettes	261

Appendix D Consent form for participants	262
Appendix E Commercial Property Advertisements	264
Appendix F CCP Propaganda Posters	265
Appendix G Personal Information	266
Appendix H Summary of Participant Information	267
BIBLIOGRAPHY	269

List of Figures

FIGURE 1 THE PROGRESSION RATES AT VARIOUS POINTS OF THE EDUCATIONAL CAREE	ROF
SELECTED COHORTS.	20
FIGURE 2: GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF CHENGDU AND SHANGHAI.	57
FIGURE 3: CHINA'S UNEVEN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BY PROVINCES.	58
FIGURE 4: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FEMALE PARTICIPANTS AND THE RESEARCHER.	68
FIGURE 5: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MALE PARTICIPANTS AND THE RESEARCHER.	69
FIGURE 6: SORTING OUT CODING IN MY ROOM.	85
FIGURE 7: KAREN IN HER 8TH MONTH OF PREGNANCY.	128
FIGURE 8: KAREN CELEBRATES HER DAUGHTER'S 1ST BIRTHDAY.	128
FIGURE 9: KAREN WITH HER TWO-MONTH-OLD DAUGHTER IN SHANGHAI.	128
FIGURE 10: RUNNING AFTER THE DEADLINE(S) FOR UNIVERSITY-EDUCATED CHINESE	
WOMEN.	135
FIGURE 11: PSA ON GUANGHAN HIGH STREET PROMOTING FAMILY CARE FOR ELDERS, T	'AKEN
BY THE AUTHOR'S PARENTS.	140
FIGURE 12: THE SHOP OWNED BY QINGCAI AND HER FIANCÉ.	168
FIGURE 13: YIMI'S HOLIDAY PHOTOS TAKEN IN THAILAND WITH FRIENDS.	169
FIGURE 14: FISH LEONG'S ALBUM COVER, RELEASED IN 2011.	180

List of Tables

TABLE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 31 WOMEN.	64	
TABLE 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 11 MEN.	65	
TABLE 3: MAIN CHILDCARE SUPPORT AND RESIDENCY ARRANGEMENTS.	205	

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. A version of Chapter Four, 'Premarital abortion, what is the harm? The responsibilisation of women's pregnancy among China's "privileged" daughters' was awarded the Early Career Researcher Prize, 2017 by the British Association of Chinese Studies, and was published under the same title on the *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies*, Vol. 8 (1), January 2018. This thesis has not been presented to any other University for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas. All sources are fully acknowledged.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The phrase fu mu zai, bu yuan you, you bi you fang (父母在,不远游,游必有方,when parents are still alive, one shall not travel far, if one does there must be a clear place to go to), kept reappearing in my mind during the years when I was completing my PhD in England. It is a famous instruction given by Confucius in the analects, and means that while one's parents are alive, the son may not go far away. If he does go abroad, he must have a definite place to which he goes. There has been much debate about what exactly fang refers to: is it a fixed place? Is it that parents can be reassured of being able to contact the son when needed, or does it mean a clear goal to strive for in order to make his parents proud? Either way, it has been a classic saying that reflects the Chinese moral values instilled into a child's mind from the earliest years: one's filial piety to one's parents and the unbreakable ties between them. As the only child in my family, this verse speaks straight to my heart. It carries the deepest sentiment of a Chinese child's feelings towards their parents. Without a brother, I know that it is my job to make my parents proud, but the guilt of being far away from them is a lingering shadow cast over my mind.

Despite the continuing influence of son preference under China's patrilineal family tradition, scholars have observed the increasing importance of daughters in Chinese family life. A combination of the One-Child Policy, changing marriage practices and more diverse economic opportunities have elevated daughters' status to an unprecedented level in their natal family, and this is reflected in 'parents' increasing focus on their daughters' upbringing, as well as in maintaining a good relationship with them both before and after marriage'(Evans, 2008, p.20). Fong's (2002) notes that empowered urban single daughters are able to defy disadvantageous gender norms while using equivocal ones to their advantages. In contrast to the old saying that 'a married daughter is like spilt water'(*jia chu qu de nü er, po chu qu de shui,* 嫁出去的女儿, 泼出去的水), W. Zhang's (2009) research on married women in rural China reveals a strengthened relationship with their birth parents. Similarly, Liu, F., (2008b) reveals that only daughters unanimously express the imperative of assuming the filial duty towards their parents that was traditionally prescribed for

sons. All these trends indicate that a change in family practices is occurring in contemporary China.

My journey to embark on this research project stems from questions that I had regarding the contradictions and confusions I had observed since my mid 20s as one of China's only daughters. Born as the only child of my family in a small Chinese city, I remember that my waipo1 (maternal grandmother, 外婆) used to tell me affectionately that I was living in a *mi guan guan* (local dialect for honey jar, 密罐罐) compared to China's previous generations. I did not guite understand why at that time. But I do know that my own mother had to cook for the whole family after school when she was young, because waipo was always busy at work throughout the 1960s and '70s. My mother also remembers that her parents used to lay her at their feet while sleeping, but held her younger brother between them in their bed. This, somehow, has become her symbolic memory of the unfair treatment she experienced growing up as a daughter, which has made her struggle to feel intimate with her own mother. Maybe this experience influenced her determination to give me a different childhood. I grew up spending a lot of time with my mother, which made me never doubt her love for me. Evans (2008) identified the communicative bonds that have built up between mothers and their only daughters in contemporary urban China, which is distinct from previous generations. I have to say that this intimate bond with my own mother laid a solid foundation for my sense of security and selfworth as a person, which makes me feel forever grateful to her.

Like many urban daughters born under the One-Child Policy during the 1980s, as my parents' zhang shang ming zhu (a precious pearl on the palm,掌上明珠), I used to see no constraints in being a girl and believed that I was free to become whoever I strove to be. Maybe, to some extent, I am indeed lucky. Growing up during a period of time when China was experiencing rapid social and economic transformations under the economic reform, I have seen my own home city expanding, with many tall commercial apartment blocks shooting up like bamboo shoots in spring, and bicycle-flooded streets washed over by private vehicles. Our family home moved from the

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¹ The word *wai* signals distance compared to the paternal grandmother, according to patrilineal custom.

initial two-room flat allocated by my mother's *danwei* to bigger places purchased with money made by my father's business. I grew up witnessing our surroundings becoming physically transformed by visible material wealth accumulating alongside dire poverty scattered at the edges of our city, which served as a warning sign to remind people to keep running fast in this market race to avoid the misfortune of lagging behind.

For a child born into an urban family with means, life was not lacking. With both parents working, throughout my school years I was taken care of by hired nannies, who were either redundant factory workers or rural migrants. Together with other boys and girls from my school, I was taught the idea that there is only one way forward: we must study hard and enter a good university, so that we can become successful in our work, therefore 'giving back' to our parents and *zu guo* (motherland, 祖国). Fierce competitions that must be won through individual efforts and deliberate self-cultivation were instilled as the norm from our earliest school years, as this was the only way for one to deserve a bright future.

Gender was not significant in my imagination of the future at that time. It seemed that everything would just happen 'naturally' as we grew up. As much as I never doubted that I would have a career, I equally never questioned that one day I would marry a man and have a family, because surely everyone will do the same, both boys and girls. It is just a normal part of life! Although dating was forbidden during my school years, my girlfriends often gathered together to discuss boys while entertaining each other with romantic imaginings of a married future. At that stage, none of us had a clue about how our lives might differ from those of our male peers.

It was only when I finished my university degree and 'entered society' for the first time at the age of 22, that I started to realise the gendered reality that I had to face as a young Chinese woman. It felt as though, overnight, the topic of 'settling down' in a good marriage had become the priority that concerned many of our parents. Parents suddenly seemed to no longer be cheering on our academic achievements or career aspirations, but to be worrying about our marriage prospects instead. It seemed that the season had come and 'flowers need to blossom' as my father jokingly put it. The idea that *nan da dang hun, nü da dang jia* (women and men should marry when they grow up,男大当婚,女大当嫁) had taken effect. This

posed a particular problem for women from my cohort who had the privilege of higher education, and believed in equal opportunities for boys and girls. The expectation on us to find a good man suddenly appeared to be more urgent than the lesser pressure on men to marry early. If she fails to marry, regardless of her other achievements, a woman is still seen as somehow failing in her life. Women are believed to have a much shorter 'expiry date' than men in the dating market; single men over 30 are said to be diamonds in high demand, whereas women over 27 are described as 'leftover'. The emotional stress attached to being a single woman makes many go on blind dates hoping to shed the shame. Simultaneously, overt gender discrimination in the job market and restricted career choices makes having a 'reliable' husband sound like not such a bad idea for young women, presuming that they are able to find one. More importantly, our loving parents, to whom we feel closest, have become the champions of trying their best to ensure that our lives are not going 'off track'. As one of my participants, Stella, commented: 'Nowadays, we can ignore other people's opinions, colleagues and friends alike, but our parents' feelings are the most influential and difficult to ignore.' The fear of failing to live up to what is expected as normal and desirable generates constant anxiety for many young women of my cohort.

Liu Jieyu (2017) points out that the unilateral emphasis on the framework of filial obligations in examining Chinese family life fails to address the complexities of doing family relationships and deprives individuals of agency and autonomy. Therefore, she applies the practices of intimacy (Jamieson, 2011), focusing on the practices that foster the subjective sense of closeness among Chinese family members. This shift of focus is illuminating, particularly at a time when the Chinese government is placing great weight upon family obligations in the context of a rapidly ageing population and limited state welfare provision, reinforcing duty by appealing to 'natural feelings' among family members. As a result of the gendered division of labour in the domestic sphere and gendered notions of emotionality, women are often the key actors in forming family bonds. Jamieson (2011) argues that 'practices of intimacy can re-inscribe inequalities such as those of age, class and gender as well as subvert them'. The strengthened bond between only daughters and their parents results from the changing family practices in contemporary urban China,

which must have interlocking impacts on both the only daughters' gendered subjectivities and their practices of intimacy in adult life.

Young women freshly graduated from universities are coming to an age when they have to reconcile multiple and often conflicting expectations from family and society. As the only child, you know that you are the only future hope of the family, therefore you should perform well as a 'substitute son' to make your parents pound². However, it seems equally un-filial or wrong if you completely forgo your gendered identity as a 'woman'. It feels as though, once a woman finishes her education, a different set of gendered requirements suddenly appears as her reality. Fully aware that parents are genuinely concerned about our future happiness and that we feel the same about their peace of mind as their good daughters, it is indeed a struggle to find a balanced solution. At this point, I wondered for the first time whether, instead of a honey jar, perhaps a pretty fish tank is better suited to describe the lives of China's privileged daughters, including myself: it appears to have no boundaries until you hit the invisible glass walls.

To better equip oneself to compete in a market economy, studying abroad has become a popular choice for the children of many Chinese families with means. It was also this experience that enabled me to 'swim in different water' and gain exposure to different schools of thought and political ideas, and this led me to reexamine the taken-for-granted norms and perceptions of my Chinese life. Working and living in both China and the UK enabled me to notice the different gender realities existing in these two social contexts. One day, as though it was my destiny, I came across an article on China's white-collar professional women and how gender affects them in their workplace (Liu, J., 2008). It felt as though a magic door had opened to me, and I could not resist stepping through it to seek an exciting new world. My instinct told me that this path might lead me to the answers to the many questions I had accumulated throughout the years about the contradictions in women's experiences in China.

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² I use the term 'substitute son' here to highlight the parental expectation on the only daughter to do well in life, as traditionally it was the son's duty to bring honour to his patrilineal family, and took care of aging parents. This by no mean implies that parental expectations on their only child are not gendered, as research has suggested otherwise, see more in Wang and Fong (2009); Evans (2011) and Liu, F. (2006).

Why Privileged Daughters?

Many might ask: why focus on these clearly privileged women, who in many ways are considered the winners in the economic reform, while there are many categories of Chinese women still suffering from disadvantaged social and economic conditions, who therefore need more urgent attention? It is true that my research cohort does not face imminent oppression like the rural migrant women who work in military-style factories (Chan and Pun, 2010; Pun and Chan, 2012; Pun and Smith, 2007) or as domestic workers (Gaetano, 2015a). However, compared to the large volumes of existing research dedicated to these causes, there is not much written on welleducated, middle-class Chinese women. In fact, the first generation of privileged only daughters is still currently going through critical life stages, such as establishing a career, marriage and motherhood. Given these women's privileged position, looking into their experiences in a contemporary urban Chinese context will enable me to throw gender inequality into sharp relief. I am interested in women who fall into the following three categories of social privilege, which I believe places them in a much better position to compete in the market economy than the majority of Chinese women.

Privileged through Urban Birth

China has a long-standing rural-urban divide, which has been growing since the economic reform. This reform has generated contrasting experiences for urbanites and rural dwellers due to the partiality of China's development policy with its uneven distribution of public spending, which has long prioritised urban development (Lu and Chen, 2004). Despite the loosening of the *hukou*³ (household registration) system during the reform, which allows people to move more freely, holding a city *hukou* still means enjoying various privileges that are not accessible to rural residents; for example, better education, good healthcare, and a minimum level of income protection. This system creates a social hierarchy, which continues to separate the urban privileged and the rural poor from the start of their lives, through job

³ *Hukou* is China's residence permit or household registration system, which gives the government the power to decide its citizens' mobility between village and city.

opportunities (Choi and Peng, 2016) and even their marriage prospects (Lui, 2016; Gaetano, 2008).

Meanwhile, parents in the countryside and in the cities responded differently to the One-Child Policy. Due to the strong resistance against this policy in the countryside, which generated catastrophic effects, including the reappearance of female infanticide in certain extreme cases (Zeng et al., 1993; Human Rights in China, 1995; Wasserstrom, 1984), the CCP issued special documents during the 1980s that allowed exceptions for rural couples with only a daughter to have two children (Greenhalgh, 2008, p.33). Besides, as Croll (1995) pointed out, during the early reform era parents in the city were more likely to be subject to closer government control in implementing this policy through their state-owned *danwei* (work unit, 单位) compared to their countryside counterparts, who could rely on their land. The availability of pensions and other benefits provided through the *danwei* framework also gave urban parents economic reasons to be relatively free from the traditional idea of *yang er fang lao* (raising a son to prevent old-age poverty, 养儿防老) that still prevailed in the countryside. Consequently, different production models led to different attitudes to the gender of the only child. Research has shown that the One-Child Policy affected girls who were born in the countryside differently from their urban peers, as the urban communities share a strong belief and interest to educate their only-child regardless of the child's sex (Fong, 2002; Veeck, Flurry and Jiang, 2003; Croll, 1995; Tsui and Rich, 2002). As a result, many of these urban only daughters have made their way through China's university entrance exam and obtained a bachelor's university degree or above.

Privileged through Higher Education

The government reopened its universities in 1977, and higher education in China has expanded at a rapid rate since the early 1990s. The *bing gui*⁴ (a combination/merger of two tracks -- a unification of state-funded and self-funded programmes in HE, 并轨) policy was introduced in 1995 and was adopted throughout

⁴ The *bing gui* policy was a substantial reform in recruitment, fee-charging, and job assignment in higher education in China. A direct effect of this policy was an increase in the number of students enrolled in higher education.

all the provinces and different types of universities by the late 1990s and early 2000s. It has resulted in a rising number of provincial higher education institutions, which have greatly increased the opportunities for participation overall (Liu, Y., 2015a). As a result, enrolment in higher education rose from 1.15% in 1980 to 29.7% in 2013 (Liu, Y., 2015b).

Figure 1 illustrates the scale of the expansion of higher education by comparing the progression rates at various selection points of the educational career of selected birth cohorts. Liu Ye (2016, p.154) points out that the combination of the One-Child Policy and the expansion of higher education has significantly increased girls' participation, which made 'the female-to-male ratio in higher education enrolment rise to 1.00 in 2010'.

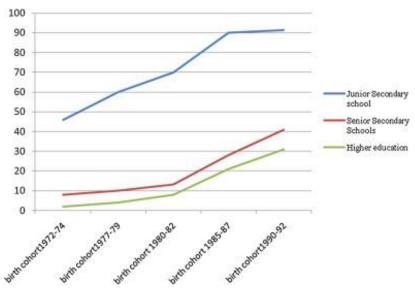


Figure 1: The progression rates at various points of the educational career of selected cohorts (China Statistical Yearbook, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2006, 2009, 2010. Liu, Y., 2015a, p.111)

Despite the sharp increase compared to previous age cohorts in terms of the progression rate into higher education for the 1985–1987 cohort, to 21 per cent, since the *bing gui*, it still only consists of a minority (China Statistical Yearbook, 2007 Liu, Y., 2015a, p.110-111). In China, a four-year bachelor's degree is often the entry requirement to access white-collar professions, including working for the government or public institutions. These jobs are regarded as enjoying higher social status and better career prospects compared to three-year diploma courses (Sohu News,

2017). This indicates that those receiving higher education are still a relatively small and privileged group. Therefore, I only focus on people who have gained a four-year bachelor's degree or above in my research.

Privileged as the Rising Middle Class⁵

As a result of China's booming economy during the reform era, urban households form the majority of the country's new rising middle class, which enjoys increasing spending power and growing influence in society (Tomba, 2004; Zhou, 2008). Most of my participants' parents are already established as part of the urban middle class, and their heavy investment in their children's education has also provided social capital for their children to start in an advantageous position. Even for the few participants whose parents are relatively poorer urban residents, their only child's higher education has functioned as an engine of upward social mobility (Lin and Sun, 2010), which has enabled them to become part of China's growing middle class. In today's China, the class-coded masculinities and femininities are highly visible, as reflected in existing empirical researches from the top-end elite masculinities (Osburg, 2013; Uretsky, 2016) to the white-collar workers (Hird, 2008; Liu, J., 2017a), and down to the rural migrants (Ngai, 1999; Choi and Peng, 2016). Therefore, the class characteristics and aspirations of this cohort are essential to understanding the nature of their gendered choices.

Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005), taking a broadly Foucauldian approach to modern biopower over life, argue that, in China, there are three categories of persons who form the site of such power and resistance, due to their centrality in the Chinese state's population projects: the reproductive woman, the quality single child and the good mother. My participants potentially fit into these three categories, which makes them extremely interesting to look at. The intersection between market neoliberalism and political authoritarianism has created a particular type of governmentality in post-reform Chinese society, and these forces together are shaping its particular types of gendered subjects (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Rofel, 2007). The privilege enjoyed by the Chinese women of my research cohort illustrate their centrality to

⁵ I am aware that the term 'middle class' is contested, especially in China. I will discuss this in more detail in my literature review.

China's social engineering programme to build a strong modern nation, and they are set as exemplary norms for others to follow. Understanding these women's lives, which are not disadvantaged in any way other than by their gender, is a good test case for considering the degree to which gender inequality persists in China.

Initially, my research questions were very broad. Being myself part of my research cohort, I wanted to learn about the 'invisible walls' that have created the strange contradiction I described for a privileged daughter. What does it mean to be a good woman in contemporary China? As my research went on, I formed more clearly focused research questions: living under the tension between the neoliberalism of the market and an authoritarian government, how do these privileged women respond to these governing powers? Do they accept them, or rebel against them? To what extent do they buy into the neoliberal ethos, and what does this mean for their gendered experiences?

In 2016, the One-Child Policy was replaced by the Two-Child Policy, which has added another dynamic to these women's lives in negotiation with their personal ambitions and external expectations. By listening to my participants' narrations of their hopes, fears and everyday lives, I started to understand how I became the person I am now. Mills (2000, p.196) argued that inward reflection drives the researcher's sociological imagination, and that you 'must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work, continually to examine and interpret it'. Critically reflecting upon my own experience and acknowledging that I am personally involved in every intellectual product that I work on helps me to become closer to what Mills described as an 'intellectual craftsman' (sic. Mills, 2000, p. 196). With the naive hope that my research project could somehow contribute to finding answers to help move China forward towards a more egalitarian future, I could finally somewhat justify these years of separation from my beloved parents.

My thesis is divided into eight chapters. The next chapter will explore the literature that informs the contemporary context in which the women of my research cohort live. I will introduce the significant policy changes, such as the economic reform and the introduction of the One-Child Policy, which have dramatically shaped the social and economic landscape of contemporary China. I discuss the revitalisation of the Chinese family under the reform in relation to contemporary governance. I will also

discuss the mixed impact of these changes on Chinese women in general before narrowing my focus down to consider its implications for well-educated women. A brief discussion of the shifting connotations of gender equality in China is given at the end with the aim of contextualising its contemporary relevance.

In Chapter Three, I introduce my research approach and examine the process of conducting fieldwork in contemporary urban China, reflecting upon the socio-cultural specificities that I took into account in practising qualitative research in a non-western context. I completed 31 interviews with women and 11 with men.

There are four analysis chapters following the methodology, which will mainly focus on issues around these women's premarital experiences and family life. In Chapter Four, I highlight issues around premarital sex, a prevalent practice under the reform among young people, to uncover how it creates new dilemmas for young women of this age as they negotiate between moralism and realism in terms of their premarital sexual conduct. I focus on their narratives about the stigma attached to premarital abortion and women's interpretations of 'responsible motherhood' in order to reveal the specific Chinese characteristics of their rationalisation of reproductive choice. Then I move on to the other side of the coin: if premarital fertility should be avoided at all costs, what does desirable motherhood look like? In Chapter Five, I explore social perceptions of responsible motherhood, which remains strictly naturalised within heterosexual marriage. I explore my participants' meaning-making around childbearing and reveal the tensions that women face in order to fulfil the social and medical norms around reproduction within an intensified timeframe. In particular, I discuss the role that family members play in safeguarding the norm and its political implications in contemporary China. In Chapter Six, I look into women's constructions of their gendered subjectivity as China's exemplary middle class. I focus on their individual agency under a powerful neoliberal discourse of a desiring and enterprising self in seeking personal happiness through heterosexual marriage. By examining their criteria and practices in seeking a suitable marriage partner, I reveal the restrictive nature of these practices, which ironically make marriage into both a struggle and a solution for these women. I then discuss how their aspirations towards happiness help to realise the neoliberal ideal that fits within the governance framework of the party-state. After all these struggles to successfully embody the

heterosexual married ideal, my final analysis chapter uncovers the reality for those who are married and its implications for women in the workplace. The emphasis on a mother's primary responsibilities for domestic life, including bringing up the next generation of good-quality children, means intensified stress on working mothers. On the other hand, the neoliberal economy, which prefers workers who are free from other responsibilities, consolidates a male-centred public space that restricts women's career progression. Consequently, the multiple pull and push factors function together to place these women in a position that stabilises the economic and political status quo through consolidating their 'gendered nature'. Therefore, women's negotiation of equality is framed as an individualised private struggle under a powerful regime. In the conclusion, in pulling all of my analysis together, I aim to cast light on the gendered reality for these privileged women in the hope of illuminating the constraints that Chinese women need to cast off in seeking an egalitarian future.

Chapter 2

Women, Family and the Nation in Contemporary China

The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 marked the end of the Cultural Revolution, as well as the Maoist version of socialism, which had disillusioned many by its focus on class struggle and continuous revolution (Rofel, 2007). In 1979, the new leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), under Deng Xiaoping, launched the economic reform that represented a shift in its priorities to economic development. This transformed China from a planned economy into a state-led market economy, where the boundaries between the market and the state is often blurred (Nee, 2000). The reform, known as *gai ge kai fang* (改革开放), literally translated as 'reform and opening up', focused on economic modernisation through market-based privatisation (Oi and Walder, 1999) and the liberalisation of direct foreign investment (Gallagher, 2007). This brought about unprecedented economic growth and social change in China, signalling the country's departure from its socialist past towards becoming reintegrated into the global capitalist economy, marked by its joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001. Its economic success has made China a world power, with remarkable GDP growth over the past three decades (NBS China, 2016).

Reconnecting to the outside world, together with the state's gradual retreat from direct control of many areas of personal life, meant that more space was given to its people to express their individuality. It also created a greater degree of freedom in everyday life, including both financial and physical mobility. The loosening of the *hukou*⁶ system by the late 1970s and the implementation of an individual resident identity-card system since the 1980s allowed individuals to move more freely (Croll, 2006; Yan, 2009). One example of this is the mass wave of rural migrants; they had come out of the decollectivisation of the rural production system and found it increasingly difficult to live off their land alone under the economic reform, and flooded into Chinese cities and coastal industrial zones seeking a better future (Unger, 2002). This essentially created a free labour market, which had not existed in Mao's China, and fuelled the booming private enterprises, along with the massive

distribution.

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⁶ The *hukou* system, commonly known as the household registration system, is an important regulatory tool of the party-state that serves multiple purposes, including control of population

scale of industrialisation and urbanisation nationwide. During the 1980s, the Chinese government gradually abandoned its job assignment system⁷ to allow employers to make their own hiring decisions (Tsui and Rich, 2002). At the beginning of 1996, the Ministry of Personnel issued a notification that officially ended the universities' responsibility to allocate jobs for their graduates (The Ministry of Personnel, 1996). All these measures essentially created a free labour market that was then available for the marketisation of its economy. Becoming rich suddenly became fashionable, and individuals were now encouraged to take their lives in their own hands and be responsible for their own success or failure. The term *xia hai* (jump into the ocean, 下海) became popular to describe people who left their stable jobs in the *danwei* system⁸ to seek business opportunities by becoming entrepreneurs during the 1980s and 1990s (Osburg, 2013; Ong, 1996).

Another significant policy change that ran in parallel with the economic reform was the implementation of the One-Child Policy in 1979° (Greenhalgh, 2008). From the very beginning, this policy had two clear aims: to control the quantity of the population and to improve its quality (Nie, 2005). It was a social engineering programme designed by the Party-State with the ambition of accelerating the nation's progress towards regaining its global prominence by raising a new generation of healthy, wealthy, smart and savvy young people (Greenhalgh, 2008). Although the Chinese government had started promoting the 'small' family model that was encapsulated in the slogan 'later, longer and fewer' for childbirth (Tien, 1980) during the early 1970s, it was not until 1980 that a strict policy of one child for every couple was implemented on a massive scale across the nation. There were variations in the policy, which allowed limited exceptions to some couples, depending on their employment, ethnicity and area of residency; for instance, rural couples with only a daughter were allowed to have a second child. For urban residents, state-employed cadres and workers, the One-Child Policy was strictly

⁷ A government programme of job allocation existed from the mid-1950s through to the late 1980s in China, which controlled the size, growth, and distribution of urban jobs (Bian, 1997).

⁸ The *danwei* (work unit) functions as a 'cradle to grave' welfare system for mostly urban industrial state-owned enterprise employees (see Lu and Perry, 1997).

⁹ For a detailed schedule of the evolution of the One-Child Policy, see Greenhalgh (2008, p. 32) and Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005).

implemented with official approval needed for exceptions under special circumstances (Greenhalgh, 2008; Nie, 2005).

Gendered Consequences of the Reform

Whilst the combination of large-scale government planning programmes and market characteristics reduced poverty, it also dramatically widened the income gap between rich and poor, as well as deepening the rural/urban divide (Riskin, Zhao and Li, 2001; Schiavenza, 2013, Yang, D., 1999). The guarantee of the 'rice bowl' that used to be the symbol of China's socialist past began to be eroded from the beginning of the reform (Cook and Maurer-Fazio, 1999), followed by mass waves of xiagang (lay-offs) during the 1990s. This meant that its famously glorious socialist workers suffered from a deterioration in living standards (Liu, J., 2007; Solinger, 2002; Guo, 2009). Croll (2006) pointed out that, instead of a diamond-shaped society with a large middle class in the centre, the distribution of wealth in China was more like a pyramid with a very small minority at the top, who control a substantial amount of wealth compared to a poor mass at the bottom. Guo (2009) pointed out that large sections of the working class have joined the new poor, citing an official figure of 23.65 million people earning less than 85 US dollars a year (Xinhua News, 2007 cited in Guo, 2009, p. 4). Depending on one's definition of poverty, the number of poor could increase considerably by counting the estimated 12 million to 100 million unemployed people and around 120 million poorly paid rural migrants (Guo, 2009). Moreover, the effects of the reform on the individual also depended on their gender, age and geographical location.

The gendered effects of the reform on women rippled through all social strata¹¹ and age groups. The combination of market reform and the One-Child Policy further complicated the picture of women's job opportunities. Research conducted in the 1980s in rural China showed that decollectivisation led to the head of the household regaining control over women's labour (Andors, 1983; Davin, 1989). On the other hand, the rise of small-town industry also broadened rural occupational choices,

¹⁰ A metaphor used to describe the guaranteed life-long employment of Chinese workers under the socialist system.

¹¹ I am aware of the controversy between the terms 'class' and 'social strata'. I use them interchangeably in this thesis as it is not the focus here to differentiate the two.

which improved women's economic status by enabling them to earn an independent income (Gao, 1994). While men and young women were able to migrate to cities for better-paid jobs, older and married women were left behind (Jacka, 1997). A large proportion of migrant women were absorbed into low-paid factory work, service industries in urban areas or the free economic zones, as they are perceived as 'cheaper and easier to regulate' (Pun, 1999, p. 18; Jacka, 2006). Although migration broadened their life horizons and increased their income, rural migrant women often worked in low-skilled and low-paid factory jobs under unpleasant if not dangerous working conditions (Pun, 2005). A good example was a toy factory fire in Southern China in 1993 that killed 84 workers, including 82 women, which hit the international news (New York Times, 1993).

In the cities, gender equality was subsumed into the market's priority of profit, which made women vulnerable to discrimination in various sectors (Honig and Hershatter, 1988). There was? a shift from the socialist 'iron rice bowl' to the 'rice bowl of youth', which infuses youthful, feminine, urban bodies with value while simultaneously devaluing middle-aged laid-off workers and rural women (Wang, 2003; Hanser, 2005). Female factory workers were more vulnerable to redundancy and were called upon to return home when unemployment rose (Liu, J., 2007). 'Youth occupations' were commonly occupied by young, less educated women (Zhang, 2000). The dismantling of the socialist job allocation system also exposed female graduates to particular pressure and gender discrimination in the job recruitment process (Liu, F., 2008a; Honig and Hershatter, 1988). Today, even the most privileged and well-educated urban women, who work in desirable white-collar professions, find that their sexuality is still commonly exploited by a male-dominated business culture (Liu, J., 2008, 2017a).

Gendered Consequences of the One-Child Policy

Son preference has always been part of Chinese culture, but it was pushed into the spotlight because of the One-Child Policy. Women who gave birth to baby girls were not only victims themselves, but also often colluded in violence against their female infants because of son preference (Croll, 1995). Research conducted by Croll (1983) revealed that son preference was the main reason why many couples who had one daughter resisted the One-Child Policy. The socio-economic functioning of the rural

household demanded more children and favoured sons over daughters, which explains the major setbacks faced by the policy in the countryside (Croll, 1983, 1985, 2000). In order to keep births within the planned quotas allocated by central government, local authorities reportedly used coercive measures, including mandatory IUD¹² insertion for all women who had one child, abortion for any woman who had an unauthorised pregnancy and sterilisation for couples with two or more children (Graham, Larsen and Xu, 1998; Croll, 1983). The desperate desire for a boy in certain rural areas even caused the unforeseen reappearance of female infanticide (Zeng et al., 1993; Wasserstrom, 1984), which led to an intensive campaign by the WFC to educate the population about the equal value of daughters (Croll, 1995). The human and social cost of implementing this policy is left largely undocumented as the public endured it mostly in silence (Nie, 2005). Although the government modified the policy to allow a de facto two children in the countryside (Greenhalgh, 1994), there were still a large number of baby girls who disappeared mysteriously within the highly bureaucratised CCP government system (Nie, 2011; Zhu, Lu and Hesketh, 2009). Among many reasons, including infanticide and sexselective abortion, the missing girls could also be a result of parents not registering their daughters in order to avoid penalties (Aird, 1990; Hull, 1990; Zeng et al., 1993). This could further disadvantage these girls in terms of education and employment opportunities.

Consequently, the concern over China's skewed sex ratio at birth is no news (Zhou, 2016; Plafker, 2002; Basten and Jiang, 2014). According to estimates from the 2010 population census, the national Sex Ratio at Birth was 121.2 boys to 100 girls, compared to the global average of 105 (NBS China, 2011). The deeply-rooted son preference, coupled with an inadequate social security system under the One-Child Policy, has exacerbated the sex ratio imbalance, which led to the National Health and Family Planning Commission to state on its website that 'our country has the most serious gender imbalance that is most prolonged and affecting the greatest number of people' (Reuters, 2015).

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 $^{^{12}}$ An IUD is a small T-shaped plastic and copper device that is inserted into the womb, and serves as a contraceptive method.

'Well-educated' Daughters

A mixture of social and economic factors contributed to the One-Child Policy's urban success. The entrenched economic rural/urban divide in China meant that it was a rather different picture for urban families. Unlike the countryside's strong resistance to the One-Child Policy, birth-rates in urban areas were already experiencing a fast decline by the end of the 1970s (Croll, 1985; Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005). In addition, an established nationwide family planning system, in place since the 1970s, effectively facilitated the distribution of contraceptives to married couples and the launching of intensive campaigns about the importance of family planning. Moreover, the danwei system, in which most city residents were employed, meant that the government had tighter control over an individual's family life, pressing them to comply with the One-Child Policy during the early stages of the reform (Croll, Davin and Kane, 1985). For example, 86% of all babies born in Beijing and 91% in Shanghai in 1985 were singletons (Gu, Poston Jr and Shu, 1987). Poston and Falbo (1990) also found that over 90% of newly formed families in the large urban areas had only one child, compared to a much smaller incidence in rural areas. The different reactions towards this policy between urban and rural areas meant contrasting experiences for daughters.

China's long-standing urban bias in development policies has meant better infrastructures and more opportunities for urban residents (Yang, D., 1999). Since its establishment in 1949, the communist government has made substantial efforts to promote educational equality for women and has achieved impressive results, especially in urban areas (Lavely et al., 1990). Well-educated professional urban families, whose socio-economic position benefited greatly from the reform, have more and better resources to care for their single child compared to their countryside counterparts (Evans, 2008). Moreover, deprived of educational opportunities during the Cultural Revolution themselves, parents often see their one child as the only hope to carry out their lost dreams (Croll, 1995; Fong, 2004). Parents' excessive attention directed towards their only child also meant strict discipline, multiple demands and high expectations (Fong, 2007). This is reflected in the social anxiety around the so-called 'little emperor' syndrome circulating in the mass media (Wang and Fong, 2009; Jiao, Ji and Ching, 1986; Wu, 1986). Meanwhile, the mass layoffs

in state enterprises and the inflation resulting from the reform created a sense of insecurity and urgency for parents to pass on their own cultural capital and help their child to accumulate more resources in order to secure and improve the social position of their family (Fong, 2004). A combination of these social and economic factors has led to a strong belief and shared interests among Chinese urban families to invest in their only child's education regardless of gender, with the child entering a prestigious university as their goal (Tsui and Rich, 2002; Fong, 2004).

As an unexpected by-product of the One-Child Policy, the vast majority of urban girls born under the policy enjoy unprecedented educational investment from their family due to lack of competition from siblings, especially brothers (Veeck, Flurry and Jiang, 2003; Tsui and Rich, 2002; Fong, 2002). Simultaneously, the mass expansion of Chinese higher education in the late 1990s also presented better opportunities for more young people to receive a university education (Liu, Y., 2016). All these factors have created advantages for urban only daughters, who are given an unprecedented opportunity to access higher education. As the old saying 'ignorance is a woman's virtue' (nü zi wu cai bian shi de, 女子无才便是德) indicates, the majority of women in imperial China did not have the privilege of education (Berg and Starr, 2007). Rawski (1979) estimated that, at the end of the imperial era, only 2–10% of women could read or write to some extent, compared to 30–40% of men. Thanks to the One-Child Policy, China has finally produced the largest number of well-educated women ever to have existed in its long history.

Neoliberal Governance and the Middle-class Subject

The cultural mode of modernisation and development has achieved a hegemonic appeal among ordinary Chinese people as 'the only reality possible', which assumes 'a desirable, inevitable, universal, and unilinear evolution towards the condition of the First World' (Fong, 2004: 21). From its beginning, population control through birth planning was designed to accelerate the four modernisations¹³ (Croll, Davin and Kane, 1985; Greenhalgh, 2003). Simultaneously, the popularisation of *suzhi*

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¹³ Deng Xiaoping referred to the 'four modernisations', meaning the modernisation of agriculture, industry, science/education, and national defence, which all came under the slogan of building an ideal *xiaokang* society to provide for all its citizens.

discourse since the 1980s became an integral part of the Chinese government's plans to improve the quality of its population thus facilitating its modernisation (Jacka, 2009).

Roughly translated as quality, it is hard to pin down exactly what *suzhi* connotes. Influenced by its eugenic tradition during the Republic era (Dikötter, 2015), the term *suzhi* now places more emphasis on a combination of Confucian and Chinese Marxist modes of self-cultivation (Judd, 2002), which gloss over the dichotomy between nature and nurture (Kipnis, 2006). In summary, it often refers to 'the innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct' (Jacka, 2009, p. 524). It has become a common description of individually embodied human qualities, with a sacred overtone.

As Harvey (2007, p. 121) points out, China's market transition and its emergence as a global economic power after 1980 was 'in part an unintended consequence of neoliberal turn in the advanced capitalist world'. Its peculiar path towards 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', or 'privatisation with Chinese characteristics' as some prefer to call it, meant that the country managed to incorporate neoliberal elements into an authoritarian system, where market development has been dictated by the state. Despite its 'Chinese characteristics', Harvey (2007, p. 144) contends that, as far as the demand for 'a large, easily exploited, and relatively powerless labour force' as characteristics of neoliberalism are concerned, 'China certainly qualifies as a neoliberal economy'.

As much as China's state-manipulated market economy has delivered spectacular economic growth that has benefited a significant proportion of its population, it has also created a shift in class relations marked by soaring structural social inequality, which quickly led to social polarisation in terms of income disparities among different classes, social strata, and regions (Wang, H., 2003). Anagnost (2004) and Yan Hairong (2003) have argued powerfully that the party-state's deployment of *suzhi* discourse is at the centre of China's neoliberal governmentality under its socioeconomic changes. *Suzhi* is used to justify a variety of social and political hierarchies by coding individual bodies with different values (Kipnis, 2006). It masks the exploitation of rural migrant workers' cheap labour which fuels its booming market economy (Jacka, 2009; Anagnost, 2004). As Anagnost (2004, p. 190) acutely points

out, 'the body of the rural migrant, which exemplifies suzhi in its apparent absence, and the body of the urban, middle-class only child, which is fetishized as a site for the accumulation of the very dimensions of *suzhi* that are wanting in its "other", both serve distinct purposes in China's market transformation. The ideal citizens whom the government aims to cultivate are those who embody high suzhi, whereas the 'low quality of the population' has taken the blame for many of the social problems China is facing (Liu, F., 2008a). Similarly, Sigley (2006, p. 504) points out that the Chinese governmental response to challenges arising from the reform involves 'a creative blending of neoliberal rationalities and revitalised forms of socialist rationalities'. Under this system, the emerging urban middle-class subjects, who supposedly embody *gao suzhi* (high quality, 高素质) are the apple of the Party's eye in terms of their capacity for self-governance within the party's set agenda. The perceived di suzhi (low quality, 低素质) rural migrants are believed to need more direct discipline and governance from the state. Moreover, suzhi has served effectively to persuade the public to participate in reconfiguring Chinese society within the global capitalist market through the maximisation of the capabilities and value of the human body in order to reach a good life as defined by a competitive market (Anagnost, 2004).

Convincing families that low fertility would lead to personal success and the prosperity of a modern nation, from which everyone would benefit, played a large part in motivating the public to accept the One-Child Policy in urban areas (Fong, 2002). Furthermore, suzhi discourse plays an important part in the government's propaganda effort to popularise the One-Child Policy and encourage parents' cooperation in raising the best quality children in order to succeed in the market economy (Kipnis, 2006). Parents' intense investment in their only child's education reflects a common belief among Chinese people that academic attainment can help them to compete better in contemporary society (Liu, F., 2008a; Fong, 2004; Liu, F., 2015). This belief is also evident in Croll's (2006) research on China's new consumers, which found that Chinese children had become a major part of family expenditure. Whilst urban parents provide their only child with every social, economic and cultural privilege in order to facilitate their access to higher education (Jacob, 2006), they also fulfil the state-designed agenda to foster a new generation of 'high-quality' people, who can function within the current political framework to build a strong modern Chinese nation (Woronov, 2009).

Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) argued that China shifted its direct political surveillance of the size of its population onto that of population quality as the state intensified its effort to develop a competitive labour force for the global market during the 1990s. Informed by a broad Foucauldian approach to forms of power that exist in and beyond the state, Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005, p.29) point out that:

Historically, the emergence of a politics of life has been intimately connected to the rise of capitalism, when newly disciplined bodies and newly educated minds were needed to form a new labour force for the expanding capitalist economy. With the development of capitalism, the power to create and instil the norms guiding the cultivation of life, particularly its health and education, drifted from the state to other social forces, including the medical, educational, and legal disciplines.

The Chinese party-state's installing of modern science as the norm for all life to follow has effectively completed the handover from external regulation to the self-regulation and self-cultivation of its population. The governmentalisation of life has been built on the 'normalisation of society' as Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005, p.29) note, within which various social forces join with the state to shape norms. Consequently, the 'high quality' reproductive women who have the ability to bear and raise good quality children become new objects of power and new sites of struggle.

De-politicising Class under the Reform

The term *jie ji* (class, 阶级) carries strong political antagonism and connotes 'exploitation' and 'suppression' associated with China's revolutionary past. It is now almost a taboo term in public discourse (Yang, 2010). It has been toned down by terms like *she hui jie ceng* (social strata, 社会阶层) or *zhi ye* (occupation, 职业) to avoid political sensitivity and mask the social inequality that might threaten the party-state's legitimacy (Li, 2013; Lu, 2002; Anagnost, 2008). Rofel (1999) points out that an emancipatory story was told about China's post-socialist reform as freeing its people from Maoist socialism, which was said to have suppressed true gendered human natures and hindered the nation from achieving modernity. This allegory led to class struggle losing its place in public discussions and policy making, alongside the official discourse describing the reform as merely a transition period towards

'socialism with Chinese characteristics', which serves to mask the self-evident contradictions that have emerged since the reform (Rofel, 2007). The eruption of nationwide protests during the June 4th movement in 1989 was a public response to the social inequality and injustice that resulted from the reform (Rofel, 2007). Research on the subsequent labour unrest in China further indicates the emerging class struggles initiated by waged factory labourers (Chen, 2000; Elfstrom and Kuruvilla, 2014; Pun, 2005). Yang (2010) contends that class is downplayed in the post-Mao era precisely because a real class structure has come into being as a direct result of privatisation. Guo (2009) explains that, from the party's perspective, its new mission of generating wealth through the marketisation of its economy does not need a revolutionary working class. Instead, fostering efficient creators of wealth and zealous consumers with ample purchasing power is their primary concern, whatever their class.

Ironically, amidst all the structural forgetting of the past class struggle, a mass aspiration to become part of the 'middle class' has emerged. As Guo (2009) wittily puts it: 'Farewell to class, except the middle class'. The rise of the middle class was anticipated by the CCP's attempt to build a comprehensive *xiao kang* (relatively well-off, 小康) oriented society, which aims to address economic disparities (Anagnost, 2008). As defined by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, moderately well-off refers to people who enjoy stable incomes, and thus are capable of purchasing private houses and cars, and can afford the costs of education and holidays (Zhang, 2016). Marked by specific consumption standards, the entire nation is easily mobilised to aspire to the apparently tangible price for everyone by actively participating in the market economy. Tomba (2004) took Beijing as an example to show that the party-state's deliberate creation of an urban middle class through stimulating consumption was part of its social engineering programme, which aims to sustain economic, social and political stability.

The difficulties in defining both the size and the heterogeneous composition of China's middle class are widely acknowledged (Li, 2013; Lu, 2002; Anagnost, 2008). However, the desire to enter the ranks of an imagined 'middle class' that is based on 'economic security and cultural superiority' has become a mass aspiration backed up by the official discourse of a *xiao kang* society (Miao, 2017). Goodman (2014, p. 60)

points out that 'the state-sponsored discourse of the middle class grew out of and has been associated with the idea of *suzhi*', and further points out that various goods and services, such as cars, clothing and holidays have been advertised as being beneficial to increasing *suzhi*. *Suzhi* has become a description of the 'minute social distinctions defining a person of quality in practices of consumption and the incitement of a middle class desire for social mobility', according to Anagnost (2004, p. 190).

Yan (2000) claims that the shift in governing ideology under the reform has replaced communism with consumerism. Against this backdrop, the aspiration to an idealised western lifestyle and consumer culture are widely recognised (Croll, 2006; Yu, 2014; Rofel, 2007). Yan (2000) and Croll (2006) both point out that fostering consumerism has contributed to post-1989 stability. The younger generations born under the One-Child Policy constitute the base for China's new consumers, whose singleton identity converges with hyper consumerism (Croll, 2006; Yu, 2014). Rofel (2007, p. 118) contends that consumption in China represents a post-socialist technology of self: 'Consumption is about embodiment, embodying a new self. At the heart of this embodiment is desire.' This type of self-making through consumption provides a handy tool to encourage behaviours that fit within the current economic and political framework. The entanglement among various consumption practices of the *suzhi* discourse and middle-classness are designed to convince one to become the ideal subject, who enjoys high cultural capital and the economic capacity to consume, and is, therefore, desirous and unconstrained. Rofel (2007, p.119) further points out that 'an embrace of variegated desires in post-socialist China has been accompanied by a rejection of what have become portrayed as the dangerous political passion of socialism'. The Chinese state is both implicated and interested in fostering the opposition between 'benign' non-political desires, narrowly defined as possession and acquisition, and 'dangerous' political passions among its public (Rofel, 2007). This is reflected in the attitudes of the young women she interviewed, who appear busy cultivating a serious, consuming self, yet appear uninterested in politics. The desire to become such subjects is not only politically useful to justify 'the existence and the behaviour of the wealthy, but also to encourage active economic behaviour throughout society: hard work will bring rewards, even to the

disadvantaged' (Goodman, 2014, p. 64). However, these seemly apolitical subjects are at the centre of a deeply politically-driven state project.

The Revitalisation of the Chinese Family

The CCP leadership under Xi has repeatedly argued for Chinese exceptionalism by claiming that China's values must reflect its traditions and prevailing national conditions, commonly recognisable by the whole society.

If our people cannot uphold the moral values that have been formed and developed on our own soil, and instead indiscriminately and blindly parrot Western moral values, then it will be necessary to genuinely question whether we will lose our independent ethos as a country and a people. Without this independent ethos, our political, intellectual, cultural and institutional independence will have the rug pulled out from under it. (Xi, 2014a, cited by Gow, 2017, p. 8)

This is shown in the Core Socialist Values, which have been categorised into three levels: prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony at the national level; freedom, equality, justice, and rule of law as societal values; and patriotism, dedication, integrity, and geniality as citizens' concerns (Gow, 2017). This defines citizenship through the responsibility to contribute to societal and national objectives, such as rejuvenation of the nation and the realisation of Chinese dreams, and conceptualises citizens' subordination to the nation and society. Citizenship is represented, not as an innate characteristic of the self, but as an expression of the relation between people, society and the nation state, which resonates well with Confucian relational logic: citizens are not 'born' but 'become' by virtue of their contribution to the teleological modernisation project formulated by the CCP (Gow, 2017). Imbricating Confucian ethical concepts such as filial piety, self-cultivation, and the morally superior person within Core Socialist Values, the CCP seeks to encourage conduct which is already viewed as culturally and socially desirable, and hence to maximise its public appeal (Gow, 2017).

Under such a political framework, the conventional family unit remains essential in the implementation of the CCP's contemporary governance. Sigley (2001, 2006b) points out that the party-state is still keen to keep the family under its surveillance in order to ensure social stability, and this resembles China's longstanding political culture. The Great Learning (da xue, 大学), one of China's ancient classics, describes well-governed families as essential for a well-governed state, and vice versa (de Bary and Lufrano, 1960). As history bears witness, the Chinese family has always been the target of social reforms (Glosser and Kerber, 2003). The CCP has also promoted marriage based on a 'socialist' ideal since the early 1950s to serve its political goals (Friedman, 2005). Ultimately, the Chinese family's paramount significance is to connect the nation to its population (Sigley, 2001, 2006b). This functionalist view of family can be observed in the party-state's annual campaign, 'Looking for the Most Beautiful Family in China' (Zhang, 2017). Started in 2014, this contest aims to find families across China that exemplify traditional values and 'positive family virtue'. Lamont (2017) argues that this campaign articulates a single state vision of the ideal Chinese family that incorporates 'core socialist values'. Looking at its promoted values, Lamont (2017) points out that the idealised happily married heterosexual family is a hybrid of notions taken from Confucian 'filial piety' and 'harmony', westernised ideas of love and romance, and the Party's belief in 'scientific development'. It aims to erect the family as moral exemplifier and harmonise social conflicts. The current trend of drawing on Confucian moral values could be understood as part of the growing revival of Confucianism since the mid-1990s, which has taken on various forms, including politics, religion, and education (Bell, 2008, 2010; Billioud and Thoraval, 2007). It restates the link between governing the country and governing the family, just as in the classic Chinese saying: establish the family, govern the country and there will be peace under heaven (zhi guo, qi jia, pin tian xia, 治国齐家平天下).

The Chinese party-state attempts to maximise the benefits of a market economy but has never accepted political liberalism (Yan, 2010). Therefore, dis-embedding individuals from the socialist economic and welfare system and pushing them to become self-reliant subjects constitute the party-state-managed individualisation, where the individual remains a means to the end of modernisation. Although the claims about the rising Chinese individual remain contested, the emergence of both an enterprising self (Rose, 1992) and a desiring self (Rofel, 2007) indeed indicate that Chinese society is going through a process of individualisation led by its party-state through 'soft management' (Yan, 2009, p. 289). Individuals seem to be free to

choose their own path and exercise self-control and self-management to obtain attractive awards that suit their self-interest, as long as they do so within party-state-set boundaries, the 'railroading with self-interest' as Yan Yunxiang (2002, p. 40) terms it. Therefore, the explosion of consumer choices and the freedom of consumption appear to be a mere mirage that represents individual freedom. Despite individuals' gradually growing awareness of their rights, particularly consumer rights, the citizen's relationship with the state has not fundamentally shifted in terms of political rights (Yan, 2010). Individual rights and identities remain dependent on the state, which resembles China's political tradition: the state symbolises both virtues and absolute authority, upon which the individual depends for protection (Pye, 1991, 1996; Yan, 2010, 2009).

It is important to note one side effect of the rapid social stratification resulting from the reform: an almost universal anxiety keenly felt by individuals who have lost certainty about their place across all social strata. As Rofel (2007) explains, appealing to an individual's desire to be 'desirable' through encouraging consumption, and hence becoming 'successful' in an ever-growing competitive society, paradoxically both relieves and feeds into the common anxiety experienced by Chinese people under the reform. Similarly, Osburg (2013, p. 1) describes the impact of the economic reform on a group of high-school teachers in their 30s from rural Guangdong, who 'felt both threatened by and drawn to the expanding world of business, angry about its injustices but seduced by its promises of excitement, status, and riches'. The dilemma and everyday struggle for China's so-called urban, middle-class, white-collar workers was vividly depicted in 2009's hugely successful Chinese TV drama Wo ju (dwelling narrowness, 蜗居), which reveals the fear and vulnerability of further downward mobility among these city dwellers (Zurndorfer, 2016). Moreover, since the mid-1990s the state's reforms in the public provision of housing, education and medical care have shed its responsibilities onto individuals, which forces Chinese people to fall back on family and personal networks for support (Yan, 2009). Since children remain the main source of old-age support for Chinese parents, it has exacerbated parents' strong belief and shared interest in investing heavily in their only child's future, which leads to various child-centred family practices that contrast with the past (Davin, 1990; Rich and Tsui, 2002; Guan, 2003; Fong, 2008; Liu, 2008). This form of child-centredness is instrumental in essence to

ensure a materially successful future for the child and the family, even though parent-child bonds are also affectionate.

The shift from being parent-centred to becoming child-centred in Chinese family dynamics, argued by Wang (2011, p. 150), 'is a product of consumerism and state capitalism', and does not create essential conflicts between the individual 'I' and the collective 'we' of a family. On the contrary, there is plenty of empirical evidence suggesting the opposite. The dismantling of the socialist welfare system has strengthened the intergenerational solidarity and collaboration within Chinese families as a coping strategy, according to Yan Yunxiang (2017). For example, a tightened intergenerational bond that is based on emotional intimacy is observed (Evans, 2008, 2010; Liu, J., 2017b). The reciprocal bonds between parents and their children remain intact (Qi, 2015; Zhong and Ho, 2014). Filial piety remains an important family practice by which Chinese adult children can display family and establish their respectable self (Zhang, 2016). Hence, the effects of individualisation on the family are neither simple nor linear in contemporary China. Despite its changing dynamics, the family retains its significance in contemporary Chinese life, both on the private and public levels.

More than thirty years after its implementation, the One-Child Policy was finally replaced by the Two-Child Policy in 2016. The One-Child Policy has fundamentally shaped China's demographic structure (Hesketh, Li and Zhu, 2005). Its negative social, economic and political impact is far-reaching (Reuters, 2015; Wang, 2010). China's fast-ageing population, accompanied by low fertility leading to a declining labour force was one reason for the change in the policy (Basten and Jiang, 2014). However, many have criticised it as 'too little and too late' (Hvistendahl, 2010). The shrinking working-age population not only poses a threat to economic growth, but also leaves its ageing population vulnerable within a rudimentary healthcare system (Crow, 2010; Hvistendahl, 2010). With a fragile welfare and healthcare system (Béland and Frazier, 2011; Ling et al., 2011), keeping the family as the main welfare provider carries political significance in the governance of contemporary in China.

