

**Exploring Rural Young Women's Lives:**  
The Young Generation of Women in Li village

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## ABSTRACT

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Since 1949, especially after the implementation of the reform and opening up policy, China has been facing new changes. Multiple ideas influence each other and coexist in today's China. With the rapid expansion of urbanization in China, rural China is also undergoing profound changes.

The main purpose of this thesis is to explore the lives of the young women in the external environment and intergenerational interaction to summarise the evolution of their lives through social, economic, political and cultural change.

I focus on specific areas of their everyday lives (such as: childhood and adolescent years, consumption, migration, education, love, relationships with husbands and in-laws, and filial piety). I also investigate how the women are affected by change, including both the structural constraints on their lives, but also their agency and gendered subjectivities in this thesis.

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Finally, I want to thank my family. First of all, thanks to my husband. Without his understanding and support, I could not have completed this thesis. Then thanks go to my parents and my mother-in-law, who took responsibility for looking after my children during my writing. Finally, I would like to thank my two little angels. Whenever I fall into the bottleneck of writing and feel upset, I feel much better when I see them. They are an important driving force for me to stick to studying.

## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

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I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

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MA YAN AND ME

Since 1978, under the opening-up and reform policy, China has gradually changed from a planned economy to a market economy. In addition, in that year, the one-child policy was launched. It was to last for 37 years. This policy has transformed the traditional multi-child (*duo zinv*, 多子女) family to a fewer-child (*shao zinv*, 少子女) family. The implementation of these two policies has brought great changes to China and Chinese families. These changes are not only obviously reflected in the quality of life and educational levels, but also in changes in values and lifestyles. In 1978 the per capita living expenditure of urban Chinese households was 311 *yuan*, and the Engel coefficient<sup>1</sup> was 57.5%; the per capita living expenditure of rural households in that year was 116 *yuan* and the Engel coefficient were 67.7% (Xu, 2014). In contrast, the Engel coefficient of China's urban and rural areas in 2017 was 28.6% and 31.2%, respectively, both having reduced by half or more (National Development and Reform Commission, 2017). However, describing development from such data alone cannot vividly show how Chinese people's lives have undergone tremendous changes since the opening-up and reform. If I take my own experience, it could offer a colourful example of the improvements in the quality of

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<sup>1</sup> The Engel coefficient usually refers to the expenditure on food in households as a proportion of total expenditure on consumption. Traditionally, the Engel coefficient is used internationally to measure the living standards of a country and a region: that is, the poorer a country or family is, the greater the Engel coefficient; the richer the life, the smaller the Engel coefficient. According to the standards proposed by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, an Engel coefficient of more than 59% indicates poverty; 50% to 59% means basic needs are satisfied; 40% to 50% indicates that people are well-off; 30% to 40% indicates wealth; and less than 30% means the most affluent. See: [http://www.bjstats.gov.cn/tjzd/zswd/201708/t20170829\\_381289.html](http://www.bjstats.gov.cn/tjzd/zswd/201708/t20170829_381289.html), accessed on 10/09/2018.

life and the huge urban-rural gap, which helps explain why I chose the topic(s) of my thesis and used qualitative methods.

I was born in the late 1980s, one of the generations that grew up after the implementation of these two policies. My memories related to childhood are often around eating and playing. I still remember that when I was six years old, I took the 10 *yuan* that my grandmother gave me as the New Year money (*yasuiqian*, 压岁钱)<sup>2</sup>. It was the first time that my parents had agreed that I was free to control the 10 *yuan*, which was 1993<sup>3</sup>. On that day, I carried the first ‘huge sum of money’ in my life and darted to the local children’s amusement park with my two cousins<sup>4</sup>. We spent the money with no concerns. I still remember that it was one *yuan* to ride a child’s train; a box of firecrackers costed half a *yuan*; a bag of ordinary snacks costed half a *yuan*. In eating, drinking and playing with my cousins on that day, we actually completely spend this ‘huge sum of money’. We returned home in an uneasy mood, but we did not suffer any penalty. I think this may have been because the Chinese New Year was going on at the time, or it may be a change in family living conditions. That 10 *yuan* was not a huge sum for the adults. Over the next few years, my home gradually acquired a washing machine, a refrigerator, air conditioning, and motorcycles.

When I was in high school in 2002, because I was at a boarding school, my parents gave me 800 *yuan* every month as my living expenses. This can be said to be the second ‘huge sum of money’ that I was able to directly control in my life. Every

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<sup>2</sup> The New Year money: one of the customs of the Chinese New Year. The elders should distribute pre-prepared lucky money in a red envelope to the younger generations after the meal. It is said that the lucky money can hold back evil spirits, and the younger generation can be safe and secure during the next coming year.

<sup>3</sup> In 1993, the per capita annual living income of urban residents was 2,337 *yuan*, and the per capita annual net income of rural residents was 921 *yuan*. National Bureau of Statistics, see: [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/ndtjgb/qgndtjgb/200203/t20020331\\_30007.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/ndtjgb/qgndtjgb/200203/t20020331_30007.html), accessed on 22/09/2018.

<sup>1</sup> pound sterling equals approximately 8.8 yuan in 2020 approximately.