Moreover, *guang gun*¹⁴ (bare stick, 光棍), constituted of primarily economically marginalised men, has re-emerged in large numbers in recent decades (Sun, 2017; Li, 2017). Its historical association with anti-state uprisings and threats to the social order (Crow, 2010; Mann, 2011) rings an alarm bell for the party-state as it seeks a way to soothe the potential threat to social and political stability. Facing these multilayered issues, the party-state seems keen to resolve them by encouraging Chinese citizens to marry and have more children. Therefore, it is important to examine the implications of this for Chinese women. For example, will these well-educated women want two children under the Two-Child Policy?

Contextualising Well-educated Chinese Women

That women's higher education contributes to lower fertility rates and delayed marriage seems to be true worldwide (Pradhan, 2015). However, in the Chinese context, this poses particular challenges for well-educated women. Hong Fincher (2012) argues that the Chinese government, concerned with creating a so-called high-quality gao suzhi workforce that can compete in the global marketplace, pressurises educated women to marry and have children through an aggressive propaganda campaign in the state-controlled media. The derogatory term shengnü (leftover women, 剩女) is commonly used in news media to refer to the increasing phenomenon of the 'urban professional female in her late twenties or older who is still single' (Hong Fincher, 2014, p. 2). Chinese state media often blame women for this phenomenon; for instance, the Ministry of Education states that it is a result of 'overly high expectations for marriage' among this group of women (To, 2013b, 2013a, 2015). The stigma attached to the term has created tension between parents and their daughters; moreover, it leads to internal struggle for the women themselves, which is well captured by a commercial campaign 'Change Destiny' by the Japanese cosmetic brand SK-II (2016a). In contrast to the UK and USA, where breaking away from the traditional marriage model has been seen as empowering for women, who are generally viewed as independent and liberated (Giddens, 1992),

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¹⁴ A social category used to describe unmarried men, which is mainly constituted of economically marginalised men and has a historical association with anti-state behaviours.

the deeply rooted patriarchal culture fails to describe this new phenomenon positively for Chinese women.

Whilst marriage remains a near universal practice for both Chinese men and women (Ho et al., 2018), the number of newly registered marriages experienced its third year of decline in 2016, with a 6.7% drop from 2015 (The Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2016). Li (2016) directly points to the existing gender inequality as having led to this decline. To (2013b) argues that it is the external gendered constraints that have isolated successful Chinese women from marriage. The deeply rooted gendered belief that a woman should 'marry up', with her domestic role as wife and mother the primary assessment of her virtue, combined with her parents' intervention in their daughter's marital choice, substantially intensifies the marriage pressure experienced by professional women. Ironically, parents' high investment in their only daughter's education and their expectations for her career development are actually the reason why women have been disadvantaged in the conservative Chinese marital market, due to the traditional belief that a man needs to be 'better' than his wife. Nevertheless, To (2015) finds that various strategies have been used by successful women to achieve their marital expectations. On the other hand, with the legacy of 'women holding half the sky' (Croll, 1995), Chinese women's participation in the paid labour force remains high, 63% compared to the global average of 49.49%, although it has fallen by 10% since the 1990s (The World Bank, 2017). Within a neoliberal market economy, well-qualified individuals free from other obligations are the best suited to an economic system that requires brutal efficiency to maximise profits (Harvey, 2007). While many fathers have sought to take advantage of the market reform, and therefore continue to be absent from home for prolonged periods (Evans, 2011), childcare remains women's business. The current retirement age for women is 55, five years earlier than for men, which also indicates the gendered assumption of women's secondary role in the labour force¹⁵. Previously, female factory workers, who were the first to be made redundant during the economic transition (Liu, J., 2007; Rofel, 1999), have formed part of the reserve

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¹⁵ At the time of writing up this thesis, China has started plans to raise its retirement age to ease the strain placed on the current social security system resulting from its increasingly ageing (Wong, 2015). According to the government's plans (Shebao Chaxun Wang, 2017), women's retirement age will be gradually increased to match that of the man by 2036, to retire at the age of 60.5.

army of labour made up of early-retired grandmothers who fill the childcare gap left by the dismantling of the socialist welfare system, including affordable collective childcare (Chen et al., 2011). Although childcare in contemporary China has gradually become an intergenerational joint mission (MSW, 2006), this does not exempt mothers from their primary role in childcare (Liu, F., 2015), but enjoins them to be responsible for the quality of their children (Evans, 2011). This also assumes the mother's constant presence in domestic life, despite her full-time employment.

In today's China, there co-exists of a market built upon neoliberal logic and a highly authoritarian political system (Sigley, 2006a). Both are products of one party rule. This interesting combination allows neoliberal market forces to promote a self that prioritises its own interests, but simultaneously gives space for the party-state to constantly promote its socialist collectivist values (Bakken, 2000). The young-adult only children Liu Fengshu (2008) interviewed during their university years displayed a self that is consistent with the autonomous, self-authoring and individualistic neoliberal subject, which exempts the state from responsibility for creating a mechanism to facilitate the individual's success. Liu Fenghshu (2006, p. 501) reveals that only daughters are expected by their parents to 'integrate both masculine and feminine characteristics, combine both inner and outer beauty, and perform both expressive and instrumental functions', while their male counterparts are still assessed mainly by their talent, as tradition requires.

Gender in China

The continuous effort to accomplish the historical task of 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' (*zhong hua min zu de wei da fu xing*, 中华民族的伟大复兴) reiterated by President Xi (The Chinese Dream, 2014) can be traced back to the late imperial Qing dynasty. It was the genuine sense of desperation to 'evolve or perish' in the face of the imperialists' aggressive advances that successfully legitimised Chinese elite intellectuals' call to replace Confucianism with western ideologies, and feudal backwardness with modernity in order to 'save' the nation by pushing it to a higher stage of existence (Wang, 1999). In this particular context, modernity, science and theories of evolution took root in China's quest for national survival (Barlow, 1994; Ong, 1996). Eugenic and biologically determinist views about sex and gender

were firmly legitimised in China and persisted throughout the 20th century (Dikötter, 1995; Evans, 1997; Jacka, 1997).

The 'problem of women', referring to their subordination in Chinese society, was identified by male elites as one of the causes of China's national weakness. During the early 20th century, improving women's physical fitness and education became politically significant, as it was linked to national survival (Judge, 2001, 2002). Gradually, rejecting traditional feminine beauty and self-adornment became a political statement for women to show their active participation in China's modernisation process, whereby being well-educated, patriotic and politically active became a fashion symbol for new modern Chinese women (Wang, 1999).

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) implemented Marxist ideology across the country through its centralised government and started its state-sponsored quest for modernity (Yan, 2010). Women's liberation was regarded as part of the CCP's national liberation programmes for all. The assumption was that, as long as the country's economic situation improved through its national modernisation projects, women's status would improve as well (Edwards, 2000b).

It is widely acknowledged that the many radical policies to promote gender equality in both domestic and public spheres taken by the CCP made significant progress in improving Chinese women's status and quality of life (Croll, 1983; Evans, 2008; Hall, 1997). Equality between men and women was written into Chinese law, which gave women electoral rights, inheritance rights and rights to own property, as well as the rights to divorce and free choice in marriage (Croll, 1983; Edwards, 2000b). The CCP's massive anti-illiteracy campaign with the aim of aiding economic development also benefited women, who were previously mostly illiterate. The call for women to participate in paid labour under a gradually nationalised economy meant that the government had policies and measures in place to help manage family life, such as the provision of collective childcare services and canteens, as well as granting women decent maternity leave (Davin, 1976; Edwards, 2000b; Gao, 1994).

Patriarchal influence remained, however, within the communist party system from the very beginning of its establishment, despite its radical approach to gender equality (Gilmartin, 1993; Edwards, 2000a). A lack of consideration of the gendered impact of many national modernisation programmes and policies created many unexpected social consequences (Edwards, 2000b). For example, when unemployment rates rose, women were called upon to return home during the 1950s (Davin, 1976). Although much progress was made throughout the 20th century, Chinese women's liberation under CCP rule continues to be tied to their relation to the nation. The modern socialist *jiating* (family, 家庭) and Maoist *guojia* (nation, 国家) coexisted in unity; as Barlow (1994, p. 269) notes, what operated in one sphere translated directly into the other, within which women became 'a triangulating category between modern state and modern Chinese family'. Therefore, it is fair to say that China has never, to this day, acknowledged women's liberation as independent from the interests of the wider collective to which she is supposed to belong.

The concept of gender introduced by feminist writers during the rise of 'second wave' feminism in the USA and Europe has been widely recognised as one of the key concepts in understanding society (Jackson and Scott, 2002; Oakley, 1972). The development of the sex/gender binary helped feminists to argue that the roles assigned to males and females were not fixed by nature, but were a social construct, and therefore open to change. As Simone de Beauvoir (1973, p. 301) states: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. This insight is crucial in challenging the gender inequality that restricts women to their domestic roles as wives and mothers (Rahman and Jackson, 2010).

Materialist feminists have taken one step further, to question the existence of the category of sex itself (Rahman and Jackson, 2010; Richardson, 2008). Instead of seeing gender as a universal category that will always exist in one form or another, they define it as a socially constructed product of patriarchal hierarchies (Jackson, 1998). Take Christine Delphy (1993) as an example. Her view of gender is particularly illuminating because she sees it as the product of hierarchy and argues that gender precedes sex. Instead of taking the social dichotomy as determined by a natural dichotomy, she poses the question: why should sex give rise to any sort of classification in the first place? (Delphy, 1993). It is the social division of labour, and associated hierarchical relations, which lead to physiological sex being used to

differentiate those who are assigned to be dominant from those who will be subordinate. Hence 'sex is a sign' and has 'historically acquired a symbolic value' (Delphy, 1993, p. 5).

Delphy believes that women exist as a political category, as a class, because of patriarchy. The gender category is founded upon unequal, exploitative, material relationships – in short, class relationships. She took Marx's insight on the social origins and relational nature of class, and applied it as an analytical tool in examining gender hierarchy. Whilst capitalism is founded upon relations between a property-owning class and a class of wage labourers, patriarchal relations are based on the direct appropriation of women's unpaid labour (Jackson, 1998). If it is a class structure, the gender division has nothing to do with nature but is the product of social and economic structures. For married women, entering into paid employment intensifies their exploitation in the home since they are no longer maintained in exchange for the unpaid labour they continue to perform (Delphy, 1992).

This school of feminist thought is particularly pertinent and illuminating in the Chinese context. Contemporary Chinese society bears the historical marks of its thousand-year-old patriarchal family structure and the radical push for women's mass participation in the public workforce under socialism (Sechiyama, 2013). As previous researchers have demonstrated, participation in the workforce alone does not bring gender equality or upset patriarchal family arrangements (Andors, 1983; Bauer et al., 1992; Stacey, 1983; Wolf, 1985). The implicit patriarchal values and practices have been embedded in China's policymaking since 1949, which led Andors (1983) to call it an 'unfinished liberation'. The transition to a neoliberal market economy has had mixed effects on women's lives. A feminine image for married women, which emphasises the virtues of supporting a busy husband's career and providing intensive good-quality care for their children, has become influential since the reform (Sun and Chen, 2015). The unchallenged essentialist understanding of gender has led to gender discrimination against women in the job market since the economic reform (Li, 1994). In a time of dramatic social and economic transition, the party-state requires a family based on universal heterosexual marriage as the foundational stabiliser, which re-emphasises women's primary responsibilities as centring upon family life (Hong Fincher, 2016). This resonates with the patriarchal

family context that Delphy and Leonard (1992) described, where a good wife and mother is the cornerstone of this social structure. Jackson (1998) points out that it is not a matter of individual men's sexism, but an institutionalised family practice.

Moreover, Delphy and Leonard (1992) point out that the gendered labour market marginalises women and restricts their ability to earn, which creates an objective incentive for women to marry. The exploitation of women's domestic labour has exacerbated their disadvantaged position in the labour market (Delphy, 1984). Therefore, marriage becomes 'a self-perpetuating state', 'ten years after the wedding day, marriage is even more necessary than before!' (Delphy, 1976, p. 80). In this regard, the Chinese context illustrates perfectly how marriage as a normative institution constrains women's life chances. A poster that recently hung in the marriage registry office in Beijing illustrates my point perfectly. It says: 'Being a good housewife and mother is the highest achievement for a woman. Why does she need to sharpen her head and be exhausted to death fighting in men's territory?' The online controversy sparked by this poster eventually led to it being replaced (Xinjin Bao, 2015). However, the fact that it was approved to be hung in a government administration office in Beijing reflects the conservative attitudes about women's role that still permeate Chinese society.

During the 1980s, prominent Chinese scholars like Li Xiaojiang started to critique the gender sameness that subdued gender to the nation and class struggle in Mao's China and advocated women's different experiences based on sex differences (see Pei, Ho and Ng, 2007, p. 207). This resulted in a surge of interest in reclaiming the female-self based on biology and psychology. This shift accommodated the revival of a patriarchal discourse that promoted the traditional gendered ideal of the 'virtuous wife and good mother'. It also sits rather neatly with the ideology of the neoliberal market, which commercialises women's bodies, sexuality and femininity as desired objects under a male gaze and transforms women into devoted followers of the so-called 'female essence' on sale (Croll, 1995; Evans, 2010; Sun and Chen, 2015; Liu, F., 2014). The booming sex and beauty economy reflects this phenomenon, which makes women both subject and object of consumption (Wen, 2013; Zurndorfer, 2016). Moreover, it could also serve to reinforce the belief that there is a 'natural' bond between mother and child, which makes women self-evidently better

caregivers because of their 'maternal instinct', which further justifies the gendered division of labour. Jackson (1996) contends that the politics of difference reinstates the patriarchal identification of a woman with her naturalised maternity in a feminist guise. Delphy proposes that we should pay attention to the institution whereby women assume responsibility for childcare, and the institution whereby individual husbands appropriate their wives' labour as analytically distinct (Jackson, 1996).

Patriarchy pre-exists capitalism. Even though history entails both an accommodation and a tension between capitalism and patriarchy, men have defended patriarchal privileges under changing socio-economic conditions (Rahman and Jackson, 2010). In the Chinese context, the party-state's vision of the patriarchal family is at the core of a strong, paternalistic state (Hong Fincher, 2016), which demands that Chinese women remain in their 'class' position in Delphy's sense regardless of an individual woman's marital status. As Rofel (2007, p. 8) pointed out, the market economy in China 'has developed in spite of or around the state'. It was designed to serve the state interest, which in many cases, as Wang Xiying (2017, p. 51) argued, 'have formulated a conspiracy relation to established barriers to gender equality'. In Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism, Rofel (1999) elucidates that gender in China is about more than just men and women, but has much to do with the Chinese state and nation, as well as the socialism and capitalism it embraced. Despite the mixture of different cultural discourses that young people could appropriate to justify their behaviours and choices, Wang Xiying (2017, p.51) states that the relation between the state and the market to create barriers to gender equality. The complex dynamics as a result of the state and the market's interactions for and against each other has created the multifaceted challenges faced by contemporary Chinese women. As Schaffer and Song (2007, p.18) concluded:

Women in China have had to confront a powerful array of patriarchal traditions, ancient and modern, that include the enduring Confucian belief systems and more recent Communist ideologies, compounded by the demands of a new market economy and the influx of Western knowledge systems – a profusion of 'isms'.

In retrospect, the classic ancient story of heroine *Hua Mulan* (花木兰), who cross-dressed as a man to join the army on behalf of her father, partially reflects the

historical expectations of Chinese women in the last century. Edwards' (2010) examination of the historical appropriation of various versions of this story reveals that the story consistently portrays the heroine's motivation for joining the military as her desire to protect her father and familial line, or her country, never for her own new social subjectivity. Particularly, at the turn of the 20th century, recasting her devotion to her family and her nation mirrored the wider historical context, which required a modern *Mulan* to sacrifice herself for the newly emerged 'national family'. Nevertheless, as the story ends, once the national trouble is settled, Mulan willingly returns to her family, and to her gender, to be remembered as a 'virtuous' heroine of China. This popular story delineates the moral boundaries of a filial Chinese daughter.

Coincidently, China now has the largest number of well-educated women in its history, who cultivate themselves as competitive neoliberal subjects. If the ethos behind Mulan's story remains, what are the historical duties required of the women in my research cohort at this particular historical juncture? How do they respond? This thesis explores how privileged young Chinese women negotiate their position as they face the tension between neoliberalism and an increasingly patriarchal and authoritarian party-state in contemporary China.

Chapter 3

Researching China's Lucky Generation: The Post 80s

As someone who is part of my own research cohort, born during the 1980s in urban China, my research fieldwork carried out during February and March 2015 was also my own rediscovery of life back home. The familiarity of the social settings in my field gave me some confidence in navigating the Chinese context while conducting fieldwork. Meanwhile, it made me anxious as it took me on a reflective journey to reexamine my choice of living away from home. Given my research participants' privileged status, these young women should have huge potential and autonomy to be successful outside the traditional domestic sphere. However, many scholars have pointed out that, under the economic reform, gender equality has lost its priority on the government's agenda under the rapid expansion of the market economy (Liu, J., 2008; Honig and Hershatter, 1988). Consequently, young Chinese women are constantly negotiating with traditional ideologies (Liu, J., 2007). At the time of my fieldwork in 2015, the youngest among my research cohort was aged 25, while the oldest was 35. All of them have finished their bachelor degrees and entered the job market. Some of them had experienced marriage, motherhood or even divorce. Therefore, their life experiences were able to reveal the important aspects of gendered reality of living in contemporary urban China.

I intended to reveal their experiences of being daughters, mothers, wives and workers in Chinese cities today. Furthermore, I wanted to know how they responded to gender-related issues in their day-to-day lives, especially when tensions arise from oppositional ideologies. Do they conform, negotiate or fight back? A supplementary aim was to explore the experiences of their male peers, as this might additionally reveal issues that women will confront in terms of marriage expectations. Last but not least, this research project is combined with my commitment to feminist activism. Through illustrating the gendered realities that women experience, it could illuminate directions for further action to push China towards a more egalitarian society.

In this chapter, I will discuss and reflect upon the methods I used for my research. I chose a qualitative feminist approach in order to investigate these issues, which

involved semi-structured interviews with 31 women and 11 men. To start with, I will discuss the rationale for the use of feminist and qualitative methods, followed by a detailed account of my research design, including the ethical considerations that applied throughout my research practice. Finally, I will reflect on the data analysis process that I undertook after my fieldwork.

Research Approach

Feminist ways of knowing challenge orthodox, male-defined epistemologies where knowledge is produced for women by men from a male perspective (Letherby, 2003). As Simone de Beauvoir (1973, p.18) put it: 'he is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other'. Feminist epistemological approaches validate knowledge produced through knowing about women's own experience and emphasises the experiential and the private as a way of confronting the male-authorised knowledge that is abstract and public (Letherby, 2003). As a challenge to the traditional orthodox way of searching for objective truth, they allow a consideration of different perspectives, employ multiple methods and methodologies, and pay attention to individual women's experience (Brooks and Hesse-Biber, 2007; Maynard, 1994; Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994). Furthermore, a feminist approach also requires the researcher to reflect on her or his own assumptions and presence, and how these relate to their research (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007; Letherby, 2003; Neuman, 2013). Brooks and Hesse-Biber (2007, p.4) note that, from the theoretical to the practical, feminist research is a 'holistic endeavor' and raises 'awareness of sexist, racist, homophobic, and colonialist ideologies and practices' to emancipate and empower women. It is often used to advocate social change and to bring about social justice for women. All these coincide precisely with my original motivations for conducting this research.

Although it is widely agreed that no single method can be called 'feminist research', I find the definition of 'feminist research practice' suggested by Kelly (1988) to be the most relevant. It distinguishes feminist research practice from others through the way in which questions are asked, the location of the researcher in the research process and the intended purpose of such research (Kelly, 1988). Letherby (2003, p.102) argues that feminists should employ methods that 'enable women's experiences and voices to be distinct and discernible...a flexible research approach which adapts to the emerging data'. These were the guiding principles in my research practice, which

enabled me to emphasise women's life experience and to understand women's issues from their own perspective (Maynard, 1994; Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994).

Although feminist research is not restricted to qualitative methods, this was my choice because of the type of data I was interested in. Qualitative methods allow the analysis of rich, nuanced and detailed data generated by the complex social world. It also emphasises meaning making in a particular context (Ambert et al., 1995), and gives a researcher the flexibility and depth needed to make sense of the subject matter in terms of the meanings people bring to it (Denzin and Ryan, 2007). As Mason (2002, p.1) notes, 'through qualitative research we can explore a wide array of dimensions of the social world... the understandings, experiences and imaginings of our research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings that they generate'. Qualitative techniques make the individual's case visible and provide the opportunity to generate a rich description of their constructed reality based on their own experience and interpretation (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). This resonates well with my feminist approach to understanding women's life experience from their own perspective.

For a qualitative researcher, it is the depth rather than the breadth that matters, which involves understanding 'specific situations, individuals, groups, or moments in time that are important or revealing' (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p.2). With the aim of collecting well-grounded data to reveal the subjective experience of gender among my participants, I used qualitative in-depth interviews to uncover participants' life stories, which could cast light upon issues affecting their experiences as women. Previous research projects have effectively employed in-depth interviews to uncover different aspects of Chinese women's lives (Liu, J., 2006; Mao, 2012; Zarafonetis, 2014). Such interviews enable researchers to see the world from another's perspective and gain access to people's experiences, memories, thoughts and ideas, in order to explore their motives and opinions in detail (Reinharz and Chase, 2002; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). They also help identify the context of participants' lives (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011).

The semi-structured, in-depth interview was chosen in order to meet the aim of exploring certain themes about women's life experience in more detail, such as their experiences as daughters, mothers, wives and workers. It also allowed me some control during the interviews (Bernard, 2002) to cover the issues in which I was interested within the limitations of a relatively constrained timescale. On the other hand, it provided space to expand and probe further when a new topic emerged (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007). My research does not aim to present a full picture of the women of this cohort, or of women's experience from this cohort, but it is intended to present key aspects of social realities as my participants experienced and recounted them in their own context.

Research Sample and Recruitment

My initial profile for potential participants was women born under the One Child Policy living in Chinese cities, who have obtained a four-year university degree. I also planned to interview some men with this background. As previous research in East Asian societies has revealed, personal networks, or *guanxi*¹⁶, are crucial for conducting successful research, including accessing participants, gaining consent and establishing rapport (Jackson, Ho and Na, 2016, 2017; Liu, J., 2006; Park and Lunt, 2015; Zarafonetis, 2014). In China, reciprocity, harmony and the importance of relationships are embedded in the Chinese way of conducting social life (Qi, 2013; Park and Lunt, 2015), People establish and maintain *quanxi* (relationships) through gift giving, which can be giving material gifts or doing somebody a favour. Accompanying these activities, one should also give the recipient *mianzi* (face), which signifies honour and respect for the other person. The expectation of the person who initially offers these things is that the other side will do the same in return in the future. Through this kind of giving and receiving, reciprocal relationships are established and maintained. The practice also draws the boundary between 'self' and 'others' in a collective sense, indicating the relational boundaries between different social groups. If a person needs help from someone with whom they have

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¹⁶ According to Yang (1994), the larger one's *guanxi* network and the more diversely it connects one to people from different occupations and positions, the better one will become in general manoeuvring in Chinese society and obtaining resources and opportunities.

had no previous contact, it is important to find the right intermediary to initiate the first contact for both sides to build up *guanxi*.

Taking Liu Jieyu's (2006) approach, I paid special attention to balancing western ideas and ethical approaches to qualitative research with the local specificity of my field. Since I intended to explore personal life experiences and discuss certain sensitive topics, such as sex and abortion, with my participants, the level of trust between us was crucial. I decided to use snowball-sampling methods through my own *quanxi* network to start with. Snowball sampling, loosely defined by Noy (2008, p.5) as 'accessing informants through contact information that is provided by other informants', which evolves in a 'snowball' effect, allowed me to utilise the established trusting relationships among my informants. Purposive sampling was added at a later stage to enrich the diversity of my sample, which allowed me to decide what still needed to be known and find people who could and were willing to provide the information by virtue of their knowledge or experience (Bernard, 2002). At a later stage, divorcees with children and women who had obtained a PhD were needed to expand the depth of my data. Therefore, I interviewed several more participants fitting this category using purposive sampling. This sampling strategy was not only efficient and effective, but was also suitable for my relatively limited time in the field.

I had been consciously building and maintaining *guanxi* and laying the groundwork for my research early on. Immediately before I started my PhD, in 2014, I spent three months doing a research project travelling around China, including all the cities chosen for my fieldwork. I took that opportunity to initiate contacts with several women who fit into my research category through my *guanxi* networks, such as families, old classmates, previous colleagues and students, in order to deepen friendships and inform them about my upcoming research. I deliberately renew these contacts in advance so that my asking for help later would not appear abrupt. For my peer group, I invited them out for a drink or a meal as well as bringing them small gifts from England. I invited family friends and senior relatives for family meals with my parents, because this showed proper respect in terms of the Chinese age hierarchy. From then onward, until commencing my fieldwork, I was in touch with

them informally through Wechat¹⁷ throughout the year, such as sending out seasonal greetings, just to remind them of my friendly presence. In addition, two young women from Shanghai, whom I met in the UK, became my key contacts upon their return. Our close friendship *guanxi* was crucial for me to accomplish my fieldwork within the available time and budget. Both participated in my research themselves, as well as introducing some of their friends as my participants. They also provided accommodation for my stay in Shanghai. All my participants were recruited through similar *guanxi* networks.

I conducted five pilot interviews with four Chinese women and one man in the UK. All of them were educated to at least Master's level, including two current female PhD students. This was particularly helpful as I was able to gain valuable feedback to gauge the effectiveness of my interview questions, and check the flow of the interview. Through these practices, I became much more confident about my interview skills, including being able to pick up on relevant topics during the conversation without losing focus, as well as adjusting my questions accordingly, which are essential skills for semi-structured qualitative interviewing. Most importantly, these interviews helped me to experience the importance of practising the researcher's role to enable my participants to voice their opinions and experiences without imposing myself on them (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

As Zarafonetis (2014) found, most Chinese people are not willing to make appointments far in advance; therefore, I did not schedule any appointments before my departure. I intentionally chose the Chinese New Year holiday period to return to start my interviews in my home city, as frequent social gatherings during the holiday provided natural occasions for me to meet potential participants. This is also the time when most young people working in different cities return to their hometowns, which made it geographically convenient for me to interview them. I spread information about my research through social gatherings, which proved effective. Instead of email, most people prefer direct phone calls or messages through text or Wechat¹⁸. It is socially acceptable and fairly common to arrange meetings at short notice. Most

¹⁷ Wechat: the most popular phone app that is used by most Chinese people for communication purposes.

people agreed to an interview based on a brief verbal introduction to my research, a personal relationship or through a common friend. The nature of our relationship was key to their consent. My impression was that they cared more about who you are or who introduced you than what you are actually going to do. Giving a friend *mianzi* (face) was many people's main reason for agreeing to my interview. The mixed effects of *mianzi* and *guanxi* on my research data in the Chinese context will be further discussed later.

Before my departure, I carefully considered the ethical issues involved in my research by following the ethical guidelines of the University of York Ethics Committee and recommended by the British Sociological Association. I prepared an information letter alongside my consent form to give out to participants. Both forms were professionally translated into Simplified Chinese to inform my participants about my research, setting expectations for both sides. With all these materials, I gained ethical approval from the University at the beginning of February 2015 and started my fieldwork in the middle of February.

The Choice of Cities

Because of the main locations of potential participants from my networks, the research sites were Shanghai in the east and Chengdu in the west (See Figure 2).



Figure 2: Geographical location of Chengdu and Shanghai. Sichuan province is highlighted in green.

China can be characterised into three regions: eastern coastal, central and western areas, with Shanghai being one of the municipal cities on the eastern coast and Sichuan located in the west. Coined in Deng Xiaoping's famous speech of 1985 'allowing a part of our people to become rich first', China's economic reform has deepened its regional inequalities, which are rooted in its historical disparity (Harvey, 2005; Rozelle, 1996; Yao, Zhang and Feng, 2005; Schiavenza, 2013). Its regional divisions are also reflected in its developmental stages: starting from the eastern coastal line, the regional differences in the economic reform are shown in Figure 3.

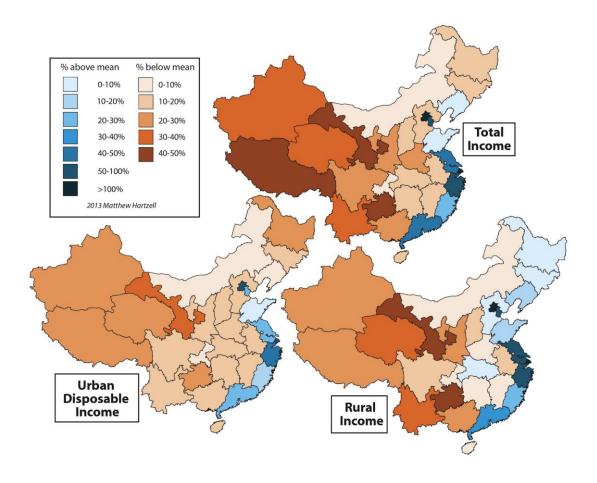


Figure 3: China's uneven economic development by provinces (Hartzell, 2013).

Using data from the 2011 China Statistical Yearbook, China-based blogger Matthew Hartzell (2013) created maps that show just how large the income gap is in the country. Three maps above measuring annual per capita income, urban disposable income, and rural income by province, all indicate that on top of rural and urban divide, people are better off living in coastal regions than inland areas (Schiavenza, 2013). Shanghai is undoubtedly China's economic centre, the top-ranked city in China in terms of concentration of 'quality population'¹⁹, living standards and cultural development. Chengdu belongs to the second level of medium developed cities (Sohu News, 2014).

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¹⁹ The idea of quality population derives from the popular *suzhi* discourse, which regards people with high education and high income as high-quality population, in contrast to poor, less educated rural migrants who often work in low-paid jobs. A recent example is the mass eviction of rural migrants from their accommodation in Beijing after a fire when the government used the term 'low-end population' to justify its action (Huang, 2017).

Shanghai, the largest city in China, with a population of 24.15 million in 2016, is one of China's major economic centres. More than 39% of Shanghai's residents are long-term migrants from different parts of China, a number that has tripled in ten years (NBS China, 2017). The city is portrayed as the most globalised and cosmopolitan place in China with its unique urban culture, which attracts the country's most educated and talented workforce and is a popular destination for Chinese people returning from overseas (Zarafonetis, 2014; Wasserstrom, 2009). Therefore, Shanghai is also viewed by its people as more 'open' and 'modern' than the rest of the country (Farrer, 2002).

Chengdu is the capital of Sichuan province in the southwest (See Figure 2). In 2016, the population of Chengdu city was 7.8 million. However, the 2010 census showed its wider administrative area as having a population of over 14 million (World Population Review, 2018). The city is known as a popular destination for investing in inland China, with 262 enterprises listed in the 'Fortune' Global 500. It is also known for its technology and innovation, industry and transportation. Consequently, Chengdu provides a good example of an urban context in western China.

I was aware of the relative economic development of these two cities, and it was not my aim to provide a comprehensive comparison between the two. However, including women from these two different cities allowed some space to reveal geoeconomic effects on my participants' life experiences. It helped to enrich our understanding of the life of women from my research cohort.

In the Field

Between 17 February 2015 and 17 April 2015, I interviewed 31 women and 11 men in China. Fully aware of the importance of building rapport with my participants, I started with warm-up questions, as Zarafonetis (2014) suggested in her research, such as talking about how we relate to our common friend, and sharing common experiences. I dressed smart casual and deliberately spoke either Mandarin or my local dialect by following each participant's choice. Since all my participants were from personal networks, about half of them already knew me, and the rest were introduced to me through intermediaries (see Figures 5 and 6), I do find it is not difficult to build rapport with most of them. For those who knew me already, I started

with casual catch-up questions before moving on to the interview. In order to avoid the problem of over-rapport in my interviews with this group, I adopted what McCracken (1988, p.23) called 'manufactured distance' through making a clear start to our interviews by going through the information sheet with them. I conducted most my interviews in a one-to-one format, apart from two occasions where my participants brought their partner or friend. Since some of my interview questions were designed to probe people's attitudes towards sex, abortion, female reproduction, homosexuality and virginity, which are still relatively sensitive topics and are not often discussed in public even among friends. Therefore, I decided to use vignettes on these topics in my interviews (see Appendix C).

To apply good feminist research practice, I made sure that there was time for each participant to read my information sheet and ask for any necessary clarification before I started my interview questions (Kelly, Burton and Regan, 1994). This was really helpful as it soon became apparent that a large proportion of my participants either did not use email regularly or simply had not read my information sheet in advance, which was either emailed or given to them prior to the interview.

Jackson et al. (2016, p.37) describe vignettes as 'mini-narratives or scenarios, usually centred on a problem or dilemma facing an imaginary protagonist, designed to elicit responses on what a person would or should do in the situation depicted.' Contextual information provided in such vignettes, instead of seeking participants' views in the abstract, allows for the recognition that 'meanings are social and morality may be situationally specific' (Finch, 1987, p.106). Widely used as a complementary method with other data-generating techniques, vignettes can be used to explore areas which would otherwise be difficult to access (Barter and Renold, 1999). They can tap general attitudes and beliefs about a specific situation, and are able to explore sensitive topics (Finch, 1987). Meanwhile, vignettes enabled me to compare the differences between men and women, and their interpretations of a 'uniform' situation (Barter and Renold, 1999). I changed the gender of the subject in each vignette to mirror my participant. In this way, I was able to let them share with me their opinions from their own gender perspective in each scenario. This method proved successful as I noticed that the majority of my participants were willing to talk about these topics.

Since I was exploring my participants' life experiences and attitudes towards genderrelated issues, the one-to-one interview was most suited to the type of questions I
was asking. In the Chinese context, group harmony is important, which often makes
people suppress their different views. Without a third person's presence, the one-toone interview freed my participants from the pressure to conform to others' views
and they could feel more relaxed about expressing their opinions. I started each
interview with open questions, such as inviting them to talk about their current life
status from whatever angle they preferred. I also gave them options to use pictures
or words to express themselves.

On one occasion, I conducted a joint interview with two women who are friends in Shanghai, due to their limited availability (Lisi and Zhangsan, see Figure 4). As the three of us had met before in the UK and they became friends after returning to Shanghai, their existing friendship made me believe that interviewing them together would not create a barrier for them to express their views. However, it was obvious that, although the two of them were open and comfortable in talking about their lives and sharing their views in front of each other, they showed little interest in each other's life stories. Often they played on their phone while the other was talking. In the end, it did not save much time in total and showed that one-to-one interviews are more efficient.

The other occasion on which I attempted a joint interview was when Atai brought her husband Adong to our interview (see Figure 4 and 5). Although I mentioned to her that her husband would also be a good candidate for my research, I was not expecting that he would turn up without an appointment. However, I felt it would be rude to turn him down, particularly in the context of Chinese culture (as described above), and it was important to interview as many participants as possible during my one-week stay in Shanghai. I slightly changed the sequence of my questions in order to start with the vignettes, which normally came at the end. I thought they would both be happy to comment on other people's stories. Ten minutes after I started, I noticed that the husband was very talkative and the wife was very quiet in front of him. Moreover, I realised that the topics involved in my vignettes might create tension and become sensitive in their marriage and thus do no good either for my participants or my data. Therefore, I quickly decided to split them up to interview the wife first. On

reflection, based on the data collected, it was the right decision to interview them separately. I will discuss specific issues relating to a partner's presence during the interview in detail later.

Upon finishing each interview, I gave participants a personal information sheet for them to fill in (see Appendix G). The sheet consisted of questions about the participant's age, number of children and siblings, highest degree obtained, whether they were a party member or not, etc. Here I also gave them a chance to choose their own pseudonym. The use of this personal information sheet also allowed me to quickly gather basic background information in a systematic way and to keep a record of my participants. I used this record to keep track of my sample to ensure that my participants were relatively evenly spread out in terms of age and marital status. This led me to use the purposive sampling method to fill certain gaps during the last stage of my fieldwork.

I also kept a field diary, in order to include all the details that I felt were worth noting down. I made notes in the field diary immediately following each interview The content of the notes ranged from general feelings about the interview to detailed points the participant made. It helped me to reflect and make improvements along the way. It also provided valuable background information for my data analysis.

Gaining Informed Consent

A set of 'institutionalized ethical review procedures' that aim to 'do no harm' underpin the western concept of good research (Park and Lunt, 2015)). However, the assumed transparency and social values of Anglo-American research norms can create awkwardness in a Confucian-influenced research field (Park and Lunt, 2015). Liu Jieyu (2006) points out that signing a written form in the Chinese context might be frightening to research candidates as they might worry that it will be used against them because of the country's unique historical and political past. Therefore, I was particularly concerned about gaining informed consent from my participants. I considered whether it was necessary to adapt the procedure to my field context and accept verbal consent from my participants, but this limitation was overcome by thoroughly explaining to them the purpose of gaining written consent (see, Appendix A, B and D).

Consequently, I gained written informed consent from all of my participants after I explained to them what it was for. There was only one participant, Patrick, who was initially hesitant about signing the written consent form at the beginning. Patrick (see Figure 5) is a male colleague of my friend in Shanghai. We met for the first time on the day of the interview. He appeared very business-like and was also the only person who asked to keep one copy of his consent form. All of the other participants signed without hesitation. A few of the participants even commented that this conduct made them feel zhenggui (above board, 正规), which contrasts with their Chinese experience. It helped them to see me as trustworthy, as the form draws a clear professional boundary for both sides. This experience also provided an interesting contrast to previous generations, who are more likely to view signing a written document as a threat, as Liu (2006) experienced. Huang and Pan (2009) pointed out that China lacks ethical guidelines in conducting social research and emphasised the importance of gaining informed consent. More exposure to western ideas and practices among the current generation might also have helped them to accept this practice. Moreover, it is important to note that the younger generation I interviewed have not worked in the old danwei system, which kept tight control over employees' personal lives through holding each individual's dang an (dossier, 档案). This might have made them less vigilant about signing documents.

I invited most of my participants to sign the consent form (see Appendix D) after explaining the information sheet and before starting my interview questions. There were only two participants to whom I deliberately presented the consent form after completing the interview. This was a decision that stemmed from trying to be socially sensitive in the Chinese context in order to collect quality data without compromising ethical practice. I was aware that those two particular participants, Xiaozhu and Wanyan (See Figure 4), were both older than me, and work in local government where people are generally more cautious about what they say or sign. They were both introduced to me for the first time at our interviews through my elders, who are their colleagues but also senior to them in age. Being aware of the relational complexity in these two cases, I thought that asking them to sign written documents might trigger a defensive attitude and make them less willing to talk. Furthermore, one of the intermediaries instructed me that I should just ask them questions without mentioning the consent form. He was concerned that asking Xiaozhu (see Figure 4)

to sign the form might cause embarrassment in their working relationship by making her feel inconvenienced. The two introducers were senior family friends and relatives to whom I needed to show respect and behave accordingly. To minimise the potential relationship cost without compromising my research practice, I asked Xiaozhu and Wanyan's verbal permission to record the interview at the beginning and asked them to sign the consent form after we finished the interview questions. I assumed that by the end of our interview, they would have a better understanding of what I was asking from them with more trust. This proved to be right, as both of them signed the form without hesitation.

Characteristics of Participants

By the end of my fieldwork, I had reached my target of interviewing 31 women and 11 men, excluding all my five pilot interviews conducted in the UK. All had obtained a degree, with some having completed their education at master's level or above, and there was also one current female PhD student. Nine women had experience of overseas education. Not all of them were the only child in their family; five women and two men had at least one sibling. This reflects the different family sizes under the One Child Policy, but remains within the main criteria of my sample selection: well-educated young urban professionals, who were born under the One Child Policy. I believed that their family background and experience help to reveal the social reality I was investigating from a different perspective. The average (mean) age of my female participants was 28.9 years old, whereas for the male participants it was 28.2. The median age of my sample is 28. None of my male candidates had children, but eight female candidates had one child each at the time of our interviews. The marital status of my participants, together with other characteristics, are shown in the following two tables.

Table 1: Characteristics of the 31 women

	Number of women
Age (in years)	
25–30	25
30–35	6
Marital Status	
Single	6
In a relationship	5
Married or engaged	18
Divorced	2
Educational Level	
BA/BSc	15
MA/MSc/MBA	15
PhD	1
Number of Siblings	
Zero	25
One	5
More than one	1
Number of Children, including pregnant	
women at the time of the interview	
Zero	21
Pregnant	1
One	9
More than one	0
Sex of Children, excluding pregnancy	
Female	5
Male	4
Age of Children	
< 5 years old	5
>= 5 years old	4
Overseas Experience	
Yes	10
No	21
Party Member	
Yes	18
No, including those who quit	13
Living in Hometown	
Yes	14
No	17
110	11

Table 2: Characteristics of the 11 men.

	Number of men
Age (in years)	
25–30	10
30–35	1
Marital Status	
Single	5
In a relationship	1
Married or engaged	5
Divorced	0
Educational Level	
BA/BSc	7
MA/MSc	4
PhD	0
Number of Siblings	
Zero	9
One	2
More than one	0
Number of Children, including pregnant	
wives at the time of the interview	
Zero	0
One	0
More than one	0
Sex of Children, excluding pregnancy	
Female	N/A
Male	N/A
Age of Children	
< 5 years old	N/A
>= 5 years old	N/A
Oversees Experience	
Overseas Experience	
Yes	$\begin{bmatrix} 2 \\ 0 \end{bmatrix}$
No Porty Marchan	9
Party Member	
Yes	6
No, including those who quit	5
Living in Hometown	1
Yes	1
No	10

Fifteen out of 31 of my female candidates were meeting me for the first time on the day of interview but were all introduced by close friends or family relatives through snowball sampling. These women were interviewed during the later stages of my fieldwork in order to balance the diversity of my sample depending on their marital and parental status. Halfway through my fieldwork, it became apparent that more

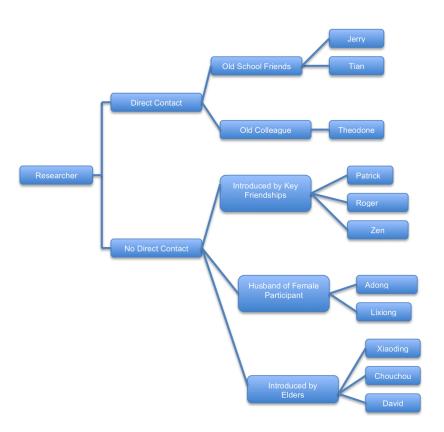
mothers over the age of 30 needed to be interviewed; hence, I used a purposive sampling method to enrich my data (Babbie, 2013).

In terms of the relationship and distance between my participants and me, I divided them into direct contacts, including 'close friendship, old work colleague, old schoolmates' and no direct contact, including 'introduced by key friendships, introduced by elder or participant's partner' (see Figure 4 and 5).

Close Friends Old Colleague Old Schoolmates No Direct Contact Zhangsan Introduced by Elders Wanyan

Figure 4: Relationships between female participants and the researcher.

Figure 5: Relationships between male participants and the researcher.



Reflections on the Interview

All of my participants were from the post-80s, only-child generation, few with siblings. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 35 at the time of the interviews. Similar to Park and Lunt's (2015) experiences in South Korea, Chinese society also functions on a seniority system, whereby respect for elders is expected. One should show respect through the title one uses when addressing others, the manners one chooses when receiving them, or whether or not one obeys what they say. The example of Xiaozhu that I used earlier serves to show how I took this into account in the field. In this context, it was important to consider each participant's age in relation to my own age. Ten of them were younger than me (I was 28 at the time of interview), six were the same age as me and sixteen were older. I used different tactics when interacting with them in order to facilitate data access.

I used honorific titles such as *jie* (elder sister, 姐) and *ge* (elder brother, 哥) to greet participants who were older than me, when it was socially appropriate. In Confucian culture, being senior in age also signifies more responsibility in terms of looking after those who are junior. For example, Tj (aged 32, female) and Java (aged 30, female), were both older than me and are distant relatives introduced to me by elders in my family. They not only paid for the refreshments, but also took me out for a meal afterwards as a subtle way of fulfilling their Confucian duty as *jie*. Apart from addressing them differently, I made an effort to neutralise the age hierarchy by behaving in a professional manner in order to minimise the effect of what they might feel they should or should not say in front of a *mei mei* (younger sister, 妹妹). I asked participants who were junior in age to me to call me by my first name instead of using the elder sister's title *jie*. My judgement of whether or not to use linguistic symbols of age hierarchy in each of my interview is based on my principle of honouring my participants in the given context but also attempt to remove potential obstacles for open dialogue.

According to the population census, 49.7 per cent out of China's total population of 1.34 billion in 2010 were urban residents (Yao, Luo and Wang, 2014). Due to the rapid urbanisation since the reform, it is sometimes hard to draw a strict line between

those who are truly urban and those who are rural²⁰. In the field, I encountered three participants who matched the main profile but had some kind of rural roots, which means that either they were sent to be educated in the city by parents who could be loosely classified as rural residents or their former rural family residence was incorporated into the city during urbanisation. Two women, Lixia and Muyu, and one man, Lixiong, who were introduced by intermediaries, are all established city residents, but introduced themselves as coming from the countryside (see Figures 4 and 5). I decided to include them in my study, as it gave me the opportunity to discover how their family backgrounds affected their gender identity, especially when they have established their life in the city through higher education.

Although 'class' remains a sensitive term in contemporary China, no one can deny China's economic landscape since the reform has dramatically reshaped its class structure. Although the class divisions in Chinese society are not the same as in Britain, the division between city and countryside through the *hukou* system is one of the many factors that have an impact on people's lives, like class. Due to China's entrenched rural-urban divide that stratified people's life chances at birth, having a 'rural background' often means less privilege comparing to their urban counterparts. Becoming an urbanite for many rural residents means upward social mobility. I am aware of my urban upbringing and overseas experience, which could appear as condescending to some participants who self-identified as having a 'rural background'. Therefore, I deliberately emphasised my respect to them by using honorific titles throughout our interview. I also draw on common experiences, such as similar educational background in China or childhood memories from the 1980s, to build rapport. This proved to work well, as they exhibited no difficulty in sharing with me openly about their life stories and feelings.

Meanwhile, China's regional disparity in economic development also means I could be perceived as inferior by my participants from more affluent coastal regions.

Shanghai's privileged social and economic position has created a unique cosmopolitan culture and identity for its local residents, who are often proud of being

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²⁰ In these three cases, my participants referred to their parents as peasants who had not made their fortune through migration. I also had participants whose parents are successful self-made entrepreneurs through migration to the city.

Shanghainese. This identity is often associated with a sense of superiority compared to people from other parts of the country. There is a widespread joke on the internet saying that if you ask Shanghainese to draw a map of China, they will just draw wild grass all over China except Shanghai to show their perception of the rest of the Chinese people as their country cousins. Born and raised in Sichuan, geographically I am from the Chinese 'West', which is often viewed as poor countryside compared to Shanghai. I went in my interviews with an awareness of these regional stereotypes and prepared coping strategies to minimise its negative impact on my data. I interviewed six women and one man who identified themselves as Shanghainese. I dressed smartly and interviewed them in standard Mandarin. We talked about our common friend whom I had met in the UK to build rapport. During these interviews, none of the Shanghainese participants showed any sign of superiority. However, Xiaoliu (see Figure 4) talked negatively about people who were not local Shanghainese during our interview, as though I were not one of them. Importantly, this might be because the intermediaries introduced me as their friend from the UK, which might elevate my social status in their eyes, as some people view the 'West' as being superior to China.

Among my 11 male participants, there were three men who were related to my female participants as fiancé or husband. Two men (Patrick and Roger) were my female participants' colleagues (see Figure 5). Five of the 11 male participants were single at the time of interviewing. With all my male participants, I received generally kind and gentle treatment, which is regarded as socially appropriate for men from this cohort. Most of them offered some kind of help in order to show their good manners in looking after a girl. Theodore, David and Chouchou paid the bill for our lunch after we had finished our interview in the restaurant. Theodore (29) and David (32) were both older than me, whereas Chouchou (25) was three years younger. Paying the bill in these contexts is less about age hierarchy and more about a way of displaying their masculinity by taking care of the finance. I interviewed Roger (28) on the evening of my arrival, when I had my suitcase with me. He naturally took over my suitcase when we started to walk out of the restaurant. Due to our similar age, and because some of the participants were my old friends from school, I did receive quite jokingly frank comments referring to me as *sheng nü* (leftover women, 剩女) or *nü*

hanzi (tomboy, 女汉子). Although spoken with a friendly tone, their choice of such terms reflects an embedded misogynist attitude in Chinese society.

There were a few occasions when, based on their comments, I sensed that my male participants were trying to make themselves look desirable to me. For example, David spent nearly 30 minutes at the beginning telling me how well travelled and financially secure he was. He particularly emphasised those characteristics, which he believed made him successful compared to his peers. Knowing his single status, I wondered whether he was trying to impress me personally as a potential partner. It was hard at the beginning of this interview as it did take extra effort for me to guide him through the relevant topics. This might be because of his career as an international tour guide, which made him super talkative, or he might also have had his own topics of interest in our conversation. I found interviewing male participants like him, who showed a strong tendency to be dominant in a conversation, to be a challenge. There is a fine line to tread as a female interviewer in this kind of context, between not being pushy and making a man feel uncomfortable to talk, while at the same time keeping the interview agenda focused.

A similar situation developed when I interviewed Theodore, an old colleague of mine, who was single at the time of interview. He graciously fitted me into his one-hour lunch break during a busy working day, just because I could not do any other day. After paying for our lunch, he was very keen on inviting me to join him for the afternoon, driving to another town for business with just the two of us. I felt a little bit anxious about accidentally giving out the wrong signals. Hence, I politely excused myself even though he insisted. Under the Chinese culture of reciprocity, I felt a bit sorry and emphasised that I am happy to help if there is anything else I can do for him in the future.

After building rapport at the beginning the interview, I approached my key topics in a gender-neutral and non-judgemental tone to encourage self-disclosure. However, I found that it was nearly impossible for them not to perceive me as the other sex. When my male participants expressed views about women, marriage and sex, they all said similar things. This might be because they tended to give socially desirable answers knowing that I am a woman who is doing research about Chinese women

and gender equality. It might also be due to Chinese society's mainstream expectations of men, to which they feel they need to conform.

Time, Space and Noise: Interviewing in Contemporary Chinese Cities

An aspect of the interview experience that became apparent was the shortage of time for my participants. Working overtime in the evening or at weekends is commonly expected by their employers, a daily commute will typically take ninety minutes each way and there is only a one-hour lunch break during the day. After a long working day, most of them want to go home and relax as soon as they can. Thus, I tried my best to respect their time and energy by keeping the interviews focused. My average interview time for women was one hour thirty minutes, whereas for men it was one hour. There were some exceptions, which lasted a much longer or shorter time due to my participants' level of willingness to talk. In general, the extremely long ones were with participants who have experienced significant events in life such as divorce or the death of close family members, or who felt close to me personally. They opened themselves up to share their stories and some even found the interview helped them to 'make time to think' (Lulu). The shorter ones were more business-like, with only short answers being given. This potentially further highlights the importance of building rapport, and finding participants from personal networks, as those who felt close to me personally may have been more likely to speak more openly, and to devote more time to the interview.

Another aspect worthy of future researchers' attention is interview location in Chinese cities. It was a challenge to find an ideal place for most of my interviews. Due to the time constraints for both my participants and me, I adopted the convenience strategy in most cases and tried to find a relatively quiet place close to each participant's location during their lunch break or right after work. Usually, I travelled to them and we met in public space such as a coffee shop, tearoom or restaurant, depending on their preference. For obvious reasons, those public places were often very noisy and bustling. To tackle this, I used a professional recorder, which could reduce the background noise. This turned out well, as most of my recordings were very clear and the relatively natural social setting helped my participants feel relaxed as well. For most of my interviews, it was more like a conversation with a purpose than clinical research, which I regard as a success.

Interviewing in these places also meant that we experienced some interruptions due to the unexpected presence of others, which affected the flow of the interview; for instance, a waiter coming to take our order or an acquaintance passing by and saying hi.

It is also relevant to mention that it became apparent that all of the places chosen by either my participants or myself in some degree represented our social status as China's emerging 'middle class'. Although restricted by time and geographical convenience, we still deliberately chose places like trendy coffee shops, elegant tearooms or stylish restaurants to treat one another in order to appear socially appropriate. On other occasions, especially during the Spring Festival when it was most appropriate, I invited some participants whom I already knew well prior to the interview to come over to my home for the interview and received them with Chinese courtesy. By doing so, I showed them signs of acceptance and intimacy, which facilitated building trust and rapport during the interview. This proved to be effective, as all of the interviews that I conducted in my own home were longer in time and more open in content. I also acknowledge the importance of the spatiality of the interview site and its influence on knowledge creation during the interview process (Sin, 2003). Due to unpredictability in the research field, I tried my best to manage each individual situation and make the best judgement about interview location for each participant on the spur of the moment.