<sup>4</sup> Each of them had 10 yuan, the same as me.



month, I generally spent 400 *yuan* as my ‘food expenses’. I divided the remaining 400 *yuan* into two parts, one for entertainment and one for clothes or other consumption. Sometimes there would be some money left at the end of the month, so I could have more money in the next month. My parents had gradually purchased computers and cars and we moved to a new and bigger flat. In 2010, I came to the UK to start my post-graduate studies. This was the third time that I had the opportunity to have another ‘huge sum of money’ that I could control directly. Also, my parents realised their desire to travel abroad during the following few years. The wider context here to note is that 140 million Chinese now have passports for travel abroad and 751 million communicate with each other and outsiders through the internet (Garnaut, 2018: 30).

The changes in quality of life in my family are a microcosm of the changes for thousands of families after 1978 in China. From 1978 to 2000, during the first 20 years of the opening-up and reform, many Chinese families began to pursue material possessions in order to improve their low quality of life. From 2000 to the present, expenditure on education and tourism has increased significantly. However, this is only one side of China after the opening-up and reform in cities. I did not encounter the other side until 2011, and then really began to pay attention.

Coincidentally, I accidentally discovered a book in a bookstore and read it out of interest, *the diary of Ma Yan: the struggles and hopes of a Chinese schoolgirl*. I learned from Ma Yan’s diary that she is a girl of the same age as me. She lived in a small mountain village in Ningxia Province in China. She was very eager to study, but her family is extremely poor. In 2000, Ma Yan was 13 years old and in her fifth year of primary school. However, her family could not afford the tuition fee of 70 *yuan* per term and she dropped out of school:

We have a week of vacation. Mother takes me aside.  
‘My child. There’s something I have to tell you.’

I answer, 'Mother, if you have something to tell me, do it quickly. Tell me.'

But her words are like a death sentence.

'I'm afraid you may have been to school for the last time.'

My eyes go wide. I took up at her. 'How can you say something like that? These days you can't live without an education. Even a peasant needs knowledge to ensure good harvests to farm well.'

Mother insists. 'Your brothers and you add up to three children to be sent to school. Your father is the only one earning money, and it's not enough.'

I'm frightened. 'Does this mean I have to come home to work?'

'Yes.'

'And my two brothers?'

'Your two brothers will carry on with their studies.'

I protest. 'Why can boys study and not girls?'

Her smile is tired. 'You're still little. When you grow up, you'll understand.'

No more money for school this year. I'm back in the house and I work the land in order to pay for my brothers' education.

When I think of the happy times at school, I can almost imagine myself there. How I want to study! But my family can't afford it. I want to go to school, Mother. I don't want to work at home. How wonderful it would be if I could stay at school forever!<sup>5</sup>

Ma Yan's mother asked her to drop out of school, which immediately made me dislike her, because it gives me the feeling that she 'values boys over girls' (*zhongnan qingnv*, 重男轻女). Because Ma Yan is a girl, the poverty of the family made her to drop out of school, but her two younger brothers could continue to study. 'Men are superior to women' which is one idea of Confucianism that leads to categorical requirements and social divisions between men and women. This idea limits women to the private sphere and binds their minds and bodies, which makes them a tool for patriarchal needs (Xiao, 2017). As described in Ma Yan's book: A family as poor as hers can't afford to pay for their daughter's education. She'll be engaged at sixteen, because her family needs the money her marriage will bring in to

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<sup>5</sup> A diary of Ma Yan, May 2, 2001.

pay for their younger son's marriages. The boys will take precedence. Ma Yan is intelligent, but she can't escape that fate. It's her unalterable destiny.<sup>6</sup>

Compared with Ma Yan, I realised how lucky I am. In my memory, I have never experienced that being a girl in the family led to different treatment of me and my two cousins<sup>7</sup>. Ma Yan's experience also shocked me. I was allowed to spend 10 *yuan* randomly at the age of six in 1993, but, in 2000, Ma Yan and her brother were reluctant to spend one *yuan* to take a tractor ride; instead, they walked 20 kilometres of mountain roads every weekend from school to get home. In 2000, Ma Yan had to suspend her studies because her family could not afford the tuition fee, which was 70 *yuan* per term, while, in 2002, I could have 800 *yuan* per month as my living expenses. After her family borrowed 70 *yuan* for her to study, Ma Yan was able to go back to school, but her mother had no choice rather than worked in wild field while she was ill and left these three young children at home, in order to pay this money back.

However, when I continued reading this book, I found that Ma Yan's mother did not 'value boys over girls' as I at first naively thought, because Ma Yan's diary was discovered entirely due to her mother. For the sake of her daughter's future, her mother handed the diary written by Ma Yan to a French journalist who travelled to their village. In the eyes of this illiterate woman, this was the only opportunity she could find for Ma Yan to continue studying, because she hoped the French journalist could finally support Ma Yan's study. The intimate relationship between Ma Yan and her mother, and the efforts made by her mother to enable Ma Yan to continue studying, can be felt directly in the rest of the book.

What I really want is to go home, straightaway, without waiting for the weekend. I want to see Mother's face and her hands again. Because I know that she's going away to work again. Far away...I don't want her to go away, but I don't know how to prevent it.

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<sup>6</sup> In The diary of Ma Yan, p.7.

<sup>7</sup> Both of them are boys.

Last week when we got home, Mother wanted to see my report card. I showed her my test results. After she had looked at them, she smiled.

‘I haven’t spent all this money for nothing,’ she concluded. ‘You haven’t disappointed my expectations in the least.’...

When I think of my mother, I really want to go home. I feel like asking for permission to leave. But even if I go home, I fear I may already have missed her. She’s probably left already to harvest fa cai<sup>8</sup>. I can only wish her good health. Because if her illness starts again, there’s no one there to look after her...How I hope that her attacks don’t start again. She only had a two-or three-day break at home before setting off again to try and earn some more money...But the unhappiest person of all is Mother. All year long she has to leave home to work far away. That’s where her illness came from. From going off to earn money to support the three of us children...

If ever I succeed in life, my success will equally be Mother’s. I’ll always remember her...<sup>9</sup>

In Ma Yan’s diary, the person she mentions most is her mother. After reading this book, I discovered that the protagonist is not Ma Yan, but her mother. In order to allow her daughter to study, this reluctant Muslim woman went out to make money in wild field while she was ill. She also taught her daughter to strive to be a useful person in the world. Ma Yan’s mother said: ‘I’ll fight to my last breath so that my daughter doesn’t have the same life as I had’<sup>10</sup>. Is this the same woman who the diary described at the beginning, allowing her son to continue to study, while asking her daughter to drop out of school? It can only be said that people are complex and multifaceted as I have found with my research participants. In the same way, it is possible to analyse the reasons from more than one perspective. I asked myself whether Ma Yan’s mother, the one who asked her daughter to suspend her studies and the one who fought for her daughter’s life while ill, can be a representative of most rural women? The economic reform has brought earth-shaking changes to Chinese cities and many urban families. Ma Yan’s family is a microcosm of Chinese

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<sup>8</sup> ‘A hairy grass that grows wild on the steppes of northwest China.’ See The diary of Ma Yan, p. 97.

<sup>9</sup> The diary of Ma Yan, 12 November, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> See The dairy of Ma Yan, p.7.

rural families and reflects the great unbalanced development between urban and rural areas in the process of opening-up and reform. Moreover, it also reflects the difficulties faced by rural girls and women in fighting for their fate in China. Furthermore, it reflects that there is almost no guarantee of women's rights and status in such a fate. What is the fate for girls/women like Ma Yan and her mother in rural China? Their struggles against their fates shocked me deeply and this inspired my interest in rural women.

I also read a news report that left a deep impression on me. A baby girl aged 11 months was discovered to have 12 needles in her body. After the police intervened in the investigation, it was found that these needles had been plunged in one by one by her grandmother. She did this because she wanted to have a grandson. Due to her superstition and ignorance, she believed that using needles to prick her granddaughter could help her daughter-in-law to give birth to a baby boy. I found this news incredible and shocking. It is incredible that, just because of the baby's identity as a girl, after only 11 months in the world, she had suffered such torture from her grandmother. This happened in a village in Shandong province. While Ma Yan's story is set in an extremely poor mountain village in Ningxia, and her experience would not be universal, this 2013 report illustrates a more serious problem: in contemporary Chinese society, the belief that people should 'value boys over girls' still exists and there is a lack of protection for women's rights and interests, especially in rural areas.

### **AIMS OF THIS THESIS**

As I am the only child in my family, at the beginning, my research interest was to study the impact of the birth-planning policy on rural women. However, after reading Ma Yan's book and the news report, I had a strong interest in the intergenerational relations of rural women. A girl's female elders, especially her

mother, have a great influence on her. This influence is sometimes contradictory: Ma Yan's mother let Ma Yan drop out of school, but later, she tried her best to enable Ma Yan return to school.

From 2002 to the present, China's rural areas are constantly developing and changing. What happens when Ma Yan grows up? Will her fate change? Does she live a different happy life from her mother in adulthood as her mother expected? These questions make me keep thinking. I really want to take a look and investigate at the daily life of young women in contemporary rural China from feminist perspective. In the beginning, I thought Ma Yan's experience stemmed from China's traditional patriarchy, which is the root cause of gender inequality in China. I want to know whether patriarchy in rural China has already disappeared. If not, what changes have taken place? However, then I realized that patriarchy is a social structural system (Walby, 1990) that is not sufficient on its own for studying women's daily lives. Although women are oppressed by men under patriarchy, it does not mean their lives are immutable. If I understand women's daily lives based on patriarchy alone, there may be a tendency to simplify understanding gender roles. Therefore, I pay attention on women's agency within patriarchy and gendered subjectivities which shaped in the external environment and intergenerational interaction.

Following the framing of research questions from David and Sutton (2011) that good research questions will be: (1) interesting; (2) relevant; (3) feasible; (4) ethical; (5) concise; (6) answerable, I decided to choose a small village in China and conduct research on young women to answer my questions: Compared with the last generation, what are changes in young women's lives? I turned my attention to a small village near my hometown because it allowed me to get familiar with the field as quickly as possible and get more data because of language communication and cultural familiarity.

In this village, I studied the daily lives of young women, to discover and understand their lives, emotions, relationships. In this thesis, young women in Li village are in the most important position, through their memories and narratives, which enabled me to understand their gendered self-identifications along with economic, political, social and cultural developments. I explore their childhood, consumption, migration experience and relationships with their natal family/husband/husband's family. The young generation of women who are living in a small village in south-western China cannot represent the whole picture of women in rural China. However, the study on their gender practices and relationships are valuable ways to provide more references for people who want to understand rural young Han Chinese women's transformation in the urbanisation of south-western China, which is another purpose of this thesis.

## **THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

Following my questions and aims, I have divided this thesis into five chapters. In the next chapter, I turn a critical eye to Chinese women in a historical, cultural and social context. Firstly, I will briefly review changes brought by policies of Communist Party of China (CPC) in rural China since 1949 and analyse effects on rural China. Secondly, gender relations in China will be reviewed.