The Presence of Others during Interviews

Apart from others' presence brought about by the natural public surroundings of my research sites, there were three interviews that I conducted while the participants' partners were nearby because there were no other options due to their limited availability. I made sure that their partner was some distance away during the interview to provide a certain level of privacy. For instance, I offered them a drink at another table while they were waiting and made sure that they could not hear our conversation. I also ensured that my participants were seated where they could not see their partner. However, there were moments when the partner came over to check on the progress of the interview. Then I had to stop the conversation and give them a break. In these interviews, I specifically reassured them of the confidentiality of our conversation before we started. Interestingly, there was one case when Lixia,

wife of Xiaoding (See Figures 4 and 5), messaged me afterwards to probe about her husband's attitude to having children, while she had particularly stressed confidentiality on this topic regarding her own answer. I had to politely reject her request. I felt sorry, because I could not respond as she wished. However, I am glad that I stuck to my research principles of confidentiality although culturally I should have obeyed her request as my *jie* (older sister).

On another occasion, I interviewed an engaged couple, Qingcai and Lixiong (see Figures 4 and 5), in their own café but on different dates. During each interview, the other partner was working in the café, leading to their constant presence, although not intentionally overhearing us. I did notice that my participants deliberately lowered their voices when discussing sensitive topics such as one's ex-partners or financial contributions in their relationship. The sensitivity of interviewing a candidate with their partner present was also evident when I had to separate a couple, Atai and Adong, shortly after the joint interview began to enable the wife to express her opinions without the pressure to agree or fear of offending her husband.

The presence of colleagues also seemed to have some impact on the level of selfdisclosure of my participants. Wanyan (see Figure 4) was a female participant introduced to me by my family elder who was working in the same government office. I was brought to her office by my relative and interviewed her in a closed-door office next to other colleagues during working hours. The interview was fairly short compared to others and she tended to give me short answers. Patrick (see Figure 5) was a male colleague of my friend in Shanghai, and we met for the first time on the day of the interview. Lisi (see Figure 4) organised a social gathering in a restaurant with several of her colleagues who she thought would be suitable for me to interview. I conducted the interview with Patrick at a different table while the others were eating, because he needed to leave early. In the presence of other colleagues, although about the same age, Patrick came across as very business-like and cautious about the things he shared. I felt that Wanyan and Patrick agreed to my interview mainly as a way of giving their colleague *mianzi* in spite of its inconvenience. In this case, their level of openness to me was a mixed product of the nature of the relationship involved and the presence of their colleagues.

Researching in One's Own Back Garden – Positionality of the Researcher

There has been much debate about the researcher's own position in the field (Cotterill, 1992; Acker, 2001; Dwyer and Buckle, 2009; Taylor, 2011; Liamputtong, 2010). Sharing many similarities with my research participants, I am well aware of both advantages and disadvantages of my own positioning brought to my data. Being Chinese and speaking the same language as my participants, and their peers in terms of age and education, I do have advantages of an insider. This can leads to deeper social insight, and quicker building of rapport and trust due to continuing contact with the field, summarised as being 'empirically literate' by Roseneil (1993, p.189).

Nonetheless, taking one's insider position for granted and failing to conduct a critical assessment of this position endangers the quality of data collected. Taylor (2011) has warned against possible knowledge distortion by an uncritical insider. My participants often assumed I knew what they meant, and I found I also had to quard against my own taken for granted assumptions the meaning of their accounts. I tried to minimised this during my interviews by self-consciously playing the role of an outsider: pointing out I now live outside China, therefore needed more explanations. It worked well, as I showed genuinely curiosity about their answers and eagerness to learn about their lives. Besides, despite similarities with my participants in terms of education and cultural background, our experiences as women could still differ massively. In particular, my exposure to feminism outside China has enabled me to seek life fulfilment outside conventional gendered expectations. I became very aware of this, because I was often surprised by so many of their responses, realising that I no longer shared the taken for granted view of the world as my contemporaries in China. Therefore, I tried to practice active listening and learn from their experiences while not taking my own experience as the unspoken norm for Chinese women.

Moreover, as a cultural participant, the researcher's position as an insider or outsider is never absolute, but has a dynamic existence and open to negotiation between all parities, and can shift over the course of a single interview (Letherby, 2003; Liamputtong, 2010). I see myself occupying what Katz (1994) advocates as the 'spaces of betweenness'. While I value the cultural background that I shared with my participants, I had also lived away from China for four years prior to my PhD,

which provided me with a new perspective on the gendered experience of being a Chinese woman. It gave me what Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) called the combination of intellectual, emotional and physical distance from my native field, which, as argued by Labaree (2002), is essential to give the clarity needed in my research practice. As I have intentionally distanced myself from Chinese culture and tried to embark on a completely different way of life in the UK, I have unlearn those attitudes and values that are taken for granted and embedded in my own cultural background. This enabled me to be more critical of conditions of life in China.

As Liamputtong (2010) notes, socially constructed identities such as gender, class, age all have great role to play in the research process. Within the Chinese context, it is crucial to understand the interplay of these factors that determine how the researcher is perceived by their research participants, and therefore the quality of data collected. In all my interactions with participants, I tried to find a balanced role to play as an interviewer in each of these encounters, while being culturally sensitive yet not to simply mirror the existing oppressive hierarchies within Chinese society, for example, age related honorifics such as *jie* and *mei*. The positionality between the researcher and my participants was explored with an ongoing reflective process throughout data collection and analysis.

Power Dynamics

The balance of power between researcher and participants within feminist research is a topic of great concern (Letherby, 2003; Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994). I must confess my naivety when I went into the field, as I genuinely believed I could build an 'equal relationship' with my participants by subverting cultural hierarchy build on age, gender and family background. It turned out to be more complicated than I had realised. The power-based dynamics inherent my research did not only exist, but was actively negotiated in the research process by all parties (Ribbens, 1989). Therefore, I must acknowledge the interactivity of positionality, power, and knowledge in my research (Merriam et al., 2001). My effort to find a balance in order to accommodate participants' differences in terms of age, gender and/or status (Cotterill, 1992; Beoku-Betts, 1994), is about the nature of power as well as access to power. I also realised that the close friendship I had with some of my participants rendered greater potential for me to exploit their trust (Stacey, 1988; Finch, 1984),

which I attempted to resolve by sticking to the information they gave me within our interviews. Since feminist researchers have argued that self-disclosure can help to equalise and humanise the interview relationship (Oakley, 2013), I disclosed myself as if it was in a friendly conversation but was consciously not to jeopardise the quality of my data. However, it is hard to tell exactly how much and what sort of disclosure is appropriate (Reinharz and Chase, 2002). Therefore, researchers do need to think carefully in each case. Meanwhile, my participants also exercise a form of control over the information they choose to disclose or not, especially when they tended to give short 'official' answers or deliberately omit certain crucial information. As a researcher, I am aware that I do have the overall power over my research, particularly in interpretation. Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) state that interpretation is exercising power and our choices have consequences such that we need to be held to account. The varieties of life experiences of my participants really humble me and lead me to consider carefully when it comes to the interpretation and representation of my group of women. I made every effort to make sure that my research process reflects my feminist rigour, including promising to send them a summary of my findings in Chinese once I completed my PhD.

Playing a Double-edge Sword – Using 'Guanxi' in a Chinese Context

Using established personal networks, *guanxi* (关系) with trust already built in the Chinese context was the key element in my completing my fieldwork within the limited amount of time available. It benefited me in ways such as gaining fast-track access to potential participants and obtaining trust, which facilitated quality disclosure. Liu Jieyu (2006) showed that the closer the links between the researcher and the interviewee, the more willing they are to share information openly. However, I argue that it is also important to take account of how people are related and the interests involved for different parties. Therefore, it is not merely the number of intermediaries involved that matters to the quality of data, but also the nature of the *guanxi* in use that is worthy of critical examination.

In most cases, my participants said 'yes' to the person who asked them to participate, as opposed to the interview itself. It became clear that it was more important for them to show trust in the intermediary and do them a favour than to know about the task in advance. For instance, although I offered participants my

information sheet either by email or as a printed copy prior to the interview, approximately 90% of them attended without having read it, apart from vaguely knowing the topic and how I related to them in relation to the introducer. I was always careful to ask my intermediaries to introduce my project with enough professional information on my behalf in advance. But sometimes, the intermediary would use their autonomy and choose not to disclose certain information to ensure that they could do me a favour by securing me an interview. They also chose the parts of my research that they felt comfortable with and that seemed 'right' to disclose to my potential participants to make it socially appropriate for their relationship. The power dynamics in these personal interactions, intertwined with what was appropriate in this cultural setting, gave a certain level of control to the intermediaries, as I was relying on them for access to participants and in helping to build trust with them prior to the interview. It is also worth mentioning that, by using *guanxi*, one is tied into the reciprocity network and will be expected to 'give back' somehow at a later time.

In addition, I found that the definition of distance or closeness of *guanxi* between an interviewee and the researcher is not fixed, and thus should be open to critical reflection by the researcher in each case. Giving you *mianzi* does not guarantee the quality of your *guanxi*. It is just a gesture showing that they are interested in maintaining *guanxi* with you. Therefore, the quality of *guanxi* might be affected both by the distance and the nature of your relationship. More specifically, the nature of Chinese *guanxi* can be affected by the hierarchical relationship involved, such as age, social status, gender etc. All these factors affect the nature of *guanxi*, not only between the researcher and the intermediaries, but also between the intermediaries and the participant, and this ultimately influences the nature of *guanxi* between the researcher and participant. Figures 4 and 5 show some of the factors that might influence the nature and quality of *guanxi* between the researcher and participants. Moreover, the interests involved in knowing each other are also crucial in determining the nature of your *guanxi*.

All the above are important to consider, because ultimately the nature and quality of your *guanxi* will affect the quality of your data. It affects what participants can and cannot share with you. For example, what the researcher may regard as a close

guanxi can be a problem when the other side is more concerned about maintaining mianzi according to the social role they embody. In this case, their close relationship does not always generate rich or good-quality data but hinders the authenticity of information given by participants when they try to make themselves 'look good' in front of the researcher. This requires the researcher to have a deep understanding, not only of guanxi as a concept, but also of how it works in practice. Moreover, one has to bear in mind the interpersonal dynamics while interpreting the data, especially one's social positioning within these guanxi networks. It helps to see, not only what has been said, but also how things were said and why they were said or not said.

Creative Approaches in My Research

In addition to using vignettes, I also tried to use drawings to generate data. At the beginning of my interview, I often gave participants some time to reflect upon themselves with the question of how they perceive themselves at their current life stage. I told them that they could use either verbal or visual methods to share with me their thoughts and offered them coloured pens and paper to encourage them to express themselves in a creative way. I asked them to explain to me what they had drawn on the paper. I was hoping this could offer me a different perspective to understand them and thought it should be an easy start for my participants to relax and be themselves. However, I found that, in the field, very few people took this opportunity to express themselves using a drawing. The majority went directly into verbally explaining their perception of themselves, with comments like: 'the question is too abstract or difficult to answer'. There were only three women who used the coloured pens during my interviews. Joyce, a female entrepreneur with a MBA degree, quickly drew a pie chart and eloquently explained to me using a businesslike tone how her social circle is constituted. The other two were both mothers with a young child. Yiyi drew a flower and explained to me how this flower represents her idealised character. She is a friend of mine who paints as a hobby. The last woman who used this method, Lulu, drew a smiley picture of her and her child holding hands. She told me that she is divorced and her daughter is the most precious person to her. She said that she knows how to do this because she usually paints with her daughter. Jinwang, who is a landscape architect, put down the pen after a few seconds and said she didn't practise, and it would be embarrassing if she could

not draw well. None of my male participants took up this option. There were occasions when I did not give them the coloured pens either because the venue was not appropriate, such as when we interviewed while eating, or we had already started the conversation naturally. I would say that this method did not work most of the time, but it did help me to better understand those who did take up the option.

I also printed out four pictures (see Appendix E and F) chosen from the Internet to use in my interviews. Two of them were commercial property advertisements targeting young adults. The other two pictures were Communist Party propaganda posters promoting China's dream and filial piety, which are commonly displayed on the streets. My choice of pictures was designed to encourage my participants to talk about their opinions on Chinese society at large. I gave out these pictures at the end of each interview in a rather casual manner with a question like: 'Do you have anything to say about the current situation of our society? Here are some pictures, in case you want to comment.' I used these pictures because making political comments is still relatively sensitive and direct criticisms made in public about the government can bring trouble to the person. In this way, I hoped to touch the base of my participants' thoughts about the status quo of the society they are living in without directly questioning them. Most of them commented on the pictures, which proves that this was an effective method to elicit their opinions.

The typical procedure of the interview session was as follows: the explanation of the information sheet first, usually followed by signing the consent form. After finishing all the interview questions, I read out different vignettes one by one for my participants to comment on. Finally, I asked them to comment on the pictures while filling in the personal information sheet.

Activism in the Field?

I am a feminist and I think everyone should be a feminist. Fully aware of my own political stance and my passion about convincing people of the importance of gender equality in China, I often allowed ten to 15 minutes after the interview to discuss relevant issues with my participants and to answer their questions. This was beneficial for both sides, as it helped to balance the interview relationship (Ribbens, 1989), as well as creating a space to discuss issues of mutual concern. Many

participants wanted to know whether they fitted into the normal range of people or not, which I found important and worthy of analysis. I used my fieldwork as an opportunity for networking and raising awareness of gender equality with my participants after the interview whenever they wanted to talk more. In addition, I also tried to raise their awareness about protecting their 'rights' by going through the information sheet with them. Together with the professional manner I brought into our interview settings, I tried to establish a sense of 'professional boundaries', which I think the relationship-based Chinese society desperately needs. In the end, we also exchanged contact details for future communication.

As in South Korea, giving a customary gift when meeting or visiting is a sign of respect in China (Park and Lunt, 2015). While remaining culturally appropriate, I also tried to challenge the Confucian norm of reciprocity by giving gifts in a slightly different way. I did not give them out until we had finished the interview. For all my participants, I either brought a small gift to give out at the end of my interviews or offered refreshments and even meals to them depending on the circumstance of each case, as a way of saying 'Thank you'. Occasionally, I also accepted a participant's offer to pay for refreshments or a meal when it was more socially appropriate. To reduce participants' feeling of obligation to answer my questions, I also did not choose particularly expensive gifts, as I did not want to create scenarios that might lead to further obligations. I either gave speciality snacks from my hometown or unique perfume samples, which were nice enough to be a gift, but small enough not to impose obligation.

I insisted that participants who were junior to me in age should call me by name without a seniority title, which was a deliberate political act to promote a more egalitarian society. I am aware that the relationship between adopting the social norms to gain access to participants and holding firm to my political commitment is not always harmonious. But, through an ongoing reflective process, I believe we were able to find a reasonable starting point.

Following the feminist tradition, I sought to understand my participants as they are, trying to listen and understand their stories from their perspective. I am also aware that I have my own assumptions about what I would like to discover in the field.

Bearing all this in mind, I have to admit that it was a challenging as well as humbling

experience for me. It saddened me when I heard my participants talk about their difficulties in life as women, then conclude by saying 'I don't think anything can change for us' or 'How can men look after a baby? We're born different, it has to be like this.' As much as I would like to step in and practise my activism, I had to be self-disciplined not to interrupt what they wanted to say. It was particularly hard to listen to views that are radically different from my own. Statements like 'I don't want to be feminist', 'I just like men who are stronger than me anyway' or 'I would rather stay at home being spoiled by my husband' made me feel uneasy. However, interview techniques that I had read about did help. I tried my best to follow their advice on how to respond appropriately and how to probe further, meanwhile maintaining a relaxed interview atmosphere (Fielding and Thomas, 2008; Rubin and Rubin, 2012). I used phrases like 'I see', 'this is interesting, do you want to explain more?' to allow them to speak without feeling judged. I find relief and encouragement in Millen's writing:

Individuals may not have a full awareness of the systems which surround and constrain them, and as researchers, we have a responsibility to illuminate these systems using their experiences, and illuminate their experiences using these systems (Millen, 1997, p.35).

Transcribing, Translation and Analysis

After returning to the UK from my fieldwork, I started to transcribe my interviews in Chinese, as this was the original language used. Initially, I thought it would be an easy task, just simply listening and typing, which could be finished within three months, or maybe even two months? Soon I realised how naïve I was! It became clear that this process was both physically and intellectually challenging. An average ninety minute interview took me at least eight hours to transcribe. It sometimes took even longer if the participants spoke fast. Moreover, typing Chinese with the *pinyin* input system means that there are often multiple choices for a word or phrase to choose from, which makes it slower than typing in English. After just one week's constant typing, I injured my wrist by keeping it in one position for too long. Therefore, I decided to use a computer programme called Expresscribe with a foot pedal to ease the workload on my hands. This helped to speed up my typing, and I would recommend it to anyone who finds it exhausting to transcribe.

Although it was a painful process, I would always prefer to transcribe data myself. I found it really beneficial in the following ways: It reduced the potential risk of leaking my participants' information to unnecessary parties, and therefore further ensured its confidentiality. It also enabled me to become familiar with my data, as the process often involved repeating one clip several times to check its accuracy. Moreover, keeping the interviewer and transcriber as one person helped to enrich the data. Listening to recordings brought back visual memories about each interview. Together with my fieldwork journal, which I wrote right after each interview, I was able to pick up subtle cues that were not textual and I added these as notes into my transcription to facilitate analysis later on.

As Davidson (2009, p.38) points out, 'all transcription is selective in one way or another', so it would be false to claim that my transcription captured all the features related to the interviews. Similarly to Chin's (2018) approach to the transcription of her research on women's experiences of gender at work in Taiwan, I also noted down 'verbal and non-verbal signals that can change the tenor of conversations and meaning' (Oliver, Serovich and Mason, 2005), such as laughter, physical actions, stuttering and pauses, to provide a clearer context for each interview.

Since all my interviews were conducted in Chinese, translation is inevitably involved when I present my research findings in English. My role as a researcher in this project was therefore threefold: I was the interviewer, the transcriber and also the translator. Although 'the researcher/translator role offers the researcher significant opportunities for close attention to cross cultural meanings and interpretations and potentially brings the researcher up close to the problems of meaning equivalence within the research process' (Temple and Young, 2004, p.168), it is equally important to acknowledge the socio-cultural positioning of the researcher and how meanings shift with their insider/outsider status. In order to retain the nuances of the data, I read and analysed the transcripts in the original language of Chinese and only translated into English the parts that needed to be quoted. Certain phrases or concepts that might be difficult to translate or were culturally specific, I transliterated to keep the pronunciation in *pinyin* and explained the meaning in English in my analysis.

Joffe and Yardley (2004) point out that thematic analysis has the strength of combining 'the analysis of frequency of the codes and analysis of their meaning in context', which enhances the subtlety and complexity of my qualitative analysis. My choice of thematic analysis allowed my data to speak through themes that emerged after coding. As someone who is a rookie in research, I was initially overwhelmed by the amount of data that I needed to code and comprehend. The step-by-step guide to thematic analysis provided by Aronson (1995) was a great help, as was using Nvivo to facilitate my coding and analysis. However, I still felt as though I was about to be drowned in the ocean of my own data after finishing my first-run coding.



Figure 6: Sorting out coding in my room.

Figure 6 is a photograph I took in my room when I was struggling with coding my transcription in 2016. In order to have an overview of the themes that could potentially be formed through my codes, I printed out all the codes generated by Nvivo, cut them up and physically moved them around in my room to give myself an idea of how they could fit together as different themes. Although it looked clumsy, it was an immense help for me to start to grasp the meaning of my data and identify themes that I was interested in analysing further.

The emerging themes that are most central to my research questions were: premarital sex and abortion, norms of marriage, perceptions of success and future aspirations, and their marital reality. Each of these themes forms the base of one of

the chapters that follow. I begin in the next chapter by looking at premarital sex and its implications for Chinese women.

Chapter 4

Premarital abortion, what is the harm? The Responsibilisation of women's pregnancy among China's 'privileged' daughters

China's 'opening-up' policy has been accompanied by change in the country's sexual climate since 1979. In addition to economic reform, the implementation of the one-child policy also helped separate sex from reproduction, as it promoted the use of contraception among married couples, indicating that sex for love and pleasure are important in marital relationships (Pan, 2006; Jeffreys and Yu, 2015). The relaxing social and sexual mores has manifested itself in many ways, such as increased acceptance of premarital sex, the proliferation of pornography and prostitution, a rising divorce rate and private permissiveness towards extramarital sex (Jeffreys, 2004, 2006; Jeffreys and Yu, 2015; Pan, 1994; Xiao et al., 2011; Zarafonetis, 2014; Zha and Geng, 1992; Zheng, 2006).

Despite a gradual loosening of restrictions on personal sexual pleasure and desire (Evans, 1997; Jeffreys and Yu, 2015; Pei et al., 2007; Ruan and Matsumura, 1991; Wang and Ho, 2011), the Chinese government is still constantly trying to curb these less predictable social consequences through various measures in order to maintain control—for example, through visible nationwide campaigns against pornography and prostitution, which have led to numerous arrests (Ruan and Matsumura, 1991), and debate on the legal regulation of sex-related bribery and corruption among government officials (Jeffreys, 2006). Besides, public discourse around sexuality and sexual conduct remains heavily moralised, such as through the party-state's promotion of 'socialist morality', and monitored, so as to maintain social stability (Zarafonetis, 2014). This state sponsored moralisation of individual behaviours is shown through public condemnation and punishment of Party officials who were caught having extramarital affairs, and an emphasis on the importance of 'moral character' when appointing government officials (Emia, 2015; Xinhua wang, 2012)²¹, as well as banning youth literature because of its sexually charged content (Weber,

88

²¹ News reports within and outside China have shown sexual bribery and scandals rampant among high-ranking officials: officially adultery is deemed intolerable and punishable according to CCP's disciplinary regulations, which can lead to expulsion (Emia, 2015).

2002). The 'abstinence' attitude has generally been dominant in Chinese sex education since 1949 (Aresu, 2009; McMillan, 2006), as conservative educators worried that public exposition of sex-related knowledge would encourage young people to engage in promiscuous behaviour (Burton, 1988; Honig and Hershatter, 1988; Honig, 2003; Wang and Wang, 2012). As a result, the conservative tone around sex and sexuality from the party-state was reaffirmed, which remains some distance from people's lived reality in the reform era.

Major public debate on sex education did not erupt until March 2017, when a news item about a newly-published sex education textbook triggered widespread online debate (Koetse, 2017). The official media called on the public to desensitize children's sex education—citing rising numbers of premarital abortions and an increase in the number of cases of sexual violation of underage children in recent years as evidence of the need to change (Lü, 2017). This most recent debate around sex education reveals the massive gap, and tension, between realism and moralism on this matter. One of the consequences of loosening sexual morality coupled with the lack of sex education is an increase in the number of unplanned premarital pregnancies, most of which are terminated (Cao, 2015).

Abortion was framed as a remedial measure in the national population control programme (Nie, 2005). Cao (2015) cites statistics from the National Family Planning Research Institute, from 2014, to show that China performs the most terminations in the world, while large numbers of non-surgical abortions are left undocumented. Though one could attribute the figure partly to the strict implementation of the birth control policy, the prevalence of unplanned pregnancies among unmarried young women that lead to abortions is not news to the public (QQ News, 2015; Wang, 2015; Liu, 2015). According to national statistics, there has been a notable increase in induced abortions in recent years: 6,000,000 in total from 2000 to 2003, and 8,000,000 in 2003-2007, which rose to 9,170,000 in 2008 (Wu and Qiu, 2010). Women aged below 25, without a history of pregnancy, accounted for nearly half of these numbers. A large unmet need for temporary methods of contraception in urban areas of China has been identified as the reason behind the large number of unplanned pregnancies and induced abortions for unmarried women (Xu et al., 2004).

In this chapter, I highlight the gap between the distant official party line and people's lived reality. I illustrate a strictly moralised discourse around female sexuality under the party-state's promotion of 'socialist morality', where the normalisation of abortion as a practice does not translate into public acceptance of premarital abortion for women. Through analysing narratives about the stigma attached to premarital abortion and women's interpretation of 'responsible motherhood', I reveal how they navigate such moralised tensions in contemporary China. In so doing, I highlight how the responsibilisation of women's pregnancy bears specific Chinese characteristics.

The Silenced Lesson: Sex Education

At the beginning of March 2017, a news item triggered wide online debate around the still sensitive topic of sex education in China. It started with a frustrated mother posting pictures of a primary school's newly distributed textbook on sex education and complaining that its contents was 'too much'. It quickly spread across popular online platforms like Weibo and Wechat²² pushed by various marketing accounts using it as a hot topic to attract attention. Most parents reacted in shock and harshly criticized the explicit contents of the textbook, labelling them as 'pornographic', as the book included clear illustrations of both male and female genitals with cartoon pictures and explanations of sex and pregnancy. It contains short scenarios that teach children how to protect themselves from sexual violation, it also treated homosexual love as a normal part of human sexuality (Hangzhou News, 2017; Koetse, 2017). In the end, the school had to recall all the textbooks distributed among students under the public pressure, but stated that they would still seek an appropriate time to promote this course. On the 25th March 2017, China News, which represents the official voice of the authorities, released a news article titled as 'Primary school sex education textbook triggers controversy: how to desensitize children's sex education' (Lü, 2017). The article explained why sex education now is not only pertinent but urgent by citing rising numbers of premarital abortions and increasing cases of sexual violation of underage children in recent years, and called for the public's, particularly parents' and teachers', acceptance of a much needed change of attitude. This article was widely circulated across multiple Chinese media

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²² Sino Weibo is China's most popular micro-blogging website, whereas Wechat is the most commonly used messaging app used by Mainland Chinese.

within one day, which shows the changing tone of the official line on sex education. The public discussion also took a turn on Weibo with people starting to show their support for sex education by recalling their own experiences at school that left them in vulnerable situations (Weibo, 2017). This most recent hot debate around sex education reveals not only the massive existing void of sex education in China, but also the tension between realism and moralism on this matter.

Claiming that China is undergoing a new cultural revolution in terms of its increasingly liberal and diversified sexual culture, Yu (2016) points out its gendered, classed and structurally imbalanced multidimensional nature, in the context of which sex education is badly needed and poorly managed. It might look contradictory on the surface that on the one hand China has experienced a liberalization of social and sexual mores in recent years, but on the other hand open discussion about sexually related topics in public remains sensitive. I used the following two vignettes about unplanned pregnancy and abortion to lead to discussion of sex education with my participants, which proved effective.

The unplanned pregnancy vignette: Xiaozhen recently found herself pregnant, but she and her boyfriend are not suitable for marriage. What would you suggest?

The premarital abortion vignette: Chenlu and her boyfriend decided to get married after living together for a while. But her boyfriend found out that she had an abortion with her ex-boyfriend. He is bothered about her past. What do you think?

Even though I approached it in an impersonal way, my participants still often appeared shy talking about it, which indicates it is still not common for them to openly discuss this matter, at least in perceived 'public space'. For example, L says she feels embarrassed to talk about it even now, as 'sex is not something you could talk about openly'. L's difficulty in openly talking about sex is not uncommon. Muyu, a girl who grew up in the countryside and later migrated to the city through higher education recalls her experience:

Muyu: What?

Kailing: Where you get your sex knowledge. [I repeated my question]

Muyu: Neither from parents nor from school. Then...it might be....I feel my knowledge about it is absolutely deficient. Maybe occasionally hear a little bit from female best friendsThen...ehr...I feel...ehr...I am very ignorant about it...and...sometimes...I...am ...a bit...Anyway, I am...a bit...I feel...me and girls around me....hardly...really...talk about sex related stuff.

Her feeling of unease in answering my question evidences how rare sex would have become a conversation topic even among close friends. As a typical 'good student' in school who changed her life path through higher education, Muyu is a living example of the view that 'good girls should not know about sex' promoted by the education system for this generation.

Aresu (2009) states that despite the interruption from periodic political turmoil, the 'abstinence' attitude is generally dominant in Chinese sex education. Young people are regarded as easily mouldable raw materials and vulnerable under the harmful western influence in the eyes of Chinese sex educators (McMillan, 2006). Hence, the focus of sex education is helping them to establish a 'healthy outlook' on their body, relationships with the opposite sex, marriage and childbirth, which would shape their moral values and have significant impact on their future life choices (McMillan, 2006: 57). Against this backdrop, the importance of moral character and promotion of sexual self-control are emphasised. It is common that education institutions implement various measures of policing students' sexual activities in order to restrain their sexual activity (Farrer, 2002: 180, 253; McMillan, 2006: 62).

This approach is reflected among my participants' shared experience of almost complete 'silence' on sex education received both at school and at home. Java (30)'s use of rhetorical questions as answer shows that it is regarded as common knowledge that little information about sex is provided by school and parents.

Kailing: How about parents?

Java: Does parents teach this?

Kailing: [Laugh] How about school?

Java: What do you think?

This way of answering the question indirectly is also a classic example of the Chinese way of avoiding mistakes that might jeopardize either one's reputation or personal prospects. It indicates a moralised tone around this topic and that explicitly talking about sex is not a widely accepted social practice.

The public's unease of approaching this topic openly is also evident through parents' silence. Lijun (28) recalls her embarrassment while watching a kiss scene in her parents' presence: 'for our generation, even watching TV with parents would be embarrassing, if there was a kiss scene on the screen. The atmosphere would immediately become awkward. It shows how it is not easy to discuss with one's parents.' From her reflection, one could have a glimpse of how culturally embarrassing it was to discuss sexual related content between parents and children.

When sex related knowledge was provided, it was often done in an implicit manner. Compared to the absolute silence from most parents, a few mothers tried to guide their daughter on this matter by giving them a book with scientific knowledge about bodily development in puberty without talking to them directly. 'My mom bought me a series of encyclopedia to read when I was younger, it mentioned something about sexual development' (Zhangsan). Atai also had similar experience.

Kailing: Do parents teach?

Atai: My parents did not teach, but I remember my mom bought me a book, something like puberty knowledge for girls. But she never talked? with me about it. She just said you could read this book. She never spoke to me in person about it.

Kailing: What do you think about her way?

Atai: I feel she wanted to teach me. She definitely doesn't want me to learn it from other dodgy channels. She wanted to teach me, but she feels too embarrassed to say anything directly. Maybe my parents' generation is like this.

Both were brought up in established family in Shanghai. As the frontier under the reform, Shanghai's frequent exposure to the western world might explain their mother's relatively pro-active approach. Their awareness of educating their daughters through 'safe scientific' channels, without openly discussing sex with them in person reflects the mark of China's communist era. Often born in the 1950s to 1960s, parents of the only-child generation grew up in the Culture Revolution period

(1966-1976), which numerous scholars contend a dearth of both public and private discussion of personal romantic relationship and sex as a result of strict ideology control (Evans,1997; Honig, 2003; Ruan and Matsumura,1991; Yang, M., 1999). Their own lack of sex knowledge together with the influence of the ideology from that time makes their silence understandable.

A few sporadic local initiatives in places like Shanghai started to pioneer sex education at school as the torchbearer of China's modernity since the 1980s (McMillan, 2006; Ruan and Matsumura, 1991, Xu, 2000). The privileged few of my participants studied in those 'Key schools' mentioned their vague memory of the so called 'puberty education', which they often describe as 'not relevant' or 'superficial'. The contents were mainly focused on the biological development of the human body like a science lesson as McMillan (2006) described, which did not provide much practical information. Viviankuku (28)'s comment reflects the reality: 'It seems they [school] did mention something, but I cannot be sure. Either way, they would only touch very basic superficial stuff, nothing major and it does no help practically.' In his report in 2000, Xu Tianming, the president of the Chinese Sexology Association at that time, acknowledges the inadequate provision of sex education would be much worse in less developed regions in China, when it was still found ineffective and lacking in Shanghai. The uneven spread of educational resources in China is evident among the majority of my participants receiving any basic knowledge about sex at school.

Lou et al (2006) suggest that due to the restriction of cultural norms public sex education is difficult to approach. The broader social silence surrounding the discussion of sex means that most of my participants were almost left to their own devices to find out information about sex. Similar to Zarafonetis's (2014) finding, online information is the main source for people to find out about sexual pleasure or contraception, as such information is absent in 'official' channels. Using pornography as a self-education tool among my participants was also implicitly and explicitly acknowledged that using pornography as a self-education tool is common practice, as is private discussion with trusted friends.

Chain: I become talented through self-study!...Actually, I didn't know very well, yes. It all comes from friends sharing from mouth to mouth, hand by hand [laugh].

Tj: All sorts, I read books, videos (means porn) [laugh]... discuss with friends like this. There was no serious sex education!

Chen: er...[I learn sex from]...Island Action films [Laugh]. I am joking...Teachers are too shy to teach this, so are parents. Nothing from them.

Island Action films is coded name for Japanese porn, which is widely available and consumed in China. A survey conducted in 2006 suggested that 68.8% of Chinese college graduates had watched porn (Pan, 2008 cited in Zhang, 2011:97). Though the impact of using pornography as a sex education tool on this generation is beyond the scope of my research, feminist scholars have long criticised pornography as promoting a problematic social and cultural environment, especially as perpetuating unequal gender roles (Dworkin, 1981; Dwyer, 1995).

Three participants were quite open and humorous when talking about learning sex themselves. This might be because they both passed a certain age (Chain was 29, Tj 32 and Chen 30), before which the society thinks they should not know or talk about sex. Though Chain and Chen were single, they were well into the age at which a girl could be defined as a woman. Despite their relative openness, their jokes and laughs connote much more implicit sexual meaning hiding behind 'a veil' that is still not easy to tear apart.

Even when acknowledging learning sex knowledge through personal networks, women often emphasise their innocence. Atai admits that she learnt about sex herself, but she ends her answer with '*I was a good kid*'. It shows that she is trying to separate herself, an innocent schoolgirl at that time from those who 'know sex and practice it'. Similar narratives were noticeable in L and Jinwang's accounts, as they also tried to distance themselves from those who know a lot about sex. Clearly, sex knowledge is not appropriate for a decent schoolgirl to master. It reveals the moral boundary on who, when and how one should learn about sex.

The Under-Discussed Reality: Premarital Sex

The increased acceptance of premarital sex among the public is shown through a survey conducted in 1989 and 1990, which included 23,000 people from 15 provinces; the majority (86%) approved of this practice (Burton, 1990). In an interview with the BBC, Li Yinhe, China's first female sexologist, compares figures in her surveys on the number of people who engage in premarital sex, showing a sharp increase between 1989 and 2014, with the percentage rising from 15.5% to 71% (Buckley, 2016). Despite lacking much comprehensive sex education, many scholars have noted the increasingly liberal attitudes and practices of sex and sexuality among Chinese youth,²³ including casual sex, non-conjugal sex, commercial sex and homosexuality (Farrer, 2002; Huang et al., 2009; Zhang, 2011). China's youth-led 'sexual revolution' has been through three stages since reforms commenced: from the re-emergence of romantic love in the early reform era, moving to the 1990s' awakening of female desires, to the new millennium's pleasure-centred sexual practices that have become valued as a means of enhancing individual happiness (Zhang, 2011).

Against this backdrop, premarital cohabitation has also become more common among many well-educated young people (Yu, 2009). Meanwhile, the rising number of induced abortions among unmarried women, and the increasing risk of sexually transmitted diseases, have highlighted the urgent need to improve sexual health and promote sex education among Chinese youth (Ma et al., 2006; Ma et al., 2009). The recent change of tone on sex education at school, which represents a more open attitude, could be read as a response to these challenges.

All of my participants described premarital sex as 'very common' or 'too normal' among couples, which confirms other scholars' findings, even though a few people said that they personally did not agree with it. Nonetheless, they also stressed the importance of responsibility in sexual relationships. For them, premarital sex, including cohabitation, could be justified as part of marriage preparation. As long as marriage is on the table, sex is excusable. This indicates that the moral justification

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²³ Though the concept of "youth" varies in different contexts, in China today, the post-1990s and post-1980s generations are often referred to as the "younger generation" (Jeffreys and Yu, 2015).

for sex has extended from strictly within marriage to marriage in prospect. Nevertheless, it is not without need of moral justification, at least in public. Research from the 1990s suggested that sex before marriage was harmful in many ways, particularly to young women, as husbands were unforgiving and 'easily disgusted by promiscuous women' (Chen 1998: 48, cited in McMillan, 2006: 64). Although it has become more common, there is little sign of change in the official attitude from research conducted in the 1990s. Authority figures, including parents and schoolteachers, have attempted to control pre-marital sex in ways that include warning of its dangers to implementing disciplinary measures (Farrer, 2002).

My participants' general tolerance towards premarital sex does not necessarily mean that everyone sees it as a positive thing worth promoting. Similar views are voiced by both genders. Maomaocong and Muyu made it clear that premarital sex is not for them.²⁴ Though viewed as a 'common phenomenon' (Theodore, male) by all, its semi-secrecy is also evident.

Tj: How to put it ... things like sex before marriage, everybody does it.

But when it needs to be discussed at the table, people still feel it is not a good thing. Though people are already doing it, if you really ask them to discuss it openly, there are many people who would find it shameful to admit it.

Tj: I feel it is such a private thing. Maybe in China, traditionally speaking, you should not have sex before marriage.

Tj's narrative reflects the tension of living between realism and moralism regarding individual sexual conduct; maintaining secrecy seems to be the best adaptation. By doing so, the public moral standard remains intact, and face is saved for both the individual and the families involved. More importantly, they can avoid the social sanctions that come from overtly challenging the establishment.

Kailing: Really?

²⁴ All participants' names have been replaced by pseudonyms. Unless specified as male, they are female.

Women as Tension Bearers

Facing the increasingly common practice of premarital sex and the moralised public sexual discourse, how do young Chinese women navigate their path? For women like Maomaocong and Muyu, insistence on avoiding sex before being legally married arguably comes from a sense of self-protection. Officially virginity is required from both sexes, but responsibility has been left mainly with women to protect their sexual purity due to the generally accepted, naturalized understanding of the male sexual drive as uncontrollable (Evans, 1997; Pei et al., 2007). A decent woman, who is expected to be passive in sex, cannot be led by her own desires. Hence, she is supposed to regulate her own behaviour according to society's moral boundaries. Liu's study on white-collar women in Chinese organizations shows that women's sexual reputations are heavily moralised and are tied closely to their social status, which constrains their agency (Liu, 2017). Hence, it is understandable that women would try to defend their sexual reputation through various means. When knowledge of safe sex practices is not sufficiently provided, the most secure option is to not be involved in sex, or at least to not make one's sexual life public. Xiaozhu commented: 'I think it is best not to live together, because, it ultimately hurts the woman.' Her suggestion can be understood as having a double meaning; first, it reduces the physical risk of involvement in premarital sex that might lead to unwanted pregnancy. Second, at least it reduces her reputational risk by avoiding being seen by others. However, even for women who want to avoid premarital sex, it can be difficult.

Joyce: Cohabitation is so common! I feel in many cases, it is not women who initiate it. Because biologically speaking, female ... more often it is men who ask to sleep together. But if the woman wants to keep the man, she might have to cooperate. I see it is quite common around me. Basically, those who eventually got married, they lived together or had sex before that.

Lulu: It is too common and difficult to avoid! Because now men would use all sorts of excuses and strategies to ask you to sleep with them, saying that if you love me, you should have sex with me. But in fact, 80% of girls paid a high price because of it. Surely there are also 20%, who obtained marital happiness because of it. It is rare, I feel personally. It is up to your luck.

In both Lulu and Joyce's accounts, it is male sexual desire that appears active and dominant, whereas women's sexual desire appears invisible. Her sexuality is portrayed as a means to 'keep' the man, with marriage as her happy ending. The universality of marriage for Chinese youth, with women facing a harsher reality in the marriage market, is widely observed in the *shengnü* (leftover women, 剩女) phenomenon (To, 2013; Hong Fincher, 2016). Under pressure to marry, women face a 'double risk' in either choice regarding premarital sex. No matter how strategic an individual woman is in navigating her way through this scenario, it would be unrealistic to assume that every woman has the means to defend herself throughout.

As a result of strictly implementing family planning policies, China has become the world's leader in contraception usage (United Nations, 2015; Sivelle, 2005). In sharp contrast to the high Contraception Prevalence Rate among married women (89%), contraception usage among sexually active unmarried women in China has remained extremely low, with more than 25% relying on less effective contraceptive methods such as rhythm and withdrawal, which has led to an annual induced abortion rate of approximately 20% among those women (Li et al., 2013). A combination of social and economic factors have been identified to explain this (Sivelle, 2005; Xiao et al., 2011; Xu et al., 2004; Zheng et al., 2001). The breakdown of different contraception measures (United Nations, 2015) shows a very low level of pill usage, and a comparatively more common male condom usage in China, which gives women little autonomy in contraception and helps account for the prevalence of abortion. Ironically, women are commonly blamed for contraception failure, as the following responses to the unplanned pregnancy vignette reveal.

Joyce's comments reflects my participants' typical reaction on this case:

Joyce: I feel it is such a stupid situation. Very stupid! ... I would ask both of them whether they would be willing to get married and raise the child together. I won't suggest that they end a life if it is not absolutely necessary.

Kailing: Why you think the situation is stupid?

Joyce: Because I feel if you are not ready to get married, why would you ... have sex with no protection! Fine, a lot times it might be the man ...he didn't protect the woman. It shows that he is very selfish, right? If you sincerely want to be with a woman, you should treat her as your wife-to-be, your fiancée.

Then you should have protected her from this. Second, as a woman why didn't you protect yourself? Maybe women are vulnerable in sexual relationships; she is at the receiving end of it. Maybe she didn't know how. Then she suffers from her own ignorance. If she knows but still had sex without protection, I can only say that she is too submissive in the relationship!

Joyce's answer is telling in several ways: first, it reveals the taken-for-granted belief among my participants that having children born within marriage is 'a happy ending for the couple' (Quennie). Hence, Yimi's comment, 'Let them get married!' (followed by laughter) is often considered an ideal solution. Second, premarital sex is acceptable if the man treats her as his 'fiancée', which indicates the importance of the marriage prospect in justifying similar dilemmas like cohabitation and pregnancy. Finally, once contraception fails, it is the woman's own fault, as she is either 'too stupid' and 'ignorant', or 'too submissive'.

Xiaozhu also believes: 'Girls should be responsible for the consequences of abortion. She failed to take "her own" responsibility to treat herself with respect and take herself seriously'. For her, women who fail to live up to society's sexual moral standards deserve the consequences. Whereas 'men are just men. This is his nature. You cannot control men; you can only control yourself'. Due to the embedded understanding of the naturalized male sexual drive and a moralised female sexuality, women are expected to take both responsibility and the blame. The overwhelming consensus among my participants is that there are only two feasible options for women in this scenario: marriage or abortion.

Abortion in Contemporary China

Official attitudes to abortion have also been through radical changes since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The regulation of abortion has changed according to the demands of the party-state's population policy. When population growth was viewed as good for national defence and economic development, between 1950 and 1956, strict administrative procedures restricted abortion (Nie, 2005). The gradual removal of legal limits on abortion since the late 1970s resulted from the party-state's ambition to control its population by implementing the national birth planning and control policy (Nie, 2005, 2010). To achieve this, women have reportedly undergone

coercive measures from sterilisation to forced abortion regardless of their gestation stages (Greenhalgh, 2005; Nie, 2005), though officially and euphemistically, abortion is described as a remedial measure.

The controversial one-child policy came to an end at the beginning of 2016 as China found itself facing a looming population structure crisis (Xinhua wang, 2015). Despite all the policy changes mentioned, the ethos remains the same: the party-state's attempts to control reproduction to suit its agenda, under which the abstract collective is deployed as the official moral discourse to justify the absolute submission of individual interests to state power. Relevant western values and ethics, and traditional customs and norms that are not in accord with the present policy, are officially dismissed or condemned (Nie, 2005). Scholars have criticised the lack of consideration for women's right to choose, and the right of the foetus to life, in the policy (Aird, 1994; Mosher, 1983, 1993). Yet paradoxically, Chinese women do not have to fight for their choice of abortion or face social stigma like their peers in many other jurisdictions, where such choices provoke strong moral controversy (Sumner, 2014).

Cao (2015) argues that the notion of 'glorious motherhood' is constructed to justify the state's use of women's fertility as a platform to achieve its population goals. Unlike the official praise for abortion within marriage, the law on abortion construes premarital sex as a legal taboo for women, which in turns reflects the 'social taboos' of premarital sex and premarital fertility in China (Li and Liu, 2004). Though abortion is widely practiced in China, this does not translate into public acceptance of premarital abortion for women. To avoid the disgrace of premarital fertility attached to women and their families observed by Guo (2012), women are more likely to hide away from family and friends instead of seeking their help (Pu, 2013). The legal restriction of the state-funded abortion services to married women means large numbers of economically disadvantaged unmarried women have to turn to unlawful abortions, which are highly likely to be unreliable and dangerous for their health. The double social and legal taboo can leave them vulnerable.

Damaging the Reproductive Body

The idea that 'abortion damages a girl's body' repeatedly occurs in my participants' accounts. The blurred linguistic boundary between a woman's own body and the 'bone and flesh' (*gui rou*,骨肉) she carries can literally mean in Chinese terms that abortion is easily read as an 'unnatural' intrusion. Hence, even without an established understanding of a foetus as having its own moral and legal status that is independent of the women before birth, women's embodiment of pregnancy makes it hard to separate the 'harm' to this 'bone and flesh' from her own health.

Nevertheless, the physical harm referred to by many of my participants also indicated the fear of damaging the reproductive body. Xiaozhu warns that 'abortion does not negatively affect men, but it does affect women, especially her body. For some people, it might mean lifelong infertility. I would say a woman should avoid abortion if she can.' In addition, common stories of spontaneous miscarriage after bad abortion experiences circulating among friends serve as warnings for women.

Lulu is the only woman who shared her own abortion experience, as she was married when it happened, which legitimised it: 'For two years after that, I miscarried three or four times. I was unable to keep them.' Qincai, an unmarried woman, used her friend's similar experience to make the same point:

She is an older mum, and had her first child when she was over 30. She told me that she had abortions several times before that. Then it caused several miscarriages afterwards. When she was one month pregnant, she took time off to keep the baby. She lay in bed all day; it seemed that she would start to bleed once she stood up. The doctor told her it was the result of her previous abortions, which damaged her body. So I think one should avoid this situation when you are not ready.

Qincai stressed that 'I have not had such an experience'. Her deliberate distancing of herself from premarital abortion again indicates the taboo nature of this topic.

Safeguarding the reproductive body is the main concern in the bodily damage narratives. It illustrates the tight association of Chinese womanhood with maternity.

As a result, despite the fact that abortion has little negative effect on women's

subsequent fertility and is even safer than childbirth (Rowlands, 2011), the fear that they might lose their reproductive ability remains strong.

Women as 'Devalued Property'

Regardless of whether or not the experience of abortion leaves a mark on women's physical bodies, it certainly negatively affects her marriage prospects. Using the premarital abortion vignette, I was able to understand the evolved 'virginity complex' in contemporary China's dating scene.²⁵ The answers show that this phenomenon is very common.

Maomaocong: It is certain that the man won't be happy about it. Abortion before marriage in China indeed is a bad thing. It is normal that he holds a grudge against her.

Kailing: Is it common for men to mind in such a situation?

Tj: Sure! They even mind if you are not a virgin! [Laughter.]

Though female chastity does not hold the same repressive institutionalized power anymore, as premarital sex is commonly practiced, it still exerts considerable influence on the Chinese psyche. The symbolic importance of women's chastity, reflected in the 'female virginity complex', in contemporary Chinese date and marriage selection, remains strong (Wang and Ho, 2011; Zhou,1989). Lulu's answer below indicates that the 'boundary' of chastity is fluid and contested, facing social changes: losing virginity now is less bad than having an abortion for unmarried women. Despite that, the devaluation of women remains the same.

Lulu: It is perfectly normal for men to care about women's abortion history! Now we have a saying: in the past, it is said that you must save your virginity for your husband; whereas now, you should guarantee that your first child is your husband's.

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²⁵ According to Wang and Ho (2011), the female virginity complex (*chu nü qing jie*, 处女情结) is a popular term used to describe how the "fetish of female virginity" remains strong for young Chinese men and women.

Scholars have found plenty of evidence to show the persistence of double standards across cultures, despite the boundary of sexual virtue having been redrawn (Jackson et al., 2013; Jackson and Scott, 2010; Ho and Tsang, 2005, 2012). How women are judged in the Chinese context illuminates this sexual double standard (Jackson and Cram, 2003), which continues to objectify women under the persistent patriarchal value system. D explains how the gendered difference is played out in the marriage market.

Kailing: How do you see the consequences for both men and women after an abortion?

D: It is different. For men, there might be some moral criticism at most, but there won't be any practical social rejection of him. He might become less popular in the marriage market. People might think he is cold-hearted. But if he is willing to repent and tell his new girlfriend: 'I didn't love her enough at that time, but I love you very much', most people would accept him again. Whereas, if a girl had an abortion, and it was known by others, it would be much harsher! Many men absolutely cannot accept a girl who had an abortion with another man. Furthermore, as a friend of this girl, I would not set her up with any of my friends. Because I would worry that if one day my male friend found out, it would end our friendship. He might blame me for giving him something bad. Even if I do introduce her to somebody, it won't be my good friends and I won't tell him the truth. I don't want to take the responsibility for covering up the fact. Because men do mind!

D's honest answer not only highlights the sharp contrast in consequences for men and women, it also demonstrates how women's sexual experiences are understood as a moral marker for drawing binary images of the good/bad girl. Her abortion experience makes her 'less complete and pure' and thus not presentable in the market. Chain's explanation further demonstrates the objectification of the female body as a commodity that needs to be kept intact.

Chain: I think men would mind this. Because abortion is like ... I am not sure how to put it. I feel they might see girls who had an abortion ... they become somehow different. It seems they are broken. Men cannot be broken in this way.

Furthermore, a striking metaphor shared by both Lixia and Lisi illustrates vividly that the continuous objectification of the female body in Chinese marriage transactions is common knowledge: 'People might not mind buying a secondhand property, but they do mind buying a house in which somebody had died.' This metaphor paints plainly the cruel reality: nearly one hundred years after the abolishment of arranged marriage on a monetary basis, Chinese women can still be subjected to objectification, such that men can pick and choose them, like property. The invisibility of men, contrasted with the concentrated judgment imposed on women, reflects the persistent patriarchal value system that continues to give men the voice and choice as a subject, but presents women as objects that are subject to men's choice. It further mirrors the invisibility of the internalised male dominance in contemporary Chinese patriarchy, which treats a woman's reproductive body as an object, and hence potentially degrades her full humanity.

The Implications of Sexual Double Standards

Facing a heavily moralised public discourse on female sexuality, Chinese women's compliance with societal expectations concerning her sexual behaviour is closely tied to her social standing.

Xiaoliu: It happens within my family. My uncle's daughter, she has not been good at school and has had lots of boyfriends. I heard she also had an abortion more than once. From my point of view, I do not agree with her behaviour. Because I feel as a girl, she is unable to behave in a respectable way. If one cannot respect oneself, how can she expect others to love her? Right? So I do not agree with abortion. You should prevent it from the beginning. Why wait until it has happened?!

Xiaoliu's description of her cousin as 'not good at school', as having had 'lots of boyfriends', and as having 'had an abortion more than once' reflects the expectations surrounding a decent girl's behaviour in Chinese society: she needs to be good at school, have no boyfriends during her school years, and to preferably remain a virgin (Evans, 1997; Xiao, 1989). She is not only blamed for contraceptive failure, but is also portrayed as not respectable. Based on her behaviour, she does not deserve to be respected or loved. Hence, any subsequent social punishment is justifiable. My

participants often gave examples of the public discourse describing such women as 'morally loose and improper' (Maomaocong) and 'like girls from outside' (Lili).

Tracing back to China's gender segregation that confined upper class women within domestic 'inner world' till the late Qing dynasty, women who exposed themselves to the outside world were not considered respectable (Mann, 2011). Hence 'girls from the outside' connotes 'morally loose and improper'. Such damage to women's reputations would directly result in them being disadvantaged in the marriage market, where all of them are expected to perform well. Xiaozhu's comments below further pinpoint how Chinese women's sexuality is strictly moralised and commodified.

Xiaozhu: Plus, people might think that if you are married once, you may try to find a man to marry again! Definitely, a man would consider your abortion history ... you might not be able to bear children after that! Furthermore, you failed to behave in a respectable way even before marriage. How would you be afterwards?!

Xiaozhu equates women who have had an abortion with divorcees, which highlights their devaluation in the marriage market. Moreover, she also points out the moral concern for such women as untrustworthy, and as failing to demonstrate desired female chastity, which would directly reduce her bargaining power in partner selection.

In sharp contrast to the woman's moralised body, my participants all agree that men have it easy, though they struggle to comprehend the reason. Chain: 'People do not gossip about men in this scenario. I also do not know why they never talk about men.' It is the consensus that men are often invisible even in gossip, whereas women become an easy target.

Lily: If I say it bluntly, he just played a bit. Nothing serious would happen to him. If he doesn't want to be responsible, he can totally be let off the hook. Society will not pick on him, whereas the girl will be the target of all arrows. They will judge her morally, and say things like she doesn't protect herself or gossip, saying she is one of those girls from outside.

The sexual double standard is made explicit here. She is blamed for all the failures, while the man's marriage prospect can remain largely intact. Lulu: 'But in reality, I discover that many girls ... never married and never had children, and still accept men like my ex-husband. I really do not understand.' The active sexual life of a man is often read as 'normal', and is easily laughed off.

Xiaoliu: People think it is normal for men to have many women in their lives. People might only comment that he is fickle in love.

Maomaocong: It doesn't matter to men. Seriously, they might laugh at men, but discriminate against women instead.

A few mentioned the moral guilt a man might feel, but also said that it strongly depended on the individual. For women, there could be multiple layers of guilt coming from both public condemnation and from within themselves.

Tina: She would have to wait and see whether this man can gradually accept it [his girlfriend's abortion history]. I think the woman herself might also feel guilt towards her current boyfriend. She might think of herself as constantly owing him something, these kinds of mentality, etc.