The third chapter describes my methodology and research methods. I explain my choices of methods in collecting data. This is an ethnographic study, and in keeping with this methodology, interviews and participant observation are the main methods in my fieldwork. I hold the view that these methods can allow the researcher to have not only an outsider position, but also an insider position. I discuss my reasons for choosing these two methods as well as their limitations and strengths. I describe in detail the preparations I made before conducting research, such as how to make a

choice of research sites. In addition, because the place I studied is a small village in China, I also describe some conditions in this village, because I think this will help readers to understand the current situation of ordinary rural areas in China. Also, in this chapter, I explain how I engaged with people in the village, how I found participants, conducted in-depth interviews, and engaged in the participant observation in the village. Ethical issues, leaving the field and the writing-up stage are also discussed.

I turn to these young women's narratives and my own observations in the next two chapters. Here, I mainly describe lives and relationships of rural young women. In young women's lives, issues on childhood, consumption, migration and education will be explored. In relationships, ideas of spouse selection, relationships between husbands and in-laws and restructured filial piety will be explored.

In the conclusion, I will review changes in the young women's daily lives and suggest reasons for these changes. Then I will analyse their agency and subjectivities.



## CHAPTER TWO

# SITUATING RURAL CHINESE WOMEN: SOCIAL REFORMS AND GENDER RELATIONS IN CHINA

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China is one of the four ancient civilizations of the world and has a long history. About 5,000 years ago, human settlements began to emerge around the Central Plains region, and then it became a country. After many dynasties and the blending of ethnic groups, it formed a multi-ethnic country with the Han people as the majority. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China (2019)<sup>11</sup>, the total population of mainland China has reached 1.395 billion, accounting for 18% of the world's total population, ranking first in the world. Among them, women accounted for 48.9% of the total population, and the rural population accounted for 40.42% of the total population. It can thus be seen that women and the rural population account for a large proportion of the total population in China, so focusing on women and rural areas is not an outdated but significant topic.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), rural China has undergone tremendous changes. Some of my older interviewees are not only witnesses, but also participants in, or victims of, these political movements and some young women in Li village identify themselves as beneficiaries of reform and the opening up policy. Before researching rural women today, especially the younger generation, it is worthwhile to draw a general picture of rural China from the Mao era to the present, which will offer a historical background to changes in rural women's lives over time.

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<sup>11</sup> See: [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201902/t20190228\\_1651265.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201902/t20190228_1651265.html), accessed on 03/03/2019.

During its long history, East Asia has formed a Chinese cultural circle dominated by Confucian culture and until now, many countries, including China, Japan, and South Korea, are still deeply influenced by historical traditions and Confucian culture (Walter and George, 1998). Moreover, compared with cities, Chinese countryside is more likely to preserve the traditional idea of Confucianism and patriarchy. However, although Chinese patriarchy has a long history and women have always been oppressed within this system, Chinese women also show their agency in bargaining with patriarchy. Therefore, it is necessary to explore. Moreover, in the study of Chinese women, we should not only see the institutional oppression from patriarchy on women, but also cannot ignore women's gendered subjectivities in their daily lives.

After the Communist Party of China (CPC) gained national power, policy changes and economic development have had a profound impact on rural women. In order to provide a better research background and to understand the gender environment in which women in Li village grew up, it is necessary to summarize these impacts on gender roles and relations.

In this chapter, firstly, I will briefly introduce the CPC's changing policies and their effects on rural China in chronological order since the founding of the PRC to offer a general background of rural women's lives. Secondly, I will discuss patriarchy, Confucianism and women's agency in order to examine women's status in traditional Chinese society. In addition, women's gendered subjectivities will also be explored as a way to understand women's daily lives. Finally, I will focus on the effects of the CPC's policy changes on rural women situating rural women from 1949 to the present.

## SOCIAL REFORMS IN RURAL CHINA

### THE MAO ERA IN RURAL CHINA

From 1949 to the present, with the CPC's continuously changing policies, rural China has been also constantly reforming and developing. From 1950, the CPC began land reforms, confiscating the land from the landlord class and allocating it to the poor peasants. At the same time, in order to consolidate the new government and ensure the smooth progress of land reform and economic recovery, the CPC launched a large-scale political campaign to suppress counter-revolutionaries nationwide, which repressed the remnants of the Republic of China government and the Chinese Kuomintang, including secret agents, traditional armed parties, gangs, bandits and other local armed forces (Shi, 2006). According to Yang (2006), more than 2.62 million people were arrested nationwide, with more than 712,000 executions. It is worth noting here that the father of one of my interviewees was executed in this campaign.

In 1953, the CPC began to implement the agricultural cooperative system in the countryside. This resulted in the land that had just been distributed to the peasants being taken back by the CPC. By the end of 1956, the agricultural cooperative movement was completed, and this transformed the individual private ownership of land into collective ownership. It marked a fundamental change in the nature of land ownership. After this reform, about 87.8% of farmers participated in the so-called 'advanced agricultural production cooperatives' (*gaoji nongye shengchan hezuoshe*, 高级农业生产合作社)<sup>12</sup>; the land and other production materials were owned by the 'advanced agricultural production cooperatives' (Zhao, 2012). A 'work-point system' was implemented in agricultural cooperatives, and a considerable proportion

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<sup>12</sup> This was from the 'collective farms', which were socialist collective economic organisations organised by Soviet farmers for the joint operation of agricultural production. 'Collective farms', the products of the Agricultural Cooperative Movement of China in the 1950s (1949–1956), were developed by the agricultural production cooperatives. There was a rural collective economic organisation that was large-scale and completely publicly owned.

of rural people's income distribution was calculated on the basis of 'labour days'. Within this system, in many areas of China, women earned far less than men each day, and some even earned half of men's income.

In 1957, Mao declared in Moscow that China would catch up with and surpass Britain within 15 years in steel output (Gao, 2006). In 1958, the CPC launched the Great Leap Forward in China. The CPC hoped to use this campaign to rapidly change China from an agricultural country to an industrial one. From January 1958, the central and local governments continuously formulated and revised agricultural production plans and competed to raise the desired high targets. For example, in May 1958, during the second conference of the 8th National Congress of the CPC, the leaders of the CPC shortened the twelve-year agricultural development task to three years, and linked it to 'surpassing Great Britain and catching up with the United States'<sup>13</sup> (Bo, 2008). All over the country, local governments at all levels began to falsely report grain production, which resulted in the CPC believing that China's agricultural problems were solved, and the food would not run out; Therefore, the CPC decided to shift the focus to industry and steel (Bo, 2008).

In June 1958, Mao Zedong proposed that it would not take 15 years to surpass Great Britain, but only two to three years. He decided to double steel output in 1958 compared with the previous year. At the Beidaihe meeting in August, the Central Committee of the CPC believed that the '*yang stoves*' (洋炉), steelworks in modern industry, could not complete the new target for steel production, and then it decided to engage '*tu stoves*' (土炉), which were built by farmers in the movement. As a result, in September, the whole country began the massive movement of 'big steelmaking'. However, these '*tu stoves*' (土炉) simply could not produce good quality steel and wasted a great number of raw materials. Farmers cut down a large

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<sup>13</sup> This was the slogan put forward by Mao Zedong around 1958. This slogan included two goals: 1. S-steel production to exceed the UK's within 15 years; 2. S-steel production to catch up with the United States within 20 years.

number of trees as fuel to make steel, which seriously damaged the ecological environment. Furthermore, the participation of a large number of farmers in this movement caused a shortage of agricultural labour, affected agricultural production, and became an important cause of the subsequent famine.

In August of the same year, an enlarged meeting of the Political Bureau in Beidaihe of the CPC decided to establish 'people's communes' in the countryside (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the PRC, 1981). Within one-month, rural areas basically established 'rural people's communes' (Bo, 2008). The climax of the 'Great Leap Forward' was marked by 'steelmaking' and 'people's communes', which reached its peak in September and October of 1958 (Bo, 2008).

In some provinces, the people's communes also set up 'public canteens' (*gonggong shitang*, 公共食堂)<sup>14</sup>, which were praised by Mao. According to incomplete statistics, at the end of October 1958, there were 2.65 million public canteens in rural areas and 70% to 90% of the population ate in them (Li and Lin, 1989). The people's communes implemented a distribution system that combined supplements with wages. The supplements mainly referred to eating in public canteens with low standards without being charged, while most communes did not offer much in the way of wages. Moreover, the people's commune strictly forbade people from storing food at home and would send militias to search house-by-house in rural areas (Gao, 2006). In addition, the government still conducted grain collection based on the falsely reported output, in order to complete its collection task. Because of food shortage, the public canteens could not be continued. However, because grain storage was not allowed in peasants' homes, widespread hunger was the result, which led to a great famine. At least 10 million Chinese people starved to death

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<sup>14</sup> The purpose of 'public canteens' (公共食堂) was 'to eat without spending money' and were unprecedentedly developed in rural areas, offering three meals a day to every member of the commune. Many places declared the rural people's communes to be owned by all the people. Moreover, the media publicised the 'public canteen' as an effective way to liberate the labour force and increase productivity.

during the early 1960s (Zhou, 2003). It is important to mention here that some of my older interviewees experienced this great famine and lost their relatives. This experience affected their lives, especially in consumption habits, which became the source of intergenerational conflict, as I will discuss in a subsequent chapter of young women's lives in the village.

In rural areas, after the establishment of the people's communes, a large number of farmland and water conservancy projects were carried out, which required more labour. However, the 'steelmaking' movement also required a labour force, which was transferred from agricultural production, and this caused a great shortage of rural male labour (Zhang, 2011). The shortage of rural labour was prevalent throughout the country at that time, so recruiting women to fill the labour gap became the only realistic option (Zhang, 2011). Therefore, the role of women had, as I will demonstrate later, been reconstructed during this period.

The Great Leap Forward and the people's commune caused huge disasters in China. This weakened Mao's reputation within the party and in order to eliminate opponents in the party and re-establish his authority, Mao launched a larger, decade-long campaign in 1966: The Cultural Revolution (Hu, 2017). The impact of the Cultural Revolution on the countryside was not as profound as its impact in the cities.