Women often internalise the sexual double standard and feel guilty of not being able to present themselves as 'pure and complete' to their husband-to-be, worrying that they might not be able to bear a child for him. Living under such a moralised discourse of female sexuality, the emotional stress women need to go through in this scenario is widely acknowledged by my participants as a form of 'double damage'.

Lilin: For girls, it is double damage. First, damage to her body is unavoidable. Then it hits her psychologically as well as emotionally. It doesn't follow the normal sequence and is not ideal for how things should be after all.

Lilin indicates the power of a normalized 'ideal' life trajectory that one should follow: marriage first, then childbirth. Chain further illuminates the disadvantageous position women face.

Chain: She might think now she has even had an abortion for this man.

Therefore, she would naturally have more expectations of him [expectation of

marriage]. If any change of circumstance occurs between them [i.e. they split up], then she might feel even more hurt.

As the power of women starts to decline following their loss of virginity (Xiao, 1989), women face a more precarious situation when it comes to maintaining power in heterosexual relationships, when premarital sex becomes prevalent. Though she could use her sexuality to keep a man, ironically it simultaneously increases the risk of her ending up in an even weaker position: pregnant without securing a marriage. In this scenario, her agency is constrained in front of a powerful conventional discourse of female chastity. The sexual double standard silences her. Secrecy becomes her last resort to shed the stigma, as recommended by many, in order to fulfil the universal marriage expectation faced by Chinese youth. The amount of emotional stress women face is obvious.

Nie (2005) reveals that the public silence on abortion practiced under the one-child policy, which is commonly interpreted in the West as China's moral ambiguity on abortion (Aird, 1990), often hides a diversity of views regarding foetal life and the morality of abortion. Similarly among my participants, behind the consensus on abortion as the last remedy, concerns about the foetus's right to life with reference to religious beliefs, were also mentioned by a few.

Yimi: Let them get married! [Laughter.] First, she should not have an abortion. I am a Buddhist. I think having abortion will make you end up in hell.

Lijun: Because that is also a life. I feel it is a gift from God. It is a life! You won't easily kill a kitten or a puppy, how can you kill a human life?

Though officially declared an atheist country, scholars have reported a gradual religious revival since the economic reforms were initiated (Lai, 2005; Potter, 2003; Yang, 2011). Among my sample, the hesitation to take a life was expressed by only four women, which remains the minority. No matter how vague the influence of religion was on the decision to have an abortion or not, their concern about taking the foetus's life signals another dilemma that could make women experience internal emotional torment. Nevertheless, in the future, the main concern of women facing this scenario is damaging the prospect of future motherhood, expected in a patriarchal society, and not jeopardising her future husband's masculinity or

depriving him of fatherhood. It has little to do with mourning the loss of a child. On the contrary, abortion in this case is understood as part of being a responsible mother. The paradox a Chinese woman faces in this scenario is that if she chooses abortion, she is irresponsible regarding her own future fertility. However, only if she chooses abortion, is she considered responsible to the unborn child, her natal family and her own happiness in the future.

Abortion: A Responsible Choice

Despite the stigma attached to premarital abortion, all of my participants suggested having an abortion if marriage was not attainable. They acknowledged that abortion was not ideal, but necessary. Both Java and Lilin put it similarly: 'For our generation, it is something unspeakable. But one will do it when it needs to be done.'

Cao (2015) argues that due to the social stigma attached to unmarried motherhood, and administrative measures including financial punishment to prevent unauthorised parenthood, abortion becomes the only 'rational and reasonable' choice for unmarried pregnant women. This justification is similar to the stigma and prejudice against unwed mothers in Japan (Hertog, 2009), as the mechanism of mixed guilt and shame explain women's conforming behaviour. The pragmatic rationale behind the abortion decision becomes evident through their elaboration of what 'responsible motherhood' is. Unlike their European and North American counterparts, among whom the moral status of the foetus could invoke strong debate, my participants' quiet but firm decision to abort was attributed to their desire to be a responsible mother in the Chinese context. Viviankuku, a junior doctor, puts it like this:

I do not support abortion, but it doesn't mean that you have to give birth to the child if you are pregnant. One needs to take the real case into account.

Abortion is definitely bad for the girl's body. This is for sure. But if you keep the child because you don't want to damage your body, you are not being responsible to the unborn child.

For Viviankuku, abortion is being responsible to the unborn child, even if it sacrifices the woman's own health. The existing public discourse that regulates childbirth within marriage illuminates the reason behind this. Children from single parent households are often portrayed as deviants and somehow lacking.

Muyu: If you keep the child, they will grow up in a single parent's home, which will have lots of problems. If you want the kid not to suffer from the single parent influence, then you must really try hard to foster ... it would be so exhausting. So I think it is better not to have the child.

Chenchen: If the couple's relationship is not stable enough to enter marriage, even if you keep the baby, it might not be the right environment for the child to grow up in.

Lisi: I would say have an abortion. It is not a matter of losing a life. If you cannot give the baby a good environment to grow up in, it is much better to not bring the kid into the world in the first place.

These answers reveal the general consensus that children should be born into a 'normal' heterosexual family, which is the 'right' and 'good' environment. . Otherwise, it is much better to not be born. My participants from single parent households always consciously introduced themselves as such. This indicates that the label has become embedded in their self-awareness as different from others. Though they were all born within marriage but later experienced their parents' divorce, which is different from children born outside marriage, their deviance from the family norm still creates similar stigma.

Growing up with his mother after his parents' divorce, Roger (male) says he suffers from low self-esteem that he believes to be a common characteristic of children from single parent families: 'You feel inferior ... like myself. I have been trying to get over it most of my life. ... The biggest thing from a single parent home is that you feel you lack security. ... It has a huge impact.' D reports her experience of being told by her mother-in-law that her single parent background makes her less qualified as a marriage candidate for their son. Fully aware of the power of such stigmatization, it is understandable that women want to protect their future child from such an experience by avoiding it. Chain: 'In a society like ours, I feel my child will become the target of gossip and be hurt by it. So I won't do it.'

Single mothers are often viewed as 'indiscreet and decadent' (Chenchen). People commonly equate single mothers with mistresses who plot to overthrow other people's marriages. Practically, Chenchen noted that not registering with the

government would create further problems for the child's schooling and other activities that require legal identification. Against such a backdrop, Chenchen explains: 'If a woman decides to raise a kid on her own, without having any other dodgy motivations, I personally admire her great courage.' A mother's primary responsibility in childrearing is common knowledge in China, particularly in providing physical care. Without the father bringing in his gendered resources (Zuo and Bian, 2001), often in financial form based on the conventional heterosexual family model, the mother faces multiple difficulties.

Lily: It seems to be the responsibility of women only. In this situation, she is left in a passive position. Really, she doesn't have much of an option, and she needs others' help. Raising a kid is not only a matter of money, they need ... oh, this is such a complicated topic.

Western scholars have recognised the vulnerability of single mothers in many ways, including that they are more likely to suffer from low income and increased mental distress (Brown and Moran, 1997; McLanahan and Sandefur, 2009; Neises and Grüneberg, 2005; Franz et al., 2003). Premarital fertility is considered a disgrace for both Chinese women and their families (Guo, 2012). Facing low public tolerance, no wonder Lily adds that 'it depends on whether her families are willing to confront the rest of society or not.' Though this sounds dramatic, it highlights the tension. A woman's decision to become a single mother does not only matter for her own life, but also affects her family's social standing, which presents another dilemma that she will feel responsible for. Even though she has adequate resources to raise healthy children, Lilin, from a wealthy family, illuminates another challenge for single mothers.

Lilin: It is always the girl who bears the cost of sexual relationships ... First, she might say: 'I can raise the child on my own'. I believe a lot of us now have the financial capacity to do so. She can even provide enough love for the child to prove the conventional belief that kids born outside of marriage will lack love wrong. But first of all, I do not think it is fair for the kid to have such an upbringing. Second, I think it is also not fair for the woman herself. Under the current social circumstances, if she raises the kid on her own, what will happen when she meets somebody later who is appropriate to marry? Then

the kid will become an obstacle between them. This would be so unfair both to her and her kid. Moreover, I feel she will have to bear lots of pressure from her parents and our society. She will have to put up with much discrimination as a single mum.

Lilin lists here the multilayered difficulties women need to tackle as single mothers. In a society that emphasizes patrilineal continuity (Barlow, 1994), a single mother and her child challenge the established family structure; therefore, both face social sanctions. Like Lilin, many share concerns over the woman's future marital happiness and emphasise that she does not have to marry the man just because of the pregnancy. Besides her responsibility to her unborn child and her natal family, her responsibility to ensure her own marital happiness appears strong in my participants' accounts.

Java: I think the relationship should be based on the couple themselves. If marriage is based on the kid, it is not sustainable. It would result in more future problems. If she didn't want to marry him herself, but did it because of the kid ... more likely she would regret it later on, feeling bitter that the kid changed her life. Because of the kid, she missed lots of opportunities, which should have been hers. Then it is not fair both for her and her child.

Like Java, many prioritize the woman's future happiness in this decision, carefully weighing up the man's suitability as a good husband. Abortion is further justified, if it jeopardises the woman's future happiness. Tj: 'If you use marriage to solve your current problem, you will only create more troubles in the future.' My participants view the relationship between the couple as the primary consideration in the woman's marriage decision. This signifies both the importance of personal happiness for this generation and their self-responsibilisation to realising it.

Zhangsan, who had watched the American film *Juno* (2007),²⁶ mentioned giving up the child for adoption as another option. However, she soon realized that without a

²⁶ Juno (see Reitman, 2007) is an American comedy-drama about a teenage girl confronting an unplanned pregnancy. It has received criticism and praise from members of both the pro-life and prochoice communities regarding its treatment of abortion.

well-established adoption system like in America, practical implementation of this idea would be difficult.

Summarising all of the practical difficulties linked with the stigma generated from public rhetoric regarding single motherhood, and the lack of alternative public arrangements, the multi-layered responsibilities voiced above make abortion indeed appear to be the most responsible choice for the unborn child, the woman's family and herself, if they are to avoid further troubles. Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005: 4) note the shift from Leninist to neoliberal biopolitics in terms of the governmentality of China's population since its reform, arguing that the governmentalisation of PRC birth planning includes 'the disciplining of conduct by non-state social institutions and the cultivation by individuals themselves of the capacity to regulate their own behaviour' besides a direct intervention by government in its early Leninist style. The recent party-state's emphasis on 'traditional family values' such as filial piety is a good example of its effort to draw on existing cultural repertoires about male and female attributes and family morality in formulating its own policies and narratives. By transferring responsibilities to capable 'neoliberal subjects', individuals are able to govern themselves in ways deemed appropriate by the regime. Premarital abortion, understood as a responsible choice is a case in point. The responsibilisation of women's pregnancies so as to fit into the heterosexual family model, through regulative power generated by certain discourses and practices, serves to maintain the party-state's desired social stability.

Conclusion

Following the party-state's use of 'socialist morality' to regulate sex and sexuality within heterosexual marriage in order to maintain social stability, premarital sex become widely accepted and commonly practiced among the young generation. The lack of safe sex knowledge and contraception provision for unmarried women leaves them vulnerable to unplanned pregnancies. Women's agency is constrained by a moralised discourse of female sexuality and by the sexual double standard in the marriage market. Facing universal marriage pressure, women become the bearers of this tension, while their reproductive freedom is subjected to the priority of maintaining social stability.

Exploring people's attitudes towards premarital pregnancy, I reveal the gendered consequences: women face multi-layered damage as a result of objectification and stigmatization under China's contemporary patriarchal marriage regime, whereas men's privileges remain intact and unquestioned. Having an abortion in secret becomes the only responsible choice for the unborn child, the woman's natal family and herself when marriage is not attainable. Through analysing the stigma attached to women after premarital abortions and their interpretation of 'responsible motherhood', I argue that the neoliberal biopolitics employed by the party-state to govern China's population, which sacrifice women's reproductive freedom to further its political agenda (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005) have proven to be powerful and effective. Hence, these women's permissiveness regarding premarital abortion should not be simply understood as their moral approval of abortion practice, but as reflecting their pragmatic attitudes under a restrictive regime.

Despite the stigma and harm Chinese women face regarding pre-marital abortion, it is important to note that I am by no means saying that women are completely powerless victims even in these difficult scenarios. Hengehold (2000: 194) states that the dominant discourse portraying women as 'victims' of male power deprives these women of 'authority regarding the complexity of their own experience'. Gilfus (1999) reveals the need to recognise the strength that women often display and develop when facing trauma in order to survive in harsh circumstances. Confronting multi-layered constraints in given scenarios, Chinese women's responses demonstrate their resilience and determination to forge a better life, through careful evaluation of multiple factors and an analysis of the pro and cons of different options.

Nie's (2005) analysis of the Chinese silence on abortion highlights the basic survival strategy people employ under authoritarian regimes: guarding one's tongue. At the same time, without sufficient public support in providing alternatives for resolving premarital pregnancy, and facing a strictly moralised public discourse of female sexuality, easy access to abortion does not mean there is a more liberal public attitude towards premarital abortion. Chinese women face a different stigma to that faced by their Western peers (Sheldon, 1997; Jackson, 2001); a more nuanced approach is therefore needed to understand reproductive rights in the Chinese context. Unlike the pro-choice battle in the West, the choice of Chinese women to

have an abortion bears the imprint of a patriarchal regime and its ambitions for governance. The responsibilisation of women's pregnancy illustrates Chinese women's embodiment of their struggle with persistent patriarchal values and the regulatory power of the state.

Chapter 5

The Right Time for Childbirth: The Naturalisation of Motherhood within Marriage

After examining the consensus on premarital abortion as being a responsible choice, this chapter focuses on what is deemed the 'right' context for childbirth. It further uncovers the forces and values that contend in shaping women's reproductive behaviours in a contemporary Chinese context. The Chinese fervour about marriage and the importance of children in Chinese families have been widely documented (Evans, 2002; McMillan, 2006; Judah and Wendling, 2016; Magistad, 2013). Sigley (2001) argues that, as part of the country's modernisation programme, the development of *suzhi* discourse since the 1980s has transformed the human body into an object of planning and administrative regulation. Jacka (2009) points out that this discourse aims to cultivate a generation of children through biopolitical techniques to become the most desirable type of subject for an authoritarian state. Meanwhile, the country's transition towards a neoliberal market economy under global capitalism has generated new discourses of 'individualism'.

In this chapter, I draw upon data generated from a vignette on a potential 'DINK'²⁷ family scenario (see below).

The DINK vignette: Luqi (woman) has been married for two years. The couple have been busy at work, and thus do not want to have children. However, both sets of parents urge them to do so. What do you think?

I start by analysing my participants' views on childbearing within heterosexual marriage, exploring their attitudes towards the idea of choosing not to have children. In so doing, I uncover their understanding and meaning making around childbearing. Then I move on to investigate the contexts in which they believe that childbirth should take place and the impact of these beliefs on their reproductive behaviour. In particular, I highlight the existing mismatched timescale between rigid social and

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²⁷ DINK refers to couples that are 'Double Income No Kids'. In this context, it connotes a married couple who are biologically able and financially capable.

biological norms, within which the scientific orthodoxy functions to normalise women's life course. I further explore its implications for these women's family lives. Last, but not least, I examine the function of various family members, particularly the couple's parents, in decisions about childbirth, and how women negotiate with the contending influences, which reflect their resilience in facing individualised pressure. I argue that the intensified struggle of this group of women is a result of being stuck between the contending demands of neoliberal modernity and an authoritarian patriarchal regime.

Motherhood: A Choice or a Duty?

In contrast to my participants' rejection of premarital fertility, discussed in the last chapter, all of them say that they will have children at some point after getting married, willingly or not. They largely agree with the idea of universal childbearing for Chinese women, which is consistent with previous findings (Evans, 2002; McMillan, 2006).

Jinwang's imagining of the special feeling of holding her own baby one day signifies the power of social constructions around motherhood as a mysterious and sacred experience that women should not miss: 'It's a special experience being a mother. If you hold other people's babies, it's different from your own. Though I don't know how it would feel. But I think I should experience it once.' This presents motherhood as appealing through its unique mystique. This discursive construction regulates the boundaries of individual imagination, hence strengthening the naturalisation of motherhood.

Many of the participants indicate the difficulty of fully comprehending the idea of choosing not to have children within marriage by suggesting that the couple in the DINK vignette delay childbirth as a way to resolve the tension with their parents. Most people are like Lijun: 'just let them wait for a bit before having one' and believe it is just a matter of time before the couple will want children; hence doubting that their current decision is final.

Lulu: I would totally encourage them to have kids... If I were a friend of this girl, I will totally tell her that she should definitely have kids! Because once a girl gives up on this, she will surely regret it when she gets older! ... Nowadays

there are plenty of alternatives they can take, such as having a test tube baby or surrogate pregnancy.

Lulu's suggestion of medical alternatives indicates the difficulty she has in completely grasping the idea of choosing not to have children for a married couple and the stereotypical assumption of a pathological basis for childlessness.

Muyu: ...Are they strongly against the idea of having a child? Or... Kailing: They just don't want them. Neither of them like kids and they are too busy at work to have kids.

Muyu: First of all, I feel...personally, a woman should...experience the process of giving birth, including bringing up children. I think one must experience this. I think for some people before they have any contact with kids, they might really dislike them. But once they have one, their attitudes will change. I think lots of people are like this.

Interestingly, although the scenario is framed as the couple's consensus not to want children, my participants seem to unconsciously relate to this decision as solely a mistake of the woman. 'she will surely regret it when she gets older' (Lulu), and Muyu expresses with certainty that a woman should experience giving birth and that she will change her mind later, all indicating that motherhood is embedded in people's understanding of being a woman. It seems to be an inseparable part of a woman's identity that she 'must experience', otherwise she 'will surely regret' it.

Although indispensable, not everyone is willing to embrace motherhood. Two (D and Xiaoliu) both clearly expressed unwillingness to have children, for different reasons. Additionally, Muyu shared that her elder sister particularly does not like kids: 'she would rather touch little animals, having pets, but not kids'. However, Muyu believes that her sister 'will still have one'. Without her sister's own account, this is hard to verify. However, Muyu's narrative clearly indicates the norm of society.

Muyu: My sister just doesn't like kids. But I think she will still have one. She will. As a matter of fact, real DINKs like you said are actually quite rare in China. ...Yes, very few people would do that. If it's not because of other irresistible factors, having a child for me is normal [Laugh].

Like others, Muyu does not believe that some women would genuinely not want to be mothers; instead, she is convinced that people will change their minds later, including her sister. For her, childlessness is due to 'irresistible factors' instead of being a personal choice. Evans (2002) states that childlessness in China is read as pathology, indicating that there are biological problems between the couple that make childbirth impossible. China's eugenic regulations also reinforce such ideas; until 2003 marriage registration required the results of a premarital health check to be presented²⁸ in order to screen out possible unhealthy births (McMillan, 2006). The connotation of such practice is the naturalisation of childbirth after marriage. Against this backdrop, women who fail to give birth within marriage will soon fall under suspicion. This illustrates why Muyu says childlessness should only exist due to 'irresistible factors', otherwise it is abnormal.

Joyce: I think it's normal. If our society requires one thing from women, usually it wants us to reproduce. For us women, once you've delivered a baby, you've done your duty to society. That's why lots of parents say to their daughters: 'Give birth first, then think about your career.' For a woman as a functioning part of a society, her primary task is completing her reproductive duty.

Joyce here restates plainly that, for a Chinese woman, giving birth is her social obligation: her 'function', 'duty', and 'primary task' within society, despite being presented as 'natural'. Her narrative illuminates the link between individual reproduction and the wider society, which indicates the moral weight placed on women's reproductive decisions. Since childbirth is understood as her contribution to Chinese society and being a responsible woman, she is expected to fulfil this duty, which in turn diminishes the relevance of her personal preference. McMillan (2006, p.69) accurately describes the extent of the naturalisation of reproduction as: '...a psychological instinct, at least in women, and having a child is almost as much an inevitability of the female body as dying'.

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²⁸ In October 2003, people interpreted the newly introduced regulation on marriage registration as making the premarital check become voluntary.

Conjugal Family: The Site for Reproduction

The universality of heterosexual monogamous marriage permeates Chinese people's psyches and marriage is not a choice but an obligation that must be fulfilled. Hershatter (1984, p.238) describes this widely accepted assumption: 'everyone will marry, finding the proper spouse is a major concern of young people in their early and mid-twenties'. Thirty years down the line, this still appears true among my participants, who expressed a 'compulsory' sense of needing to get married.

D: Marriage is a must in China...If you stay unmarried after a certain age, you are seen as abnormal. Others will have a prejudice against you. Not everybody, but 80–90% would. They would belittle you by giving you a certain nickname, like leftover woman, old virgin, pervert. People see those who stay unmarried for a long time as sexually abnormal or perverts. Then they will match-make you with others non-stop. No matter how old you are, they would feel you should find a marriage partner.

According to D, unmarried individuals are deviant in the sight of the 'normal' majority. Similarly to childlessness, staying unmarried bears a pathological mark, which can generate suspicion about the individual's biological ability to reproduce, as the eugenic practice of the premarital health check indicates (McMillan, 2006). This explains why constant efforts will be made to 'correct' such abnormality. D naturally moved on to talk about childbearing directly after marriage, which indicates that, at least for her, the connotation of marriage is almost equivalent to childbirth. Joyce's comment on the meaning of marriage illustrates the equivalence even more clearly: 'marriage is more for the purpose of raising-up the next generation, contributing to humanity. In my opinion, a couple getting married is for such a purpose, otherwise why marry?' The important link between reproduction within marriage and the wider society, or 'humanity' as Joyce puts it, is illuminating because it indicates the role that family plays in Chinese society is more than biological reproduction, but also social reproduction.

The close relationship between the Chinese family and the state has a long history. The Great Learning (*da xue*, 大学), one of China's ancient classic texts, seen by most Chinese late imperial literati as the source of political ideology, describes well-

governed families as essential for a well-governed state, and vice versa (de Bary and Lufrano, 1960). When national survival is under threat, the Chinese family becomes the target of reform. During the New Culture Movement (1915–1923), China's urban elite proposed this formula to save the nation. Although vehemently attacking all of Chinese culture, this movement still retains the traditional political culture in itself as it reaffirms the close link between family management and state order in its solution (Glosser and Kerber, 2003). Along the same lines, since the early 1950s the communist government has promoted the family based on a 'socialist' ideal of marriage, functioning to stabilise society and serve China's modernisation programmes (Friedman, 2005). Carrying on this political tradition, Chinese contemporary scholars (Liang, 1985, 274; Ren, 1993 cited by Sigley, 2001, pp.123–124) view the family as 'the cell of society' and believe that fostering a harmonious and productive family is crucial to maintaining good social order. Ultimately, the Chinese family has paramount significance in its connection with the nation and its population (Sigley, 2001).

In terms of women's role within the family, regardless of historical changes, reproduction has remained her primary contribution (Cao, 2015; Glosser and Kerber, 2003; Judge, 2002). Mann (1997) states that the family structure in the 18th century using the inner and outer concept placed wives and mothers in charge of the 'inner' world of the family, which provided support for husbands and sons to succeed in the world outside. Glosser (2003: 4) points out that such a family system 'constitutes a seamless, unitary social order centered on the home and bounded by the outer reaches of the imperium, which carried on its influence into the 20th century. Against such a backdrop, a well-governed motherhood embodies the success of state governance. This helps to explain people's initial response to the unplanned pregnancy vignette. Marriage is regarded as the perfect solution for the trouble, as Yimi said: 'let them get married!' [Laughter]. As Quennie, quoted before, says: 'it should be a happy ending for them to have a child, once married. Through using mixed 'carrot and stick' measures (Cao, 2015) to regulate women's reproduction, together with the stigmatisation of premarital fertility, it is not surprising to hear that all my participants comply with the strictly regulated social norm on reproduction: it needs to happen within marriage. The overwhelming majority of my female

participants expressed a desire to give birth to their own children. But 'marriage has to come first' is embedded in their understanding of a happy family life.

Kailing: Have your families mentioned anything to you about kids?

Muyu: Me having kids? ...not at the moment...they haven't mentioned such a thing. Because marriage has to come first before considering kids.

Muyu (27) was still dating her new boyfriend at the time of our interview. Although expressing strong affection towards children, she is very clear that the conversation about having children of her own cannot even start until she is legally married. She is not alone, as all the single women I interviewed emphasised the importance of following the correct sequence for these two events.

Kailing: Do you want kids?

Chain: Yes, I do.

Kailing: Why?

Chain: It might mean the continuity of my family's emotional bond. Besides, I believe that my parents and family elders are also looking forward to seeing my offspring.

Kailing: Are they?

Chain: They are. If I get married, they will be eager to see. See how pretty the baby is.

Kailing: [Laugh] When do you think it is a good time to have a baby, then?

Chain: Well, I'll let nature take its course.

Kailing: How do other family members think?

Chain: They hope I can get married as soon as possible. Well, not exactly that. They wish me to have a boyfriend soon, at least. They haven't mentioned

things like kids yet.

Chain was single at the age of 29. According to the widely circulated discourse of 'the best time to give birth'²⁹, Chain is nearly past her prime age. Despite the fact that all of her family want her to have children, they all know that it has to wait until she is

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²⁹ The best time to give birth will be elaborated upon in the next section 'Timing Motherhood under Intensified Pressure'

married. Hence, their current focus would be on her finding a marriage partner as soon as possible.

Similarly, Joyce was single at the age of 30. Her single status has created enormous stress between her and her family, who want her to get married as soon as possible.

Joyce: Sure, I like kids. I really adore them.

Kailing: When do you think is appropriate to have kids? Do you have any plans?

Joyce: No plan. I think I do really love kids. I treat my friends' kids like my own...But for me, I would not have a child unless I met a suitable person.

When I probed her opinion on single motherhood, her answer was rather intriguing.

Joyce: I feel people should first of all have a think, what is the purpose of giving birth to a child? For me, it's about 'inheritance', carrying on stuff, which is part of our family and us. Second, it's about carrying on the inheritance of society and the whole of humanity. So, for me, it doesn't mean I need to give birth because of my age. If I give birth before I meet the right person then I can't make him a meaningful inheritance to contribute to society. So, what's the point?

'Meet the right person' means meeting the right marriage partner in this context. For Joyce, childbirth outside marriage is unable to '[carry] on the inheritance of society and the whole of humanity', hence it is meaningless because children born outside heterosexual marriage cannot become 'a meaningful inheritance to contribute to society'. Asserting the meaning of childbirth as an inheritance for society, as well as a social contribution to both the heterosexual family and the state, Joyce's account illustrates that women's biological reproduction also functions as social reproduction and its normative power regulates her reproductive preferences. It reproduces the desired family model through upholding the meaning of 'heterosexual marriage'. It also reproduces the existing hegemonic social structure that ties family together with the success of state governance.

Regulating human reproductive behaviour within the hegemonic traditional family model is a powerful tool to help govern a population as large in size as China's. The

party-state is still keen on keeping the traditional family model under its surveillance to ensure social stability (Guo, 2010; Sigley, 2001, 2006b). Conventional family values, such as the veneration of elders and upholding women's role as virtuous mothers and wives, are re-emphasised to tackle challenges that destabilise families (Sigley, 2001). A good example would be the campaign launched in 2014 by the ACWF³⁰, 'looking for the Most Beautiful Family in China' as a response to implementing the key points made at the 11th National Women's Congress and remarks made by President Xi while meeting with the ACWF's leaders (Liu, 2014). It showcases the party-state single vision of the Chinese family, which resembles Confucian values such as filial piety and an emphasis on harmony. Under the power of such official rhetoric, which ties personal happiness closely to family life, reproducing within such a family becomes the platform to realise the aspiration of pursuing happiness. Hence, it is not surprising to hear my participants' willingness to conform to this model, as they generally display an internalised understanding of the reproductive norm. This indicates the effectiveness of the party-state's population governance through biopolitics (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005).

Timing Motherhood under Intensified Pressure

Responding to the DINK vignette of a couple's potential voluntary childlessness, some participants are concerned about the age of the woman when they suggest delaying pregnancy as a middle-ground solution. They directly ask her age, as it is a crucial consideration in their suggestion. When I probed their opinions of the best time for women to give birth, my participants' answers represent the homogeneous discourse widely circulating among the Chinese public. These answers share their roots in the health and medical discourse regarding childbirth: 'it's best to give birth before 30, and after 35 would be too risky'.

As one of a few people who had actually followed the 'golden age guideline' of childbirth, Lulu's answer stands out as follows:

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³⁰ The All China Women's Federation (ACWF) is the Chinese government organisation that is responsible for promoting government policies relating to women and advocating women's rights.

My mom says it should neither be too early nor too late. That means not before 25, no later than 30. Normally it's best if you can do it between 25 and 35. My mom is a doctor, hence she has lots of cases to support her view. Although my previous marriage was not good [she is divorced], on this matter [following child-birth age] it was correct. I had my daughter at the age of 27, which is slightly late.

Evans (1997, p.75) points out the peculiar term *zao lian* (premature love, 早恋), used to describe dating during adolescence. Farrer (2006: 106) cites the ideal dating age for Chinese youth instructed in Chinese adolescent education as 20, 'with any dating earlier than 18 being premature'. Bakken (1993) points out that the discourse of premature love constructs adolescent sexuality as a social problem. For this reason, a prohibition on dating during school years was commonly inculcated by both teachers and parents, and premarital sex was punishable in most universities (Farrer, 2002, 2006). My own dating experience in high school, detected by my school principal, which led to my parents being summoned by the school in the hope that they could cooperate with the school to re-educate me, is one example. Although from 2005, university students were finally allowed to marry (Farrer, 2006), until this day a teenage girl's involvement in premature love can still trigger violent punishment from parents that can lead to tragedy (Li, 2018b). Throughout my participants' school years, dating was definitely not encouraged, and often completely forbidden.

Lulu's answer reveals the Chinese perspective on women's 'normal life course', indicating a fairly clear age cap for each significant life event. 'Neither too early nor too late' reflects a normalised age range for childbirth. Not 'too early' explains the deliberate non-provision of safe sex information during school years (Farrer, 2006). 'Nor too late' acts as an alarm to remind women to enter into marriage and motherhood in due course because it is commonly believed that 'it is more risky to have it after 30' (Stella). The idea of appropriate sexual behaviour matching with a certain age is summarised in one sentence: 'Each age has its own tasks', by Tina responding to the DINK vignette. This is traditionally characterised as: students should focus on study, not engage in 'premature love' (Evans, 1997). Once they have accomplished higher education, cheng jia li ye (establishing family and career,

成家立业) will naturally become an individual's priority. For women, as the popular saying goes, *sheng er yu nü* (bearing and rearing children, 生儿育女) will become her primary role. The widely accepted medical and health discourse endorsed by scientific orthodoxy on the best time for women to give birth reaffirms the normalised life course.

Jinwang verifies this by quoting her doctor friend's words, telling her that around 28 or 29 is the best time for women to give birth. She is in no doubt about the credibility of such an answer as she stresses that her friend has 's tudied medicine, thus should know best. Evans (1997) notes that a natural-science bias has dominated discourses on sexuality in China since 1949, and authorises a biologically essentialist representation of sexual and gendered conduct as scientific fact in the official discourse while disregarding cultural and social factors. Farrer (2006: 121) points out that an argument made with reference to biological nature 'is a powerful rhetorical device in a society that still holds science in high regard'. As Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005: 32) argue, 'modern science, far from being external to power relations, has been fundamental to the construction of the modern state and modern power while working to mask that power in the language of truth, rationality, and progress'. Presented as a 'scientific fact' and lacking the representation of critical feminist discourse among the Chinese public, it is not difficult to sense the way it weighs on women. For example, Jinwang (28) is quite open about the negative effect of such a 'scientific' discourse on her:

I'm afraid it does make me panic, indeed. Partly this is because I'm aware that I'm not perfectly fit. I'm rather weak. When they talk about this [her age], it makes me feel even weaker. [Laugh together]

Within this medical discourse, it is understood by women that delaying childbirth until after the age of 30 is risky, both for the mother herself and the unborn child. 'I heard people say that in terms of physical fitness, it's better to do it before the 30s' (Stella).

Joyce, who understood women's reproduction as a responsibility towards Chinese society, says 'under such circumstances, of course the earlier you can give birth, the better it is. Because the younger she is, the healthier the baby will be. This can be proved medically. Also it's better for herself to recover.' Muyu shares a similar view:

'it's scientifically proved and physically easier to recover before 30. You can easily find information online' (Muyu). This illustrates two reasons for women to catch 'the scientifically best time' for reproduction. Firstly, because women's reproduction is understood as their duty to the nation, the *suzhi* (quality, 素质) of their children does matter. Hence, timing is a key component to ensure that a healthy baby is born to achieve the eugenic goal of the party-state: improving population quality. Secondly, it is easier for her reproductive body to recover from childbirth.

Backed by the party-state's eugenic policy, the scientific medical discourse that promotes 'having good quality children' has wide public appeal. All my participants agree that 'good quality children' were born to women aged between 23 and 30. This belief has been reaffirmed in both popular and official media (Baidu, 2014; Xinhua News, 2009). The belief that it 'makes scientific sense' reflects the effect of government-sponsored eugenic policies presented as scientific facts. McMillan (2006) claims that, since the start of the One-Child Policy in 1979, the Chinese government has widely employed eugenic ideology in its policy-making, aiming to improve population quality (suzhi 素质). Among the issues, the desire to have 'superior' children requires women to follow the rules in terms of birth control, pregnancy care and child rearing (Zhu, 2010; Anagnost, 1995). Medically proved or not, Berryman (1991) contends that a balanced provision of information on later motherhood is needed to shift attention from the problem-centred medical approach. People need to be given the opportunity to take into account the psychological and sociological benefits that later motherhood could bring into a woman's experience. However, in contemporary China, the medical approach prevails. Moreover, it is not only a matter of ensuring that 'quality' babies are born, but also to avoid 'inferior births'. Support for the families of children with disabilities is rudimentary, which leads to these families suffering from exacerbated social and financial pressure (Shang, Fisher and Xie, 2011). This adds further pressure to women's reproductive decisions, as 'bad timing' could add risk to 'inferior birth', which is often viewed as an extra burden to the family and a personal misfortune.

The second point that Joyce made is about women's ability to recover from childbirth, which was echoed by others. Women's youthfulness is highly valued in contemporary societies as a global cultural trend. Against such a backdrop, the

sexualisation of popular culture has added another layer of demands on Chinese women: to remain youthful, and hence desirable. The belief is that the younger a woman is when she gives birth, the better chance she has of securing her position as a desirable subject in the neoliberal economy. The burgeoning industry that provides various services to help new mothers recover from birth, especially to restore her figure, evidences this trend (China Industry Information Wang, 2016). The need to retain an 'attractive figure' after giving birth manifests itself in the popular culture trend of the 'sexy hot mummy' (*xin gan la ma*, 性感辣妈), which has been celebrated online since 2014 through the Chinese hot mummy competition.³¹ Karen³² kindly allowed me to share her embodiment of this image (See Figure 7, 8 and 9)

Karen had her daughter at 27 after four years of marriage to her academic husband. In order to keep her figure throughout her pregnancy and ensure a speedy recovery from childbirth, Karen paid particular attention to her diet and engaged in regular exercise. Coming from a well-to-do family in Shanghai, she enjoyed a postgraduate education overseas and has the resources to embody the neoliberal ideal: young and pretty, she married into a good family and had her daughter before 30, and is currently living a transnational lifestyle as an entrepreneur, which is a much-desired personal success for a contemporary Chinese woman.

³¹ The Chinese Hot Mummy Competition started in 2014 and has been running annually since then on Sino Weibo under the name: '中国辣妈大赛. It encourages the public to enter the competition by @ their account after uploading photos.

³² Matching all my selecting criteria, Karen is one of my pilet study participants.



Figure 7: Karen in her 8th month of pregnancy.



Figure 8: Karen celebrates her daughter's 1st birthday.



Figure 9: Karen with her two-month-old daughter in Shanghai.

On the other hand, the phenomenon of 'leftover women', a term used by China's All Women's Federation to describes women who remain unmarried after the age of 27, has received both popular and scholarly attention in recent years (Hong Fincher, 2014b; Magistad, 2013; To, 2013a). My focus here is on women's insistence on following the social norm, which requires marriage before childbirth, despite the fact that this leads to many of them passing their so-called scientific 'reproductive prime'. Willingly or not, only six women among my 35 participants had managed to marry and have children before the age of 30. Even though they largely agree with the

medical and health discourse and are either close to or already over 30, they all emphasise that they are 'holding off' childbirth for good reasons.

Stella: They all say it's like this [before 30]. I assume so, but it's not definite either.

K: Will you change yourself because of this?

Stella: That's very unlikely. I can't give birth for the sake of it. [Laugh]

Stella is still single at 26 and, like many of her peers, although acknowledging the medical discourse, insists upon the importance of taking other social factors into consideration. Chenchen, who is still single at the age of 30, puts it like this:

Everybody talks about the best time for women to have babies. People say it...but this is not something...For me it's not necessary to follow that. Because I feel there should be some individual differences. For example, a couple who are both fit and healthy can produce better quality sperm and eggs, then the health of their kids might still be better than average even if they are older. Assume that I am fit and healthy, I am over 30 now. If I have kids around 40, it might still be better than an average person. Of course, my bodily functions would have declined along the way. I heard people say that women over a certain age are at high risk of giving birth to children with schizophrenia. I think there may have been some research done on this. But they said it's women over 40, I believe. So I feel maybe it's acceptable to have children over 35.

Chenchen's account is particularly interesting. She was still single at the age of 30, which is the suggested deadline. On the one hand, she reiterates the importance of giving birth to a healthy baby, which reflects the government's eugenic agenda. Regardless of the correctness of the medical details that Chenchen has received, the fear of giving birth to an unhealthy child is certainly there. On the other hand, she has created her own argument to give herself some leeway. This indicates her ongoing self-negotiation between the time constraints constructed by the society in which she resides and her own lived reality. This is an observable trend among the single women I interviewed. They are concerned about the effect of the woman's age on her reproductive capacity, drawing upon the medical and eugenic discourse;

however, when talking about their own case, they often emphasise the significance of other social factors in making motherhood a success.

Similarly, Jinwang, aged 28, who holds a master's degree and is engaged to a PhD researcher, thinks that 33 is a reasonable age for her to have children. On the one hand, she is concerned that she might 'not have the energy to accompany my child to grow up. I feel if I am too old I won't have the energy to run after my kids...like: sweetheart, wait for your mama! [Laugh]. On the other hand, she argues that it is important for the woman to feel ready for the sake of the quality experience for both the child and the mother. Hence, even though she is approaching 30 and about to marry, Jinwang says that she does not want a child at all for the time being.

Jinwang: Because I haven't even figured out my own life yet. Like my friends told me having kids is really going to disturb your life plan. I just started to work about one year ago. My plan for the next two or three years...I feel I'm just starting to sense a bit of direction in my career. If I have a child now, it means the following two or three years would be in vain in terms of career.

Jinwang, who already has a legitimate partner to reproduce with, further builds on the social norm to emphasise the importance of her 'feeling ready for children' as a way to legitimise the temporary delay before pregnancy in order to pursue her personal development in her career. Similarly, Lilin also based her argument on the quality of parenthood to support a self-determined timing, particularly for the woman.

Lilin: I think they should wait till the right moment for them to have a kid. You can't put pressure on such things. Because if they do end up having one now, there's no other way around. They won't have enough time to take care of it. Then...To be honest, firstly the woman will definitely sacrifice her work. This is for sure. For a girl, this might create resentment later on. She might feel: 'oh dear (ai ya, 哎呀), it was because of you I gave up my job'. She might be resentful. Secondly, if they're both busy with their own careers, they might neglect the kid.

Jinwang and Lilin both point out the potential negative impact of motherhood on women's careers, as childcare is understood to be mainly a woman's job. When having children is seen as a 'disruption of women's life plan' and that she will

'definitely sacrifice her work', women's unwillingness to become mothers might reduce the quality of the motherhood provided. Hence, it makes a good counterargument against those who are pushing the norms of motherhood timing. It also exemplifies the social norm's potential for change, which provides women with a certain amount of space to negotiate and reconstruct. This reveals a glimpse of hope, despite the remaining 'quality' issue. Even though it could help in women's resistance to the biological norm, the framework in which it functions is still the belief that good quality children are born and raised within a secure heterosexual marriage.

Regardless of their marital status, my participants have demonstrated a compelling desire to prioritise the social norm of reproduction over the biological norm. For single women like Joyce, at the age of 30, expressing her fondness for children but meanwhile emphasising that 'I will never give birth unless I meet the right person' is a case in point. She believes that children born outside legitimate heterosexual marriage means 'losing its meaning of inheritance for the individual, family and society', so she would never do that. In these circumstances, upholding the importance of the social norm provides the important discursive power these women need to resist the oppressive biological discourse imposed upon them to reproduce regardless of their personal preference. However, on the other hand, one should not neglect the oppressive nature of the social norm itself.

Married, aged 27 and about to finish her PhD, Ginkgo believes the right time is when the couple are 'both physically fit and psychologically mature'. She acknowledges there are different ideas around the best biological timing: 'I heard some people say before 25, or before 30, some also say it's ok before 35. I've just heard these and don't know which is right.' However, she regards psychological maturity as being of primary importance when considering motherhood. For her: 'If she doesn't want kids, it is hard to be a responsible parent. Then it's not good for the child, or for society.' Like Joyce, Ginkgo links the responsibility for childbirth and parenthood to the collective responsibility towards society. Hence, the determination and inward readiness of the individual are crucial for them to justify a self-determined best time for reproduction. Consequently, the feeling of 'wanting' a child and being 'psychologically mature' become the precursors of responsible parenthood. Apart

from the psychological and emotional maturity that Gingko mentioned, Atai emphasises that 'every aspect' needs to be 'mature'.

Atai: When you really want to have children, when every aspect, including your partner and yourself, are relatively mature at least. You have some detailed plan about child rearing, and financially you have some savings. This probably is the right time.

The emphasis here is that 'the couple' are both prepared for the childrearing project, which requires each partner to bring in their resources. 'Have some detailed plan' indicates that, on top of the emotional maturity to handle parenthood, materiality also matters. Childrearing is understood as a collective family project, which requires careful planning. It sounds as if these social factors carry far more weight than the so-called 'scientific best timing'. For example, Atai believes that individual decisions on this should vary, depending on their own circumstances.

Atai: ...I just heard about it and I don't have a particular opinion [on the age of childbirth]...If you want...I also know some people who had a child right after finishing uni, whereas some people still don't have kids after 30. All sorts, if you feel you can hold your life at the moment, then go ahead to have one, it's fine.

At first glance, Atai's answer seems to value the importance of individual choice in this matter, which the individual can and should control. A free-choosing, self-enterprising, rational and responsible subject is presented among the younger Chinese generation under marketisation, who believes in personal responsibility to succeed in life (Hanser, 2001; Liu, F., 2008a). However, digging deeper, one can see the limited availability of such choices.

Atai: I think if you don't want to, that's fine. But how to convince your parents would be your business. But I think, if you don't want to, don't let other people or even your parents influence you to make an inappropriate decision for yourself. Because for things like having a child, I think you need to be very prudent. Once the child is born, you need take on lots of responsibilities. If you feel resentful, I think the child will be negatively affected. So you must be very cautious about your decision.

The heavy responsibility to ensure good parenting is emphasised by Atai as the woman's personal decision, which needs to be weighed up carefully and should not be influenced by others' opinions. Her approach is a heavily individualised one. Its success for women relies heavily on both the material and intellectual resources that are available to her. Moreover, 'how to convince your parents would be your business'.

Coming from a well-to-do family in Shanghai and having an overseas education, Atai married well³³ before the age of 28. She works as a teacher in a state school, which has been seen as an appropriate and desirable occupation for women due to its stability³⁴ (Chow and Ngo, 2002). Atai's privileged social and economic status enables her to feel more at ease with the multiple options at hand. She was married before 30 and is financially able, so she could feel freer than most people to choose 'when to have children'. However, even people like Atai are not free from all social pressure. In her narrative earlier on, the comment: 'some people still don't have kids after 30' indicates that age 30 is still a significant milestone for her. Indeed, as her following narrative shows, she thinks that 30 might be about the right time to have children.

Atai: Now my parents haven't come up with anything. Not sure...maybe my parents, they would hope that when I reach a certain age, around 30, I could have a child. Because, by then, I will have been working for a while and should have reached another stage in life. Then it's time to have kids. Eh... I can understand. Like I said earlier, it's much more feasible when you're prepared in every way.

Atai's narrative illustrates another layer of expectation placed on well-educated Chinese women: the importance of work. As the 'only hope' of the family (Fong, 2004), these women are often raised as surrogate sons, who carry the family expectation of achievement in their career. As single daughters, they need to fulfil the expectation to perform well both in career and marriage. The struggle to find a balance point to manage both is common for my participants. Although Atai seems to

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³³ See Chapter 6 for more information on marriage practices among this generation.

³⁴ See more on desirable jobs for the women of my research cohort in Chapter 7.

be at the 'perfect time' both socially and biologically to have children, she uses the career expectation on her to justify the idea that she needs to gain more work experience until age 30 and then it would be the right time to enter 'another stage in life'. Atai has a master's degree from Australia, so compared to her less-educated counterparts this could mean that she has less time to do both. In order to handle this double expectation, Muyu's view represents another strategy: giving birth first before establishing a career.

Muyu: Psychologically it's easier to readapt. After you give birth, there will be a period of time when you need to be with the kid. So your career has to be put aside. If you have kids young, you might still have the enthusiasm and vigour when you return to work. It's easier to restart, I think.

Muyu's answer reaffirms the importance to these women of participating in paid work. This strategy of 'getting it done early' has recently been noticed by the Chinese media, while more female university students are deciding to give birth while studying to avoid discrimination in the job market later on (Yang, 2016). It has become a particular trend among female postgraduate and PhD students to marry and give birth while studying, so that they can have a better chance to focus on their career development afterwards (Yang, 2016). Since the change in the rules to allow students to marry and have children in 2005, most Chinese universities have taken a 'neither forbid nor promote' approach and left it as a personal choice for adult students to decide for themselves (Xu, Xiao and Lin, 2009). However, the official media's commentary reveals reservations about such a strategy with concerns being raised about the challenges facing both female students and universities (Yang, 2016; Beijing Youth Daily, 2015). The reality is that, despite the relaxed rules, only a few people have the resources to manage pregnancy and childbirth while studying.

Gingko is married but still lives in her university dormitory while doing a PhD in Beijing. She confided that they are planning to have a child when 'we are less busy'. When I probed further, she answered 'before 30', which is within the recommended 'scientific' time range. Between a new academic career to establish and their plan to

have a child 'before 30' when she is 'less busy', how she will manage is a question that only time can tell.³⁵ However, the following sheds some light on the reality.

Since children's prospects are tied closely to Chinese family's future fortune, it is in the family interest to deploy any strategies ensuring their precious child 'does not lose at the starting line' (Karen). Moreover, eugenic ideologies that reflect social Darwinist values are promoted in state policies. Hence it is easy for Chinese parents-to-be to feel the heavy weight of childrearing. The financial cost of raising a child in Chinese cities like Beijing to meet the new standards of middle-class consumption is high (Croll, 2006) compared to the modest salary of the white-collar professions in which these women work. China's birth planning and control policy has long promoted the idea of 'you sheng you yu' (good quality birth, good quality childrearing, 优生优育). The whole discourse of quality assurance to produce the best possible quality of children places heavy demands on individuals to plan and calculate carefully about each single move in their reproduction-related decision-making, particularly for women.

Consequently, managing the timing of reproduction is an interesting business for these women. The various demands on their time after graduation require them to follow a normalised life course with tough deadlines to meet, and the stakes are high. 'Each life stage has its own tasks', as Tina said. I map out the timescales for university-educated Chinese people after graduation, according to the existing discourse and the social norm of reproduction in Figure 10.



Figure 10: Running after the deadline(s) for university-educated Chinese women.

Created by the author using clipart and based on data collected.

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³⁵ In a follow-up interview with Gingko in 2017, she told me that she gave birth to her first child in 2016 at the age of 28.

As shown in the picture, typically girls finish their undergraduate degree at the age of 22. Then they have five years to secure a career and pin down a husband before being labelled 'leftover' at 27. If they are lucky enough to be married by then, they have about three years left to give birth, at least to the first child under the current two-child policy. If she does not accomplish all these on time, after 35 there is a danger that she will be viewed as a failure beyond redemption, a social outcast. It is important to note that dating was not encouraged even up until university level for my participants. In addition, a postgraduate course takes three years, while a PhD could easily take more than four years depending on an individual's realisation of the publication quota³⁶, which means that their time window could be even tighter.

As Ginkgo says of women: 'you can afford a break from work. If you decide not to have children because you're busy, how about if your body doesn't allow it when you have more time?' Ginkgo's answer further reveals the internalised naturalisation of motherhood for women like herself, as she simply cannot afford to miss out on it compared to her career progression. Therefore, I argue that, even if women are able to strategise by using the discourse of social norms to resist the biological norm of reproduction and win more flexibility in their timing, their agency is strictly constrained under the established framework of heterosexual marriage. Moreover, the unchallenged norm of universal childbearing endorsed by so-called scientific truth, together with the Chinese government's promotion of a eugenic discourse, intensifies the demands on Chinese women's reproductive decision-making. In order to reach the expected time targets, they need to master skills such as precise time management and astute resource deployment. The clear discrepancy between these women's desired life trajectory and their lived reality indicates the pressure under which they live.

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³⁶ It is set as a requirement for Chinese PhD students to have at least one or two publications in key journals before they can apply for graduation. The exact number varies depending on the university.

Tension in the Family Business: Who Decides What?

As the Chinese saying goes, the top priority of filial piety is carrying on the family bloodline (bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da, 不孝有三, 无后为大). Under the One-Child Policy, there has been a shift from patrilineal emphasis to a bilineal orientation (Qi, 2015a), which means that urban only daughters' reproductive decisions are a matter of concern for families from both sides. While authoritarian filiality has indeed been undermined since CCP came to power, a form of reciprocal family obligation is increasingly observed as encompassing not only material support when needed, but also emotional and spiritual commitment to one's parents out of gratitude for receiving care from them (Yeh and Bedford, 2003). The sense of paying back for parents' sacrificial love is deeply imprinted in Chinese children's mentality, and functions as an effective social mechanism to encourage their continuing care for parents (Whyte, 2005; Ikels, 1993; Ferree and Merrill, 2000). Zhang (2016) notes that although the meaning of xiao has been re-interpreted and renegotiated in practice in various ways, caring for parents' opinions and feelings remains important The emotional intimacy observed among this generation with their parents (Evans, 2008, 2010; Liu, J., 2017b) potentially exacerbates the emotional pressure children felt to meet their parents' expectations.

As Lijun explains: 'We are their only child, whether we have kids or not directly decides whether they have grandchildren or not.' Many have observed an increasing emphasising on intergenerational intimacy in contemporary Chinese family (Even, 2011; Zheng, 2017, Zheng and Ho, 2017, Liu, J. 2017). Unlike their parents, who grow up with more siblings at a time emphasising political participation and making sacrifice to build socialism, some even caught upon to denounce their parents during the cultural revolution, this young generation are often the only hope (Fong, 2004) of their parents. The strengthened emotional bond between these two generations does play a crucial role in this family decision. Parents often act as the most influential 'broker' to ensure their children fulfilling the conventional gender expectations of marriage and childbirth. This manifests in various ways, from matchmaking on their behalf to influencing when and how many children to have once they are married.

With an MBA from the UK, Joyce tried to set up her own business after returning to China. However, her single status has become the focal point of her parents' concerns. For Joyce, getting married and having children 'is to accomplish a family task, the duty of inheritance'. Responses to parents urging the couple to have children in the DINK vignette reveal a consensus among my participants that it is a common occurrence in their lives.

Lily: Common, very common. There are lots of pressures from work already. Family pressure [to marry and have children] is another thing one has to deal with. Like in this case, work is too busy, they don't want a kid, and then parents would keep urging you non-stop.

Lily voiced the double pressure that women experience, both over work performance and parents' persistent expectation for them to have children. As Joyce's answer reveals 'many Chinese parents are like this. Parents have too much influence on us on this matter. Like the people around me, almost everyone gives birth for their parents.' Xiaoliu also confirms parents' influence on this matter:

I can only wish them [the couple] good luck. [Laugh] They could try to dodge it or muddle through...Parents certainly have power. I tell you, for the post-80s generation, those who genuinely want children are in the minority. Actually, they themselves are still kids. They are not mature in many ways. Many people just follow their parents' wishes.

Both Joyce's and Xiaoliu's narratives reveal the serious family pressure on women to conform to the norm. Chinese parents' active involvement in helping their children to marry and have children is common sense in Chinese society. The Match-Making Corner initiated by parents in many Chinese public parks is simply one public manifestation (Zarafonetis, 2014; Zhou, 2016). Additionally, Chinese grandparents are the main childcare support for married couples (Goh, 2009; Goh and Kuczynski, 2010). Rather than being victims of exploitation by their children, parents are often willing to be actively involved in their only child's married life, according to Ho and Zhong (2014), as a way of re-entering society and as an old-age investment. Either way, the inter-dependency across generations in contemporary Chinese families

seems to have tightened under marketisation. The following quote further evidences this trend:

Jinwang: My mom would give me subtle nudges, saying 'Oh, how sweet it would be to take my grandchild for a stroll'. Whereas his mother [in-law] would directly say 'if you're pregnant, just come back. We will take care of it for you!' No! Their plot can't trap me! [laugh]

D: It wouldn't be a problem to have two if our parents were willing to support us. Because we do have to raise them in Shanghai, his parents can look after them in Wenzhou.³⁷

The above narratives show that parents are eager to be involved in taking care of grandchildren and make it an enticing prospect for their children to reproduce, assuming there is a family coalition of caregivers (Goh, 2010).