Although the debates of the Cultural Revolution reached into many communes, in general, the participation in its movements in rural areas, especially group disputes, did not reach the fierce level that was seen in cities (Andors, 1983). According to Andors, in addition to some basic issues related to the Cultural Revolution and the spread of the Red Guards (*hong weibing*, 红卫兵)<sup>15</sup>, the CPC did not involve rural

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<sup>15</sup> This refers to organisations established by college or middle-school students during the Cultural Revolution and also to their members. The typical dress of the Red Guard was a green military cap, a green military uniform, a belt around the waist, a red armband on the left arm, and with Chairman Mao's quotes in hand. On 29 May, 1966, the first Red Guard organisation was established in the secondary school affiliated to Qinghua University, and it quickly spread throughout the country.

areas deeply in the Cultural Revolution<sup>16</sup>. In rural areas, the CPC adjusted the people's commune policy from the 'one big two public' to 'three classes of ownership, based on teams' (*sanji suoyou, duiwei jichu*, 三级所有, 队为基础)<sup>17</sup> in view of the great famine caused by the Great Leap Forward. Rural women were still encouraged to participate in the production team and could earn work points. Meanwhile, with the demise of public canteens, cadres in rural areas no longer had the right to manage food, and the personal control over rural women by the people's communes reduced greatly. However, under the strong mobilisation ability of the CPC, there were also many 'Iron Girls' in rural areas. Jin (2006) states: 'Iron Girls' is an ideological construct image in the Cultural Revolution that women can do anything men can do, which use 'iron' to describe women and compared with the forced labour during the Great Leap Forward period. The ideological construct had a big impact on rural women as I will introduce later in this chapter.

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<sup>16</sup> This point was reflected in my research. Respondents who experienced the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution told me about the Great Leap Forward and the famine caused by it, but no one talked about the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>17</sup> Three classes: the production team (*shengchan dui*, 生产队), the production brigade (*shengchan dadui*, 生产大队), and the people's commune. 'Belonging to three classes' means that the production materials and products were owned by the people's commune, the production brigade and the production team respectively. 'Based on teams' means that the production team was the basic accounting unit in the three classes of ownership. During the Cultural Revolution, rural areas continued to maintain this system. Each production team had a dozen to thirty households, in addition to the production tools and the reserved land belonging to each household, all other things were owned by the production team. Up to a dozen production teams composed one production brigade, which had some larger production tools, irrigation tools, and even medical stations and schools. Up to a dozen production brigades formed a people's commune, which was the same as a township in contemporary China. During the Cultural Revolution period, rural people were not completely tied to the collective land. The sidelines of a rural family, such as poultry breeding, cottage crafts and migrant work, were the main source of cash income. Although peasants were still poor, there was no widespread famine during this period.



In the Mao era, successive political movements tore apart the Chinese society. Although the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the countryside was not as deep as the cities involved (Andors, 1983), in the whole Mao era in rural China, people were divided into different levels according to class composition and fought each other in these movements (Huang, 1989). Chan et al. (2009) argue that the revelations and struggles in these movements made both cadres and the masses harbour hatred against each other and these movements taught them how to use the name of the revolution to disguise selfish motives and fight against others for profit. In this way, the successive movements not only failed to establish a new morality and unity, but turned China into a cruel, infighting and rolling political arena and in the end, people were exhausted by this kind of movement, and both sides who used to fight in these movements suffered from defeats and were extremely tired (Huang, 1989; Chan et al., 2009).

## **THE POST MAO ERA**



The Cultural Revolution lasted for ten years and ended with Mao's death in 1976. After a series of internal struggles, Deng Xiaoping became the leader of the CPC. He adopted a different strategy for governing the country. Externally, China opened its doors to participating in the global economy; internally, a series of reforms began to be implemented in both urban and rural areas. These reforms have brought about tremendous changes in rural China. A major change affecting the rural population was the introduction of the 'household contract responsibility system' (*jiating lianchan chengbao zerenzhi*, 家庭联产承包责任制, HCRS).

On 24 November, 1978, due to the difficulty in maintaining their livelihood, 18 farmers in Xiaogang Village, Xiaoxihe Town, Fengyang County, Anhui Province privately signed a 'life and death contract' (*shengsi zhuang*, 生死状) in order to contract the land in the village separately. This bottom-up reform, which was initiated by farmers received official confirmation and promotion from the CPC (Qu, 2018), and facilitated the breaking down of the commune system from below (Dikotter, 2017). This was the beginning of the HCRS and also the beginning of China's opening-up and reform policies. The biggest difference between the HCRS and the people's communes was that farmers could contract the collectively owned lands. The contract stipulated that farmers would pay a reasonable proportion of their agricultural products to the state, and other surplus products were freely disposed of by the farmers themselves, such as selling them at the market. This reform changed the production mode of the production team or production brigade, which was previously managed collectively, and converted every single household into a production unit. Some scholars, however, argued women's land interests were often not protected in practice and this reform exacerbated gender inequality (Aslanbeigui and Summerfield, 1989).

After the ‘Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee’<sup>18</sup>, with the active support and strong advocacy of the Central Committee of the CPC, the HCRS was gradually put into practice across the country. Deng gave up the people’s commune system of Mao’s era and replaced it with the HCRS in rural areas. By the beginning of 1983, 93% of the production teams in rural areas across the country were implementing this responsibility system, grain output had increased from 300 million tonnes in 1978 to 407 million tonnes in 1984, and the income level of farmers had increased by 2.69 times (National Bureau of Statistics, 2006). However, from the mid-1980s, agricultural production stagnated, the slow growth of peasant incomes was notable, and the urban-rural income gap began to widen. The disadvantages of the HCRS as a de-collectivisation mode, but also a small-scale farming production and management mode, became more and more obvious (Chen and Brown, 2001). Fragmentation and small-scale, low-risk resistance, along with uncertain property rights, were its main issues, and these had a negative impact on farmers’ enthusiasm (Reisch, 1992; Chen and Brown, 2001; Xu, 2008). HCRS was unable to sustain the growth of China’s agricultural output, leading to further reforms to China’s land-tenure system (Dong, 1996). In the subsequent reform process, the gap between China’s rural areas and cities gradually widened. The rapid development of cities requires a large amount of labour, which led to the loosening of China’s hukou system.