Despite the condemnation of traditional practices, including filial piety, as feudal backwardness during the communist era, the Chinese government recently returned to emphasising filial piety as a tool to utilise family care in order to solve the social problems created by its fast-ageing population. From issuing 'The New 24 Paragons of Filial Piety' in 2012, which triggered a public backlash (Jacobs and Century, 2012), to the commonly seen Public Service Announcements (PSA) in most Chinese cities, the message is clear: caring for one's family elders is promoted by the government as 'the traditional virtue of Chinese nationalities' – a moral discourse. However, one should not neglect the fact that it is also reinforced by Chinese law.³⁸.

³⁸ China's Marriage Law clause 21 states 'It is a child's duty to support his or her parents'. An amendment made in 2012 adds 'frequently visit parents' into the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly.

³⁷ At the time of the interview in 2015, Shanghai has started to pilot the two-child policy, which allows couples who are both the single child in their families to have two children once married.





Figure 11: PSA on Guanghan High Street promoting family care for elders, taken by the author's parents³⁹.

In her research on contemporary Chinese family practices, Zhang (2016a) argues that being filial is not enough: displaying 'xiao' (being filial) is critical for both children's and their parents' face. Being able to let parents enjoy the happiness of a family union together with multiple generations (tian lun zhi le 天伦之乐) is a longstanding practice of 'xiao' to one's parents, and is reflected by Chain's narrative: 'As the Chinese elders, they really want to see the birth of the grandchildren's generation, and enjoy tian lun zhi le'. Hence, I argue that being able to provide grandchildren for one's parents remains influential in the Chinese contemporary practice and display of *xiao*, which affects the social standing of its family members as one unit. Wielander (2016) argues that the Chinese government is good at tapping into people's sentiment to promote its own political agenda, meanwhile instilling the value of collectivity. Understanding both the official rhetoric and practice of xiao helps to partially explain why many people comply with their parents' wishes, as this still forms an important part of Chinese perceptions of happiness and life fulfilment. Here, utilising the public's yearning for family happiness (zui giu xing fu, 追 求幸福) functions as a low-cost and effective way of persuading young couples to have at least one child in order to resolve the looming population crisis faced by the party-state.

³⁹ The core message in this PSA is that caring for and loving the elder means respecting their mind set and personal choices. Each family needs to be self-resilient to create a convenient environment for the elders to feel they are loved and valued by their family and society. Filial piety is the traditional virtue of the Chinese nation.

Jinwang (28) works in Beijing as a landscape designer while in a long-distance relationship with her fiancé, who works in Singapore as a PhD researcher. I interviewed her in their hometown in Sichuan during Chinese New Year. Jinwang's narration of her experience illuminates the effectiveness of intimate family relationships in regulating women's life.

Jinwang: I didn't feel much while I was working in Beijing. Once I came back home, my mom has been nagging me every day. She goes: '[sigh] you're not young any more. You should do what you're supposed to do'. His [her fiancé's] mother would say similar things.

Kailing: What should you do?

Jinwang: [Laugh] Should have a child! [Laugh] Right on the day of my return, I feel I haven't even warmed up the chair I'm sitting on, my mom started to say: 'don't you think you should get married this time? Look, you two are only back for a few days. Maybe you should take the chance to get it registered.' Then the next day, we went to register our marriage. [Laugh] I didn't even sit down properly at home! After that, his mom starts to ask: 'Have you found a wedding planner? Have you fixed a date for the wedding banquet?' She keeps pressing me. I thought, what are you all rushing for? When I ask, the answer is always 'we think you're not young any more'! ...The arrow is always towards me! I asked why he [her fiancé] doesn't need to do anything? His mom says: 'it's different between man and woman'!

Kailing: What difference?

Jinwang: His mom is worse than my mom. My mom at the end of the day, still tries to defend me a bit. The difference between man and woman [sigh], women reaches this age, you need to give birth. 'It will become more difficult as you get older. We have many neighbours who can't get pregnant'! [Acting like her mother-in-law].

Jinwang also complains that her mother and mother-in-law act like many other middle-aged Chinese women (*zhongnian funü*, 中年妇女)⁴⁰ as they are very stubborn

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⁴⁰ Zhong nian fu nü (中年妇女) connotes negative meanings in Chinese. It often refers to married middle-aged women who are not well educated or attractive, but are often enthusiastic in talking about domestic trifles.

in what they believe is right. They believe that Jinwang needs to hurry up before it is 'too late', so the pressure is on from the moment she returns home. Through this motherly 'mundane nagging', Jinwang is ushered towards conforming to the norm. The understanding that in order to have a child they need to be married played a role in pressurising them to register their marriage the next day. Against this backdrop, the biological and social discourse voiced by intimate family members compresses the process from marriage to childbirth.

Compared to the active female actors in this scenario, men seem to be off the scene. The silence and invisibility of the groom and both fathers presents the whole scenario as entirely women's business: from both mothers' loving suggestions to the bride-to-be to ensuring a smooth procession of events: marriage registration to wedding planning. Since childbirth is understood as Chinese women's natural destiny, the pressure from both mothers is supposed to be for Jinwang's benefit, as she 'is not young anymore'. However, from discursive mechanisms to practical arrangements, Jinwang felt that the arrow is always aimed towards her. These gendered practices place heavy responsibilities on women to ensure the smooth reproduction of an institutionalised patriarchal culture. Mothers who are genuinely concerned about their daughters' future prospects within the current social structure often act as the most zealous advocates for their daughters to conform. Jinwang's mother's advice serves as an example:

Jinwang: My mother also told me that some neighbour's daughter (*jiejie*, 姐姐 older than Jinwang) got pregnant before registering her marriage. Then they immediately went to the registry office. She told me there are lots of cases like this, and said: 'you don't need to be scared'. [Laugh]

Kailing: [Laugh] Scared of what?

Jinwang: What they mean is, if I get pregnant by accident, I just go to register, no problem! [Laugh] 'We're very open-minded!' She means both lots of parents! [Laugh] But I was still shocked at that moment when I heard this. [Laugh]

Speaking as representing both families' interests, Jinwang's own mother acts as a delegate to reveal the parents' flexibility or 'open-mindedness' as long as the final goal is met: to be married and have children. By presenting a real-life story of a

neighbour's daughter, the parents send out a subtle signal of their wishes for Jingwang and this functions as a gentle reminder for her not to forget to act on this important agenda.

The DINK vignette assumes that the couple shares the same opinion: neither wants to have children, whereas in reality it could be more complicated than that. D comments: 'If neither of the couple wants kids, then that's great! As long as the husband and wife stand firm on a united front, it's much easier to solve the problem.' However, a 'united front' between the couple is often difficult to sustain, as is reflected in her own dilemma. D is one of two participants who explicitly announced their preference for not having children if possible. However, her husband-to-be and his family have clearly expressed a strong wish to have children. She told me that she definitely would have to have one:

Kailing: Do you like kids?

D: No, I myself do not want kids. But it's both sides' parents' wish. My stance on this is negligible. All family relatives from both sides want us to have kids. My husband also loves kids. He often says he really wants us to create a baby together. Just me alone who doesn't want it. Do you think this is an achievable goal for me? When the man you love tells you that he wants to have a child with you? This is the most beautiful thing in the world. No matter how difficult for you to feel such beauty, you can't say no, can you? It would be my achievement if I could stop them after having one child. I think it is highly likely it won't stop there. Because we meet the two-child criteria.⁴¹

Her situation illuminates the complicity of the power dynamics within Chinese families and highlights the common family interests. More importantly, her love for her husband makes her feel that she needs to materialise that love by 'doing his will', even if it is at odds with her own. Hence, the elusive term 'love' has the potential to gloss over the exploitation happened in intimate relationships. Jonasdottir (2011) made a helpful comparison between the freely sold wage labour under capitalism with freely given love under patriarchy to argue that exploitation in both cases may

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⁴¹ I interviewed D in 2015 in Shanghai, when China had just started to allow two children per couple, if either parent is an only child.

not only benefit both parties, but also occurs with the full voluntary consent of the exploited. She further explains that, despite the mutual benefits, 'one party controls much more effectively than the other the circumstances of differential advantages which keeps the exploitative system going' (2011, p.52). D further elaborates the importance to her husband of having his own children.

D: His [the husband's] paternal grandparents are still alive, including his aunties. They all love him dearly. My boyfriend's [engaged at the time of interview] father is the only son in the family. He is the only grandson in that family. So all of them want him to have children as soon as possible. The child will carry on their family name!

D is fully aware of her situation in marrying an only son, who has the duty to carry on the family name on top of her own: their reproductive decision is inevitably shaped by their families' relationships. She knows that she will need to compromise and acknowledges that 'In Chinese society, men face even more pressure to procreate', because they need to 'have a son to carry on the family line' (chuan zong jie dai, 传宗接代). However, the pressure on a man is ultimately transmitted to and felt by his wife. Similarly, Yangyang (29), who had married into a wealthy family, had just had her first daughter three months previously. She says:

My father-in-law and my husband both want to have another child. Although my husband doesn't overtly express it, as he knows that I have sacrificed a lot for our first child. I really don't want to do it again. For the men and his family, it is *tian ding* (adding human assets, 添丁). It's a net gain for them, but a net loss for me.

Yangyang feels unfulfilled because she had to give up her managerial position at work to receive IVF treatment and give birth. However, she confides that she might change her mind later because the intricate family relationships and emotions involved also made her uncertain about her own wishes. Resulting from China's gendered reality, a division of interest in reproductive decisions is not rare, which makes the 'united front' mentioned by D hard to achieve. One extreme example of a conflict of interest is evident in a case where a woman in labour jumped off the hospital building when her request for a Caesarean section was rejected on the

grounds that her husband and his family insisted on a natural birth (BBC China, 2017). Under the intricate relational dynamic, I argue that it is difficult for a wife to insist on her own different opinion within the family unit.

The intense social pressure on women to marry and reproduce within a short timescale in the Chinese context makes 'her act of love' become the sugar coating for the dire material reality in which a woman lacks any choice when she 'voluntarily gives her consent'. Hence, it further complicates her articulation of the exploitation she might experience. Although the effects on women of the newly implemented two-child policy of 2016 are still unclear⁴², 'love', located within its romantic and familial contexts, has enormous potential to become a powerful language to silence dissidents, particularly in a society that values harmony.

Zhangsan (25) and Lisi (26) are both from wealthy families and live in Shanghai. They have not given much serious thought to having children, as Lisi says: 'I haven't thought about it. I still want to live for myself a bit.' When I asked whether they would consider having two children later, they both answered 'yes'.

Lisi: My mom also wants me to have two! [Laugh]

Kailing: What do you think?

Lisi: Oh dear, only if I can have two in one go!

Zhangsan: I agree!

Lisi: I really don't want to do twice. It's so scary, so painful! [Laugh]

Although it is still too early to know their final decisions on this matter, the intricate family influence is made clear, which means that these women will need to face delicate negotiations within their intimate relationships.

Kailing: So can they ignore parents pressuring them in such a situation? Lily: Oh no...it's best to reach a consensus.

Growing up among China's dramatic social and economic changes, with the increasingly mixed global influence brought by the reforms since 1979, this

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⁴² Research has suggested that the Two-Child Policy may exacerbate a vicious circle of gender inequality in China (Qian and Jin, 2018).

generation demonstrates a certain outlook that indicates a growing sense of individuality, particularly the value of individual choice. Despite the homogeneous consensus on family pressure to reproduce and their naturalised understanding of motherhood, almost all my participants mentioned the importance of respecting the couple's personal choice on this matter.

Lily: Don't have a kid if you don't want one. I think it's OK without kids. Like we talked about 'leftover women'. If one is like that, one can't force others to be the same. But one should have the freedom to choose.

Chenchen: I think people should respect the couple's decision.

Lulu: This is up to them. If they ask me, I will suggest they have one. But if they don't ask me, then...I think it's solely their own private business, it should depend on their preference.

It seems that the decision of the couple is viewed as primary, which is in line with what Yan (2010) observed, a growing sense of individual privacy and respect for personal choice among this generation.

Lisi: This is a private decision that needs to be made within their nuclear family after all. Parents having their expectations is one thing, but the couple is ultimately responsible for the child. So they should decide for themselves.

Zhangsan: I agree!

Joyce: Don't have kids if they don't want to! I think only when they're ready, otherwise they would definitely give the child to their parents. They can't do a good job being parents either. It's just to satisfy their parents.

'The couple is primarily responsible for their children' becomes the main reason given by my participants for why the final decision should be made within the nuclear family: a concern for the quality of parenthood. My participants' consensus on the need to respect the couple's decision when it conflicts with their parents indicates a shift from prioritising parents' wishes to the conjugal ties, as found in rural China (Yan, 2011; Thøgersen and Anru, 2008). Meanwhile, many have also noted a strengthened emotional bond between urban only children and their parents (Qi, 2016; Zhang and Sun, 2014). It is this very tension of trying to find a balance between respecting their parents and their own will that exacerbates the struggle young people experience. Despite parental pressure on such matters, it does not

mean that my participants would easily give in. It also does not mean that they think their parents' opinion could or should be ignored. Instead, they often emphasise the importance of including parents in decision-making to reach a mutual understanding. For example, Lijun and Chain both restate the importance of 'opening up with parents and discussing with them' and 'helping their parents to understand'. As a result, despite the fact that people seem to value personal choices in theory, in practice the situation inevitably involves intricate family negotiations, not forgetting that there is often a split of opinion between the couple.

The parents of the only-child generation grew up in Mao's China, during which they were taught to prioritise their loyalty to the party-state over their filial duties to their parents because filial piety was condemned as part of China's feudal past (Yan, 2010). Zhong and Ho (2014) find that these parents show a certain level of respect towards the will of their children when dealing with their relationships. It seems that the absolute control of parents over their children has been further weakened among this generation; instead, influence is best exercised through the strengthened emotional ties between generations.

Stella: See whether they can change or not.

Kailing: Who?

Stella: The couple. It depends on whether they just want it [a baby] later or definitely don't want one at all. If they will have one sooner or later and their parents are quite old already, they should consider their parents' feelings as a sign of gratitude for them bringing you up. You should not be too selfish. But, after all, they have to be totally willing. If I advise them, but they're not convinced, then forget it. One should not give birth unwillingly. But I would suggest to them to look at it from their parents' point of view. If they can understand it, that's good for everyone involved. If she still can't accept it after all, then let it be.

Stella's answer reveals the classic dilemma between respecting one's own choice and satisfying parents in China, which symbolises modernity contending with tradition. 'They should consider their parents' feelings as a sign of gratitude for them bringing you up' reflects the indebtedness of children towards their parents (Qi, 2015a). This sense of obligation to pay back their parents' 'sacrifice' for them has

been imprinted into part of Chinese children's psyche (Qi, 2015). As Ikels (1993) says, these ties of obligation and affection makes caring for parents seem natural to Chinese children. Parents' expectations of their children include expressions of gratitude and emotional commitment, as well as material support (Qi, 2015). Ferree and Merrill (2000) further point out that this sense of obligation not only carries emotional weight, but also has a pervasive social influence.

Obviously, not everyone follows the will of his or her parents. Muyu said: 'It totally depends on the couple, I think. Some people will not listen to their parents' advice at all, while others really take them seriously.' There is a growing sense of unwillingness to sacrifice their own interests for parents among adult children (Thøgersen and Anru, 2008; Yan, 2011). Against this backdrop, since around 2000, the Chinese government has deliberately promoted Confucian ideology as a moral force to combat this individualistic trend, in particular adopting the modified New Confucianism developed in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan (Bell, 2010; Song, 2003; Whyte, 1997). Traditional Confucian family values, such as filial piety, have been rehabilitated by the party-state as it uses propaganda and constitutional measures to reiterate the responsibility of family as the welfare provider for its citizens instead of treating it as a government responsibility (Qi, 2015a). As a result, the importance of family for the individual is re-emphasised and its influence on the individual is strengthened. As part of the well-educated rising middle class, my research cohort resembles the modern Chinese ideal citizens engineered by the party-state, because they are supposed to be the embodiment of high suzhi (quality, 素质). As a result, phrases such as 'not being too selfish' and 'considering parents' feelings' (Stella) frequently appear in my participants' accounts.

Tina: Well, it depends on the couple themselves, their preference I think. It's their own business, their life. But if it's me, I will definitely need to consider my parents' feelings and their opinions. But still it depends on oneself. If one really doesn't want one, then don't have one.

Like others, Tina thinks the couple's own choice matters, but she made it clear that for her it is important to 'consider parents' feelings'. Qincai: 'they should communicate with parents. However, parents rarely accept DINKs in China...it's very difficult to change parents' minds...it's tricky...I don't know what to do'. [Laugh] If

childlessness is indeed difficult for most Chinese people to digest, as Qincai points out, 'considering parents' feelings' indicates the necessity of 'delaying not refusing childbirth' as a reasonable compromise. Nevertheless, let us not forget the tight timing of motherhood that is set for these women. Tina reminds us of the existing dilemma once again:

Tina: Nowadays, it's normal to give birth relatively late. This is unavoidable. But if it might affect one's ability to give birth...They say it would be difficult to deliver if one is over 30, [laugh] like it would be much more painful or hard to recover, etc. Technically speaking, it's scientific, but...what can you do? One has to give birth when one needs to. [Laugh together] This is not something that can be changed because you dislike it.

Well-educated women with career prospects, like Tina, the women of my research cohort could be occupied with many other things instead of childbirth. However, living under the multiple discourses that regulate their reproductive timing, their intimate family relationships become the crucial catalyst for realising their reproductive duty. Like Tina, they are fully aware that, sooner or later, childbirth is something a woman 'needs to' do and this 'cannot be changed' simply 'because you dislike it'.

The signs of mutual trust, respect and love between an only child and her or his parents are commonly expressed among my participants, which indicates their strong emotional bond. For instance, Tina talks about how her own parents consider her feelings through not mentioning the topic of wanting grandchildren.

Tina: ...I still want to have some fun. I don't want to be tied down and get stuck so quickly. [Laugh]

Kailing: What do your other relatives think?

Tina: My mother-in-law seems to want us to have one as soon as possible. [Laugh] She's impatient.

Kailing: How about your parents?

Tina: I guess they also want one as they're getting older, but they just don't mention it in front of me.

Kailing: Why? Do you know?

Tina: They don't want to create pressure for me.

Urban parents and their only children value shared decisions on big issues like purchasing property and divorce, and this reflects their economic and emotional interdependency (Zhong and Ho, 2014; Yan, 2015). In addition, Fong (2004) discovered that many urban parents become keen to establish affectionate emotional ties with their only child. This has resulted in a significant change in postmarital relations compared to previous generations: the only daughters tend to retain a closer relationship with their family of origin than was usual in the past. The old custom that regards a married daughter as being like poured-out water (jia chu qu de nü er, po chu qu de shui, 嫁出去的女儿,泼出去的水), indicating that she does not belong to her parents' family any more (Croll, 1981) and her children belong to her husband's family, has lost its appeal. The parents of only daughters are also keen to claim their legitimacy as grandparents, as demonstrated in their active involvement in raising their grandchildren (Chen et al., 2011). In this context, a woman's own parents' opinions about her reproductive decisions are equally important as the inlaws', if not more so. Although they both want grandchildren, Tina's parents do not want to create pressure for her, hence they never mention it to her. Despite this, Tina is fully aware of her parents' love for her, which they demonstrate by not giving her extra pressure. Hwang (1999) notes that reciprocal filial piety is on the rise, replacing the old authoritarian model. Along the same lines, even though they do not directly voice their desires, Tina is morally bound to express the gratitude of love by 'doing' her parents' will.

Moreover, instead of viewing pressure from their parents as 'selfish will', many express an understanding of their parents because they are genuinely trying for their children's benefit.

Muyu: ...I think it's not a matter of filial piety...I feel parents ask you to have a kid...for their generation it's not so much about wanting you to satisfy their selfish wishes, but more because they believe that by doing so, you would be happier. I think they say this for your own interest and future happiness. Because, for them, a kid is the key tie that can help maintain family relationships. They are considering your future happiness.

From Chinese parents' perspective, their only child's future prospects and happiness equate with their own. Like their investment into their education in the past, their continuous investment into their adult children's life, from helping to buy the marital home to support raising up grandchildren (Zhong and Ho, 2014;), reflect their family strategy to secure the most reliable 'welfare agency' through their children. Ensuring their children marry well and have their own children is their emotionally felt obligation as parents. It is worth noting that in this regard, parents' emotional and instrumental needs are not mutually exclusive, but actually bound together. Because of this particular link, it is hard to distinguish the structural constraints that drive parental behaviours from the emotionally charged episodes commonly experienced by so many single women. Joyce, who faces pressure from her parents to marry and have children, confides that her parents worry that: 'Oh dear, you're on your own. What will you do after we die?' She says: 'I think it's understandable. I will think the same if I have children.' 'Yang er fang lao' (raising a son to secure future prospects in old age, 养儿防老) illustrates the purpose of family formation in the Chinese context. Although there have been many changes in filial practice, the Chinese family as the main welfare provider for individuals regains its importance, as the party-state is keen to rely on a traditional family model to provide care for its rapidly ageing population. D's narrative below is a case in point:

D: The welfare system in China is not good. Raising children is at least 50% about preparing for one's old age. Your children might not live close to you or not be xiao (filial, $\not\equiv$). But you have half a chance to have a filial child. For many people in the old days, it was more about providing old age labour support when one is no longer able, if not financially. Whereas, in countries that have a good welfare system, one does not need to depend on children.

Without an established state welfare system, the family is the only reliable place for an individual to turn. Qi (2015a) points out that the structural basis of family obligations in present-day China remains intact, which is reflected in the continuity of the inter-generational interdependency of family members and the absence of any state provision of welfare. This makes resisting the marriage and reproductive norms extra difficult for women, as one needs to establish a new set of networks to provide welfare, otherwise resisting it equates to self-harm.

After more than 30 years of implementation of the One-Child Policy, China is facing a rapidly ageing population with a dramatically decreasing percentage of children and young people among its population (Carrie, 2015). It is reported that about 30% of China's population is over the age of 50, while the total population of the country is around 1.36 billion. The decision made in 2016 to allow all families to have two children was designed 'to improve the balanced development of population' and to deal with economic risk, according to a statement from the Communist Party's Central Committee (Xinhua News, 2015). Meanwhile, the government uses its monopoly of the media to promote traditional values such as filial piety in order to moralise family care for their elders. For example, an article entitled 'The contemporary value of traditional filial piety' recently appeared in *Guangming Wang* (Qiu, 2016) and has been widely reprinted by other state media. Both are key official media for the Communist Party Central Committee. Numerous Chinese media copied the article and advocated its contents within days. This strategy is both clever and cunning, as it taps into Chinese people's sentiment, which has a wide appeal, and directs public attention onto individual families' performance of old-age care instead of the provision of relevant state services. Moreover, it again utilises the time-tested technique of 'honour and shame' as its motivating strategy for a population that holds *mianzi* (face, 面子) in high regard, with the aim of stabilising the status quo. Furthermore, when official discourses are controlled and reproduced on an industrial scale by the party-state, which holds a tight grip on almost every media outlet within its jurisdiction, the pressure to conform to the promoted norm can be multidimensional, and hence overwhelming.

Joyce: For a lot of people in our society, the reason they want kids is because, first of all, pressure from public opinion. Second, peer pressure. Third, when parents want to preach, they can do it to the grandchildren instead of us. ...Lots of people use parents as an excuse, actually they see others having children, and thus do not want to miss out. Their in-laws might urge them as well.

Public opinion and peer pressure, as well as the wishes of both sets of parents, all weave together to illustrate the hegemonic heterosexual family culture in Chinese society and its power over individuals, as each part interlocks and reinforces the

others. The function of *mianzi* in Chinese culture as a moral sanction or approval for certain behaviours (Qi, 2011) is worth noting here. Parents of unmarried adult children often incur gossip and disapproval from others in their family and community (Choi and Luo, 2016). The ability to carry on the family bloodline and its association with filial piety will enhance the 'face' not only of the individual but also of their families, whereas the stigma attached to childlessness discussed earlier will lead to loss of face for all the families involved. As a result, *mianzi* functions as a safety lock to ensure the influential strength of the hegemonic cultural norm on each individual. Above all, the emotional weight coming from parents works best:

Chenchen: For us, the only-child generation, maybe gradually the pressure from society will reduce, mainly it's from the family, the elders want to have their grandchildren.

Despite the individualistic trend observed among the young generation, Whyte (2005) argues that, in terms of family obligation and filial support, they still share very similar views with their parents. The close emotional bond established between parents and their only child makes parents' opinions hard to ignore.

In addition, there is a widely held societal belief that having a child can stabilise one's marriage. A man needing a wife to carry on his family bloodline has been the default in Chinese marriage. Giving birth is socially perceived as a wife's duty. Failing to fulfil it could be used as an easy excuse to justify a husband's mistreatment of his wife. Joyce comments on the impact of infertility on marriage:

She will be miserable, absolutely miserable. Because in our society, including many people around me, a man marries a woman because he wants a family, which means he wants children. If the man knows that the woman cannot give birth, he's more likely to give up, maybe he will try many times with her in different ways. But if it still didn't work out in the end, he would give up and find another woman.

Others are more positive about the power of 'true love', like Chouchou (male): 'it really depends on whether it's true love. If it's not, the woman's infertility is definitely enough for a divorce.' All these statements highlight the importance of having one's own children in marriage. In a society where children are becoming 'priceless' (Liu,

F., 2015), with an increasing emphasis on quality family upbringing, the existing stigma against children from single-parent households often makes couples think twice about divorce for the sake of the life prospects of their children. Moreover, the persistent gendered division between the inner and outer domain means that mothers are increasingly disadvantaged in income compare to fathers due to the assumption that women will do the domestic care work. This weakens women's financial position after divorce. Financially disadvantaged wives who have children to take care of find it easier to ask their husbands for monetary contributions to the household, even when the marriage is in crisis, because they can claim the money for their children's sake.

Consequently, although parents might be willing to respect their children's wishes to a certain extent, it is understandable that any practice that could jeopardise the main welfare provision of their only children would deeply concern parents. The more they love their children, the more concerned they might become. Under the existing social structure, the price of resisting could be too expensive to pay, whilst conforming to the norm provides a certain reassurance. Therefore, pressurising their daughters to reproduce within the heterosexual family model can be understood as parents' way of protecting their children from perceived future risks. On the daughter's side, willingness to consider her parents' feelings and showing gratitude for their sacrificial love are commonly voiced by many, and this is exacerbated by the party-state's recent restoration of family values, including its promotion of filial piety. This means that many daughters consider that enabling their parents to enjoy the happiness of the family union (tian lun zhi le, 天伦之乐) is a goal worth achieving.

The emotionality involved in the whole process from both sides is well captured in a commercial video made by the cosmetics company SK-II for its targeted customers: China's middle-class women. It features these women positively in the *Marriage Market Takeover* video (SK-II, 2016), which is ironically followed by their skin product advertisement. The first half of the video vividly depicts the tremendous pressures and emotional blackmail exerted by parents on their only daughters to marry through interview quotes from both sides.

Without willingness from the government to establish a welfare system to resolve the structural issues raised by its own previous population policies, the pressure felt by

these well-educated only daughters and their families is the cost of a public bill paid privately. Framing it as a private family matter within the heterosexual family and appropriating the traditional cultural scripts such as filial piety, the government deliberately masks a structural issue under a 'private veil': It aims to pass the tension of the structural population risks faced by the party-state down to each family unit to resolve. Hence, the close and often intimate relationship between parents and their only child is appropriated as a low-cost but hyper-effective strategy to manage the public risk faced by China's government in order to stabilise its ruling status quo. All the tension, frustration and stress felt by family members is often internally digested without a public explosion. Women's life choices and bodies are kept under close scrutiny in the interests of both the family and the state and are subject to the state's family planning and control, as the recent Two-Child Policy exemplifies.

Conclusion

In order to achieve the high-level modern civilisation desired by the party-state, the Chinese government has deployed multiple discourses that regulate women's reproductive behaviour, such as the popular medical and health discourse. *Suzhi* discourse was brought in to cultivate a generation that embodies its political ideals. As Jacka (2009) argues, the *suzhi* discourse provides a critical means of state governance in post-socialist China. Meanwhile, to combat the individualistic trend among its population during the reform era, traditional Confucian ideology, such as filial piety, has been rehabilitated back into public discourse by the government in order to reinforce the family's function in Chinese society, while it has been reluctant to take over welfare provision for its population. Through emphasising family and stirring up affectionate sentiments within it, governing power over reproductive behaviour of this generation is effectively exercised through the hand of private families.

The neo-Confucian thinking that started during the Song dynasty (960–1279) draws a causal link between a self-cultivating family order and state governance, which has since become the central prescriptive model for China's elite (Glosser and Kerber, 2003). Lamont (2017) believes that the recent campaign 'Looking for the "Most Beautiful Family" in China' reaffirms the deeply functionalist view of family held by the party-state through articulating a single state vision of the Chinese family that

incorporates 'core socialist values'. Looking at its promoted values, Lamont (2017) points out that the idealised happily married heterosexual family is a hybrid of notions taken from Confucian 'filial piety' and 'harmony', westernised ideas of love and romance, and the party's belief in 'scientific development'. It aims to erect the family as a moral exemplifier and to harmonise social conflicts. Within this, motherhood is naturalised within the heterosexual family. The current trend of drawing on Confucian moral values restates the link between governing the country and governing the family, just like the Chinese classic saying: establish the family, govern the country and there will be peace under heaven (zhi guo, qi jia, ping tian xia, 治国齐家平天下). However, the reality is far from this idealised harmony. Under this governing framework, well-educated Chinese women in particular are under pressure to marry and reproduce as they embody the ideal of a modern Chinese nation that is formed by productive/reproductive, high suzhi citizens. Hence, these women's reproductive decisions become the target of sanctions under China's current neoliberal governance. Their labour serves to stabilise the party-state's rule and resolve the population risks it faces. There is a cunning handover of public risk into the private sphere of individual life, through which the tension and stress are contained within the family and internalised by its members. Women's lives and bodies once again become the focal site of moral sanction and regulation. The pressure on only daughters to give birth is intensified after they marry, as their bodies contain the capacity to deliver the hope anticipated by both the family and the state. Therefore, their bodies and lives become the pivot of the power struggles between the private and public spheres.

I argue that, under the current model of governance, some women are deprived of the choice to be a mother, as heterosexual marriage is presented as the only remedy for 'their own personal problems'. Moreover, living in a time of compressed transition to modernity since the reform, these women and their families are experiencing the tensions brought by dramatic social changes, which manifest in their intimate relationships. Jinwang voices the yearning of women like her who have to confront such a reality.

Kailing: What is the most important thing for a woman?

Jinwang: ...it's freedom! [Laugh] I say it with passion. I feel that too many people are pushing women. Too many people are trying to teach us what we should do, how we should do it.

This evidences the invisibility of state power as it grasps hold of women's lives through its embedding within a largely unchallenged patriarchal social structure. It keeps their struggle behind family doors, as they try to hide away from the public in their 'personal failure' to fulfil their reproductive duty. As well-educated, middle-class women with career prospects, fulfilling the rigid societal expectations to marry and have children before it is 'too late' is proving no easy task. They are expected to resolve structural problems by resorting to their limited personal resources. The word bi hun (to nag their child about getting married, 逼婚), which is often used to describe pressure from parents, has occupied centre stage in the public discussion, which masks the real issue behind the phenomenon: the lack of alternative welfare provision apart from the conventional family. The party-state intends to re-erect socalled family virtues in order to resolve its public risks, within which regulating motherhood remains as a central part of this type of governance. It serves to sustain the foundations of the political status quo by reproducing the conventional welfare family for its large population at relatively low cost to the state, meanwhile retaining the negative impact of previous state policies within individual families.

Chapter 6

The Gendered Construction of Exemplary Middle-Class Identity: The Hegemony of *Chenggong* (success)⁴³

Despite the mounting pressure to marry before it is 'too late' (To, 2013b; Hong Fincher, 2014a) and the stress this caused for my participants, married family life remains a crucial aspect of obtaining personal happiness for these women. Although complaining about the pressure and difficulties of fulfilling marital norms, my participants rarely question the heterosexual family model based on a free-choice, monogamous marriage for love. This chapter focuses on their gendered constructions of a middle-class self that embodies economic security and cultural superiority (Miao, 2017), to which marriage is central. Through examining their preferences and practices in looking for a potential spouse, I uncover how these women navigate a path to marital bliss while facing contending ideologies. Analysing their narratives, I illustrate their subjective experiences of attempting to embody the exemplary gendered middle-class ideal, against which a woman's success is measured. Furthermore, I discuss the political implications of their gendered constructions of subjectivity in contemporary Chinese society, particularly the influence of love, tradition and personal success discourses throughout the whole process. I start by analysing their aspiration to achieve the Chinese middle-class ideal.

Embodying the high *suzhi* middle-class ideal

The marketisation of China's economy, together with its reintegration into the global economy, has profound impact on individuals who are said to have become more individualised and materialistic (Li Zhang, 2010; Yan, 2009, 2010). The gradual dismantling of the collective practices that were once the livelihood of most of its population has exposed that population to the neoliberal fable of self-making, which is evident from the numerous success stories that are widely circulated among the public (Ong, 1996). Growing up in the context of China's rapid economic growth,

159

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accompanied by increasing materialism and consumerism (Croll, 2006), the post-80s generation is trained to live up to the neoliberal ideal: self-realisation, personal achievement and competitiveness. Individuals are constantly seeking opportunities for self-development in order to better locate themselves within China's fast-changing class structure.

Although the definition of the Chinese middle class is widely contested, I agree with Zhang Li (2010, p.7) that three distinct characteristics mark the new middle class in China: 'their moment of emergence, their highly heterogeneous composition, and their heightened sense of insecurity.' Zhang Li (2010) argues that cultural consumption and symbolic capital have gained particular importance in authenticating one's social status in China. Due to its heterogeneous and fragmented composition, Shen (2005, p.36, cited by Zhang, 2010, p.8) considers that the middle class is 'more of a discursive construct that serves as an aspiration for society'. Despite my participants' varied incomes and family backgrounds, their white-collar professions and similar educational background do enable them to share a similar 'mode of consumption and access to resources' (Tomba, 2004, p.3), and they therefore form part of China's emerging middle classes. Meanwhile, they all display the same aspiration, attempting to embody what Miao (2017) described as the 'imagined middle class ideal' whose cultured lifestyle rests upon strong economic foundations. Consequently, my participants' determination to secure a privileged social position through individual effort also leads to them becoming the embodiment of the social aspiration, a collective exemplary norm. However, as Liu Fengshu (2017, p.4) points out, 'striving for a position which is worthy, complete, and superior in the social order as ordained by the exemplary norm of *chengong* entails great effort and sacrifice'.

Hsu (2007) argues that there has been a shift to an increasing focus on human capital to raise one's social status during the reform era, which relates to the popular *suzhi* discourse among the Chinese public. Anagnost (2004, p.197) argues that the difficulties of anchoring *suzhi* to any kind of fixed meaning, either by its users or by scholars, suggest that it operates as a kind of 'floating signifier' that 'transects ... as it traverses the complex terrain of economic, social, and political relationships.' The differentiating function of separating the 'superior class' from others is made possible

through the very insubstantiality of suzhi. Anagnost (2008) contends that the Chinese middle class is instrumental in both consuming and producing the suzhi discourse, which emphasises their cultural superiority. Transforming a 'bare life' into the 'qualified life' that actualises the 'potentiality' of the human body, to use Agamben's term (1998), requires continuous self-development and deliberate selfcultivation. Following the neoliberal economic logic, Anagnost (2004, p.201) argues powerfully that the human body becomes the new frontier for the 'expansion of capitalist accumulation' and is 'expressible in a rhetoric of development', which opens it to super-exploitation 'through the threat of a failure to be recognized as a body of value'. The body of the urban, middle-class, only child forms the very site that is supposed to display the successful accumulation of various dimensions of suzhi, which incarnates the discursive construction of middle-classness. In emerging economies, the ambivalent social position occupied by middle-class people often intensifies their sense of fear of sliding down the social and economic ladder, as 'the socialist safety nets have been eroded rapidly while the new social welfare system is not yet in place' (Zhang, 2010, p.8). This explains the intensified anxiety about downward social mobility that is so keenly felt among the adult only-child university students whom Liu Fengshu (2008a) interviewed, whose construction of self reflects an autonomous self-making neoliberal subjectivity that derives from their continuous efforts to win a middle-class lifestyle. Jacka (2009) points out that suzhi is central to the cultivation of citizens who know their place and who work accordingly to attend to the needs of the nation-state. Consequently, both the fear of failing and the determination to embody the imagined middle-class ideal motivate my participants' striving for constant self-improvement as the emblem of China's modernity.

Securing Her 'Value' through Paid Work

Despite the importance of marriage, career also matters to my female participants. Mostly coming from well-to-do urban households, many of them had studied abroad. Working in respectable white-collar professions, they all emphasise the importance of money as the foundation for a happy life; more specifically, independent control over their own finances. Often carrying high parental expectation due to lack of siblings, most of my participants also witnessed their own mothers' participation at work, which normalises women's paid employment as an indispensable part of their

identity. This leads them to completely reject the idea of being full-time housewives, in order to preserve their independence. For example, Gingko told me about a friend's mother, a housewife, who advised her daughter always to have her own job:

Her mom has suffered from domestic violence from her alcoholic dad for years. Without a job, their relationship is pure economic dependence. If he leaves, she would have nothing to rely on. Her position would be even weaker.

Such stories send a strong warning to capable young women to remain financially independent despite having a husband. This is particularly true, given the increased possibility of divorce these days. The divorce rate in China increased by 3.9 per cent in 2014 compared to the previous year, according to data released by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which means it has risen for 12 consecutive years since 2003 (Yao and Yang, 2015). The same report also shows that couples born in the 1980s have the highest divorce rate. There is evidence to suggest that the average marriage of divorced couples among the post-80s lasted only 3.9 years (Dongfang Zaobao, 2013). Consequently, this results in certain reservations about the life security provided by marriage alone, which is illustrated through my participants' accounts: 'No, never [become a housewife]!...A woman without her own career, it's too risky. [Laugh]' (Muyu). Another participant, Maris, also offers a good example to explain the sense of risk that a woman feels if she does not have her own earning power:

Independence is the key for women. Without financial independence, it is hard to achieve personality independence. Once you have your own income, you give yourself a choice. Otherwise, you lose your right to speak in an argument if you live in his flat. My girlfriend is like that. She has nowhere to go at midnight when her boyfriend throws her out. Financial independence will make a woman's life much more comfortable.

These messages reaffirm the importance of financial autonomy that individuals feel under the market reform. It also reflects one's sense of risk of devaluation once one is 'out of the market'. Therefore, women's participation in paid employment has become an integral part of modern womanhood.

Besides the financial concerns, both men and women believe that staying at home also makes a woman less valuable as a person. Influenced by China's revolutionary

past (Zuo, 2003), the term *jia ting zhu fu* (full-time housewife, 家庭主妇) is loaded with negative meanings. This is in sharp contrast to the glamorous image of the 'white-collar beauty' with whom they are eager to identify. As Tina typically cried out: 'It's too boring! No, I won't even consider it. A person should have more contact with society; know more about the outside world.' My female participants believe that being a housewife would limit their potential for self-realisation. 'Though there is plenty to do at home, it limits my value and restrains my full potential' (Atai). Men also express hesitation about accepting their partner becoming a full-time housewife. 'I definitely support the idea that a wife should have paid work, be financially independent. Because she needs her own "circle", it's better. A full-time mother has her value, but isn't it better to have more value?' (Zen, male). Such articulations reflect the internalisation of the suzhi discourse among my participants, which requires constant self-examination according to the set value system.

To understand what it means to be an individual of low or high value in the Chinese context, it is important to take the historical gendered division between the domestic and public domains into account: men are in charge of outside, women are in charge of inside (nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei, 男主外, 女主内). Although women were said to 'hold up half the sky' under Mao's socialism, men were never called upon to 'return home'. This saying did not completely interrupt the embedded sexism within Chinese society, summarised as nan zun nü bei (men are superior to women, 男尊女卑), and the gendered division of space attached to it, which assigns more value to 'male public space'. Consequently, women are expected to participate in the public sphere and also attend to domestic duties. However, one's involvement in the domestic domain continues to be seen as secondary, if not actually a hindrance. As Zen mentioned, 'she needs her own circle'. However, a woman's circle only carries value if she is engaged in paid work outside the home. This indicates that, even though 'there is plenty to do (at home)' (Atai), doing things only at home is not enough to validate a woman's worth. Under this value structure, contact with 'the outside world' (Tina) is essential for asserting one's cultural superiority as a high suzhi, middleclass woman.

As the Chinese proverb warns: *ni shui xing zhou, bu jin ze tui* (sailing against the current; either you keep forging ahead or you keep falling behind; 逆水行舟,不进则

退). This phrase captures my participants' internalised anxiety, exacerbated by the market reform, which pushes them to remain plugged-in to the wider society, in order to avoid being 'washed up'.

Yiyi: Honestly, I'm scared of being out of touch with society. It would make me become a *yuanfu* (resentful woman, 怨妇). Humans are social animals; without my own career, the only thing I can talk about is domestic gossip. Easy to envy and gossip. It's not good. [Laugh]

There was a shared consensus amongst my participants that having a job outside the home allows the modern woman to keep in touch with society, enriches her life experience and prevents her from becoming a 'boring' and 'resentful' housewife. Therefore, paid employment is crucial in their subjectivity construction.

In addition to optimising a woman's value for herself, participation in paid employment is also deemed important for marital harmony and increases the woman's desirability as wifely material. Individuals with 'low value' inevitably become undesirable partners, because the accumulation of *suzhi* requires being constantly equipped with 'valuable resources', including other good-quality human capital. Accounts from both male and female participants suggest that 'staying at home' will prevent the woman's self-improvement, and will consequently disconnect the couple, therefore jeopardising their marriage. As Gingko says:

I don't think it's good for marital harmony... Without a public role in society to keep up knowledge exchange, soon I will lag behind. It will disconnect my relationship with my husband, if only he is progressing. I also hope I will have my own career.

Working outside the home is crucial for a wife to keep pace with her working husband. It is important not to allow oneself to 'lag behind', to use Gingko's phrase, as the wife feels anxiety at the prospect of the relationship breaking down, and even being deserted if she 'lags behind'. Lisi further explains how this plays out in a couple's relationship:

If the relationship is based on a shared worldview and mutual affection. In order to sustain it in the long term, both sides should keep the same pace.

Because our views are constantly changing, we are always changing. For example, if a woman stops working and becomes a housewife, whereas her husband keeps progressing in his career. No matter which side is left behind, this increasing difference will eventually lead to problems in their relationship.

This pressure 'to keep up' means that the relationship of a married couple faces competition similar to that of the market. The couple needs to constantly compete for each other. Exposed to the same neoliberal rhetoric of self-making, Chinese men and women are encouraged to try their best to accumulate various forms of capital that will increase their chances of succeeding in the market. Now a Chinese woman in particular needs to carefully manage her pace of progression in relation to her husband in order to avoid becoming 'too boring' (Atai), which could be used to justify potential desertion by her 'more advanced' husband. Moreover, worrying that their husbands might be wandering off with the 'other woman' (xiao san, 小三) has placed Chinese wives under considerable pressure to compete with these largely invisible but widely available 'young and pretty enemies' by relying on the booming cosmetic and beauty industry to maintain a youthful look that is catering to the male gaze (see Ho et al., 2018, pp.24–25; Yang, 2011)

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Atai: My male friends generally seem not to be interested in women who have no thoughts of their own, who purely depend on men. They seem not to be interested in such types, as it might be too boring for them. They can't have a decent conversation with them to discuss and share things on a deeper level.

A woman's paid job is said to make her a more interesting companion for her male partner, which to a certain extent reflects the male-centred logic embedded in Chinese life. In this sense, staying at home alone indeed devalues women's attractiveness to men and potentially jeopardises their relationships. Men's responses further confirm this. 'Everyone should have their own career, I don't expect her to achieve a lot, it's good even if it's just to kill time. I think it can enhance marital harmony' (Chouchou, male). 'Spending a long time at home will certainly affect the relationship. I think women should have their own dreams and enact their

dreams. Only focusing on housework for too long would be boring and damage our relationship' (Lixiong, male).

Women who ONLY focus on domestic affairs are deemed 'boring' by these men. A woman needs to keep herself connected with the outside; otherwise her boredom will endanger her desirability as a partner. For most unmarried women, financial independence is closely tied to the popular imagery of the 'white-collar beauty' (Liu, 2016), whose success embodies China's gendered modernity. Yimi's response serves as an example:

I think a woman should have her own life. Even if she hasn't got a particularly successful career of her own, she should still keep her independence. I think this kind of woman is attractive. If she gives herself completely to the family, being isolated from the outside world, she would lose her charm. I don't want to be like that. I'm more looking forward to having an independent career.

Like Yimi, many women see their career as a channel to display their feminine charm in accordance with the white-collar beauty imagery. The image of the capable woman, who has a decent job, gives her a modern touch that is clearly more desirable than an old-fashioned housewife. In line with this imagery, the recent TV hit The First Half of My Life (wo de gian ban sheng, 我的前半生), tells the story of a once pampered full-time housewife abandoned by her husband for his colleague, and her struggle to re-establish herself as a desirable, independent 'beauty at work'. This drama vividly depicts the reality that Chinese women face: the need to juggle between family and work and to strike the right balance in order to keep their desirability. The popularity of this show reflects the wide relevance of the issue. Women's aspiration to maintain their value in similar situations resonates with my participants' experience: Java, a married woman whose husband is more financially established than her, expresses the value of earning an income: 'I think women should be financially independent, I don't want to rely on my husband too much'. And Tj said: 'Apart from providing an income, I also hope to grow together with my child by keeping in touch with society, keep discovering the potential in me and realise my value. Work is essential in this process.' It becomes apparent that continuous effort is required from Chinese individuals to self-validate their worth. This demonstrates that the rhetoric of growth and self-development has been deeply instilled into the

psyches of my research cohort. Individuals are motivated to do their best in order to keep up with the constant demand to prove their value.

Displaying her 'Value' through Lifestyle

Like higher education, property ownership, together with other forms of lifestyle consumption, have become symbolic markers for the Chinese middle class (Goodman, 2014). Although it is commonly the responsibility of an eligible bachelor to provide the marital home in contemporary China (Zhang, 2010) and 'many mothers-in-law now ask for the men to provide the marital home' (Gingko), more and more women have started to buy their own property. Given that the recent changes in marriage law of 2011 have eroded women's rights in the marital home, a woman's divorce can lead to her becoming homeless if her name is not on the property deeds (Davis, 2014). Maris, like one third of my female participants, owns property under her own name, sponsored by her parents. This is usually undertaken as a form of investment and a way to secure their daughter's future. Others, like Chain, also regard owning their own home as a goal worth achieving: 'owning my own property would be my dream come true', which indicates their financial ambition.

The sense of autonomy brought by their employment is evident in these young women's accounts, and this also drives their desire to fully embrace a comfortable middle-class lifestyle. Chain, single, aged 29, works at a well-paying international school. She feels 'quite satisfied' about her 'healthy and happy' life, because she enjoys 'the freedom in life' by 'earning my own money and being able to spend it on my hobbies without worrying about other people's opinions'. Personal happiness is frequently voiced as the ultimate goal among my participants: 'happiness is why we live' (Chain) 'I want to live for myself, eat and drink, be merry' (Xiaoliu). Such an individualistic pursuit of personal happiness needs to rest on a solid financial foundation.

Chain: For example, I really enjoy spending my own money on travelling. It makes me really happy. If it cost me half a year's savings to do that, of course I would be upset. I am happy because I can afford to *shuo zou jiu zou de lü xing* (travel with freedom,走就走的旅行).

Travelling, symbolising both financial and time flexibility, has become a popular cultural practice among privileged urbanites and is aspired to by many. Almost all my participants referred to *lü you* (travelling) as one of their hobbies. Jinwang's declaration: 'I love travelling around in my spare time' provides a typical example. The booming travel industry, both nationally and internationally, targeted at Chinese tourists demonstrates the national zeal to enrich cultural experience and broaden horizons (National Tourism Statistic Centre, 2018). Travelling, with experiences shared both online and offline, facilitates a public display of the person's cultural and financial superiority. As the Chinese saying goes, du wan juan shu, bu ru xing wan li *Iu* (读万卷书,不如行万里路; it is better to travel ten thousand miles than to read ten thousand books). Travelling has become a popular way for the public to increase their *jian shi* (见识, knowledge and experience); in other words, a way of accumulating human capital, suzhi. This is important in constructing China's middleclass subjectivity, as it allows individuals to assert their perceived middle-class superiority, both financially and culturally, and to differentiate themselves from 'vulgar others'. For example, David (male), who works as an international tour guide, proudly refers to his job in order to present himself as a culturally sophisticated partner who has good taste.

Apart from travelling, lifestyle consumption, such as reading, going to the gym, and fine dining all emerged from my participants' accounts, which reaffirms Miao's (2017, p. 641) findings about the imagined middle-class ideal that 'quality consumption, ability to travel and send children abroad for education, intellectual pursuits, hobbies and ambition were all part of the "financially worry-free lifestyle". In particular, single women, who are not tied down by family obligations and have more disposable income and time, tend to fully embrace such a lifestyle to strengthen their cultural superiority. Xiaozhu's description serves as an example:

What I mean is a good quality life, not simply like those girls who chase after vanity. There is a picture in my head like going travelling whenever I want, to a beautiful place, and reading a book under the sun. Just doing something meaningful to nourish my thoughts and improve my taste.

Xiaoliu explicitly separates herself from 'those girls who chase after vanity'. Instead, she portrays herself as someone who seeks intellectual nourishment and has

sophisticated tastes. Her distancing of herself from those 'vulgar others', who are either rich without good taste or too poor to afford the 'good quality life', demonstrates her deliberate assertion of her cultural superiority, which is based on financial superiority. Money is a must, but its usage reveals the cultural distinction of the high *suzhi* middle-class, whose firm belief in self-development is perfectly summarised in Xiaoliu's consciousness of nourishing her thoughts and improving her taste.

Qingcai, aged 30, left her stable job in a bank and opened a small café and gift shop in Chengdu with her fiancé. She describes her choice as:

Before, I was passively receiving pressure from my boss, telling me what to do every day and I had no choice. Now I still have pressure to earn a living, but I have flexibility to arrange my own time. The best bit is that I'm doing things I like, my work is my life, my life is my work. Let's say today is sunny, I can chill out with my cat, have a cup of coffee and read a book while attending to my clients from time to time.

The freedom to control her own time and work for things she enjoys led Qingcai to leave her stable job in the bank. Running a cute little shop with her fiancé, a freelance tour guide, represents their passionate yearning to craft their own life trajectories according to the imagined tasteful lifestyle that needs to rest on a solid financial foundation.



Figure 12: The shop owned by Qingcai and her fiancé (reproduced with permission).

Similarly, Yimi left her job as a schoolteacher and tried to pursue a career following her passion for writing recipes for a popular cooking website. She also 'spends all summer and winter holidays travelling and diving'.





Figure 13: Yimi's holiday photos taken in Thailand with friends (reproduced with permission).

Often, this yearning for individuality means tensions with parents, who want their only child to have a more stable and conventional life. Chain and Stella both went against their parents' wishes and chose to work in private teaching institutions that offered a better salary than stable government schools. Stella said: 'Of course, they [parents] want me to work for state schools...But I enjoy my income a lot. I don't want to not be able to afford to travel when I want to', which speaks volumes.

My participants' eagerness to continuously maintain and display their high *suzhi* middle-class lifestyle reveals their embodiment of the neoliberal technologies of self-making that are enmeshed with the enterprising culture of the economic reform. This type of autonomous modern self is a central feature of contemporary governmentality. From a Foucauldian perspective, power works through subjectivity and discourse (Miller, 1987). Rose (1992, p.146), following the same line, points out that 'regulatory practices can be transformed to embody the presupposition of the enterprising self, striving for fulfilment, excellence and achievement', which becomes evident in my participants' drive for continuous self-improvement. Moreover, the embodiment of cosmopolitanism among young heterosexual urban Chinese women reveals that various 'sexual, material and affective desires bind citizen-subjects to state and transnational neoliberal policies' (Rofel, 2007, p.111). Consequently, the autonomous individual's desire for success could be framed within a prescribed discourse by the party-state to reward certain compliant gender behaviours.

Negotiating love and class

Despite the individualistic approach taken by my participants to achieve personal happiness, a *mei man jia ting* (happy and full family, 美满家庭) as a site for both 'material and spiritual enjoyment' remains central in their narratives about a complete happy life. This resembles Liu Fengshu's (2017) findings about Chinese young men's perceptions of the good life. For example, Chain, who expressed contentment with her single status in the interview, imagines a future of having three children with her husband: 'in the future, I want to have a big family'. Similarly, Yimi says: 'of course, I long for a mei man jia ting, I am waiting in anticipation for it to happen. I am also willing to work hard for it, like keep bettering myself.' Xiaozhu, a married mother, directly links her perception of happiness with a comfortable family life, where family is clearly a site of both material and spiritual enjoyment.

My sense of happiness lies in having a middle-level stable income, my family members are healthy, and we can afford to travel once or twice a year. We don't need to be super rich, but we have no need to worry about food and clothing, things like that.