*Hu* refers to a household, and *kou* refers to the population in the household. *Hukou* is a legal document that records and retains basic information about the population of the household. There are agricultural and non-agricultural *hukou* types in China. The regulation on household registration in the PRC was promulgated in January 1958 and was designed to control population migration. The purpose was to not allow an uncontrolled increase in urban labour, nor let the rural labour force flow out freely. This was also the official establishment of the binary division between urban and

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<sup>18</sup> This was held in Beijing, from 18 to 22 December 1978.

rural areas. Residents with non-agricultural *hukou* enjoyed many benefits that were provided by the government, such as food, medical care and education, which also created disparities between rural and urban areas, because people with agricultural *hukou* did not have these benefits.

The shortage of arable land, lack of local employment opportunities, a fall in agricultural prices and increased taxes, and the unscrupulous corruption of local cadres, together with the widening urban-rural income gap and stagnating incomes during the mid-1980s, forced farmers out of their villages (Jacka, 2006). At the same time, due to the greater openness of urban economic reforms, the development of cities also required a large number of labourers. Therefore, the Chinese government adjusted its household registration policy (*hukou*, 户口) to allow farmers to work in cities. ‘Notice of the State Council on the Entry of Peasants into Towns’ was promulgated in 1984. The notice stipulated that farmers could settle in towns by ‘self-care rations’ (*zili kouliang*, 自理口粮)<sup>19</sup> and enjoy working rights and observe the same obligations as the residents of the town. The restrictions of *hukou* on the rural-urban migration were loosening. As rural people were no longer dependent on the government’s supply of food and other necessities, they could live in towns for months, or even several years (Jacka, 2006).

Chinese farmers were more likely to work in cities to improve their families’ living standards (Bai and Song, 2002). However, due to the *hukou* system, farmers could not enjoy the resources and material benefits of work, education and social security that were attached to an urban *hukou*, making the cost of migration work in the early 1990s high, so in most cases rural families could only choose one person to go to the city (Zhu, 2008; World Bank, 2009). Rural-urban migration has presented different

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<sup>19</sup> This was the temporary *hukou* policy adopted by the State Council in the mid-1980s to solve the practical difficulties of farmers entering the cities. These farmers were calculated in non-agricultural *hukou*, but they were still not provided with rations or welfare from the government.

characteristics over time, and has had a great impact on rural women, as I will explore later in this chapter.

## **RURAL AREAS IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

To remedy the uneven development and increasing inequality between urban and rural areas, the CPC began to adjust rural policies and has proposed the policy of ‘building a new socialist countryside’ (*jianshe shehuizhuyi xin nongcun*, 建设社会主义新农村). At the Fifth Plenum of the 16<sup>th</sup> CPC Central Committee in September 2004, Chairman Hu Jintao clearly stated the plan of ‘two trends’: firstly, using agriculture to support industry, in order to accumulate resources for industrial development during the initial stage of industrialisation; then, using industry to assist agriculture and driving rural development from the cities when industrialisation has reached a significant level. At the Central Economic Work Conference in December 2004, Hu Jintao emphasised that China has reached the stage of development of ‘promoting agriculture through industry, bringing up the countryside by cities’ (*yigongcunong, yichengdaixiang*, 以工促农, 以城带乡)<sup>20</sup>. Since then, the CPC has increased investment in rural areas. In 2006, the agricultural tax (including the agricultural special products<sup>21</sup> tax and the animal husbandry tax) was abolished, marking the end of a 2600-year long agricultural tax in Chinese history.

In terms of education, in 2001, the number of children who should be attending school but were not enrolled reached 1.14 million, of whom 1.01 million were in rural areas (Wang, 2003). The new social security system was established in 2003, which started with ‘the new rural cooperative medical care system’; by 2010, it covered nearly all rural residents. From 2009, to protect the basic lives of rural residents in their old age, the ‘new social endowment insurance system’ for rural

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<sup>20</sup>See: <http://theory.people.com.cn/GB/40557/49139/49143/3633627.html>, accessed on 27/01/2019.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Agricultural special products’ refers to crop farming (excluding food crops), fisheries, forestry and animal husbandry products. But the tobacco leaf tax was not abolished.

residents was implemented. In 2011 in China which has always been known as a big agricultural country, the proportion of urban residents reached 51.27% in the total population exceeding the number of rural residents for the first time in the country's history<sup>22</sup>. By 2016, the proportion of urban population had increased further, to 57.35% <sup>23</sup>in the total population. The programme of 'building a new socialist countryside' has brought great changes to rural women. For example, the education level of rural women has improved, and they have received social security.

For more than 40 years since the implementation of the reform and opening up policy, especially after entering the new century, China has been undergoing unprecedented changes. There has been a situation temporarily where multiple ideas influence each other and co-exist. This is what Yi (2017) calls 'mosaic temporality'. She defines 'mosaic temporality' as 'tradition and modernity, the resurgence of Confucianism, the socialist version of modernity, the capitalist version of modernity, and the socialist heritage are interwoven, and all seem to play a role' (Yi, 2017:1).