Xiaozhu's description reflects the common imagery of a happy family life promoted in the government's campaign for 'the most beautiful family': 'ordinary' and self-sufficient (Lamont, 2017). Similar government campaigns in recent years have promoted family values that tap into Chinese sentiments about family and therefore have a wide public appeal (CCTV News, 2018; Koetse, 2018). This construction of the family, which embodies both traditional and modern virtues as the exemplary norm for the Chinese public to follow, further reinforces young women's romanticised imagination of a 'love marriage for life' that is yet to be realised. These propaganda efforts subtly encourage women's desire to create their own happy family, which channels their individual determination to achieve the party-state's governing model through the family.

Despite the emphasis on independence, their pragmatism around marriage does not dent their romantic ideal. The mounting pressure that women face to marry, and the rising divorce rate, do not upset the enticing loving sentiments around family. As Qingcai cries: 'I must have an airen (爱人, love partner)!' Many have actively

accepted matchmaking initiatives from family and friends, despite little success. Jo, at the age of 25, feels great pressure to find somebody, not only to meet her family's expectations, but also to fall in love with.

I want to find a partner as soon as I can. This is the biggest concern for my parents as well. I know the urgency of this matter, but I just can't do it without feeling in love with the person.

Lilin, aged 27, expresses a similar urgency to be married, which has become her top priority.

I want to be married. Just be married. This is the most important goal. As long as my career is not going backwards. The biggest aim at the moment is trying to get married. Because I feel I've reached a certain age [27]. I also really want a family. I'm not against it at all. Another major reason is that my parents feel the same. If they didn't care, I might be OK to wait longer. But they both think it should happen now, which is really an important reason. They want me to get married as quickly as possible. This is really not a joke; this is a serious task.

For both Jo and Lilin, their desire to be married is intertwined with their parents' wishes. In a society where children are supposed to make their family proud, it is hard to completely separate the individual's own desires from parental pressure. Even those who are largely satisfied with their single status, and are enjoying financial autonomy, still express a strong determination to find 'Mr Right', like Stella:

Most of the time, I feel good. I feel I actually have lots of freedom at the moment. But I'm single. It makes me feel that maybe I still lack certain things... I will be 31 in 5 years, I hope at least I won't be single. It doesn't matter whether we're officially married by then, a stable long-term boyfriend would be good.

Although Stella enjoys her freedom as a single woman and thinks there is still time, she does feel the need to be engaged in a long-term heterosexual relationship to avoid self-doubt as somehow 'lacking'. A seemingly more liberal view of marriage is voiced by Atai:

Marriage is not a must. I feel if you can find a highly compatible partner, then marriage is a good thing. In this way, you can share your emotions and many other things with this person. Also, when you're bored, there is one person to hang out with. Of course it's a good thing. But if you can't find such a person, and you can handle lots of stuff yourself, then of course it's fine that you remain unmarried.

At first glance, one might gain the impression from this statement that marriage is simply a personal choice. However, looking further into Atai's narrative, the romantic appeal is rather evident as marriage provides a good life. Her statements: 'If you can't find such a person' and 'can handle lots of stuff yourself' give away the darker side of the story. Firstly, being single is a secondary choice if 'you can't find such a person'. It readily carries a negative flavour, as it calls into question the image of desirability that these women try so hard to maintain. Secondly, the requirement that 'you can handle lots of stuff yourself' indicates that life without a marriage partner contains various obstacles, which implies a disadvantageous social position in contemporary China. So, marriage is closely associated with happiness and various practical benefits, which presents it as a panacea for women's lives. Consequently, it is not surprising to see single women who are determined to find their Mr Right.

Few of my female participants recalled any memory of gender discrimination while growing up. Their privileged upbringing in the market economy equipped them with a certain level of self-confidence and determination in obtaining a life that they desire as long as they strive for it. Both the men and women I interviewed seem to share the desire for a *mei man jia ting*⁴⁴, which is shaped by a mixture of influences from the market, the party-state and the family. Meanwhile, young unmarried women also want to have a balanced professional life. Take Lisi as an example:

For me, work and family are both equally important. The trick is keeping the balance, as missing either of them would be weird. Say, I enjoy a happy family life or good romantic relationship, but underperformed in my career, how could I be happy about myself? [Laugh]

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⁴⁴ There are very strongly gendered expectations of marriage, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Marriage based on romantic love has become the ideal among Chinese urban citizens over the past few decades (Zhang and Sun, 2014). Research on Chinese youth shows that love is understood as both emotionally expressing one's passionate feelings and a long-term commitment through marriage (Jankowiak and Moore, 2012; Farrer, 2014), which carries a wide appeal among my participants. For example: 'He must love me, and thus know how to be considerate and take care of his wife' says Joyce. Since its establishment in 1950, the Chinese Marriage Law has proclaimed that marriage should be between two equal parties. Since the language of love and 'equality' appear to have become common sense, my participants, both men and women often see their relationships as equal despite obvious contradictions in their accounts. Women repeatedly emphasised mutual affection and understanding as essential for their future married life. Xiaoliu: 'Mutual respect comes first, and understanding. I think it should be mutual. Both sides need to respect and be equal. This is fundamental.' However, it is important to note that affection and understanding can exist in a hierarchical relationship.

In terms of housework, Chain says: 'I would not give all the housework to him, but don't expect me to do it all.' For these unmarried women, a fair share of housework could be achieved without much hassle: 'We could do it together over the weekend! No need to clean during the week' (Zhangsan); 'Housework? My partner is sensible. We just need to go with the flow. Whoever has time does it. If I'm too tired, he can do it. It should be easy to negotiate, and doesn't have to be fixed' (Jinwang). As love is paramount, it seems too trivial for my participants to plan ahead for who does what in the house, as it could be seen as being a killjoy and nobody wants to appear fussy. Mutual consideration should come naturally in terms of sharing family responsibilities, as Chenchen states: 'Both sides should be considerate about the intensity of the other's work and availability of time'. A few, like Stella, are clearly aware of the unfair division of housework in most relationships, and appear more assertive about the necessity of negotiation:

It's not me only thinking about my own personal gain or loss. Because people are like this: the more you give, the more they take you for granted. So he has to demonstrate in these visible ways [do more housework], to show he cares enough and to show his love. He needs to be willing to give. If he can't do

these things, then it would be even harder for him to give in other places. So I want to make it clear with him...or he could do more, because I need to give birth! [Laugh]

Despite this, she still feels the need to clarify that she is 'not only thinking about [her] own personal gain or loss'. More are like Muyu, who took a more conventional approach: 'The ideal is that both of us will be involved, like half each. I guess it doesn't matter. I'm not that kind of person who squares accounts in every detail. I don't think it should be fixed.' Her deliberate distancing of herself from 'that kind of person' indicates the trivialisation of domestic chores, tangled with the traditional expectations of womanhood being considerate and sacrificial. Therefore she should not 'square accounts in every detail'. Such accounts hint at the complexity involved when women seek to initiate crucial negotiations that could adjust 'hidden inequality'.

Up until this point, women's determination to succeed and their longing for a *mei man jia ting* do not differ much from their male peers. However, their paths to achieving such a common vision reveal the deeply gendered reality that these women will have to face. There is plenty of literature on professional Chinese women's marriage dilemma, which was further confirmed by my participants. As a female entrepreneur with an overseas MBA returning to China to establish her own business, Joyce finds it is 'extremely hard' to have it all. Her account provides a typical example:

I heard a saying that 'most men are lucky because they are born as men.' Because *lao tian* [heaven] requires them...no, it's the society that requires them as long as they walk in one direction, they will harvest something. But for women, even if you try your best, you can easily be crushed without being given a second chance. Particularly in Chinese society, it's a completely different game for men and women. It's extremely difficult for women to live a triumphant life, which is based on being financially self-sufficient, *jiating meiman* [having a beautiful and complete family], being able to take care of her family and work. I think it's extremely hard, whereas for men, his triumph only requires him to be successful in his career, then things are easy for him. Once he has a successful career, a happy family is a piece of cake. He can

easily find a wife, who treats him well and will be willing to bear children for him.

According to Joyce, both men and women are pursuing a similar triumphant life: career success and *jiating meiman*. Although a decent career is incorporated into modern womanhood, it is not sufficient on its own. The traditional ideology regarding the gendered division of labour remains influential in judging a woman's life performance. Compared to a far less conflicted and more straightforward path to male success, without a successful married family life, regardless of her career and academic achievements, a woman is commonly viewed as incomplete or simply regarded as a 'loser'. At the age of 30, Joyce's single status is at the pivotal point of giving her stress, as she is culturally viewed as having passed her 'sell by' date. While her entrepreneurial efforts are in line with the spirit of the times, they do not redeem her from being judged as a failing woman. Her description reveals a deeply gendered measurement of personal success, rooted in a largely untroubled patriarchal structure that facilitates male success as though it were granted by 'heavenly forces'.

The Masculine Ideal

The emphasis on material wealth and the power to consume in constructing a desirable masculinity since the reform has been repeatedly noted by scholars (Song and Hird, 2014; Zhang, 2010; Song and Lee, 2010; Chen, 2002; Farrer, 2002; Louie, 2002; Osburg, 2013). For example, property ownership marks an eligible bachelor for marriage (Zhang, 2010), as does a man's ability to display high *suzhi* (quality) and *pinwei* (sophisticated taste) based on solid economic foundations (Song and Hird, 2014). Although there have been increasing numbers of spaces for more diversified and hybridised masculinities to emerge since the reform (Hinsch, 2013; Song and Hird, 2014; Jankowiak and Li, 2014), not all of them are equally valued; they form a hierarchical structure. According to Liu Fengshu (2017, p.2), the ideal of *chenggong* (success, 成功), outstanding achievement accompanied by financial rewards, has achieved hegemonic status in shaping exemplary masculinity in contemporary China with 'the power to define the world and win the consent and complicity of both heterosexual women and subaltern men'. Although the possibility of enacting and achieving this ideal varies greatly depending on each individual, it

has certainly become a strong norm that holds wide appeal for Chinese youth to admire and emulate.

A popular denunciation of Maoist feminism since the reform, which is believed to have 'emasculated men, masculinized women, and mistakenly equates the genders' (Rofel, 2007, p.117) has given rise to the post-Mao recovery of 'real men' and 'real women', which is based on the unchallenged discourse of sex difference, and widespread commercialisation. Both the state and the market forces co-shaped the normative gender order, within which a man's role as the main provider for the family has become re-established (Zuo, 2003; Zuo and Bian, 2001). The reconfiguration of femininities around these familial norms, although varied in its forms, require women to embrace domestic roles as wives and mothers as its core feature (Evans, 2002, 2010; Liu, F., 2014). Crucially, this refeminisation of women is based on the widespread sentiments that the Maoist past they are leaving behind is defined by sacrifice and personal constraints. Therefore it is easy to hear the willing consent of young women, who often imagine themselves as more 'modern' than their 'traditional' parents, especially regarding gender and sex. Although some young women adopt variant forms of feminlinities, such as zhongxing, neutral sex (Li, 2015), even they often express a desire to be normal and to conform to the expectation of heterosexual marriage (Li, 2018).

The reemphasis on gender difference also affects my participants' descriptions of men they admire, which affirm the popularity of the ideal male imagery as a 'loving protector and main provider' for the family. His strength and superiority might be manifested by his age, knowledge and capability at work. 'He needs to appear reliable, mature enough... men who have the courage to take responsibility are attractive, good husband material (Tina); 'I like mature and reliable men' (Lijun). Xiaoliu's complaints about her male peers as 'being over-protected by their parents', 'dependent on his family' and 'lacking career ambition' also indicate that a good man is one who can be 'relied on', a protector instead of someone in need of 'being protected', and who has career ambition that should enable him to provide for his family and to be responsible.

Consequently, men's maturity is also perceived positively in a relationship. 'I like men to be mature and quiet. So I guess it would be hard for me to find a partner

among my peers, as men mature later' (Lilin). The age hierarchy embedded in Chinese culture illuminates such a preference; being older signifies wisdom and authority, therefore greater capability to display the desired masculine traits to guide and protect the junior woman. This gendered preference is widely observable in young men's and women's romantic relationships. For instance:

Atai: Since I started working...I prefer guys who are older than me. [Why?]...I feel they might know more. I don't know, it's just a feeling...I want him to be more decisive in decision making.

According to Atai, men should 'know more' and be 'more decisive'. The question here is not to ask whether older men indeed know more or not, but why women want men to know more. Similarly, Stella made it even clearer:

He needs to be very capable at work, know more than me, also to have broader views and be able to teach me lots of new things. I want to learn new things from him. Not like he doesn't even understand what I already know. It's better that he can answer my questions...So I could look up to him [head up, looking upwards]. I don't want a man, who I look at like this [looking downwards signalling looking down upon someone].

Despite Stella's emphasis on negotiating 'equality' in her future relationship, she still endorses the view that a woman should 'look up' to her husband. Like my other participants, she articulates a clear and hierarchical asymmetry between feminine and masculine attributes, which undermines her claim to be pursuing equality. For her, attractive men are those who can 'teach' her and 'answer' her questions, and those she can 'look up' to. Age is just an easy signifier to fulfil such gendered expectations within the Confucian moral framework, which places the weak under the authority and care of the strong, and has the young submitting to the old. However, as long as a man displays his 'manliness⁴⁵', his young age can also be excused, as shown in Stella's experience: 'My ex-boyfriend was my student, about 10 years younger than me (26). He is very mature and manly in his behaviour.' The Yin and Yang perfectly captures the Chinese binary understanding of gender

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 $^{^{45}}$ As one of the four conceptions elaborated by Hinsch (2013, p.3) included in the term 'masculinity'. Manliness here refers to 'being a better man than other men'.

relations. Under this model, the sexuality and physicality of the biological male is understood as naturally stronger and more active than their weaker and more passive female counterparts, which naturalises male supremacy over women (na zun nü bei, 男尊女卑) by asserting the sacred harmony. The Chinese idiom yang gan zhi qi (virile, 阳刚之气), used to describe desired masculine strength, and its match ying rou zhi mei (the beauty of softness and purity, 阴柔之美) is deeply entrenched in people's understanding of themselves and others, and this is reflected in my participants' accounts about being a desirable woman.

The Feminine Ideal

Although all my participants thought that a woman's professional role adds to her attractiveness, it remains crucial for her to possess the more conventional feminine characteristics such as youth and beauty. This was also highlighted in Yang's (2011) research, along with other 'feminine virtues' that are needed in order to be a desirable partner.

Yiyi: In general, men like pretty women. Appearance comes first, then good personality. The men I know seem to like to protect girls. At least, if she doesn't look bad. You can't be big either; otherwise guys wouldn't want to protect you. She needs to be pretty, pure, soft tempered and considerate (wen rou, 温柔).

Yiyi's description of the popular female images in men's eyes as 'pretty, pure, soft tempered and considerate' reaffirms the refeminisation of women since the reform. Zhang Li (2010, p.183) uses the concept of 'inadequacy complex' to describe the acute feeling of lack felt by Chinese men who fail to be the primary breadwinner of the family, which illustrates that masculinity is 'a highly unstable social construct fraught with anxiety over a perceived lack', which can be financial and/or sexual⁴⁶. Huang's (2006, p.32) analysis of the late imperial cultural discourse on masculinity reveals two common definitions in relation to women: namely, to 'validate itself through the feminine' or to 'defend itself against the feminine'. These two notions do

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⁴⁶ There has been an increased concern over impotency among Chinese men since the reform (see Farquhar, 1999; Zhang, 2015).

not have to be mutually exclusive, but often co-exist to construct a particular type of masculinity, which remains evident in Yiyi's description. HIS strength is manifested through HER need for protection, contrasted against her softness, and consequently validated. Even her body size should not be 'big', neither should her personality. My male participants repeatedly used similar imagery to describe their preferred type of woman: 'soft and considerate' (Adong, male); 'I like girls who are considerate and understanding. When we argue, she can keep calm, and not be hysterical to solve the issue. Tolerance (bao rong, 包容) is also important (Chouchou, male); 'good personality, like soft-tempered (Patrick, male). Similarly, Xiaoliu comments: 'men all like soft tempered women. I think no men would like a nanren po (Tom boy, 男人婆). Pretty, soft and considerate, of course. Average education level is fine, no need to have super high qualifications.' She should be soft and considerate, in order to allow a man to display his potency. Being averagely educated ensures that she will not put her man in her shadow, which partially explains the stigmatisation of high-achieving women as 'the third gender' in Chinese society (Kuo, 2014; Shanghai Star, 2005). Similarly with her age, most men I interviewed clearly prefer younger women, like Chouchou: 'She should be younger than me, like within three years? As long as she's not older than me!'

Confirming Xiaoliu's perception, average cleverness and prettiness is needed, but not too much: 'first, appearance should be OK, at least bearable. Then, she needs to be educated to a certain level, at least completed three years national college, not those dodgy ones. [Laugh]' (Jerry, male); 'Not too ugly, average is OK' (Chouchou, male). She does not need to be stunning, but certainly pleasing to the male gaze. Compared to outward appearance, 'inner beauty' such as being 'kind-hearted' (Jerry, male) discursively carries more value and is regarded as essential for good wifely material: 'kind-hearted and inner beauty' (David, male); TL's description provides a good summary of their preferences:

My type of girl is like the singer Fish Leong.⁴⁷ You see, her looks are not outstanding, but rather ordinary, they don't outshine others, not too sexy or having a great figure that makes everybody bow. She also is not ugly, just

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⁴⁷ A pop singer, she was well-received by her mainland Chinese audience during the 2000s.

within the normal range. She is very much compliant and soft (*wen shun*, 温顺), reasonable, understanding and warm.



Figure 14: Fish Leong's album cover, released in 2011.

TL's ideal girl is described as being like a cup of warm water: a daily essential in Chinese life, but not expensive or striking in any way. She is neither a threat nor does she have the ability to overshadow others, but is easily tamed and able to provide softness and warmth. Therefore, she is non-threatening to most men's sense of manliness, but rather complements him. As the Chinese saying goes: a daughter is her mother's *xiao mian'ao* (little winter inner jacket, 小棉袄), which indicates that a girl's character is expected to be warm, considerate, and able to attend to others' needs. Likewise, this is expected by her husband. The word *wen shun* (soft, 温顺) captures the key features of the male imagination of a desirable female: non-threatening and compliant. However, this raises the question: compliant to what? Whom should she avoid outshining? Patrick's answer offers some insight:

For me, a girl's good personality and cuteness (*ke ai*, 可爱) lies in her willingness to listen to me. How to put it, I think of myself as rather 'da nanzi zhuyi' (machismo, 大男子主义) . No matter whether I'm right or wrong, I know it might sounds a bit selfish, but she should listen, and give me support. She

should have a good temper. If she can do these things, she is rather cute and lovely.

Although Patrick does not want to be seen as 'selfish', he did not shy away from labelling himself as 'chauvinist' and certainly did not feel the need to hide it, as though it is 'normal'. This reveals the larger social context that makes him feel entitled to make such a claim. 'A woman should *tin wo de hua* (follow my words, 听我的话),regardless of whether I'm right or not' said Patrick. Stella's account further evidences this preferred feminine trait:

Stella: My ex-boyfriend told me that men do not like women who are lofty and cold (*gao leng*, 高冷), but prefer approachable ones. When he speaks to her, she should respond without giving him a hard time. Soft-tempered, willing to listen and show interest while he talks.

Both the men and women I interviewed revealed strikingly similar accounts about preferred gender ideals, which reveal the persistence of the conventional gender order.

She is too Materialistic and Superficial!

As ordinary, middle-class salarymen working in white-collar professions, whose varied income falls between the extremes of China's new rich described by Osburg (2013) and poor rural migrants (Choi and Peng, 2016), my male participants used various discursive strategies to defend their manliness. One example is employing the discourse of *suzhi* as a filter both to avoid *bai jin nü* (money worshippers, 拜金女) and to select 'decent girls' to ease their financial burden.

TL: First of all, she can't be very materialistic, chasing after vanity, superficial. No, no no! I surely don't want to live with that...these people can rarely afford such a life themselves. Unless she has already reached a certain level financially. Some women prefer to spend their food budget on expensive brands, it's too superficial. I can't deal with this.

TL's response reflects the fact that, for most men, the expectations of a good wife are rather practical: she should not be high maintenance but should be thrifty, as

extravagance would further add to the financial stress on her husband. As most male participants still attempt to enact the main breadwinner role within the family that is expected under the masculine norm, condemning certain women as 'materialistic and superficial', I argue, is a coping strategy for ordinary salarymen to hide the financial gap between themselves and the 'elite', through which they defend their masculinity. 'I really don't like those superficial and pretentious ones, like buying expensive brand products to pretend they have taste. On the contrary, girls who are intellectually tasteful and culturally sophisticated are attractive to me,' says David. Putting these two types of women in contrast to each other, condemning one and praising the other, David is able to select a partner based on certain class privileges at the lowest cost.

Girls who are 'tasteful and cultured', a symbolic marker of high suzhi, are highly sought-after by men. 'I like those who are culturally tasteful. They can bring new excitement into daily life. They need to understand how to make life enjoyable, not just hardworking and dull. [Laugh]' (Chouchou, male). Being tasteful and cultured indicates a solid financial foundation on which a more 'exciting life' is based. 'I think she should have at least a four-year bachelor degree. Because I think it increases her virtue of self-control (han yang, 涵养), enlarges her horizons and adds perspective. I want that (Zen, Bachelor degree, male). Such value-adding traits are indeed important identity markers for this cohort, as individuals constantly need to evaluate each other in order to form a 'good quality' marriageable coalition that could further secure their social position in the face of China's fast-shaping class formation. The ambivalence of *suzhi* also provides the flexibility for men to measure their partner in relation to themselves. 'I don't expect her to be highly educated, as I only have a bachelor degree. For me, her inner beauty is more important like honesty, kindness and understanding me, shi da ti (识大体, understand the bigger picture)' (David, male).

Completely enacting the elite gender order: men in charge of the outside, women in charge of the inside (*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei*, 男主外,女主内) always raises the question of affordability for the family. In recent years, for some men, having a wife who is a full-time housewife (Fang and Walker, 2015) has become a new status symbol. The fast-paced demands on employees in a neoliberal economy means that

everyone could do with a *xian nei zhu*⁴⁸ (virtuous domestic assistant, 贤内助), although few can afford it. Young professionals like my male participants had a strategy to cope with this extra financial stress.

Chouchou: She needs to be motivated to progress in her own career. However, it's important that we complement each other in the family. One person must be domestic-centred, while the other is career-centred. Different emphasis, but we can help each other out.

Theodore: Generally, I think I'm able to afford the mortgage on my own, otherwise I wouldn't have bought it. However, if the woman has the ability and insists on contributing financially, I would not go against it, as it indeed relieves my pressure...furthermore, I think everyone is equal. I don't mind women who earn a lot of money.

Like their female peers, 'equality 'for them seems not to contradict the idea of complementary gender differences. These men's approval of women's professional identity carries a double meaning. On the one hand, they indeed prefer a woman displaying high *suzhi*, whom they believe to be a better partner, and this also presents them as open-minded modern men. On the other hand, the double income also eases their financial responsibilities. Despite their approval, as revealed in Theodore's account, being able to pay the mortgage himself remains symbolically important to him, as it is closely tied to men's sense of self-worth (Zhang, 2010). Meanwhile, men's support for their wives' career commitment is not without limits.

She is too Kaifang⁴⁹ Because of her Job!

In spite of seeing women's jobs almost as a necessity, men's comments on women's choice of profession reveal the gendered reality. 'She should have a decent stable job, like civil servant or teacher' (Zen), which indicates respectability and availability for domestic affairs. In contrast, women working in sales are often mentioned as an example of 'moral decadence', which is to be avoided in a wife. Many specifically

⁴⁸ 'Virtuous domestic assistant' often refers to a wife who is able to assist her husband's success in the public domain by managing his household.

 $^{^{49}}$ Kaifang (too open, 开放) simply indicates openness; therefore, it can eventually be used to define an excess of openness, for example, in the context of sexual mores.

said that they would not allow their wife to work in these professions: 'definitely not sales, too much drinking and socialising with men' (Zen). Roger further explains the reason behind this:

Women in sales have a reputation as 'pretty sluts'. Because they need to be able to entertain their clients with sexualised jokes at the dinner table, allowing their sexual advances, even sleeping with them. It's the hidden roles. I've heard too many stories!

The sexualised business culture that centres on male desire through consuming female sexuality as part of important male bonding activities is widely acknowledged (Palmer, 2015; Liu, J., 2008; Zhang, 2001). These male contacts are deemed inappropriate for a wife. However, sexualised contacts with women at work seem to be taken as default for a man's career prospects, and hence 'understandable' by his wife:

Quennie: I never told my husband, but if he was involved with prostitutes with his boss for the sake of his work, I can tolerate it once or twice, as long as it was just a game for the occasion (*feng chang zuo xi*, 逢场作戏) and he's not in love with other women. It's hard for rich and powerful men to avoid these things.

Uretsky (2016) also notes Chinese wives' tolerance towards their husbands engaging in sexualised entertainment with their bosses for their career advancement. The existing double standard is evident here, which further reveals a strictly moralised female sexuality (Liu, J., 2008, 2017a) compared to loose male sexual conduct. Men express disdain towards women 'trying too hard for her career' (Adong) by asserting a moral boundary on women's activities at work. 'Women who do anything to gain advantages at work are really annoying. Put it in a minor tone, they're career-focused. But it feels as though they could do ANYTHING for their personal gain' (Patrick); 'Women who are "too open" because of their work, like accompanying clients in drinking. Though it is for work and she might have her bottom line...but going home too late, it's bad' (Adong); 'If she has too much socialising, like playing "machong" every day outside, not caring about family, or having too much socialising for work or more experience outside, it would be too

much for me to handle. My job is simple' (Jerry). The suspicion of women in sales who engage too much with clients is also noted by Liu Jieyu (2017a, 2008). These similar accounts highlight that, for these men, their ideal wife should be family-focused and needs to carefully heed the invisible gender boundary both at work and at home. Such moralised judgements on women's professional engagements, I argue, act both as an exclusion of women from male privilege at work, and as a protection of male privilege at home, by reasserting the conventional gender order and defending their masculinity.

Since women who are *ai mu xu rong* (worship materialistic gains and chase vanity, 爱慕虚荣) are condemned by men and avoided as wives, my female participants consciously differentiated themselves from these 'vulgar others', by deploying their own discursive strategies to ensure that they fall in love with the 'right' type of men, without compromising their class privilege. The importance of having shared values, *san guan* (the three core values, 三观) is emphasised by many of the women I interviewed as the priority when seeking a compatible partner: 'First of all, his values need to be correct, we have shared san guan' (Atai); 'He needs to have a stable life and worldview, as well as decent values' (Joyce). Education and family background were both explicitly voiced in the name of compatibility. 'At least he should have been to university, similar experiences could make mutual understanding easier to achieve' says Muyu.

Yiyi: For me, I don't mean to be *men dang hu dui* (matching doors and windows, 门当户对⁵⁰) as I don't have many requirements materially. I ask for matching values and an emotional bond.

Atai states more explicitly: 'I agree with the idea that marrying a person from the same social rank (门当户对)... It's more likely we share a similar social circle, deal with the same type of people. That's very important.' She further gave an example that a person with a PhD degree could marry a high-school dropout. But 'as the freshness wore off, their differences of coming from different social circles would eventually create problems for them in the long term'. Both specifically explained that

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⁵⁰ 门当户对 was an important marriage practice in China's feudal past, and refers to strictly matching people based on their social rankings.

their judgements are not based on materialistic considerations but on shared 'values'. Compatibility is used here to emphasise the importance of matching values whereby an emotional bond can form. Lis and Zhangsan, who are both from solid middle-class families with overseas master's degrees also agree:

Lisi: I didn't realise it until recently. People sharing similar educational and family backgrounds are much easier to communicate with. For example, there would be nothing for me to talk about with a high-school graduate. Similar values and worldviews are the foundation for any long-lasting relationship.

Zhangsan: I agree.

In many cases, women use 'career focused, capable' or 'having potential or the right attitude to achieve' as a subtle reference to their financial expectations of their partner. For example, Xiaoliu emphasises that she does not require her partner to be rich per se, but to 'have the potential to be outstanding', so 'finance would not be an issue'. In this case, through emphasising the man's potential, Xiaoliu could safeguard herself from being viewed as 'vulgar and superficial', but still ensure the 'financial quality' of her partner. Similarly, cong ming (smart, 聪明) is used by many women to measure whether the man has the intelligence and ability to 'be the man' (Joyce) in society. 'Smart, but it doesn't have to do with his education level' (Tina); 'Education level is not my main concern. A businessman is ideal for me. Actually, as long as they are capable and assertive, I don't like those ones who can't decide things' (Stella); 'I want somebody who is capable, has his own thoughts but is also able to tolerate others. Smart and intelligent that enables him to skilfully handle various situations' (Lisi). Here, 'smartness' is a discursive strategy which functions as an economic indicator to ensure the 'quality' of a potential male partner.

Chain's answer sums up my participants' views of a good match: 'I think a similar background means that their education, family and tastes match, which gives a greater chance of matching or similar values and lifestyle. But without mutual affection there is no way people can live together in the long term'. The above examples illustrate that my female participants deployed a wide range of cultural capital around education (degree level, capability and smartness), morality (values and beliefs), and taste (common interests) as markers to describe the type of men

they would feel comfortable falling in love with. Through emphasising compatibility for love, women ensure that their material considerations are not compromised while avoiding appearing 'too materialistic and superficial'. My participants' accounts reveal how classed identities are deployed and reproduced through conceptions of compatibility. As Johnson and Lawler (2005) argue, relationships can become the very site in which class is 'done'.

Alternatively, women also draw on essentialist discourse on gender to justify their financial expectations of their husbands. Even though Tina earns a similar amount to her new husband, since both are recent graduates, she still made her expectations of her husband's financial potential very clear: 'I want him to earn more than me later on...I expect a man to be stronger. This also shows that I'm a bit traditional. Come on, they are men!' Similarly, Joyce expects men to perform better than her financially: 'Men should be feisty (you xue xing, 有血性) and ambitious. Because, genetically, men are hunters, they should be...very aggressive. If he doesn't have such aggressiveness, I think he's not my type.' Resorting to essentialist views provides women with certain justifications for their financial expectations of their male partners in order to avoid downward social mobility within a precarious neoliberal economy. However, it also reinforces the various gender inequalities that are rooted in this belief, which contributes to these women's struggle to find love in a hypergamous marriage culture.

Performing her Gender for Love

Since the current masculine ideal, which is largely based on material achievement, holds a hegemonic position in contemporary Chinese society, all men are required to position themselves in relation to it. Meanwhile, fulfilling this masculine ideal is a real challenge for most men, including my participants, whose female counterparts are often competitive and well-to-do. This often creates a sense of unease for them, and makes them feel ambivalent about women who might have the potential to challenge their manliness.

Adong: She must have high emotional intelligence, be independent but not too much...otherwise what's the point of our marriage, right? [Laugh]...Many people around me think the same, men and their parents, we have traditional

concepts, like: assisting their husband and bringing up children (*xiang fu jiao zi*, 相夫教子) is expected from women.

Similarly, David states: 'I don't feel that girls have to be independent. I feel that if a girl becomes too independent, she won't need a man! There might be a lack of trust.' For David, a woman's independence could directly threaten his sense of self-importance and manliness. Along the same lines, Jerry raises concerns about dominant women:

For her to be better educated or earning more than me are both acceptable, but if she's more dominant than me it would be a problem...it's better that we can discuss together on big matters, whereas domestic matters, she can do whatever she likes. Big decisions, I must be consulted.

It is intriguing that, despite appearing to accept women who perform better in their education and career, Jerry still carefully asserts himself as 'the man of the house' (yi jia zhi zhu, 一家之主), who needs to be consulted on big matters, whereas he delegates trivial domestic matters to his wife, which indicates the engrained gendered division of labour. This outlook makes my male participants' invariable refusal to consider the possibility of being a stay-at-home husband not at all surprising, as Roger states: 'People would gossip about you as a gigolo. I couldn't do that...I don't like those women who look down upon men.' Eligible wives, therefore, need to smartly perform their gendered tasks, and tread a fine line between being independent and dependent in order to keep their marriage in good balance. Being dominant is almost a sin for the Chinese woman and decisiveness is clearly not a virtue for her.

The demand to live up to the masculine ideal for these ordinary salarymen often means that their sense of manliness is rather fragile, and needs to be defended.

Take personal income as an example. When asked whether or not he could accept his wife earning more than him, David answers with hesitation:

....erh...I could...but I can't say I like that. My income is not low. In most cases, I'm in an advantageous position. But if one day I meet someone who is too *li hai* (too competent, 厉害), or similar to me, I will feel pressure. If she's

far better than me...realistically, the pressure is on...but it depends on whether we match with each other spiritually at a deeper level. If we do, I might not mind...well, if I accepted her in the first place it means this woman is not bad, but rather competent...But I still would not prefer this...Even if we can both accept that she's better than me. There's still more peer pressure, public opinion like 'how can your woman earn far more than you!? You're a man, you should work harder and better'...Well...I feel maybe it's secondary...the main thing is, we run a family together, if she's fine with it, I'm OK. But...look at me...I've made so much effort to reach where I am now...My rewards should match my effort...so I think the scenario you described is unlikely. I should not be far worse than her.

Rather confident in his own financial status and regarding himself as open-minded, David's answer reveals his inner struggle: his desire for a competent woman who can match him on the deeper level versus the normative masculine ideal that restricts him from appearing 'weaker' than his wife. He should be 'in an advantageous position' to avoid this awkward scenario, as he reassured himself in the end.

Joyce, experienced in dating, summarised the type of femininity that is welcomed by Chinese men:

Based on what I've experienced, Chinese society, in the Chengdu area, for a woman, you don't need much, as long as you're pretty... docile and submissive, easy to control, that means you don't have too much of your own opinion, but are willing to listen to your boyfriend or husband. Then you will be popular among the guys.

Being aware of their male peers' attitudes, women consciously perform their femininity as the 'weaker/softer' sex, in order to find love and, ultimately, to achieve gendered success through marriage. This is evident in cases where my participants consciously engage in performing their gender to gloss over things that might be seen as a threat to their partner's sense of manliness in order to secure their relationship.

In Lisi's case, her boyfriend is slightly younger than her. Since, ideally, the man should be older/wiser than the woman, how they mitigate their age difference is revealing.

My current boyfriend is a few months younger than me. He looks quite mature, I think he appears fairly mature in the way he talks and carries himself. He asked my age first, then he kept his own age a secret for a while...Now when we go out, I will let him take care of me. I feel it's more normal. So I can pretend to ignore the fact that he's younger than me.

Keeping his age a secret reaffirms the normalised expectation of a good match: a man should be 'senior' to his woman. However, his ability to display his maturity through appropriate manly behaviour makes him an eligible bachelor for Lisi, as manhood in many cultures, Chinese included, cannot be presumed, but needs to be public affirmed (Jankowiak and Li, 2014; Hinsch, 2013; Gilmore, 1990). Lisi's deliberate effort to 'let him take care of me' during public outings reaffirms his 'manliness' by giving him opportunities to do things that display his male potency. Consequently, it keeps the relationship 'normal', and thus 'safe'. Despite this, Lisi still shares her boyfriend's complaint: 'he thinks I don't rely on him enough, which hurts him'. In order to maintain their relationships, guarding her boyfriend's mianzi seems to be a strategy adopted by many women, particularly when it relates to the core feature of hegemonic masculinity: financial supremacy. For many women, like Stella, it is far easier to avoid potential trouble:

I don't think a man would choose me if I earned more than him. Because that would make me look at him like this [means looking down upon him], and gradually hurt his self-esteem, unless he's not a normal man. If a woman earns more than him, it would certainly put him under lots of pressure. If he's not capable enough to surpass her, he will be annoyed or even become angry. Bad things might happen. [Laugh]

Stella has a well-paid teaching job at a famous private language school, and in addition her parents have bought her a flat in Chengdu. Technically, she does not need a man to provide for her, as she is self-sufficient. Her 'personal preference' and the gendered expectation of 'strong, capable men' reflects 'how gender ideals are

constructed in relation to hierarchical differentiation of persons, thus serving as means of both social control and distinction' (Liu, F., 2017, p.2). The social penalties of 'losing face' on both sides brought about by transgressing gender norms effectively regulate individual choices and preferences. Moreover, to focus solely on individual choices and preferences is to overlook the effects of the social surroundings where these choices and preferences are shaped. Johnson and Lawler (2005, p.13) argue that 'social space impinges upon, organises, and to some degree dictates, how and whom we love'. Following this train of thought, I further argue that our gendered position within these classed social spaces is not only central to shaping our 'sympathies and antipathies, affections and aversions, tastes and distastes', but also guides us to seek a 'strong and capable' compatible partner with whom our ideal of happiness can be fulfilled (Bourdieu, 2000: 150 cited in Johnson and Lawler, 2005, p.5). In Chain's case, the normative constraints on women's choices and preferences for a partner become apparent:

He doesn't need to be the main breadwinner, but I need him to earn slightly more than me. [Why?] Because it could enhance his self-esteem, which is crucial for men. In Chinese society, especially so. Men highly value their *mianzi*...I really don't need him to earn lots more than me. But my ex earned far less than me, which sometimes made him feel as though he was losing face...so in order to avoid potential problems, I would rather he earns more.

Chain is financially capable and in the past has accepted men who earn less than her, but the gendered effect of *mianzi* becomes one of the barriers restricting her choices. She further explains how this plays out differently for men and women:

It doesn't make women lose face when their men earn more than them. Currently, our society doesn't have high expectations of women to earn lots of money. If you do, people might think she is a bit *xiong* (strong, capable, fierce, 凶) like *nü qiang ren* (female strong man, 女强人). But nobody would criticise you if you earned less. If men earn less, people gossip about it and he loses face.

The economic reform has given more opportunities for the single-child generation to negotiate new forms of gender (Song and Hird, 2014; CNN, 2017), leading some to

believe that Chinese men now have a 'heightened respect for females' (Jankowiak and Li, 2014). It has been suggested that men are more involved as affectionate fathers (Jankowiak, 2002, p.376; Li and Lamb, 2013). Young celebrities seem to visually blur the gender boundary, as represented in the popular *zhong xing* (androgynous) trend (CNN, 2017; Li, 2015) and the hugely popular 'little fresh meat' (*xiao xian rou*, 小鲜肉) phenomenon (Wu, 2016). Despite these indications that new masculinities and femininities are being formed, many are embracing the more traditional gender norms (Yang, 2011; Liu, F., 2017). Therefore, it would be naïve to ignore the persistence of patriarchal values that gave rise to the current hegemonic masculinity, which maintains its grip on how individuals construct their gender identities, even in their love-based relationships.

Even nowadays, sometimes when Chinese women do perform well at work, they are often stigmatised, as shown in my data and elsewhere. For instance, Osburg's (2013) research on Chengdu businessmen uncovers disdain for women entrepreneurs on the part of men, as they considered these *nü qiang ren* to be lacking feminine charms and virtues. Therefore, it is no wonder that women often distance themselves from being seen as *nü qiang ren*: 'I never wanted to be one' said Joyce. As the term reveals: 'if you are a woman but as strong as men, you become an alien, a third gender, subject to social alienation'. Hence, it is safer, easier or even 'better' for women to conform to the gender norms, particularly when marriage is presented as essential and urgent for women (Zhang and Sun, 2014).

Performing Sajiao

In order to secure her Mr Right, *sajiao* (撒娇) has become a popular strategy for performing femininity. *Sajiao* often involves behaving in a pettishly charming manner by using a child-like tone and voice. Although it can be used on all kinds of occasions and could be gender-neutral, it is particularly noted in public discourse and media representations as the display of one's feminine charm as a way for Chinese women in everyday life to express emotions, avoid conflicts and persuade others in an unthreatening way and elicit help by taking a lower position (Yueh, 2013, pp.3–4).

Chain explains: '[A woman] knows when to sajiao, how to deal with men's friends and parents to attend their feelings. All these enhance a man's mianzi. It shows that his woman is shidati (understands the bigger picture, 识大体).'

Sajiao (撒娇) has developed as part of a gendered survival strategy in the patriarchal culture. As Java recommends 'I think girls must know how to sajiao in front of men. Because when she sajiao, the man has to concede. Such women are the most formidable.' Moreover, shi da ti (识大体) requires a woman to be self-aware of her position in the given culture and to navigate accordingly within it, without directly challenging it. It places men's needs at the centre, and requires heightened emotional labour from women. Chain reflected:

I think it's ingrained in us Chinese women to depend on men. We're ingrained to protect their ego...my friend used to remind me: 'you didn't give him mianzi!' ... Then I realised that a man's mianzi needs to be respected. We need to be very careful not to hurt that, because it's such a crucial part of Chinese gender etiquette.

Because it is 'such a crucial part of Chinese gender etiquette', no wonder many would agree, like Zhangsan:

Realistically, it's still better if a man earns more than his wife. Although now you need both salaries contributing to the family budget, in order to sustain your relationship in the long term, following the Chinese tradition makes sense here...in China, I feel that even the woman doesn't mind. In the long term, a man would feel sensitive about having a stronger wife. Then problems will arise...one side would lose the psychological balance. The girl might appear bossy as time goes by, so...it's not good for anybody.

Compared to the 'embryonic state' of western romantic love in 1920s China (Pan, 2015), when the relationship was neither free nor equal, today's younger generation seems to have fully taken the concept of romantic love on board and to be striving for a free choice love marriage, as emphasised by my participants and elsewhere (Farrer, 2014; Zhang and Sun, 2014; Jankowiak, 2002, p.363). 'In terms of our thinking and life pursuit, we can generate sparkles and reach consensus with each

other' (Stella); 'We're willing to support each other to chase our dreams, which are not in conflict with each other' (Lixiong, male). However, as I have argued, love is not innocent of class or gender, but both are tightly intertwined with an individual's understanding and choices for love.

Briefly considering women's preferences for men, it seems that they neatly fit into the gender stereotype of the 'manly man': strong and better than his woman. However, the description of a 'loving protector and main provider' for the family reveals the important 'romantic twist' on this conventional gender order. For Chinese women, to be loved is often interpreted as meaning 'to be protected and taken care of'; while for men, to be loved often means to be admired. This gendered practice of love has become enmeshed into the Chinese social fabric and fits perfectly with the gendered construction of personal success, and an individual's experience of happiness.

Romantic Love Localised

Although the strict form of arranged marriage by parents has declined, Chinese parents still play a hugely influential role in each individual's decision to marry. Even though dating has become to norm to find a marriage partner, 'taking someone home to see the parents' for their approval remains the essential step in marriage preparation. For example, Tina's decision to marry illustrates my point: 'after dating for one and a half years, he proposed and I said yes. My parents like him, and his parents like me. We are at the right age (28).' Moreover, being filial to parents on both sides and valuing family have become essential criteria in considering a spouse: 'She should be filial to both our parents, it would be best that she also comes from a harmonious family, so it would be easier to get along with mine' (Theodore, male); 'He is good tempered, filial to parents, hard-working, valuing family' (Wangyan). Family harmony, which includes a good relationship with parents on both sides, is a common vision shared by my participants. Many have noted the increasing intergenerational dependency in recent years and the strengthened emotional bond between parents and their only child (Yan, 2015; Zhang and Sun, 2014).

In a conference presentation, Yan Yunxiang (2017) said that the state's withdrawal of the socialist welfare provisions has given rise to neo-familialism, which makes family become 'a secular and safe approach of self-salvation for most individuals –

still "sacrificing the small self for the realization of the greater self" but with a concrete, affective and materialistic goal'. 'Family interests first' came across very clearly in my participants' accounts. 'First of all, he needs to take care of the family. Yes, he should prioritise the family' (Lilin); 'She needs a stable job plus be family-centred' (Jerry, male). The practical function of family for Chinese individuals, coated with a romantic glow, exacerbates the pressure one feels to form one's own heterosexual family, since it is the ultimate embodiment of Chinese understanding of happiness.

Conclusion

Located in a rather privileged position on the Chinese social ladder, most of my participants display a strong belief in continuous self-betterment as a qualified neoliberal subject, who is determined to achieve success in life through their individualistic approach (Liu, F., 2011a, 2008a). However, the societal perception of personal success is deeply gendered. While a man's success is primarily measured by his outward achievement of being the main provider for and protector of his family, for a woman, her success is judged predominantly through her married domestic life. Despite its transformation, patriarchal practices remain widely visible, which makes men's path to success more straightforward than it is for women. Since accumulating suzhi requires both time and financial resources, women's human capital, hard-earned through education and work experience, often puts them in a rather awkward position in the marriage market. Due to the relational nature of Chinese society, young women's striving to avoid failure and embody success as perceived by society is intricately tied into their sense of self-worth and belonging. However, the strategies available for these women to negotiate their success remain limited. The fear of downward mobility permeating contemporary Chinese society and the social norm of hypergamy for women push them to 'look up' as they perform gender in their relationships. This serves as their rescue in a still male-dominated society, whilst perpetuating patriarchy.

As the powerful party-state utilises the conventional family to maintain stability, the romanticised vision of a happy family based on an essentialist conception of sex differences serves an instrumental function of exercising the governing power through women's life choices. Consequently, their self-enterprising efforts to succeed

paradoxically lead them to conform to the exemplary gender ideals. Their ambition for success was trained into them through their upbringing without much collective consciousness and this means that their individualised struggle to embody success is deeply classed and gendered. Meanwhile, the vision of a love marriage with an affluent lifestyle captures the individual's longing for love and peace in the midst of dramatic social changes, despite this ideal often being too expensive to afford for ordinary Chinese men and women. Popular rhetoric such as Love, personal success and family happiness are used by a neoliberal economy backed by the party-state as a way to smooth over social conflicts and harmonise the irreconcilable. The state's ideological contradictions ultimately require 'identity splits' within these women, when their class privilege collides with their gender (dis)privilege. Consequently, love marriage becomes both a struggle and a solution for these women in seeming to embody middle-class success in contemporary China. Their determination to succeed also encourages compliance with the state's governance of its people. In the next chapter, I focus on those who are already married in order to consider how these ideal women fare when confronted with the reality of their married lives.

Chapter 7

Reality Bites: Gendered Experiences of Marriage and Work

After exploring my participants' gendered perceptions of success and their determination to embody a successful life in contemporary China, this chapter contrasts the romantic visions of love marriage held by many unmarried women with the reality of married life by drawing on the accounts of married women with children. I then move on to discuss gendered discrimination in the workplace and consider how inequality at home and in the workplace are mutually reinforcing. By looking into their childcare arrangements and the domestic division of labour, I identify the multiple constraints resulting from the assumptions about women's primary domestic role that limit them from freely excelling in China's neoliberal economy. I then go on to reveal the widespread discrimination against women from recruitment to promotion in white-collar professions, where these women find themselves. Although conforming to the norm that prioritises family might appear to be an 'easier' option for women, I point out that it is the double burden imposed by their married domestic life and the neoliberal market economy that weighs them down in both reproductive and productive value chains. Facing a competitive market economy alongside the state's re-emphasis on family values, women's liberation is short-changed. By revealing the essentialist arguments used to justify the existing gender order, I further contend that, without a feminist deconstruction of sex and gender, or any public space in which to question gender norms⁵¹, 'modern science' becomes an easy excuse for consolidating oppressive social structures and silencing critical voices.

The Making of a Good Wife and Daughter-in-law

The ideal of the dutiful wife and loving mother (*xian qi liang mu*, 贤妻良母) has been a long-standing feminine virtue in China following the prevalent notion of *nan zhu wai nü zhu nei* (men control the outside, women control the inside, 男主外,女主内). Moving away from the masculinised female image of Mao's China, the refeminisation of women since the reform has been exacerbated by the rising

198

⁵¹ One example is the deletion of social media accounts of the renowned Feminist Voices on International Women's Day, 8 March, 2018 (Feng, 2018).

consumer culture since the 1990s, which has created a particular standard for well-educated middle-class women to aspire to, in order to maintain a class-specific gendered self that is centred on heterosexual marriage. Despite a rather 'rosy' outlook on married futures among most unmarried and newly married women, my interviews with married women with children present a rather different reality.

Despite the fact that all the married women I interviewed are employed full time, they are not exempt from being primarily responsible for various domestic duties. Women's domestic role starts to take priority in their life after marriage and is further intensified after childbirth. Yiyi's view of the roles taken by husband and wife within marriage is representative among this cohort:

She needs to demonstrate the glory of a mother; when the man comes home, everything is organised and well prepared. Guests should also feel the same when they visit your house. It makes your man feel relaxed and comfortable at home, so he can work better outside and be motivated...whereas men are more like a protector of the family, just like in the animal kingdom.

Here the division of gender roles is endorsed by 'nature': 'just like in the animal kingdom'. Within such imagery, a wife is 'naturally' placed within the family home and under the protection of her husband: a rather loving and cosy image. Her job is to ensure that her 'motherly glory' is appropriately displayed through domestic services to satisfy visitors and her husband. The husband 'comes home' to be comforted, so he can 'work better outside'. In this context, both men and women are supposed to 'put the family first', with a woman's internalised desire to provide care for her husband enabling him to fulfil his symbolic role as 'protector' (Yiyi) or 'breadwinner' (Yangyang). Resembling the classic imagery of women 'feeding egos and tending wounds' (Bartky, 1990), these descriptions might appear to depict sweet love. However, they essentially serve to confine women within a gendered social boundary.

The restrictive power of such social confinement is reflected through resurgent traditional discourses describing various 'wifely virtues', which were widely used in my participants' accounts. Java, Wangyan and Yiyi used identical words to describe the social expectations of a good wife, which serves as a good example: 'She needs

to be presentable to guests in the living room, and skilled in making good cuisine in the kitchen (jin de ting tang, xia de chu fang, 进得厅堂,下得厨房)⁵². This saying indicates that a wife's role is to attend to her husband's needs and please him accordingly. Although the exact demands may vary due to historical changes, the male-centred logic remains. Java explains:

Her [the wife's] personality is key, she needs to be very diplomatic in the way she deals with various relationships in the family...For example, traditionally, a wife needs to be good at cooking. However, as long as she can please her husband so that he doesn't think it's a problem, it's OK. It's a real skill to know how to manage these things...She can occasionally cook one or two dishes to please him or take him out to eat.

Nowadays, a wife might not need to cook well herself, but it is still expected that she will find ways to keep her husband happy so that he will not regard her as lacking in wifely virtues, which requires women to expend emotional labour and display gendered intelligence. It is important to note that these desirable wifely virtues, although closely associated with domestic life, are never simply confined to a specific locus, the home; in fact, the boundary between woman's inner domain and man's outer domain is relational and fluid (Bray, 1997).

While all the husbands of the women I interviewed took a minimal role in helping out in the house, all the married mothers were juggling between full-time employment and family duties, with the main support coming from their mother or mother-in-law. Take Java as an example. She has a two-year-old boy and works in the logistics department of an airline company. They moved in with her in-laws after their son was born. Her in-laws provide the main childcare support while she is at work. Even so, she is still the main person taking care of their son, with only occasional breaks.

My job is not very demanding, and doesn't occupy a lot of my private space. After work I just spend time with my son. Occasionally, when the elders [in-

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⁵² This saying might have first appeared in colonial Shanghai at the beginning of the 20th century, when women were increasingly seen in public at social events among elite circles. It is used to exemplify the ideal wife for a successful man.

laws] allow, I can go out in the evening. I think it's good enough...I have very little time of my own.

Java describes her husband as lacking basic childcare skills: 'He doesn't know how to send the baby to sleep, how to mix milk powder etc. ...the baby only lets him play a bit. Apart from that, our baby does not want him at all.' She further refers to her husband as 'Lord junior' and her father-in-law as the 'Lord senior' in the house, because she and her mother-in-law do all the housework: 'we [husband and her] do not share [housework], I do it all... He [her husband] does not do housework at all! He is totally a Lord (da ye, 大爷) in the house! [Laugh].' Similarly, Tj lives with her inlaws and relies on her own mother and mother-in-law to provide childcare during her working hours. In terms of sharing childcare and housework, Tj answers: 'I don't think we're sharing. I find myself doing most of it. [Laugh].' An almost identical situation is reflected in Xiaozhu's account: 'How to share? We never shared. He didn't do anything from the beginning.'

The conventional expectation of men to be the main 'provider' for the family also means that they tend to travel frequently for work. Yangyang's and Yiyi's husbands both work in different cities, away from home. Their newborn children are left with their wives and parents. Their physical absence from home is commonly understood as necessary so they can to perform their gendered family duty as the main breadwinners, which not only requires their wives' loving understanding but also leaves the wife to deal with all domestic affairs, which are regarded as her gendered portion. For example: 'It's very rare that my husband spends time with our son. From when I became pregnant until the delivery day, he only visited home three times. The longest he stayed was nine days when I was giving birth' (Yiyi). Although Yiyi was hoping that her husband might be promoted later that year so 'he could come home every month', she understands that 'currently he is at the stage of fendou (striving for great achievement, 奋斗). He is the man, the pillar of the family.' We can see a classic example of the Chinese phrase 'xian ne izhu' (贤内助, virtuous domestic assistant), illustrating the domestic assistance that a good wife provides for her husband to succeed outside, evidenced here. Yiyi explains: 'I don't want him to be tied up by family life, but to focus on his career. In many cases, a husband's absences from home and childcare are justified by his symbolic role as the main

breadwinner, despite the fact that their wives are all employed full time. Like many others, Yiyi works for a multinational firm with a good salary, but she believes that if there were a need in the family, she would be the one to make the career sacrifice.

Recent empirical evidence shows that there has been a decline in co-residence between parents and their adult children in China as a result of the housing reform in the 1990s and income growth among urban elder parents, as well as increased geographical mobility (Zhang, 2010; Meng and Luo, 2008; Palmer and Deng, 2008). The parents of my research cohort are still relatively young and are mostly financially established city residents. The majority of them are both willing and able to provide support for their only child, even if living separately from them. Although a separate marital residence provided by the husband and his family has become a requirement in today's marriage negotiations (Zhang, 2010; Zavoretti, 2016), virilocal residence is still practised for various reasons. It has been noted that a couple's childcare needs often potentially accelerate co-residence with parents, which reflects the tightened intergenerational bond among this cohort. For instance, Java moved into her husband's parents' home due to the convenience of childcare support. Yangyang's in-laws asked them to live together to resemble the filial tradition of a happy big family: ji shi tong tang (几世同堂, multiple generations under one roof). Xiaoliu and Tj did so primarily in order to receive childcare and financial support. Although parents from both sides can get involved in providing childcare support, it still seems to be less common for the couple to move in with the wife's parents, to avoid beings seen as ru zui (入赘)53, which could tarnish the man's masculine image and place a question mark over his financial status in the household. Among the five women I interviewed who were living with their in-laws, in only one case did the wife live with her own parents while her husband works in another city. These living arrangements created a mixed impact on the women's experiences at home.

The public child-care facilities that were widely available in Maoist China (Stockman, Norman and Sheng, 1995) were largely dismantled during the 1990s (Goh, 2011).

⁵³ A marital practice dating back to Imperial China, in which a man marries into and lives with the wife's family, which is contrary to the patrilineal custom. It happens either when the man's family cannot afford a dowry to acquire a wife, or a woman's family needs labour and wants to secure oldage care due to a lack of sons.

This has intensified the need to rely on family networks or market services for childcare. The substantial amount of domestic support from family elders, predominantly older women, has helped young mothers to juggle work and family (Goh, 2009). Parents of the adult only-child continue to reflect a childcenteredness in their family practice. Java reported that 'we [the couple] argue less since we moved in with his parents as his mom can share part of the housework with me'. Xiaozhu also points out that it can also ease the financial burden of their nuclear family, as her in-laws do not ask them to contribute to the household budget. She even used the term kenlao54 (biting the old, 啃老) to describe their situation. Importantly, the transformed intergenerational relations in contemporary China mean that elders have little institutional power to compel obedience; the filial piety of their children must be earned by building emotional connections (Liu, J., 2017b; Ikels, 2004; Santos and Harrell, 2016). This is not to disregard the state's keen interest and endorsement of adult children's duty to provide care for their parents, which is reflected in both law and recent campaigns supporting 'traditional family virtues' as well as issuing of the new 24 filial piety exemplars (Qi, 2015b, Zhuang, 2012; see also Santos and Harrell, 2016, p.21). Zhong and Ho (2014) also discover that Chinese parents actively invest in their relationship with their adult children, to strengthen their position within the family. Providing childcare support is an important practice to enhance the intergenerational bond. Current childcare arrangements are evidence of the continuity of the historically significant cultural emphasis on collective family interests and the importance of intergenerational reciprocity (Croll, 2006; Chen, Liu and Mair, 2011; Davis and Friedman, 2014). Throughout my participants' accounts, they consistently include three generations as one family unit, within which family harmony is emphasised. Since the norm of reciprocity, rather than a patriarchal mandate, marks the recent changes in filial piety (Davis and Friedman, 2014), the heightened intergenerational bond under the One-Child Policy also means a stronger sense of moral duty to 'pay back' the love of one's parents through various practices and the displaying of *xiao* (Zhang, 2016b). Therefore, although the moral and emotional base of filial piety seems to be changing, parents

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⁵⁴A popular term that has spread online in recent years to describe children who exploit their parents like worms.

can still exercise considerable influence over their adult children through offering practical help like childcare (Santos and Harrell, 2016; Zhang, 2016b).

Ikels (2004) notes that the Confucian paradigm of *xiao* (filial piety, 孝) regulates the relationship between parents and children. This requires the right attitude, accompanied by correct conduct. The geographical proximity required in order to receive parents' childcare support often brings the relational complexity within the Chinese family into the daily lives of married couples. Women, in particular, are regarded as the emotional bond among family members and the managers of all household affairs. This means that the role of a daughter-in-law can be demanding. Yangyang, for example, married into a very wealthy family. Her in-laws are old friends of her parents. Although the couple married after a period of time had been allowed to establish mutual feelings, initially her husband was forced by his parents to date her, and he had to break up with his previous girlfriend, because his parents believed that Yangyang would be a virtuous wife and daughter-in-law based on their years of observation of her mother. This case not only shows the continuing parental influence on young people's marriage decisions, but also reflects parents' potential interference into their married life.

Although working mothers could benefit from the strengthened interdependency between generations, I argue that the increased parental gaze under the revival of traditional Confucian discourse promoted by the party-state could impose extra pressure on women to observe 'wifely virtues' in order to maintain family harmony, which complicates the family dynamics and adds to the density of women's emotional labour. Tj, whose husband does no housework, comments:

It's really convenient to live with them [in-laws] because of childcare support...Our relationship is all right. But none of my friends live with their in-laws...Maybe the generation gap is too wide in terms of lifestyle and beliefs (guan nian, 观念). It can create lots of conflict...I mean, it might...to be honest, it definitely requires some compromise from you if you live together...however, I think it's worth it for the sake of family harmony.

Many others, like Tj, would give up the negotiation of housework with their husband for the sake of family harmony. Being the only son, whose mother often does all the

household chores for him, it is not easy for his wife even to start the conversation with him in front of his parents, as housework is viewed as women's work and a good wife needs to know this well. 'Making' one's husband do housework in front of others not only risks his *mianzi*, but also does not make the wife look 'virtuous' in front of family elders, which can lead to marital conflicts, as seen in Yan Yunxiang's (2015) research on parent-driven divorce. Therefore, it is not hard to imagine the pressure to self-police and display appropriate behaviour in front of in-laws.

As the only child in the family, both boys and girls of this cohort are often exempt from helping out in their natal home so that they can focus on their studies. As Chenchen points out, 'nowadays, often both sides' parents think that if their only child does not need to do housework at home, how could they let them suffer from it after marriage?' This account indicates the relational complexity within the Chinese family when it comes to negotiating housework after marriage. Since domesticrelated work is traditionally regarded as women's work, this inevitably disadvantages women within such negotiations. When Java's husband refuses to help out in the house, I asked whether she could ask his mother to tell him to help her. Java said: 'His mom can't tell him that as it has always been done by her'. Tj and Xiaozhu tell similar stories. The revival of Confucian cultural influences exemplified in the mainstream *guo xue re* (revival of national learning, 国学热), or the more extreme version of the virtue school for women that sparked online outrage (BBC, 2017; Zhang, 2017a) in recent years, reflect the discursive power that continues to exert influence over women's gendered conduct. As Java said, a good wife 'needs to be very diplomatic in the way she deals with various relationships in the family'. It is still primarily women's responsibility to maintain emotional harmony within the family, despite the recent discursive shift to a more emotionally aware masculinity (Song and Hird, 2014).

All the married women's accounts were consistent in suggesting that parents' involvement could reinforce the gendered division of labour and further complicate negotiations between the couple, which might be easier if the couple lived on their own. Atai, who is married without children, but lives just with her husband, says: 'we both do it, like half each. But we don't regard tasks as fixed to one person. Like, if I cook, he would wash the dishes. And vice versa...whoever has time does it.' Without

children, there could indeed be less work that needs negotiation. Hence, the gendered experience of family life could be less obvious for women without children. Ochiai et al. (2008) discovered that role sharing in cooking is particularly common among Chinese couples. Additionally, domestic services provided by rural migrant women have become widely available and relatively affordable for urban middle-class families, which is one desired solution mentioned by my participants. While bearing children is not a topic for open discussion for the majority of Chinese couples once married, grandparents' involvement in the couple's married life in one way or another is almost unavoidable (See Table 3).

Table 3: Main childcare support and residency arrangements.

Female Participants	Main Childcare support		Living with the in- laws	Living with wife's	Separate Housing
with Child(ren)	Mother	Mother-in-law		parents	
Quennie	V	V			V
Java		V	V		
Lulu	V			V	
Tj	V	V	V		
Wangyan	V	n/a			V
Xiaozhu		V	V		
Yangyang	V	V	V		
Yiyi	V			V	

The neo-local residency that is found in many urban households is believed to free women from the daily supervision of the senior generation (Liu, J., 2017a). However, soaring urban house prices, together with young families' childcare needs, could potentially bring back a certain degree of parental control. In particular, as shown in Table 3, it is predominately women who are involved in childcare, while men do the minimum, or even nothing. This could create family tensions when resurgent traditional expectations of a daughter-in-law are confronted by the only daughters. Chenchen explains:

Often women are in charge of the family, like bringing up the children. This often creates conflict, as often the grandparents would be involved in helping. You and your own mother even have different opinions on things, not to mention with your mother-in-law. It's really troublesome for the woman to manage these things.

While family harmony is highly valued, skilled resolutions are needed for the daughter-in-law's dilemma. Xiaozhu, who lives with her in-laws, comments:

Being a good wife is like taking good care of kids and husband, maintaining good family relationships, especially with her mother-in-law, also having her own job...living together could bring lots of trouble between the wife and her mother-in-law. But the wife should learn to handle it with great care. My husband rarely meddles between us, because men are too rough, he doesn't know what to do.

The diplomatic skills required to maintain family harmony are regarded as a necessity that marks her wifely virtue within Chinese society's moral paradigm, which is deeply gendered. Tj illustrates what is expected from her:

Never do things to harm the family...do not create conflicts, like don't stir things up between both sets of parents, don't hold a grudge against the inlaws, at least no overt confrontations. Have my own income to take care of the family and maintain a harmonious relationship.

As the Chinese saying goes, *Jia he wan shi xin* (家和万事兴, All things prosper in a harmonious family). Drawing on these widely accepted cultural scripts, my participants' accounts demonstrate their aspiration to live up to the harmonious family ideal. Within that, their gendered middle-class identity regulates their behaviour as an exemplary moral subject, and personal compromise is expected.

Tj: His parents had already bought a house before we got married, it's quite a spacious flat. He asked me whether I want to move out or live there. I feel that, since they already bought this house, if I asked to move out, it would not be appropriate. So I decided to stay. Until now, we still don't have property under our own name. It's OK by me for now.

The groom's family providing a separate marital home as part of the 'bride price' (*cai li*, 彩礼) has become a status symbol among China's urbanites (Jinhua Forum, 2009). Tj's husband letting her decide on this matter essentially means that the financial and logistical burden for him becomes her moral dilemma. Tj is aware of the morally desirable choice for her as a wife and daughter-in-law: she needs to be thrifty and considerate. Since 'they already bought this house, if I ask to move out, it would not be appropriate', her 'moral conscience' overrides her personal preference, and sometimes her personal interests.

Moreover, these women's acceptance of childcare support from parents and in-laws further binds them into a moral contract of care for them in return. 'If we move out after they helped raise the kid...I feel I can't do that to them. Everybody will become old one day. We will surely take care of them' (Tj). While solely depending on her inlaws for childcare during work without much involvement from her husband, Java is trying her best to be considerate: 'the elders already make a lot of effort to care for our son during the daytime. If I went out with friends after work, I would feel very guilty. They would be so exhausted.' Java's gendered moral conscience under the current family framework, which emphasises harmony, filial duty and motherly love, means that she 'voluntarily' takes up night shifts of childcare and ends up having 'very little time' of her own, while her husband remains 'useless' in this regard. A wife's attempts to ask for her husband's help, as shown below, often end without much success.

Tj: Sometimes I would ask for his help. But men are really useless in these things. Like cleaning, he doesn't think it's necessary. He can tolerate quite dirty rooms. Later I thought, why bother to ask? Since he is so unwilling and would not do a good job anyway. So I gave up.

Java: If I asked him, it would only create conflict. He's always playing computer games. I'm so tired of such arguments. I would rather do it myself. I would feel better this way. Each time I ask him it would lead to arguments; I'm more tired in that way.

Tj's and Java's failed attempts to negotiate reflects the wider social context in which they are embedded: the unproblematised 'gender roles' that are still largely fixed to

biological sex; a patriarchal cultural system that effectively demands women's domestic service, moralises their behaviour and marginalises their voices. However, I do not intend to say that all my female participants were born to be obedient domestic goddesses. Fong (2002) notes that the only-child generation is trained to focus on their education and undertrained in doing household chores, which were often done by their parents. This is evident among my participants.

Tj: ...In most cases, it's women who take care of the home...I feel...men since a young age have never been viewed as someone who will need to do such things, like cooking, cleaning, etc. Such a belief from a young age exempts them from learning these skills.

Kailing: Have we [women] learnt them since a young age?

Tj: We also weren't raised to do these things, but we are expected to be the one who should do them in marriage. It's like a label on our forehead.

After getting married, the gendered realities sink in. Even when the couple both lack domestic skills, it is often the wife who picks up the job, simply because the 'woman should be the one who compromises in the family' (Chenchen). Against this cultural backdrop, for the sake of her daughter's marital bliss, the mother of an only daughter could also play a policing role. Although Yiyi's parents fully supported her education, her mother also frequently reminded her to 'practise housework' when she was free. When there is a son in the family, Yiyi's parents' attitude about who should learn housework is rather telling:

Compared to boys, like my elder brother, my parents never expected him to do housework but would ask me...Because they think as a woman I should do these things well...But I want to have my own choice. I'm not a machine!

Yiyi explains that her parents believed this was helping her to become 'a good wife'. Although she complains about the unfairness, her life reveals that she is living up to the gendered norm: doing all the housework and childcare while her husband works in another city. She also works in a prominent multinational firm in order to ease the financial burden for her husband and is very considerate: '*Until we can afford a domestic helper, I'm expected to take care of it.*' Similarly, Quennie's mother also

wants her to be more 'hardworking' in domestic life: 'she wants me to do more in our marriage, I often feel I don't do enough according to her standards. So my mom often tries to correct me.' Mothers' advice on their daughters' marriages often results from their genuine desire for their marital happiness. The significance of marriage for a Chinese woman often means that she has more to lose if it fails. Ultimately, how well she performs in her marriage is the benchmark of her social success as a woman.

The last resort for women facing inequality at home is to create a sense of autonomy by the responsibilisation of their own feelings as a coping strategy to adapt. 'Now I've discovered that, in order to keep a good mood, I can't rely on others to give me one. I need to rely on my self-adaptation' (Java); 'Many men I know are like that [not doing housework or childcare]...you might confront them at the beginning. But after a while, you will get used to it and let it go' (Tj). This attitude appeared consistently across my data. Wielander (2018) points out that the ability to resort to one's inner resources to be positive and happy has been linked to being a higher suzhi (quality) person. Under such notions of happiness, promoted in the government's campaigns, individuals are supposed to be responsible for their own emotional wellbeing, regardless of their material circumstances.

Being a Successful Mother

Since motherhood within heterosexual marriage is almost a prescribed destiny for Chinese women, it is nearly impossible to picture the image of a good wife without taking into account her role as a mother. Yangyang's husband works for the local government, and is also an only child in his family. At the age of 27, she had been married for two years. The pressure on her to produce 'a much expected child for both families' was mounting since she was approaching the age 30 'deadline'. She began trying to get pregnant right after marriage and discovered that she had a fertility problem. Therefore, she had to quit her job as a manager at an educational agency to 'prepare her body' and went on an expensive and painful course of IVF treatment. Her career has been put on hold since then. Although Yangyang's case is rare, there is great pressure on women to ensure optimal health before they produce their desired high-quality child (Zhu, 2010).

Since the 1990s, China has witnessed the widespread influence of 'scientific childbearing and childrearing' (ke xue yu er, 科学育儿) in urban areas, whereby young women have been taught to believe in 'scientific knowledge' in assuring highquality human reproduction. From pregnancy to nurturing her child, the role of mother is constantly under the spotlight of social scrutiny, which is reflected in various dietary requirements for the pregnant woman and new mothers to ensure optimum nutrition for the newborn, the proliferating educational literature on how to mother, and the booming postnatal confinement business (Zhu, 2010; Dan, 2015). Maomaocong, pregnant at the time of interview, complained about the pressure on her from her family. 'Besides, I have to eat things I don't want for the child.' Others frequently refer to taking a long time to prepare for pregnancy in order to give birth to a 'healthy' baby. Muyu reports that her research colleague moved to another, featherbed post to avoid poisonous reagents in their lab. In many cases, it is the lack of general safeguarding procedures for all employees that creates a particular dilemma for expectant mothers. However, the naturalised expectation on women to produce healthy babies normalises the sacrifices they have to make, since maternity is seen as emblematic of a prosperous family future. The demands on their reproductive bodies often involve physical pain and personal struggle, as Yangyang laments: 'I had to go through the IVF treatment although it was extremely painful. I couldn't bear the consequences of not being able to give birth. That would have made me a total failure! Fortunately, she succeeded in having a daughter in the end.

When asked whether infertility would damage the marital relationship, my participants expressed a belief that 'true love' between the couple should enable them to endure such a 'family tragedy', which reflects the romantic vision of marriage held by many. Despite people's wish that love will endure, many recognise that the reality can be a different story: 'If the man really loves her, it might not be too bad, but if he doesn't love her very much, 100% damage to the marriage' (Theodore, male). The infertility of a woman carries huge personal shame, and childlessness is read as a family misfortune that breaks the patrilineal line. For the only-child generation, the only daughter's ability to give birth is potentially tied to two families' fortunes, and therefore doubles the pressure on her. Joyce describes a woman who might experience infertility as:

Miserable, absolutely miserable! Because in our society, many men marry a woman for kids, the Chinese family is like this. If he knows that she can't, often the man will give up, or try, try, try many times. If it still fails, he will replace her.

She also points out the gendered twist to this scenario:

If the man has infertility issues, often the woman will let it go to keep the family together. I have relatives are like that. The wife still loves him regardless...But our society requires women to give birth. If you can't function because you're broken, then it surely blames you for it...whereas if it was the man, 'I'm sorry, life goes on'. Adoption in this case would be difficult, because men often require a child of their own blood.

It becomes clear that the embedded patriarchal culture places women in a much weaker position in relation to men. While men could be justified in keeping a mistress in this scenario to keep the patrilineal bloodline going (Mao, 2012), women's moralised sexuality often sidelines their desire for motherhood within heterosexual marriage.

Being a Mother of Success

After childbirth, the gendered division of family responsibility is further evidenced, as the wife's domestic role is often intensified due to the demands of childcare, whereas becoming a father often further highlights the importance of the man's breadwinning responsibility, which further excuses him from being more practically involved in domestic affairs (Cao, 2017; Du et al., 2015 Shu et al., 2013). In addition, the widespread discourse of the 'white-collar beauty' infused by neoliberal discourse and market forces adds another layer of pressure on mothers. As Yiyi describes it, 'she should be good at her work' and 'cannot let herself become un-presentable (la ta, 遥)'. The issue of 'presentability' as a desirable wife exacerbates the pressure that new mothers face.

Shortly before her due date, Yangyang's husband was sent away to another city for potential promotion. Such a case is not unique, as Yiyi also shared a similar experience. A father's absence for the sake of his career is credited as working hard

to bring in his gendered contribution to the family (Zuo and Bian, 2001). An understanding wife is supposed to show appreciation and support. Moreover, the prevailing essentialist belief assigns women 'naturally' to their maternal role and further exempts men because of 'biological differences'.

Tj: After giving birth to my son, I immediately felt like a mother. It involves so many things, like feeding him, etc. I feel that this baby suddenly becomes the most important thing in my life. But the man is different. He only knows that he now has a child, but it takes him a long time to actually enter into the role. It's all because of biological differences! How can we change that?!

While mothers experience emotional turmoil and physical exhaustion, a father's participation in childcare is easily ruled out thanks to the 'biological difference' that readily provides 'scientific' justification. Such a deep-rooted belief in biological differences leads many women to see no alternatives, as Tj says: 'How can we change that?!' Furthermore, since the quality of the precious child is closely tied to the family's future prospects, any risk should be avoided.

Muyu: Men in general are not soft or careful enough. You can let them care for the child. But even if it's my own husband, I still won't feel assured. It's not that they can't. It's that you won't feel it's the right thing for the baby...for the sake of raising emotionally healthy children, the woman should contribute more...Objectively speaking, it has to do with the biological difference.

On the one hand, women are eager to defy gender norms that seem to be restrictive to their understanding of a modern-self: 'I don't think there should be a fixed responsibility within the family' (Muyu); on the other hand, their frequent references to essentialist understandings of gender severely restrict their vision for change. For the sake of bringing up good-quality children, any sacrifice is bearable.

My participants' education and professional experience are viewed as educational resources for bringing up good-quality children, because grandmothers or hired nannies, who are often rural migrant women, are seen as less than ideal due to their lack of education (Santos and Harrell, 2016; Gaetano, 2015b), therefore they are unable to take the most 'scientific approach'. It is often the grandmothers who perform undesirable household chores, while the young mothers take charge of

decisions about the child's education. Consequently, the mother's direct involvement as 'manager' is still regarded as irreplaceable to ensure the child's quality upbringing. Many, like Xiaozhu, distrust the childcare provided by in-laws, which might deprive her daughter of the 'best resources'; thus, they keep a close eye on the whole process. Others are concerned about overburdening their parents, like Tina: 'I might still need my parents' help because of work. But I feel it's my own responsibility. They [parents] should enjoy their own life.' As a result, many women prefer the couple themselves to take the primary roles in childcare, which essentially means the mother taking up the primary role.

Even when the husband is occasionally involved with the child, as in Java's and Tj's cases, it is only through playing or occasionally escorting their child to extracurricular activities. Much as Hochschild (1989) found in 1980s America, even among working couples who did share housework and childcare duties, men tended to have more control over what kind of jobs they did at home according to their preferences, like playing with children on special outings, whereas women are more likely to take up routine and undesirable household chores, such as cooking and cleaning. Compared to some husbands' complaints about their wives not bringing up their child scientifically, captured by Cao (2017), men's occasional involvement is often highly praised: 'If one Dad accompanies his child to some extracurricular activities among my friendship circle, he will surely be highly praised!' (Yuhan)⁵⁵.

As Song and Hird (2014) point out, there is a caring, engaged father enmeshed with the idea of egalitarian, power-sharing, companionate marriage emerging in the media, especially within white-collar, middle-class relationships. Equality in relationships, as suggested by Song and Hird (2014), seems to be interpreted by Chinese people in terms of 'equal' but different 'needs' between men and women based on a belief in innate biological differences. Similarly, my male participants are eager to profess their support for gender equality and love companionship in marriage, and all the married women believed they were entering an equal partnership based on love. Equality for them means complementary gender roles that are rooted in an essentialist belief in a stronger male to protect and provide for a

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⁵⁵ Yuhan was an additional woman I interviewed for a related study. I include her in this chapter because she has interesting thing to say about wifehood and motherhood.

weaker female: an equity approach that on the surface can justify gender specific expectations in a relationship as reflected in my participants' preferred partners. Sometimes, it even appears to be that '*life is easier for women, as society has higher expectation on men*' (Stella). The self-contradiction within this argument can be exposed by simply asking how could life be harder for males if they also are stronger than females? Moreover, Delphy (1993) rightly points out that 'it is also not possible to imagine the values of a future egalitarian society as being the sum, or combination, of existing masculine and feminine values, for these values were created in and by hierarchy. So how could they survive the end of hierarchy?' Thus, it is important to be reminded that the changing models of masculinity do not mean the end of patriarchy; instead, they reveal its power and capacity to change its form. Ross (1995, p.172) warns us that patriarchy 'shares with capitalism a modernizing hunger to seize the present and dictate the future'.

Yuhan and her husband both work in Chinese universities as lecturers. Despite him pushing her to secure her lectureship with a PhD, he left the childcare completely to her. Yuhan complains about this, describing it as 'widowed education'.

He's basically not involved at all. In our family, it's typical 'widowed education' (sang'ou shi jiao yu, 丧偶式教育). This popular Chinese term basically means only mothers are present while the kids are growing up! Dad is like dead! [Laugh] Partly because he's busy at work, as he's constantly focusing on his research design, publication, cooperating with enterprises for funding, supervision, and building his team in order to raise his research profile. Working overnight is normal, so he basically does nothing with the kids. My mom is my main helper. From the beginning, it's forever my mom and me, occasionally my dad joins in as well. I can count on my fingers the number of times we went out with my husband as a family.

Yuhan's childcare arrangements reflect a common pattern among my participants. They readily agree with the idea of 'equality' between men and women as though it were common sense. Yet, without an established cultural script to challenge the essentialist underpinning of complementary gender roles, they find it is difficult to articulate exploitation within family relations. As Delphy and Leonard (1992) argue the fact that the relationship is love-based and not calculative does not necessarily

mean it is not exploitative. There is as Song and Hird's (2014, p.240) point out, a contradiction observable between men's verbal profession of equality and what happens in daily practice. There is:

a need to commit to a rhetoric of sexual and gender equality, or at least in part, to align themselves with discursive models of enlightened, 'high quality', twenty-first-century manhood, while at the same time maintaining the attitudes and practices in their everyday behaviour that they felt most comfortable with, and that sustained their domination over their female partners.

For married Chinese women, this has very concrete consequences. As McMillan (2006) states, the term *xingbie* (sex difference, 性别) used in Chinese still conflates the meaning of sex and gender, which suggests a lack of any linguistic tool for the public to deconstruct the naturalised roles prescribed for men and women based on their biological sex. In the Chinese context, 'science' has been sold to the public as a label for 'truth' that is used to support the dominant ideology welcomed by the party-state and to avoid the critical gaze. The naturalised order for sex, gender and marriage upheld by popular culture discourse constrains women's agency when they try to navigate their position within contemporary society's constantly changing demands (Evans, 1997, 1995). Although there were some marginal signs of change observed by Evans (2002), more than ten years down the line, no obvious change has reached my participants. All of my participants verbally professed that male and female are equal, and that their relationship is based on equality and love. The obvious contradictions commonly experienced by married women with children require their individual resilience and internal reconciliation.

Split Female Subjectivity

Rofel (2007) foresaw the impossibility of combining the desirable single free career woman, represented by the white-collar beauties, with Chinese women's naturalised domestic responsibilities as mothers. This creates the contradiction experienced by my female participants in their sense of subjectivity, which becomes apparent in Yangyang's account:

The biggest contradiction I've experienced in my life is that everybody is telling you that a woman should be independent, self-resilient and not depend

on men economically or emotionally. I followed this advice and did my best. However, after I had this child, the whole society has bombarded me with so-called 'scientific' knowledge that tells me the baby cannot be separated from the mother. It's a job 24/7. They all reinforce one message: women need to return home to take good care of the kids!

Since the economic reform, there has been wide public debate calling on married women to return home to devote themselves to domestic responsibilities, thereby leaving more job opportunities for men, when the market economy cannot provide sufficient vacancies for both (Hooper, 2002; Jacka, 1990). Due to a combination of reasons, including the traditional gender order and the rolling back of state support for women, a full-time wife phenomenon has emerged (Fang and Walker, 2015). Among the affluent urban class, having a full-time wife has become an identity marker for a man's financial wealth (Hooper, 2002; Song and Hird, 2014). However, it is neither the most desirable nor practical arrangement for my participants. For most of my participants, their working identity is an integral part of their gendered success. Furthermore, two wages are crucial for most families to sustain their standard of living. Although many long for relief from the double burden, none of them feel that they have the option to give up either part of it. Xiaozhu voices the stress of shouldering both paid work and domestic responsibilities: 'I wish I could be a full-time wife if we could afford that!'

Moreover, the issue of 'presentability' means that wives are facing increasing pressure to preserve their attractiveness for their husbands, whether through youthful looks or other displayable items that serve to enhance the *mianzi* of their husbands. Women's aspirations to gendered 'success' exacerbates the internal tension they experience, 'the biggest contradiction' described by Yangyang. Conversely, even after she had followed the 'scientific suggestions' to 'return to the family' in order to provide the best care for her daughter, she discovered the further irony of it:

After I quit my job to take care of the kid, you realise that everyone around looks at you with a strange gaze, thinking 'this woman is a stay-at-home mom!' I realised people's discrimination against me as a full-time housewife.

Although everybody wants a housewife at home, people indeed look down upon you if you're not working outside!

As a result, Yangyang went through emotional turmoil about her identity as a mother. On the one hand, she suffers from tremendous guilt if she chooses to go back to work. Because 'Just to give one example, everybody tells you to breastfeed nowadays. It would seem to be so cruel to the baby if I couldn't do that because of work. This would make my return to work so difficult.' In big cities like Chengdu or Shanghai, where most of the jobs are, long commutes between home and work pose real challenges for new mothers. Yangyang's struggle is a typical example of the tension and confusion commonly experienced by my research cohort. As a loving wife, she should support her husband's actualisation of his conventional gendered role as the main breadwinner, even though she desperately needs help:

It's not that he can't do it [childcare and housework]. Everyone can learn. Essentially it's those deep-rooted beliefs, including in myself. I feel that a man staying at home taking care of the child is a useless man. I would look down upon him. If I seriously raised such a suggestion and said 'I've had enough, you take care of the baby now', I believe that my husband would consider it. Even if we both felt at ease with such an arrangement, the current societal structure would not let us get off easily. There's no way we could live without other people's gossip. We can't escape from the society...Honestly, as his wife, if I really love him, I can't make such a proposal.

Yangyang's narrative reveals the societal constraints placed on women under a perfect alliance between patriarchal gender norms and the neoliberal ideology inculcated by the party-state. Yangyang's husband seems to be understanding when he suggests that she does whatever she wants, as long as she can manage. However, such a gesture only provides lip service, since his focus on his career, which symbolises his masculine identity, is further strengthened after becoming a father. It inevitably demands and justifies Yangyang's wifely sacrifices and further complicates family negotiations. As Yangyang concludes herself:

This is the most depressing reality I'm facing, the moment when I realised I'm living in a real patriarchal world where women face constant discrimination in

various ways. My sacrifice is viewed as normal, or even good for me as a woman. People, including my parents, his parents and my husband himself believe it...The situation is like cancer. Before you touch it in reality, you don't know that you're already sick. The moment you realise, you're already dying.

Although the women I interviewed readily describe how maintaining a balance between being a mother, wife and employee is '*impossible*' (Chenchen) and 'daunting' (Joyce), that only 'super women' (Viviankuku and Yangyang) can resolve the situation, few felt that they would change anything apart from themselves.

Tj: To be honest, I feel that the pressure on women in our society is huge and it's very exhausting to manage everything.

Kailing: Have you thought about change?

Tj: Change? How? Not go to work? [Laugh] I can't do that! It's too difficult! Show me how to change!...I think this might be the reason why now we see women becoming more and more formidable (*li hai*, 厉害). It's because of the harsh environment. It should change, but I really don't know how. All the pressure we face as women. There's nothing you can give up. So you can only adjust yourself to adapt.

Fixed in their gender role, self-resilience becomes the only way. Many, like Yangyang, are determined to set a successful example for their child.

Yangyang: Now I have a daughter, I want her to live in a more equal, respectable society. I can't change the world. The only thing I can do is not let her see me just staying at home. I want her to have the courage to change. At least I should show her a way out, I can't tell her to change her life while not being able to do it myself.

The way in which women resort to their personal strength, while expressing a sense of powerlessness to 'change the world' (Tj), reflects the impact of neoliberal rhetoric of self-making on these women, which individualises their struggle through self-improvement and self-resilience. These accounts confirm that Chinese women's issues have been reprivatised, while collective struggle is discouraged under the

alliance between the neoliberal rhetoric of personal choice and traditional gender ideology (Sun and Chen, 2015). Women are left on their own to reconcile contradictory demands. Their upbringing pushes them onto a one-way path to become the mother of success. However, it is deemed to be an uphill struggle for many.

Young women's 'egalitarian' romantic vision of their married life crashed into a rather unequal gender arrangement, which made Yuhan cry out: 'I was silly, I thought I married for ai ging (romantic love, 爱情)! None of my participants would deny that they married in the hope of an equal relationship based on love. To resolve this obvious contradiction, Jamieson (1999, p.484) insightfully points out that 'there is a general taken-for-granted assumption that a good relationship will be equal and intimate. Rather it is to suggest that creative energy is deployed in disguising inequality, not in undermining it.' The strength of individual agency is required to make peace with one's life circumstances; as Song and Hird (2014, p.252) wittily put it: 'it is a small wonder that many people reach for the comfort of stable, "whole" identities for themselves and their families.' Indeed, 'Personal relationships remain highly gendered. Men and women routinely both invoke gender stereotypes or turn a convenient blind eye to gendering processes when making sense of themselves as lovers, partners, mothers, fathers and friends' (Jamieson, 1999, p.491). Examining women's experiences in white-collar workplaces presents the other side of the coin, and further reveals how this on-going gendering process inevitably disadvantages married mothers in contemporary Chinese society.

The Gendered Reality in the Workplace

As part of the legacy of gender policy from socialist China, Chinese women's working identity is firmly established, especially in the cities, because being a full-time housewife proved almost 'unacceptable' to most of my participants. Although there has been a major shift of gender discourse in Chinese mainstream media over the last two decades, which have witnessed a revitalisation of the traditional gender values that attached women to the private sphere (Sun and Chen, 2015), China's female labour participation rate is still relatively high (63%) compared to the global average of 49.49%, despite a decrease from 73% in 1990 (The World Bank, 2017). All my female participants, apart from one new mother, Yangyang, were in full-time

employment at the time of our interviews. Yangyang was also desperately trying to return to work, as even her temporary role as a full-time housewife was giving her huge anxiety and self-doubt. Unemployment is often understood as a personal failure: falling short of the glory of the neoliberal ideal that is prevalent among my research cohort.

The fast expansion of tertiary industries under the reform has absorbed large numbers of female employees (Wang, 2000). More importantly, Zhou (2009) points out that tertiary industry diversified from 1992–2006, which created a big demand for well-qualified young professionals to work in high-value-added industries such as finance, IT and telecommunications. It is within this economic context that my participants entered the job market. Privileged through their higher education, accompanied by the mixed influence of marketisation and global capitalism, with its increasing appreciation of meritocracy at work, they all engaged in types of work that are classifiable as 'white-collar' office-based roles (Liu, J., 2017a).

Due to the limitations of my sample, it is not possible to analyse gender segregation across industries. However, my participants' narratives about their occupational choices reveal gendered connotations. The general consensus is that working in education and other customer-facing or supportive roles are better suited to women, because their gendered attributes make them more 'patient, detailed, gentle and caring', which could better serve others' needs. As Chain, a teaching assistant, says: 'our advantage as women is that kids are more willing to be close to us. We are more patient, gentle and sensitive.' Mlm, who works in a bank, says: 'Women seem to communicate better than men, so the company likes to use a woman to deal with difficult customers as she can be better understood.' A similar idea is voiced by Tina, who works in a private company's customer service department, to explain why her company prefers to recruit women, as 'we are dealing with customers and looking after them... Our job requires a lot of detailed administrative tasks; boys might not want to work like us.' There is a clear sense of a gendered allocation of work tasks. On the surface, it might looks promising that women can enter certain professions more easily than men, because of their gender. However, I argue that, without challenging these stereotypes, this only perpetuates the dominant hegemonic masculinity that constrains both men and women.

According to Judge (2002), when paid work for Chinese women first became available at the beginning of the 20th century, it was strictly confined to teaching, which remains a popular profession for women. Nine out of 31 of my female participants worked in education-related jobs, ranging from a private languagetraining institute to a state university. The feminine associations with the teaching profession and its relatively generous welfare package, including school holidays, has attracted more women than men in recent years. The media has recently reported concern over the 'serious gender imbalance among teaching staff in Chinese schools' (Zhen and Lin, 2015; Sun, 2016). The nature of education seems not to conflict with the social expectation of women's nurturing character: her motherly virtue. Arguably, it also presents them as more suitable wife material. Such a career choice also seems to gain parents' support. Atai, a schoolteacher, concludes: 'Lots of parents think that us girls working as teachers is a good thing. They would have no problem with supporting us.' Considering the overarching pressure on women to find a marriage partner, it is reasonable to assume that this may influence them to avoid jobs that might contravene the established gender norms. None of my female participants work in any profession that might endanger their respectable feminine identity.

Jerry, who is a rare male teacher in a school, also reflects on the prevailing gender norm in teaching.

Jerry: In teaching it is definitely true that women outnumber men. It suits women better, because they are more patient, caring and loving. Traditionally, we believe that to be a good teacher is like being a loving mother. I think it's better.

Kailing: Can men not be loving?

Jerry: Well, they could be. But normally, just like the saying goes, *yan fu ci mu* (严父慈母, strict father, loving mother). That's why we have fewer men working in education...Another important reason is that, compared to other jobs like working in officialdom or commercial institutions, there seems to be an invisible wall between the real society and school. Its environment is more pure for women, as teachers mainly deal with under-aged innocent students. The environment is less stressful and more pure compared to others. You

don't need to spend too much energy or time to engage in exhausting social activities acting like a creep, in order to build up *guanxi* like in other industries, which can be precarious and dangerous. You can have more time and energy for your family.

Jerry's narrative reveals the still-existing gender boundary between the domestic and public space permeating people's consciousness. His choice of language, although metaphorical, visualises how space is understood to have gendered connotations. Here, school is a space that guards students and their teachers (presumably female) against the contamination and danger of the 'real' outside world. Within the 'wall', the environment is 'less stressful and more pure' as a woman's main contact would be with 'under-aged innocent students'. Hence, it is more suitable for them. Jerry also contrasts it with working in the 'real society' outside the 'wall', such as officialdom or commerce, which are mainly male-dominated (Song and Hird, 2014; Liu, J., 2017a; Osburg, 2013), therefore 'precarious and dangerous'. Because of the 'exhausting social activities' involved, they might distract women's attention and energy from their families. Even when engaged within full-time employment, a woman's responsibility towards her family is thus still understood as primary. Moreover, the invisible wall that Jerry described echoes the elite family practice of gender segregation and the confinement of Chinese women within their family walls up until the turn of the 20th century (Croll, 1995; Mann, 2011). In spite of the dramatic changes that have happened in China over the last century, which have challenged the strict inner-outer boundary, such segregation remains marked on the Chinese psyche. Furthermore, describing other industries outside 'the wall' as 'precarious and dangerous' cannot be fully understood unless we uncover the moral discourse around women's participation in the public sphere.

Mann (2011) notes that whether or not a woman crosses the gender boundary between the 'inner' and 'outer' space is crucial in defining her reputation as either respectable (*liang*, good, 良) or pariah (*jian*, polluted and unworthy, 贱). Under such spatial division by gender in pre-modern China, women's social identity was tied to their sexuality, whereas men were judged by their occupational status (Mann, 2011, 2002). If a woman is frequently seen as exposed in public, male-dominated space,

her reputation suffers. In a relational society like China, it also tarnishes the *mianzi* of those related to her, which could create a web of social pressure on her.

Post-Maoist China has seen an increasingly sexualised femininity deployed in the economy, public discourse and commercial culture, which objectifies the female body (Zurndorfer, 2016). This resexualisation of the female body has not led to a demoralisation of women's sexual desire and autonomy in public discourse. On the contrary, despite the various strategies that professional women adopt in facing the sexualised business culture, their occupation still impacts on their private lives to different extents (Liu, J., 2008). Both Liu Jieyu (2017a) and Zhang (2001) have exposed how these sexualised workplaces exploit women's sexuality and sustain a heteronormative, masculine organisational culture. Women who are concerned about endangering their reputations would deliberately shun male-dominated homosocial bonding activities: described as 'three-step socializing' consisting of banqueting, karaoke and sauna by Liu Jieyu (2008, p.93), which are crucial in facilitating business transactions. This is what Jerry means when he refers to those extensive work-related *quanxi*-building social activities outside the education industry, which could be 'precarious and dangerous' for women, as they are costly for her reputation⁵⁶.

Mlm reports rumours around her female bank manager, saying that she slept with her boss in order to be promoted. Both Mlm and Chenchen gave examples that further testify to the prevalence of the male-centred drinking culture in the Chinese workplace, together with a rising sexual economy, which pose challenges for women who want to seize career opportunities (Osburg, 2013; Uretsky, 2016; Zurndorfer, 2016). 'It really depends on how much she can drink' (Mlm). Chenchen, a mid-level bank manager, says: 'I don't drink myself. But sometimes I do with our clients. They might force you to go to karaoke. Your boss might ask you to drink with them. In a situation like this, you have to drink.' Facing this situation, as a young unmarried woman and a mid-level manager in a male-dominated space, Chenchen faces a tricky dilemma. The deliberate utilisation of female sexualised labour in Chinese

⁵⁶ Due to the recent crackdown on corruption as part of a government campaign, people who are engaged in such activities can also face the danger of being caught up in the 'anti-corruption war' initiated by Xi's government. However, in this context danger means the potential damage to a woman's reputation.

companies to strike deals is a common practice in Chinese business culture. For example, recruiting women working in sales-related departments is a case in point, as well as using young women as company to 'flavour' the business drinking culture. This might give women the chance to advance in their careers, but too many contacts with male clients often tarnish their reputation as wife material. My male participants' comments on their female colleagues reveal the moral judgement imposed on 'women of this kind'.

Adong: Oh...gosh...those women who work too hard for work...too open...she accompanies men drinking till late, not returning home. Even if there is no serious transgression, she does it for work. She might believe she is very advanced in the workplace. But we still think she's too low. She has a sort of false confidence, always tries to express her opinion and believes herself capable of achieving at work. But her behaviour shows her limited EQ⁵⁷. No matter how hard she tries, realistically the workplace is generally a male-dominated space. So when a woman doesn't conform to gender norms in that space and thinks differently, she is very likely to face exclusion.

Adong's narrative indicates how a woman's career ambition is judged by the condescending attitudes of her male colleagues. Firstly, she is immoral because of her efforts to succeed in a male-centred working culture and not returning to her own space (home) early enough. Her wit and confidence, which challenge the gendered expectations of a submissive woman, make her a second-class citizen under the male gaze. If she does not follow the rules of the male territory, she deserves punishment: exclusion. Here, the hostile attitude of her male colleagues becomes explicit, when a woman does not wisely display her assumed gentle and submissive role. Adong also comments on those *nü qiang ren* (female strong men, 女强人) and tomboys in his workplace as:

⁵⁷ EQ, (Emotional Quotient) refers to one's emotional intelligence. The English initials have been incorporated into the Chinese language. Howard Gardner, an influential Harvard theorist, describes EQ as the level of one's ability to understand other people, what motivates them and how to work cooperatively with them.

Workwise, they are very hard working, often too much. They're too stubborn. Many remain single even into their 30s or 40s. I think their chances of ever getting married are slim. Their personality defect leads to their marriage defect. Their EQ is too low...

Apparently, a woman's career competency alone can never redeem her failure under the male scrutiny without a 'successful marriage'. Describing such women as having a 'defect', Adong asserts his male superiority over them. Meanwhile, stating that these women lack Emotional Intelligence (EQ) because they do not behave in the way he expects them to, he claims his authority to try to push them back into women's place: being second-class citizens in the workplace. Another male participant, Zen, explicitly states that he cannot accept dating women who work in sales.

Zen: I don't like that, they're involved in too much socialising and drinking. I want her life to be simple, not running around outside all the time. I don't want her to be in contact with the dirty things in society. I want her to be responsible for our family, to love me. So not involved in those...I mean, to protect her.

It becomes obvious that a woman's active engagement in a male-dominated work culture will not only risk her reputation, but could also damage her marriage prospects. While many women tend to avoid job positions that could jeopardise these, male bosses who want to assert their moral credentials often deliberately prefer men over women to work with. Both Lulu and Gingko, who work in higher education, report similar stories that illustrate the reality.

Lulu: If I were a man, I would have been given an official title as section chef or division chef alongside my academic title. But in a public service unit like us, they rarely select women to promote...partly because women are not as convenient as men in business-related activities. Rumours will spread fast and wide when women participate in power: she slept her way up, etc. I can feel it by hearing rumours about our two current female bosses.

The statement that 'women are not as convenient as men in business-related activities' not only indicates that women are understood as physically weak, but also

illuminates how female sexuality is utilised in these activities, which a decent woman should shun. Gingko: 'It's very troublesome for women to travel with their male bosses. Rumours will start. There are pressures from his family and society to avoid this. Also a boy could defend himself better in the drinking activities.' L also states similar reasons to avoid recruiting female secretaries for some CEOs. Here, a woman's sexuality at work is read as a moral hazard for her decent male bosses, or simply as not practical because she might refuse to participate in the male drinking culture, which could jeopardise her reputation.

Tina, a pretty woman in her 20s, told me that her boss, in the name of 'training', deliberately put her in the sales department to serve important clients, instead of the technical department she had applied for. Tina clarifies that, although it is a common practice to drink with clients in business, this is not the case for her. She emphasises that her future plan is still to transfer to the technical department, because 'my personality is shy'. Tina's boss's decision to place her in sales and her own plan to transfer to a non-client-facing role, together with her emphasis on not drinking with clients, shows that professional women like her need to consciously tread a fine line to defend their reputation in the workplace.

These risks explain the general consensus among my female participants that it is important to avoid the tragic trajectory of being seen as a 'female strong man' who often fails in her family life. This in turn decreases women's chances of career progression, and solidifies men's bureaucratic power at work. It also partially explains the commonly observed vertical gender segregation within institutions and across industries that concentrates women on the 'sticky floor', or means that they cannot break the 'glass ceiling'. The 2017 Global Gender Gap Report shows that Chinese women earn on average 22% less than men, and China was ranked 100th out of 144 countries (Li, 2018a). Statistics from the ACWF (2011) also show that women's income is only 67.3% of their male peers', even in urban areas. The changes in women's employment, such as the public-sector retrenchment, were a major force driving income inequality in post-restructuring urban China (Ding, Dong and Li, 2009). Inequality at work partially explains women's financial subordination to men in general and the gendered arrangements of family life. The official voices seem to suggest their support for such an arrangement, as a wedding manual given

out to newly-wed couples at Beijing's registry office says: 'a wise woman should not be dominant at home for the sake of her children's correct upbringing, she should erect her husband as a strong and powerful figure to rely on and a role model for the children' (China Digital Times, 2018).

Both education and office-based positions in public institutions are attractive to women. Such institutions are known for their much-desired stability and more generous welfare packages, including maternity leave, compared to private enterprises (Jacka, 1990; Zuo and Bian, 2001). Hence, they become much-sought-after jobs among university graduates, despite their relatively modest salaries. However, under the economic reform, the competition to enter such institutions is becoming fierce; the large number of people who register for the national civil service exam is a good example (BBC, 2016). Muyu works in such an institution.

My job as you know, like in all public institutions, it's very stable. I do the same thing every day. It's not as challenging as private enterprises. Staying here might mean I will be the same after 10 years. The hospital does not sack people easily. I can basically stay as long as I wish.

As shown in Muyu's account, it is the stability and relatively less intense working environment that make it a desirable place for women. Among my 31 female participants, 14 work in such institutions. Muyu frankly states: 'Doing research like us, men are not willing to come.' (Why?) 'The salary is too low. They all prefer to join private companies, because men face pressure to support their family.'

The male main breadwinner model seems to be taken as default, which creates a pattern of constraints on women's career choices and earnings. On the other hand, it indicates an almost sanctified male dominance in contemporary China. While it is deemed necessary by my male participants to have a working wife, 'I don't expect too much from them, but some financial help would reduce my pressure' (Jerry, male). Xiaozhu, who works in the same government office as her husband, admits that her family cannot afford her to become a full-time housewife. Workplaces like these could be a desirable compromise for women. Paradoxically, the female concentration in such 'suitable' positions often intensifies the gender discrimination

against women in these places, both through recruitment processes and promotion opportunities.

Muyu told me that, in her research lab, there is only one man among the ten interns. All the female interns either hold a master's degree or a PhD, whereas the man only has a bachelor's degree. Muyu noted that, in the recruitment process, companies often deliberately reduce the requirements to favour male applicants. The profiles of the interns illustrate this point.

Well, if they recruit women, this means they invest in them. They might work for one or two years to the age that is ideal for bearing children. After giving birth, they might leave their position. For my boss, it's a waste of the department's resources. I discovered that my boss really values this one male intern and invests heavily in him. He has even been told by our boss that he will be sponsored to read for his master's degree and referred to famous supervisors in the Chinese academy of science in top universities. [Wry smile] Then when he comes back, he can take over a managerial role in our department.

Atai also testifies to the same male privilege in promotion opportunities.

In front of the bosses, male teachers have more advantages...Maybe it's because our school already has too many female teachers. So they prefer some male teachers. Because women will inevitably face the problem of pregnancy and maternity leave, it's too messy. They [school bosses] will think it negatively affects their work.

Unsurprisingly, all my participants reported that more men than women occupy positions of power within their organisations. While men are highly valued in female-majority workplaces and are often promoted quickly, their female counterparts often face marginalisation and stigmatisation when they enter male-dominated workplaces. It is not only women's naturalised motherhood and primary responsibility towards the family that disadvantage them, but also the prevailing view that women are naturally the 'weaker sex', which further confines women to second-class citizen status in the workplace.

The Weaker Sex

I commonly hear my participants, of both genders, describe the differences between men and women as: men are physically stronger, women are weaker; men are more logical and rational, women are sensitive and emotional. Male supremacy is apparent in these narratives, which are used to justify discrimination against women at work. L said: 'Our company now prefers to recruit men. We currently have more male interns. Because they indeed have clearer logic, girls are more careful, but they are physically weaker.' She is physically weaker and less capable, and hence requires both protection and leeway from men.

Atai: Female emotion fluctuates; it's not good at work. I heard our boss say we need some male balance at school. Indeed in many scenarios, you need men to do certain tasks, like taking students on excursions, or carrying bags and stuff, organising certain programmes, etc. Things female teachers can't do.

It is certainly not that women are unable to perform the tasks mentioned, but the stereotypical belief in a weaker female body makes women like Atai draw a naturalised gender boundary between tasks and internalised misogyny. Gingko points out how this belief affects her mobility as a female researcher.

Being a woman, it certainly limits the places you can go and the things you can do for research. Certain places could be dangerous for women to go alone, that makes everyone worried [she recalls her research trip to Russia]...Sometimes we need to climb trees or drill the soil, which requires energy and strength. Women are not as convenient as men.

Gingko mentioned later that these challenges could be resolved by using machines. But her initial concern reveals the underlying belief in women as the weaker sex and how this makes her feel that she should avoid certain tasks, which in turn could restrict her career opportunities.

Not every woman experiences being perceived as the weaker sex as a negative thing. Often it appears benign or projects an illusion of 'female privilege', and hence deflects women's resistance. Atai shares her experience of how rebellious male

teenagers at school would often give *mianzi* to female teachers and not make their life difficult, as a typical chivalrous behaviour to display their manliness. Similarly, Tina, Lijun and L all talk about how aggressive male clients would treat female sales staff more gently than male sales staff, which has been harnessed by the company to recruit more women into such roles. Other common examples include giving men more responsibilities than women at work in the name of 'taking care of female employees'. Viviankuku mentioned her experience as a trainee doctor who receives fewer harsh comments from her male supervisor compared to her male colleagues: 'He would be much stricter towards boys at work, whereas for girls he tends to expect less and be more gentle.' Benign as these gestures seem to be, essentially what lies underneath is the chauvinist assumption of male strength. Gentle treatment implies fragility, hence weakness; lower expectations mean fewer opportunities in the workplace.

The Cost of Maternity

Looking through a gendered lens at organisations, as Acker (1990, 1992) proposed, illuminates the gendered assumptions embedded in an organisation's contracts and documents, which indicate an ideal worker as 'male'. Meanwhile, gender is produced and reproduced through these organisational practices. Similar practices have also been observed in Taiwan (Chin, 2018). These ideal male workers possess the most high-powered, high-paying jobs. Striving for career success is matched with an ideal middle-class white-collar masculine imagery, while his family is taken care of by his wife (Liu, J., 2017a; Hird, 2008; Song and Hird, 2014). Under a hyper-competitive neoliberal market economy, everything is guided by cost and measured by efficiency. Well-qualified individuals free from other obligations are the best suited to compete in such a job market. This delivers an advantage to men and young unmarried women, whereas it disadvantages married women with family obligations.

It is generally agreed that the discrimination women experience at work is due to the understanding that it is their 'nature' is to bear and care for children. Companies carefully calculate the cost of female maternity and avoid hiring 'high-risk' female employees, whom they believe might become pregnant 'too soon'. Examples from Atai and Muyu presented earlier both make this point. L, who works for a Shanghai-

based HR agency to select candidates for companies, also shares her knowledge on this:

L: During interviews, it is for certain that a woman will be asked whether she has a boyfriend, when she will marry, whether or not she plans to have children. This is for sure. Such cases are everywhere. My friend, who is married without children, simply cannot get a job. The thing is, if you're married with children, it's OK. If you're married without children, this is the worst. If you're unmarried, they'll ask you when you will marry. Your interviewer will directly ask you.

Kailing: How about if I say I have no plans to marry?

L: Then your chances might be greater than being married without children, but smaller than married with children. Some companies even ask you to sign an agreement to promise that you won't give birth within two years. A real example is my friend: in the end she signed the agreement. She says she will plan her pregnancy in the third year. Such an agreement is illegal. Even if she becomes pregnant within the two years, her company still can't sack her. But it won't make her life any easier in the company.

Due to such practices, when women come to the age when they need to give birth, it might be easier for them to quit their job than to stay with the company. Although all but one of my participants held a full-time job at the time of our interview, it is widely acknowledged that women's marital status and pregnancy plans are commonly questioned during the recruitment process, even if they are not directly rejected because of it. The logic behind interviewers' questions reaffirms that motherhood has been read into each woman as their 'natural' life course. It seems hard to conceive a different trajectory. For women, this requires a series of careful calculations: what kind of job to take, when to marry, whom to marry, when to give birth and how it can all fit together. Such calculations could involve a heavy personal cost.

Lulu is divorced with a five-year-old daughter. She recalls the memory of an abortion in order to maintain her career prospects.

We had just registered our marriage. Meanwhile, I started my first job in July. In August, I found myself pregnant. I told my mom on the phone. She harshly

told me off, as both my parents expect a lot of my career. They thought, you just started to work and now you're pregnant. What does your boss think about you? It will ruin your career! They reasoned with me. Although I was married back then, and it was morally ok for me to become pregnant...Maybe this is a classic example of the choice between family and career. If I had chosen to keep the baby, I would not have been able to come this far in my career. Because my boss would have minded me taking maternity leave right after I started working. It might have taken me a long time to make up for it. So in the end I decided to abort.

Although it was morally acceptable to be pregnant because Lulu was married at that time, as a new employee, the timing of her pregnancy was problematic. If she took maternity leave before she had 'earned' her recognition in the workplace first, it would be highly likely leave her disadvantaged for future promotion opportunities. She would have fallen into the stereotypical impression about women, who do not take their paid job seriously and prioritise family life over work. It is worth pointing out that, without a brother, like many other only daughters, Lulu's parents expect her to 'fulfil their career expectation of a son'. It is not that her parents do not want grandchildren; my data have shown the opposite. In this scenario, the timing of her pregnancy was critical. In a society where things are largely managed based on relationships, despite the law that protects women's maternity leave, it is the unspoken rules that matter: how to carefully manage the relationship with her boss to prove her competency before asking for any rights was a decision that needed careful calculation. Lulu's multiple consideratins included her age, career plans and family's expectations. Her parents' expectations for her career achievement clash with her mother-in-law's interest in her producing a son as soon as possible. Lulu's abortion has left a heavy mark in her memory, and it also contributed to her divorce.

Physically I suffered a lot, including two subsequent miscarriages until I finally had my daughter. However, it did help me to gain the trust of my boss. He is very satisfied with my work performance and showed tremendous support when later I got pregnant. For the whole year of my pregnancy with my daughter, I wasn't given any tasks at work. My boss really supported me in that way.

Lulu's choice to have an abortion was not an overreaction for a woman who has career ambitions. Muyu works for a state-owned research hospital in Shanghai. She reported a female colleague whose research career was terminated for this very reason.

A was born in '87 and joined the hospital one year before me. She was part of a research project. But she suddenly got pregnant and wanted to keep it. Then our boss was not happy. They moved her to a featherbed post. It's good for her as a mom, because it gives her plenty of spare time to take care her family and kids. But objectively speaking, her research career is finished.

Without the concrete implementation of laws that are said to protect women's rights at work while the state is rolling back public support within a cultural system that naturalises gender roles, discrimination against women is normalised and varies in its forms.

Zhangsan: For example, say you're pregnant and you need some rest. According to the law, they can't sack you. Well, fine...I'll just give you an example of how it is a in real-life situation. I couldn't ask you to work hard, but you can do some simple tasks, like taking notes for meetings. Easy, right? How about clients smoking in the meeting, can you stay there? Most likely the woman would choose to quit her job. Situations like this show that there are many other ways to discriminate against women without breaching the law.

From pregnancy to maternity, women are expected to have one to two years when they are not able to fully concentrate on work. Although the official maternity leave was 98 days at the time of the interviews⁵⁸, women's primary responsibility for family life constantly distracts their time and energy away from work. The newly introduced paternity leave is far from established and is much shorter than maternity leave and also varies across regions (PCEncyclopedia, 2017). Along with the replacement of the One-Child Policy with the Two-Child Policy since 2016, there have been more days added to women's maternity leave for them to have a second child, whereas there are no significant changes to paternity leave (PcEncyclopedia, 2017). The

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⁵⁸ There has been a slight increase along with the implementation of the Two-Child Policy that started in 2016. The exact number of days varies across regions.

current regulations indicate that it is the mother rather than the father who is the primary caregiver. The current policy set-up does not promote a fair share of childcare between couples. L's comment shows how paternity leave is understood within the popular discourse.

Shanghai only has three days [paternity leave]. In Beijing, the father can take a one-month leave from his wife's maternity leave. But how can this be fair for the woman? She needs more rest and the baby needs its mother more! It rarely happens. There was one case, in which our whole office were shocked and wondered 'how can he take away his wife's holiday!'

This indicates how the public perceives a man taking paternity leave: He is exploiting his wife! It also reflects the public perception of the gendered division of labour within the family. In collective societies like China, an individual's commitment to long working hours is often read as self-sacrifice to serve the needs of the family, hence leading to the family's appreciation and support (Yang et al., 2000; Spector et al., 2004, 2007). Becoming a father reinforces a Chinese man's symbolic responsibility as the main breadwinner for his family. It therefore pushes him harder to pursue his career progression, whereas childbirth reinforces women's domestic role, which further consolidates the invisible inner-outer gendered division of labour that disadvantages women's career progression. Muyu shares a vivid example at work:

It creates a huge gap for women. Our boss [male] in our lab often comments on a very capable female researcher B, who is 32 years old, married without children. He would say: 'wouldn't it be perfect if B was a man?' It's time for her to have children at the age of 32. From his point of view, once she starts to have kids, she won't be able to focus on the research project. It's a common belief among the company leadership. So they will start to prefer to recruit more men in the future.

It seems logical that, for employers, it is much more cost-efficient to hire men. L explains how women's maternity is perceived as a burden for companies:

It's a form of discrimination. But for companies, they also have no better choice. I'm in contact with lots of companies. Because in China, from pregnancy to maternity, it affects a woman's efficiency and time commitment

to work. Her company also needs to find somebody to cover for her. What to do with the new person after her return? It's a managerial challenge that lots of companies don't want to face. During breast-feeding, she also has one hour more break each day for up to a year. I've seen so many women change their focus after having a child. They need to go home early, they can't work overtime, etc. So I understand why companies don't want that: 'I recruit you, but you can't work for me.'

In the Chinese labour market, competition is notoriously tough. It is understandable that female employees often feel that they do not have the bargaining power to negotiate with their employers on these matters, not to mention the lack of genuine trade union support that represents the interests of Chinese workers (Chen, 2003; Bai, 2011)⁵⁹. Personal compromises, as much as her individual circumstances allow, become the last resort. However, even if a woman is willing to make compromises for her career, she might not be given the chance due to the widespread perception of women as less competitive workers (Zuo and Bian, 2001).

Muyu: Like me, I'm quite confident about my research ability. But the disadvantage for me is that I'm at the age to get married and have children. Then it would be difficult for my career to develop...It seems really hard to change!! Like my colleague B mentioned earlier. She can only postpone her pregnancy, making compromises herself. It's impossible to ask your *danwei* to change for you. This is the real dilemma for a female researcher.

Consolidating Male-Centred Space

All my participants work in tertiary industries, and the majority are in private firms. Although state-run institutions often provide better job security than private firms, individual employees still feel powerless to confront the unfair treatment they experience. Muyu's narrative above is a case in point. The sense of competiveness permeating the job market makes employees feel that they can only adapt to survive. Unpaid overtime work is a commonly accepted practice according to my participants.

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⁵⁹ The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU; 中国全国总工会) is a party organisation under the CCP's rule. Historically, it has taken the role of stopping workers' protests and has sided with the party agenda.

For instance, Lijun works in an internationally renowned accountancy firm in Shanghai and reports that on average she works 70 hours per week. 'On average it's from 9:30am to 12 midnight...sometimes it can also finish at 4 or 5 am and last like that for about a week.'

Lisi, who works for an investment firm in Shanghai, reports that her work includes frequent business-related travel to work with different clients. Apart from long-distance travel, she needs to work long hours, from 8 am to 1 am, including weekends and holidays, without any overtime pay. When asked whether such working hours without pay is illegal, Lisi and Zhangsan both laughed and said: 'Do you think China is governed by law?' Zhangsan, who works for a law firm in Shanghai, says that they never discuss such legal matters like this at work, but she shares a very similar working pattern to Lisi. They both agree that the current job market does not give much bargaining power to individual employees.

Zhangsan: Everyone knows that China has loads of people. All your predecessors worked like that, and there are plenty of others who work harder than you. You can only adapt. If you have a better choice, you can leave...My job is project based. Our boss won't ask you directly to work overtime; as long as you finish everything before the deadline, nobody forces you to work overtime.

Zhangsan summarises the general consensus among employees in the Chinese workplace: one can only adapt or leave. Without a functioning system, like independent labour unions, to protect worker's rights (Chen, 2003; Bai, 2011), individuals are often left to their own devices to battle. Men as the 'breadwinner' of the family, could easily fit into the imagery of an ideal neoliberal employee, whereas women's disadvantage stemming from maternity appears unavoidable.

Moreover, apart from keeping up the competitive pace at work, women often express worries about their appearance as a result of their heavy workload. The pressure on Chinese women to maintain a certain appearance is made explicit in women's consumption within the beauty industry (Wen, 2013; Yang, 2011). Lulu shares how this affects women in computer programming:

It's not at all because women are less smart than men! We are very competent in writing excellent programs with minor mistakes, and are often better than men. But the problem is that the social cost for us is huge compared to men. I have a colleague who is an excellent programmer, a PhD. Sadly her work speeds up her ageing! This is not an issue for boys. They could sit there for hours without any worries whatsoever about their skin, body shape or the radiation. For me, these worries kill me daily. I ask myself all the time while programming: how many more dark spots am I gonna get today? For this very reason, many women will eventually change to other, less intense roles.

Underneath these self-policing behaviours is the gendered judgement of personal success:

Lulu: The same eight hours programming, the cost for women is high. People would criticise and ask what happened to her that made her this ugly and unkempt. It's not an issue for men at all. Being pretty is a woman's role in society. She needs this to maintain her social status.

When talking about her female bank managers, Lily also makes a similar value judgement: 'There are several managers [women]. It's too stressful for them to manage both family and work. You can see them quickly gain wrinkles after taking the office. It's too obvious.' It is irrelevant whether or not a woman gains wrinkles quicker than a man, but the emphasis on maintaining her appearance as 'young and pretty' illuminates the different gendered focus, and how her success is judged. Paradoxically, in order to survive in a competitive workplace, women often need to work extra hard to prove their worth. To maintain her gendered asset, youthful beauty, she might need to refrain from overwork. This is indeed a dilemma that she faces, not to mention that not working could also make her less attractive.

Zuo and Bian (2001) explain that a man's work is for fulfilling his obligation as the breadwinner of the family, whereas a woman's paid employment is seen as an extension of her womanhood. According to Zuo and Bian (2001), the high social value that women place on paid employment over and above its economic value means that professional women could have more flexibility to retreat into their family

life or make career changes if their job loses its extrinsic or intrinsic benefits. This seems to be true among my female participants, as they often regard such 'choice' as a good thing to have by asserting man's symbolic breadwinner role. Although it does present women with limited agency to gain a certain flexibility, the choice she seems to have is in fact shaped by a wider social and economic structure that leaves her little choice. For example, Muyu frankly states that she would like to use pregnancy as an excuse to move to a less important role in order to avoid unwanted work tasks. Similarly, Yiyi excuses herself from the main financial responsibility for the family.

My advantage is that I don't need to be scared of failing. Because I don't need to consider raising the family, as my husband is responsible for making sure there is money coming in, his job needs to be stable. So I have more flexibility, I can choose and I can fail. But he can't. But the difficulty for me is that it's hard to balance my time. I can't fully focus on what I want to do [setting up a business] while looking after our son.

Yiyi's account illustrates that such gendered flexibility comes with its own limitations. Without challenging the structures at work, these coping strategies can only provide a temporary remedy for women's condition. By doing so, they reinforce gender stereotypes and perpetuate the existing gender hierarchy between men and women. Moreover, let us not forget that women's 'choices' and decisions relating to the 'balance' achieved by individual women with respect to the market and caring work is intricately shaped by both normative and structural constraints (Crompton and Lyonette, 2005).

Conclusion

Looking across the boundary between family and workplace, it becomes obvious that women's domestic responsibilities retain their attention and occupy their labour. On the other hand, within the neoliberal economy, it has become increasingly difficult for women to compete with men, as shown in the worsening situation faced by working mothers. Facing a conventional gender discourse that re-privatises womanhood in reform China (Sun and Chen, 2015), women are left on their own to face an ever-more-individualised struggle with a powerful system that constrains them, and they

face both internal and external battles generated by the often conflicting and multi-layered demands from the family, the market and the state. It is not surprising that women of this cohort can feel bewildered and stuck between the old and the new. This explains why many of my female participants would 'prefer' an easier middle ground: settling for 'a more relaxed job after marriage and childbirth' (Muyu). Even for women who have career ambitions and capabilities, the current harsh reality in the Chinese workplace might make 'getting married and prioritising family' seem an easier 'choice'. Women experience high stress and multiple demands in a neoliberal economy, with few promotion opportunities and success mainly measured by domestic life. The reputation risks involved in participating in male-dominated sexualised bonding activities further marginalise them in the workplace and demand different coping strategies so that it is easier to retreat to the home.

The apparently simple choice for women is never simple. Under the current wider cultural and structural constraints upheld by the party-state's agenda for social stability, I have revealed how heterosexual marriage becomes both a haven and a site of struggle for Chinese women. Giving the husband his symbolic breadwinning role while holding onto her paid work as an extension of her womanhood becomes an 'easy' middle ground, and is where most women tend to stand. Santos and Harrell (2016, p.34) accurately point out that 'Patriarchy in its various forms (historical and contemporary) is never just private or public; it is always both private and public.' In contemporary Chinese society, we are witnessing increasingly entangled intersections between private negotiations and public dialogues at different levels. While I do not wish to deny that there is some room for women's agency to manoeuvre within these constraints, the question I ask is: how much flexibility do women actually have when facing a transformed patriarchy, as it is women who are expected to 'do it all'?

Chapter 8

Concluding Discussion: Living with Contradictions

Around the same time as I was completing my thesis, back home in China, the 2018 spring festival, the Chinese New Year, was being celebrated. As a long-standing tradition of the CCP, the state Council of the People's Republic of China (CPC) organised a celebration gathering at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, where President Xi gave a speech that contained important instructions to the Chinese people (Xinhua News, 2018). The next day, ten golden verses were summarised by CCTV news and broadcast nationwide (Yangshi News, 2018). Within the speech, Xi emphasised the importance of *fendou* (奋斗) in determining a meaningful and *xing fu* (happy, 幸福) life. Fendou is often translated as struggle or striving. The phrase fendou is often used on political banners or slogans that motivate Chinese people to participate in various national rejuvenation and collective projects⁶⁰. Its use is also popular in encouraging young people's individual striving for a better life in the market economy, as was captured in a Chinese TV series released in 2007 entitled Fen dou⁶¹. Xi claims that the new times belong to those who fendou for a better future, and explains that such struggle and striving is not only difficult, requiring perseverance and purification of one's soul, but also long term; it might take a few generations, but will eventually bring rewards through a courageous and sacrificial spirit. More importantly, he reiterates that such *fendou* is crucial for the wider collective: the happiness of the family and the prosperity of the nation. It was made clear in his speech that the relationship between individual struggles, the family and the nation are tied closely together as one unity, as he calls on Chinese people to unite their love for the family with love for the nation. He ended his speech by claiming that China has achieved a great leap from 'catching up with the times' to 'taking the lead of the times'. All this rhetoric can easily make one feel lucky to live at such a great time in Chinese history, since the ideological discourse used by the CCP is well known for its rich use of emotional and 'spiritual' language. The speech

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⁶⁰ A good example of this usage is Hsu's (1995) book *The Rise of Modern China*, which includes a detailed account of China's difficult transformation from a traditional universal empire to a modern nation state. The book's title in Chinese is *Zhongguo de fendou* (China's *fendou*).

⁶¹ Directed by Zhao Baogang, the series realistically depicts the lives of six new graduates of the post-80s generation in Beijing and their *fendou*. It was well-received by the post-80s audience.

effectively feeds into the Chinese national sentiment and longing for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, which is taught to all Chinese students at school. However, I wonder what role contemporary Chinese women are expected to play in this grand narrative of a revitalised Chinese nation state?

Carrying on China's political tradition of linking a well-governed family to a wellgoverned state, the current CCP government reiterates the importance of the wellmanaged conventional heterosexual married family to an orderly state, which maintains the family as the basic cell of society (Sigley, 2001). As Gow's (2017) analysis of the core socialist values promoted by the CCP reveals, popular Confucian concepts have been reinserted into contemporary state governance in order to facilitate its public acceptance. Wielander (2018, p.9) points out that 'the CCP does not only wish to rule by coercion. Winning over the hearts and minds of people through carefully chosen discourse that resonates with the public sentiment was an important factor in its ascendancy to power, and has remained a key feature of the mechanics of CCP rule.' Within such a framework, advocating the importance of family is both effective and efficient for state governance. It is effective because creating an emotionally charged ideological discourse around family simply amplifies the widely cherished Chinese affection for *jia* (home, 家), which is already deeply embedded in the Chinese psyche. It is efficient, because by placing a happy, harmonious and unified family at centre stage for Chinese people to celebrate, admire and fendou for, people's attention is essentially shifted from the public to the private, which helps to alleviate the pressure on the state to provide for public welfare. It also reflects the state's concern with political stability. Chinese rural migrant men's reluctance to fight the injustices they experience at work is a good example of such a shift of attention (Choi and Peng, 2016). Choi (2018) explains that these men's endurance of injustice and hardship at work is because, for them, work is just a means to an end, the family⁶². Therefore, family functions to mitigate potential social conflicts. Such a state-sponsored discourse, as articulated in Xi's recent speech, masks the individual suffering resulting from widening social inequality and even further legitimises individual struggle by praising its sacrificial

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⁶² This is not to claim that Chinese workers do not resist at all, as spontaneous workers' protests and individual suicides in Chinese iphone factories has demonstrated otherwise. See more (Smith and Pun, 2006; Pun et al., 2010, p.138; Fullerton, 2018).

nature in contributing to the family and the state, with a promise of future reward. A bright future that is deemed to arrive through *fendou* is not merely a distant heaven that is worth dying for but, by claiming that *fendou ben shen jiu shi yi zhong xing fu* (*fen dou* itself is a kind of happiness, 奋斗本身就是一种幸福), Xi is comforting the Chinese people by reminding them that happiness is at hand, regardless of how far they are from their dreams. Following Xi's interpretation of happiness, Chinese people should not only strive hard for future happiness but should also feel happy throughout their struggles for it. This reaffirms Wielander's (2018, p.11) argument that 'happiness seems to have become a new marker of high *suzhi*, if understood as an inner quality, which is cultivated and perfected, regardless of the individual's material circumstances'. Individuals, therefore, once they adopt the correct positive attitude, will always happily *fendou* for the goals that suit the party-state's approved agenda.

In Ahmed's critical study, *The Promise of Happiness* (2010, p.28), she argues that the judgement about certain objects as the cause of happiness has already been made and is circulated 'as social goods before we "happen" upon them'. Therefore, we anticipate happiness's arrival once we are in proximity to the 'right' objects, which motivates us to obtain these objects. Furthermore, our expectations of what these objects will deliver will indeed influence how they affect us, including the disappointment if we fail to obtain them. In recent years, yiding yao xing fu (must be happy!, 一定要幸福) has become a popular phrase used by young people to congratulate each other at weddings. It illuminates how happiness is conceived in relation to marriage in Chinese young people's minds. Marriage, in this case, has become the right object that has been obtained, a destination arrived at, happiness incarnate. Therefore, the individuals within it, must *yiding yao* (be happy). It also serves as a visible prize that everyone should strive to obtain. In the Chinese context, the party-state defines what makes for happiness in a family, and it has the power to promote this vision through the state-controlled media. This approach is evident in the state-run campaign of 'looking for the most beautiful family' (Zhang, 2017b), as well as the very recent campaign led by Xi, 'holding your mother's hand' (Koetse, 2018). Its effects are visible among my participants, in their desire for a *mei* man jiating (beautiful and complete family, 美满家庭), like the young men featured in Liu Fengshu's study (2017). The ideal middle class lifestyle that relies on solid

economic foundation and is displayed through heterosexual family life has become the exemplary norm my participants aspired to embody. Consequently, state governing power is realised through stirring up public desires, whilst it presents itself as understanding and benign, as though things are just 'normal'.

Although the normative core of tradition is the inertial force that maintains society in a particular form over time (Shils, 1971), Bakken (2000) made it clear that norms are social entities that are available for active manipulation and construction. The norm establishes itself as an order, through which the whole of society is defined. Foucault (1979) has claimed that this norm functions at the level of 'micro power' in the 'disciplinary society', which relates to the subtle disciplinary techniques built upon it. This is particular pertinent in contemporary Chinese society, where the party-state is both keen and apt to effectively manipulate and construct the norm through its propaganda, serving its political agenda. As Bakeen (2000) notes, 'a discipline based on the norm is more durable than one based on outer force only because it seeks to bind people to society with their own ideas', therefore it is less likely to provoke mass resistance (2000, p.214). Moreover, the deployment of exemplary norms has long been observed as a disciplinary technology in China. Exemplarity refers to a higher standard set from above. Bakken (2000, p.218) believes that this is especially true when it comes to moral-political education in China, where 'the minute construction of standards is explicitly linked to the discourse on human quality'. This can be illustrated by my participants' great efforts to embody the exemplary gender norm as gao suzhi (high-quality), middle-class urban citizens, whose collective socio-economic position is erected as an exemplary norm for others to admire and strive towards. For individuals and their families, it is not only the social recognition and the sense of pride that positively encourage them to embody this exemplary norm; the fear of falling out of its glory also carries much coercive power, especially considering how it affects the *mianzi* of the individual and their family. All these examples illustrate the importance of maintaining one's 'success profile' as part of the established middle class in conducting a privileged Chinese life.

I embarked on this research in the hope of understanding more about the lives of urban Chinese women born under the One-Child Policy, as well as the society that has shaped their experiences. These women have benefited in many ways from China's economic reform and are believed to be in a privileged social position. Unlike their mothers' generation, who grew up during the political upheaval of the Cultural Revolution when educational opportunities were scarce, if not completely disrupted, these young women have enjoyed unprecedented familial educational investment and opportunities. Many have even received higher education abroad, which has arguably made them the best-educated group of women throughout China's long history. These women, who reside in China's prosperous cities filled with abundant material goods and services and work in comfortable white-collar professions desired by many, form an important part of the privileged urban middle class. However, their privilege does not necessarily make them rensheng ying jia (a winner in life, 人生赢家), a term that has gradually replaced chenggong renshi (successful person, 成功人士) online. The former is frequently used to describe an individual who displays balanced family and career achievements according to societal standards, whereas the latter only refers to being successful in one particular area. One typical example of when a woman is called a winner in life was when a girlfriend of mine recently posted a family photo online showing her husband and their two children, one boy and one girl, shopping together. Attached to this photo is her expression of gratitude for her husband's companionship. Underneath, one of her friends has commented: 'you have become a rensheng yingjia!' As a mother of two children, encouraged by the Two-Child Policy, who managed to keep her youthful looks and good figure whilst working in a non-career job at a state institution with a modest but stable income, my friend's display of her happy and complete family life fits into the gendered imagery of a *meiman jiating* (happy and complete family, 美满家庭), which is aspired to by many. The display of her domestic life in this picture has evoked the perception of a life winner in contemporary China. I find that the term rensheng yingjia captures the essence of the daily struggles that Chinese men and women experience. It clearly reflects the idea that, in contemporary Chinese society, life for many people is a grand competition and an ongoing struggle to obtain a set of prescribed prizes, throughout which an individual's life is ranked according to the quality it displays; therefore, this motivates them to keep striving for the set goals.

My participants' choice of adhering to the conservative gender norms focused around marriage reflects their class position and their desire to become properly respectable middle-class. They are encouraged to embody these norms as

exemplars of 'success stories' that dominate public desires, including their own, and conversely restrict their choices. Their determination for gendered success starts with their absolute rejection of single motherhood when they express the importance of following the social norm of marriage to avoid the shame of being perceived as failure (see Chapter Four). On the other hand, voluntarily remaining childless is still largely viewed as 'abnormal' if not unimaginable (see Chapters Five and Six). Women's sexual activity and reproduction are legitimised through an almost universal marriage norm. Heterosexual marriage as the site to represent a 'complete' life, under the state endorsed medical norm of 'high quality birth' (优生优育) exacerbates tension and stress for well-educated women as they strive to conform. Despite the emotional stress and tension within their families, particularly with their parents, both women and their parents feel the need to comply, as reflected by the naturalisation of motherhood within heterosexual marriage (see Chapter Five). The biologically essentialist view of sex differences is rigidly grounded in heterosexist assumptions, and can be easily found in official discourses presented as scientific 'facts', which are widely circulated among the public through schools, the media and medical institutions (Evans, 1997). This understanding of sexual differences consolidates the view that women are the weaker sex, which normalises and justifies the gendered daily encounters between men and women today. For example, my participants express a 'natural' preference for a stronger partner and they deliberately perform and display a certain type of femininity that highlights masculine strength in their dating practices (Chapter Six), as well as accepting the gendered division of labour within the family and at the workplace (Chapter Seven). All fit into the post-socialist understanding of a complete happy life that sits on a naturalised gender order.

Liu Fengshu (2008, 2017) and Liu Jieyu (2007) both point out that the younger generation expresses a powerful longing for personal success and views the middle-class lifestyle as the norm for a good life. Growing up in a child-centred environment under the One-Child Policy, these women, together with their male peers, have been raised as part of China's social engineering programme to embody the country's national ambition and become 'high-quality' citizens who can compete on the global stage. Improving one's competitiveness through deliberate self-cultivation and educational investment has been instilled as the norm from a young age, and this is

further exacerbated by the market economy that surrounds them. Self-improvement and *fendou* for set targets have almost become second nature to them in their hope of obtaining a better life. Consequently, this younger generation has displayed a form of self that is filled with cosmopolitan desires as Rofel (2007) observed. The structural forgetting of the Maoist past among Chinese society, argued by Rofel (2007, p.127), manifest itself in the young women's 'imagined opposition between their open desires for sex, love, and happiness, which makes them properly cosmopolitan, and their mothers' experiences when they presumably married only out of kinship obligations'. They forget that the Maoist ideal was for companionable marriage based on free choice of marriage partners within a revolutionary ideology of gender equality, which was written into the first constitution of the People's Republic of China. My participants' gendered choice sits comfortably within the post-socialist discourse of freedom that plays upon finding one's 'true' gendered self aligning one's aspirations within the dominant imaginary of global capitalism.

As in Liu Fengshu's (2008) findings, my participants have shown the characteristics of an autonomous, self-authorising and individualistic neoliberal subject, which differs from a sacrificial self striving for socialist-collective goods promoted by the party-state in the past. Paradoxically, they appear to be economically individualist yet pursuing the same goal. Unlike the highly individualised forms of late-modern selfhood posited by theorists of late modernity such as Giddens (1991, 1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), without a long history of individualism, Chinese women and men's individualistic dreams of autonomy often co-exist with more traditional projects (Jackson, 2011, p.23). Since the Chinese self has historically been shaped by relational positioning to others within a hierarchical order formed under a long Confucian patriarchal and patrilineal family tradition, young people's new-found individualism is under constant renegotiation with traditional ideologies. Nevertheless, the dilemma for women in post-Mao's China, as Rofel (2007, p. 117) notes while 'it is imperative to make radical distinctions between femininity and masculinity and yet the cosmopolitan self one should embody is both implicitly nongendered and easier for men to achieve'. My participants' struggle to reconcile the multiple and often oppositional ideologies arising from the intermingling of tradition and modernity in their personal lives has demonstrated their active agency in reshaping their daily lives as they confront the constant changes in contemporary

China. Consequently, instead of completely opposing tradition, these women's subjectivities reflect a complex self-reflexive endeavour that attempts to incorporate some resurgent traditional expectations, as their marker of 'regained liberty' to pursue a 'true' gendered self, distinct from the supposed 'denial' of femininity of an 'oppressive' Socialist past. This is reflected in their mate selection criteria and consideration of parents and family when making marriage and career choices.

In China, self-worth has long been closely intertwined with distinct notions of masculinity and femininity, whose meanings are culturally and historically constructed and class-specific (Brownell and Wasserstrom, 2002, pp.1-41). Liu Fengshu (2017) points out that *chenggong* (success, 成功) has reached a hegemonic status among the young men she interviewed. Zhang Li's (2010) research on home ownership and living in Kunming shows that the rising middle class in China is seeking happiness and fulfilment through material comfort that marks its social distinction and cultural superiority. This has given rise to 'a rapid commodification of the differentiated longings' (Zhang, 2010, p.166) based on gender differences and sexual desires under the market economy and consumer culture. For men, the ability to accumulate material wealth and gain political power has become the marker of self-worth (Hird, 2008), which is also reflected in urban men's manhood being marked by home ownership (Zhang, 2010). Since masculine identities exist in relation to their Other, new kinds of femininities are necessarily required (Gilmartin et al., 1994; Glosser, 2002). Therefore the remasculinisation of men in post-socialist China demands the refeminisation of women, which is evident in urban women's self-cultivation of a refined femininity (Yang, M., 1999).

Similarly, my participants express their awareness of cultivating a type of desirable feminine self based upon 'natural' sex differences that is non-threatening to the male gender ideal in order to embody the gendered norms that match their class privilege. This resonates with Chinese young women in Liu Fengshu's (2014) study, whose realisation of empowerment is reflected in both consciously degendering their female self to appropriate 'manly' qualities, and meanwhile regendering themselves by selectively using certain traditional gendered ideals in fashioning 'modern' Chinese womanhood. This reflects their agency under the influence of the traditional philosophy of 'complementary oppositions' in negotiating a harmoniously balanced

'modern' self, paralleling with the state's use of tradition to construct modern 'Chinese' identity (Liu, F., 2011b, p.294). These privileged Chinese daughters carry an internalised self-esteem that drives them to strive for a better life and happiness. Having a *mei man jia ting* (happy and complete family) has become an exemplary norm for these middle-class women that is both classed and gendered. Success or not in this regard is never a merely personal thing, but affects their future prospects of their family. Their aspiration towards success, growing up as the only hope of their family, has fed into their drive to obtain happiness within the heterosexual family framework, which has made marriage both a struggle and a solution. Their struggle is largely silenced and privatised within the family, where their hopes and sorrows remain hidden. In this regard, their class position constrains their gendered choices.

Bakken (2000) argues that the inflexibility of the exemplary norm leads to resistance. While there is little sign of resistance among my participants, people do skilfully calculate in order to achieve personal advantages. As much as the gendered conception of a good life is constantly open to individual negotiation and interpretation, we should not underestimate the power of biopolitics exercised from below. Living in a neoliberal economy governed by an authoritarian state, Chinese women's striving for a happy and successful life is subject to multiple structural constraints beyond their individual control. With marked gender discrimination affecting women's career development in a hyper-competitive market economy that structurally favours male labour unconstrained by domestic responsibilities, women are often at a disadvantage within the patriarchal capitalist political economy. Arguably, it is 'easier' for women to conform to a family-centred lifestyle than to embark on a lone struggle in a male dominated public sphere. At least, in this way, she could avoid the social penalties of challenging the existing gendered order. Resistance to the norms is deemed to be a costly and painful process. Following Ong's (2006) take on neoliberalism as a malleable technology of governance that can be adopted globally in diverse ways without radically altering the state apparatus within a specific socio-political condition, the autonomous, self-governing, middleclass subjects cultivated by neoliberal techniques that my participants embody face limitations in challenging the existing gender order. Their individualised approach to personal success during a time of constant anxiety exacerbated by hyper

competitiveness essentially restricts their potential for collective resistance and critical reflections.

Coming from a completely unrelated discipline, I started my research with nothing but my passion to find answers to the questions and frustrations I had lived with for years. With a few rather broad questions in mind, I did not know what to expect in my findings. My data later revealed that these women are very much preoccupied by their domestic lives and are mainly concerned with how their working life can fit around it. Although, in theory, their privileged position should enable them to become successful, they eventually have to negotiate the contradictions that arise from marriage and parenthood. Although these women are, to an extent, living their dreams and want to establish their individuality in obtaining success of women, paradoxically they also conform to the existing gender regime. Despite their potential access to alternative framings of gender, available on the internet and their experience of studying abroad, maintaining their class privilege in Chinese society discourage them from forgoing a complete and happy family as the main means of displaying success. This helps to explain why, despite many of them recognising injustice, few of the women I interviewed take action to resist, but instead conform. Therefore, more often than not, they paradoxically find themselves striving for the set goal under the current economic and political system. The state's interest in maintaining its current political economy requires Chinese women's reproductive and domestic labour; it therefore uses propaganda to generate public concern about 'leftover women' (To, 2014), to idealise the family (Guo, 2010) and most recently to emphasis the benefits of having two children. Meanwhile, enacting biopolitics from below through cultivating a desiring and desirable middle class women, contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of the state governance.

So far, there has only been limited research like mine, focusing on privileged Chinese women. Evans' (2008) book on Chinese urban mothers and daughters, Liu Fengshu's (2008a) research on young-adult, only-child university students and Rofel's (2007) depiction of young heterosexual women who embody cosmopolitan desires, are among the few examples. Others' works are more focused on urban white-collar professional women (Liu, J., 2008, 2017) or a particular phenomenon related to them, such as marriage (Hong Fincher, 2014; To, 2015). My research

provides first-hand empirical evidence to shed light on the adult lives of privileged post-80s women. It analyses attitudes towards premarital abortion among these women, a previously under-explored issue. The stories and mentalities uncovered have rarely become known to outsiders, which advances knowledge in the field. Through carefully mapping out the existing discourses and family dynamics that pressurise women to conform to the norms of marriage and childbirth, this thesis enriches the existing knowledge on the dilemmas faced by urban Chinese women with good career prospects. By focusing on their dating criteria, it expands the existing knowledge on Chinese middle-class identity and how it shapes women's gendered experience. Sketching out the gendered division of labour within marriage, it provides further evidence to demonstrate the gender inequality under the reform. Focusing on the experiences of privileged women, it illuminates the persistence of gender inequality in contemporary China.

The forms and effects of neoliberalism have been hotly debated around the world in recent years. Some find that it is productive in understanding different aspects of Chinese society (Anagnost, 2004; Ong, 2006; Rofel, 2007), while others are more sceptical about its relevance to China and remind us of the anti-liberal elements in its state governance (Kipnis, 2007, 2008; Nonini, 2008). Skirting an industrial or military model of neoliberalism as a fixed set of attributes with predetermined outcomes, Ong (2007, p.1) conceptualises it as 'a logic of governing that migrates and is selectively taken up in diverse political contexts'. Revealing the neoliberal techniques that are used in manipulating individual choices and preferences by a powerful authoritarian regime, I offer concrete examples of neoliberalism's malleability and effectiveness when applied in a non-liberal political context to show that marketisation does not necessarily lead to a decline of the state (Ho, et al., 2018). Therefore, I further challenge the narrow definition of neoliberalism and expand its application in 'an oligarchic corporate state' which is said to have little interest in neoliberal ideas and practices, as argued by Nonini (see 2008, p.145).

Due to the limitations of time and resources, I was only able to focus on limited geographical locations and relied on a relatively small sample. Therefore, my research findings are only indicative, not representative. I by no means claim that it represents all young Chinese women's experiences, or even those of all educated,

urban, middle-class women. Although the women in my sample do not show any strong resistance, it is important to note that not all Chinese women are conforming. There are some young feminists who are organising themselves both online and offline to raise awareness of gender inequality and trying to fight back, including the fast spreading Metoo movement initiated by young women (Hong Fincher, 2018, Yang and Liu, 2018). However, facing the rising power of a patriarchal authoritarian state, their resistance could be a difficult uphill struggle, as the arrest of China's feminist five in 2015 has indicated (Hong Fincher, 2016).

Nevertheless, as the American civil rights activist Cesar Chavez said: 'once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read.' As I am aware of how the education I received in the Centre for Women's Studies has changed me, I remain hopeful. As we continue our commitment to education and research on gender issues in China, I believe that there will be more Chinese women who have the courage to speak up and feel empowered to forge different life paths.

Appendix

Appendix A Information sheet for female participants

1. Research project title

The Gendered Life of China's Privileged Daughters — an Insider's Research on Well-educated Women in Urban China, born in the 1980s

2. Invitation

You are being invited to take part in this research project. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please contact me if anything is unclear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

3. What is the purpose of the study?

This research aims to investigate China's privileged daughters from the only-child generation who enjoyed higher education and career opportunities and live in urban China. By focusing particularly on this group of women I intend to find out how your experiences of family, education, financial background and current environment shape your identity as women in today's Chinese society while performing your roles as daughter, mother, wife and worker as applicable. This project wants to explore your reaction to gender related issues in your day to day life, especially when value conflicts arise in choices between career and marriage, career progress and family, and other gender related issues. I would like to ask questions about your life experience as a woman in different roles and your reflection on these roles.

4. Why have I been invited?

You are being invited to take part in this study, as this study focuses on women who were educated to degree level and born in the 1980's living in urban China and you fit in to this category. The privileged social status of your group can offer insight into those cutting edge conflicts and issues related to women's gendered life experience in modern Chinese society. ⁶³

5. Who is conducting the research?

The research is being organised by Kailing Xie, PhD candidate in the Centre for Women's Studies in The University of York.

6. What will participation involve?

If you decide to take part then the researcher will interview you at a time and place that is convenient to you. The interview will take approximately one hour. It will be a conversation between you and the researcher, which is intended as an opportunity for you to express your life experience as a member of a young generation of women in China, in particular concerning your roles as daughter, wife, mother and worker (as applicable). If you agree, the interview will be tape recorded, and later transcribed into text form. All data will be stored securely.

⁶³ Note to ELMPS: I recognize that this expression can be pejorative in English. However, in the context of China, being 'privileged' is a compliment, which is why I have used this term.

7. Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide. I will describe the study and go through the information sheet, which I will give to you. I will then ask you to sign a consent form to show you have agreed to take part. If you do not want to sign the form, you may choose to give your consent verbally. You can refuse to answer any question or stop the interview, or withdraw up to six months after the interview, without giving a reason. If you withdraw from the study any information that you have given me will be withdrawn and destroyed.

8. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

9. What are the possible benefits and risks of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will help to increase the understanding of the needs of women like you and the current situation you are facing as a group.

The interview will take up some of your time. I will try to reduce inconvenience by arranging a time and place that suits you.

10. What will happen to the interview data?

The data will be used for researcher's PhD thesis and related academic publications. You would be very welcome to a copy of the final report. You will not be identified in the thesis. Your comment will be quoted, but you will remain anonymous.

11. Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved by the ELMPS Ethics Committee in The University of York. The contact information for the chair of the ELMPS is:

Prof Celia Kitzinger, Department of Sociology, Wentworth College, University of York, York YO10 5DD

12. Contact for further information

If you wish to obtain further information about this project, please contact the researcher. You can also contact the researcher's supervisor.

Researcher	Supervisor
Name: KAILING XIE	Name: Professor Stevi Jackson
Address: Flat 5 Block C1, Wentworth College, Heslington, York, YO10 5NG, UK Email: kx539@york.ac.uk	Address: Centre for Women's Studies, Grimston House, University of York York, YO10 5DD, UK
Tel: +447714025936	Email: stevi.jackson@york.ac.uk

Thank you for taking part in this project

采访信息女生版

研究课题:

中国 80 后受过高等教育城市女性的性别生存现状

我诚挚地邀请您参加我的研究访谈,在您考虑同意参访之前,我会提供一些你有必要知道的相关的信息。请仔细阅读考虑您是否愿意参加访谈,如有疑问请随时提出来。

研究目的

此项研究意在调查中国出生在独生子女政策下享受过高等教育和拥有事业机会的城市女性。我希望借此了解你们的成长生活背景如何影响你们看待自己在当代中国社会中所处的位置,以及你结合切身经历对中国性别现状的看法和倾听你相关的诉求。我尤其对你们在扮演女儿 妻子,母亲以及雇员的各种角色中的切身体验感兴趣。

为什么我被邀请?

因为您满足我研究对象所要满足的要求'出生在 80 年代的受过大学本科以上教育,生活在城市的女性'.您在中国社会中所处的优越位子会为我们了解中国当代社会发展中最前沿的女性问题提供宝贵资料。

谁在进行研究?

该研究是正在英国约克大学女性研究中心攻读博士学位的学生谢恺玲的博士课题。

参加研究意味着什么?

如果你决定参加与我面对面地访谈对话,时间大约1至1.5小时。你可以根据你的时间和地点的便利和 我预约。 访谈会给你机会讲述你在女性生活扮演的各种角色中的切身体会和经历。如果你同意,访谈 会被录音。所有的资料会被加密保存。

我必须参加吗?

你并非必须参加。我会为你讲解访谈信息的相关内容。如果你同意,我会请你签一份同意表格表示你同意访谈。如果你不愿意签署文件,我们可以采取口头录音的方式。 你可以拒绝回答访谈中的任何问题,或者在接受访谈后的六个月内无条件退出。如果你选择退出,所有你所提供的相关数据都会被销毁。

参加是匿名的吗?

所有采集的数据都会经过保密处理,在以后的报告中,你的个人信息不会被识别出来。

参加可能有哪些影响?

你的参加会帮助增加我们对这类女性所面临现状和需求的理解。 采访会占用你的一些时间,但我会尽量安排你方便的时间和地点。

采访数据的用途:

数据会用于研究者的博士论文和相关学术文献中。 你可以要求免费获取一份论文终稿。你不会在论文中被辨别出来,所有引用你的地方都会被匿名。

谁负责此项目的学术规范审核? 此项目已通过约克大学研究审核委员会的审查。

联系人:

Prof Celia Kitzinger, Department of Sociology, Wentworth College, University of York, York Y010 5DD

如何进一步联系我们?如果你想要获取该项研究的进一步相关资料,你可以联系其导师:

研究员	导师
姓名: 谢恺玲	姓名: Stevi Jackson 教授
Address: Flat 5 Block C1, Wentworth College, Heslington, York, Y010 5NG, UK Email: kx539@york.ac.uk	Address: Centre for Women's Studies, Grimston House, University of York York, Y010 5DD, UK
Tel: +447714025936	Email: stevi.jackson@york.ac.uk

真诚感谢您的参与!

Appendix B Information sheet for male participants

1. Research project title

The Gendered Life of China's Privileged Daughters — an Insider's Research on Well-educated Women in Urban China, born in the 1980s

2. Invitation

You are being invited to take part in this research project. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please contact me if anything is unclear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

3. What is the purpose of the study?

This research aims to investigate China's privileged daughters from the only-child generation who enjoyed higher education and career opportunities and live in urban China. By focusing particularly on this group of women I intend to find out how their experiences of family, education, financial background and current environment shape their identity as women in today's Chinese society while performing their roles as daughter, mother, wife and worker. As man from similar background, I would like to listen to your opinion on gender related issues in your daily life.

4. Why have I been invited?

You are being invited to take part in this study, as this study wants to explore well-educated 80's generation men's attitude towards gender issues and you fit in to this category.

5. Who is conducting the research?

The research is being organised by Kailing Xie, PhD candidate in the Centre for Women's Studies in The University of York.

6. What will participation involve?

If you decide to take part then the researcher will interview you at a time and place that is convenient to you. The interview will take approximately one hour. It will be a conversation between you and the researcher, which is intended as an opportunity for you to express your life experience as a member of a young generation. If you agree, the interview will be tape recorded, and later transcribed into text form. All data will be stored securely.

7. Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide. I will describe the study and go through the information sheet, which I will give to you. I will then ask you to sign a consent form to show you have agreed to take part. If you do not want to sign the form, you may choose to give your consent verbally. You can refuse to answer any question or stop the interview, or withdraw up to six months after the interview, without giving a reason. If you withdraw from the study any information that you have given me will be withdrawn and destroyed.

8. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

9. What are the possible benefits and risks of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will help to increase the understanding of the needs of the 80s generation and the current situation you are facing as a group.

The interview will take up some of your time. I will try to reduce inconvenience by arranging a time and place that suits you.

10. What will happen to the interview data?

The data will be used for researcher's PhD thesis and related academic publications. You would be very welcome to a copy of the final report. You will not be identified in the thesis. Your comment will be quoted, but you will remain anonymous.

11. Who has ethically reviewed the project?

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Researcher	Supervisor		
Name: KAILING XIE	Name: Professor Stevi Jackson		
Address: Flat 5 Block C1, Wentworth College, Heslington, York, YO10 5NG, UK Email: kx539@york.ac.uk	Address: Centre for Women's Studies, Grimston House, University of York York, YO10 5DD, UK		
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研究目的

此项研究意在调查中国出生在独生子女政策下享受过高等教育和拥有事业机会的城市女性。我希望借此了解这类女性在扮演女儿 妻子,母亲以及雇员的各种角色中的切身体验。作为生长环境相似的同龄人,我希望借此了解您结合切身经历对中国性别现状的看法和倾听您相关的诉求。您的想法会帮助我们了解同龄的两性交往如何影响当代中国女性的性别意识.

为什么我被邀请?

因为您满足我研究对象所要满足的要求'出生在 80 年代的受过大学本科以上教育,生活在城市的男性'.您在中国社会中所处的优越位置会为我们了解中国当代社会发展中最前沿的女性问题提供宝贵资料。

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我必须参加吗?

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参加是匿名的吗?

所有采集的数据都会经过保密处理,在以后的报告中,你的个人信息不会被识别出来。

参加可能有哪些影响?

你的参加会帮助增加我们对 80 后所面临性别现状和需求的理解。 采访会占用你的一些时间,但我会尽量安排你方便的时间和地点。

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联系人:

Prof Celia Kitzinger, Department of Sociology, Wentworth College, University of York, York Y010~5DD

如何进一步联系我们?如果你想要获取该项研究的进一步相关资料,你可以联系其导师:

研究员	导师
姓名: 谢恺玲	姓名: Stevi Jackson 教授
Address: Flat 5 Block C1, Wentworth College, Heslington, York, Y010 5NG, UK Email: kx539@york.ac.uk	Address: Centre for Women's Studies, Grimston House, University of York York, Y010 5DD, UK
Tel: +447714025936	Email: stevi.jackson@york.ac.uk

真诚感谢您的参与!

Appendix C Vignettes

Vignettes for Female Participant

- 1. The unplanned pregnancy vignette: Xiaozhen recently found herself pregnant, but she and her boyfriend are not suitable for marriage. What would you suggest?
- 2. The premarital abortion vignette: Chenlu and her boyfriend decided to get married after living together for a while. But her boyfriend found out that she had an abortion with her ex-boyfriend. He is bothered about her past. What do you think?
- 3. The DINK vignette: Luqi (woman) has been married for two years. The couple have been busy at work, and thus do not want to have children. However, both sets of parents urge them to do so. What do you think?
- 4. Helan finds out after she got married that she cannot get pregnant. What would you suggest to her?
- 5. Huangxia had a really good relationship with her boyfriend. But recently, he realised that she is not a virgin so does not want to marry her. What do you think?
- 6. Jiaping is a lesbian and has had a stable partner for many years. However, both sides' parents have no idea of their sexuality and want them to go on blind date and find a marriage partner. How would you suggest to Jiaping?

Vignettes for Male Participant

- 1. The unplanned pregnancy vignette: Chenming is your good friend. Recently he found out that his girlfriend is pregnant with his child. But he and his girlfriend are not suitable for marriage. What would you suggest?
- 2. The premarital abortion vignette: Chenxun was considering marry his girlfriend after a period of cohabitation. However, he recently discovered that she had an abortion with her ex-boyfriend. He cannot accept this fact thus hesitated. What do you?
- 3. The DINK vignette: Wangyi (man) has been married for two years. The couple have been busy at work, and thus do not want to have children. However, both sets of parents urge them to do so. What do you think?
- 4. Zhangliang finds out his wife can not get pregnant after they are married. What would you suggest to him?
- 5. Huangjun had a really good relationship with his girlfriend. But recently, he realised that she is not a virgin, so he does not want to marry her. What do you think of him?
- 6. Liuyang is a gay and has had a stable partner for many years. However, both sides' parents have no idea of their sexuality and want them to go on blind date and find a marriage partner. How would you suggest to Liuyang?

Appendix D Consent form for participants

Researcher: Kailing XIE

Research project: The Gendered Life of China's Privileged Daughters — an Insider's Research on Well-educated Women in Urban China, born in the 1980s

PhD in Centre for Women's Studies The University of York	
This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take and answer every question. If there is anything you do no more information, please ask the researcher.	•
Have you read and understood the information leaflet about the study?	Yes □ No □
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study?	Yes □ No □
Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in confidence by the researcher?	Yes □ No □
Do you understand that you may withdraw from the study for any reason up until 6 months after the interview?	Yes □No □
I am happy for my anonymous information to be used in the PhD dissertation.	Yes □ No □
I am happy to have my information used in other publications and presentations, on the understanding I will be kept anonymous	Yes □ No □
Do you agree to take part in the study?	Yes □ No □
If yes, do you agree to your interviews being recorded?	Yes □ No □
(You may take part in the study without agreeing to this).	

伦理和同意表格

研究课题:

中国 80 后受过高等教育城市女性的性别生存现状

谢恺玲

女性研究中心

英国约克大学

在这份同意表格里,我会解释您提供的信息将以何种方式被我的研究所采用,我也会列举出您在我整个研究过程中所享有的权利。如果有任何疑问,请提出来。

	我已经阅读并了解这项研究地相关信息	是 🗖	否 🗖
	我获得了询问相关问题的机会	是 🗖	否□
	我知道我所提供的匿名信息将被应用于此次研究	是 🗖	否 🗖
	我认识到我的参与是自愿的,并且我有权在接受采访的六个月内无理由退出。	是□	否 🗖
	我同意将我的信息以匿名的形式应用在博士论文中	是 🗖	否 🗖
	我同意将我的匿名信息应用在其他出版物和演讲中	是 🗖	否 🗖
	我同意参加这项研究	是 🗖	否 🗖
	如果同意,您是否愿意您的采访被录音? (您可以参与采访但是选择不被录音)	是 🗖	否□
	您是否想要获取完整的博士论文	是 🗖	否□
签名	名 (手写体)		
签名	3(打印体)		
日期			

Appendix E Commercial Property Advertisements

The image below is a real estate advertisement taken by the author in her hometown. It reads: Who said young people cannot afford owing property?



The second image is also a real estate advertisement is taken by the author in her hometown. It reads: I am nearly 27/28 years old this year, I should have a home.



Appendix F CCP Propaganda Posters

The image below is a common poster seen on the high streets in various Chinese cities. It says: The Communist Party is good; Socialism is good; the economic reform is good.



The second image is also a common street poster that promotes the China Dream mixed with various traditional images.













Appendix G Personal Information

个人信息

Name 名字:

Pseudonym 假名:

Age 年龄:

Children's Age 小孩年龄:

Siblings 兄弟子妹:

Hometown 家乡:

University 大学所在地:

Current Residence 现居住地:

Highest Degree 最高学位:

Subject 科目:

High school Subjects (Liberal arts or Science) 高中文理科:

Occupation 工作行业:

Martial Status 婚恋状况:

Party Membership 党员:

Preferred Contact (If you would like to know the research findings)喜欢的联系方式(如果想要获取博士论文):

Appendix H Summary of Participant Information

Female Participants

No.	Name	Age	Martial	Education	Industry	Children
			Status			
1	Atai	28	Married	MA	Teaching	0
2	Chain	29	Single	ВА	Teaching	0
3	Chenchen	30	Single	ВА	Banking	0
4	D	27	Engaged	MSc	IT	0
5	Ginkgo	27	Married	Doctor	University	0
6	Java	30	Married	MA	Transportation	1
7	Jinwang	28	Married	MSc	Design	0
8	Joyce	30	Single	MBA	Entrepreneur	0
9	Karen	27	Married	MA	Entrepreneur	1
10	L	27	Single	ВА	Human	0
					Resources	
11	Li xia	29	Married	ВА	Accounting	0
12	Lijun	28	Dating	MSc	Consultancy	0
13	Lily	27	Married	BA	Human	0
					Resources	
14	Lisi	26	Dating	MSc	Finance	0
15	Lulu	32	Divorced	MSc	University	1
16	Maomaocong	32	Married	ВА	Teaching	Pregnant
17	Mlm	33	Divorced	ВА	Banking	0
18	Muyu	27	Dating	MSc	Hospital	0
19	Qincai	30	Engaged	ВА	Entrepreneur	0
20	Queenie	30	Married	ВА	Administration	1
21	Stella	26	Single	MA	Teacher	0
22	Tina	28	Married	ВА	Environment	0
					Service	
23	Tj	32	Married	ВА	Construction	1
24	Viviankuku	28	Married	MSc	Hospital	0

25	Wanyan	35	Married	MSc	Government	1
26	Xiaoliu	26	Single	BA	Finance	0
27	Xiaozhu	34	Married	BA	Government	1
28	Yangyang	29	Married	BA	Education	1
					Consultancy	
29	Yiyi	28	Married	BA	Sales	1
30	Yimi	27	Dating	BA	Teaching	0
31	Zhangsan	25	Dating	MSc	Law	0

Male Participants

No.	Name	Age	Martial Status	Education	Industry	Children
1	Jerry	29	Dating	ВА	Teaching	0
2	Tian	29	Single	MA	IT	0
3	Xiaoding	29	Married	ВА	Translation	0
4	Chouchou	25	Engaged	ВА	Banking	0
5	David	32	Single	ВА	Tourism	0
6	Lixiong	29	Engaged	ВА	Tourism	0
7	Patrick	27	Married	MSc	Finance	0
8	Roger	28	Single	MSc	Finance	0
9	Zen	25	Single	ВА	Government	0
10	Adong	28	Married	MSc	Government	0
11	Theodore	29	Single	ВА	Education	0
					Consultancy	

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