Chan et al. (2009) states after the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, the rural areas began to transform to modernization. He pointed out three aspects of transformation to modernization in Chan Village where he conducted fieldwork: First, the degree of mechanization is constantly improving, and the village is changed from backward agriculture to modern industry; Second, the original clan ideas was broken. Third, influenced by the market economy and effects from Hong Kong, people's ideas have undergone tremendous changes. After entering the 21st century, Chen Village has undergone more fundamental changes. It has changed from 'a fairly typical farming community' during Mao era to 'one of the world's industrial heartlands, feeding foreign departments stores, electronics companies, and discount emporiums with much of their merchandise' (Chan et al., 2009: 330).

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<sup>22</sup> See: [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201201/t20120118\\_12783.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201201/t20120118_12783.html), accessed on 06/11/2018.

<sup>23</sup> See: [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/sjjd/201702/t20170228\\_1467357.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/sjjd/201702/t20170228_1467357.html), accessed on 06/11/2018.

Moreover, he emphasizes the village is not the only area in China which has been significantly impacted by ‘global demand for inexpensive mass-produced goods’:

Up and down the country’s east coast, once-rural districts have filled up with factories churning out export commodities and, increasingly, producing for an expanding domestic market. Chen Village is no longer a typical village—it is no longer a village at all. But it is a typical part of a globalized industrial development that is engulfing ever more space and people in China. (Chan et al., 2009: 330)

The economic development of China’s eastern coastal areas has attracted a large number of inland populations. Tian (2014) argues under the impetus of industrialization and urbanization, rural population continues to flow into cities, and rural areas, especially remote villages, have become sparsely populated areas. He points out due to the large outflow of villagers, many houses in villages have been vacant, and some migrant workers have moved into cities (towns), causing old houses in rural areas to be vacant. The large number of idle houses in the village is not only a waste of resources, but also damage the connection between the old village neighbourhoods, and even disintegrates. Village merger has become one of the ways for China to deal with the decline of village organizations. Chinese local governments merged the original local villages into similar communities in the city. Lin and Ma (2018) state that the rapid village merger and the rise of a large number of new communities in rural China have become important events that mark the rapid transformation of the countryside. They argue the original scattered community of natural villages, which were dominated by local life, has been rapidly disappearing, and new, more centralized, non-agricultural communities have been emerging.

In private lives of rural China, Yan (2003) argues there has been an important transformation in the lives of Chinese farmers: the rise of private family and the general emergence of personal private lives within families. He states that the private

family should have the following characteristics: the family is relatively less subject to external interference, the behaviour of the individual in the family is relatively unsupervised by others, and the family life is centred on a partner-style spouse relationship and paying attention to personal happiness and emotional connections between people. In addition to the lives of peasant, the organizational forms of Chinese villages have also undergone great changes.

## GENDER RELATIONS IN RURAL CHINA

Kongzi (孔子)<sup>24</sup> is the founder of Confucianism. In Kongzi's student's record, *The Analects of Confucius-Yang Huo*, there is a famous statement about the status of women, which is '唯女子与小人为难养也；近之则不孙，远之则怨'. I think the most accurate English translation comes from Indiana University:

The Master said, women and small men are difficult to nurture. If you get too close to them, they become uncompliant, and if you stay too distant, they become resentful.<sup>25</sup>

Ni (2014) argues that this passage is full of Kongzi's discrimination against women, because 'small men' (the inferior men, 小人) are the opposite of 'junzi' (君子)<sup>26</sup>, and it refers to low status people who are seen as morally inferior. Putting women together with the small men implies women and small men are inferior beings who need supervision by those morally superior to them. Due to the discrimination against women, Confucianism established the ethical norms and moral precepts that women must abide by during their lifetime. This is the 'three obediences four virtues' (*sancong side*, 三从四德). 'Three obediences' requires a woman to be

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<sup>24</sup> Kongzi (551–479 BCE): Confucius. He was an educationalist and a philosopher.

<sup>25</sup> See: [http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Analects\\_of\\_Confucius\\_\(Eno-2012\).pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Analects_of_Confucius_(Eno-2012).pdf), accessed on 04/03/2019.

<sup>26</sup> Junzi (君子) refers to people with a noble personality and good moral character, or a man of high status.

obedient to her father before marriage, her husband while married, and her sons in widowhood; 'four virtues' refers to morality, proper speech, modest manner, and good work for women. The morality of women requires obeying the ethics, loyalty and submitting to their husbands; proper speech means that women should be cheerful and whisper when talking; modest manner refers to the dress and deportment of women; and the good work demands that women be good at housework.

Confucianism developed further during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE) and produced a Confucian school of idealist philosophy, Neo-Confucianism, which became the orthodox form of Confucianism during the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties. The requirements for women under Neo-Confucianism are mainly reflected in the concept of chastity. Although original Confucianism also requires women to be responsible for chastity before marriage, it mainly requires women to be loyal to their husbands. After her husband's death, a woman can remarry. However, Neo-Confucianism further requires that women should keep their 'virginity' before marriage and retain their 'chastity' in marriage. If a woman's husband dies, she must also obey the rules and should not remarry.

Furthermore, the requirements of women in traditional Confucian culture were not only that they follow the 'three obediences four virtues' and virginity, but also that they perform filial piety. Filial piety plays an important role in Confucian morality. According to Confucianism, filial piety mainly includes these aspects: respect, obedience, loyalty and financial assistance to and physical care of parents (cited by Zhang, 2016). Confucianism encourages filial piety and requires children to respect their parents, follow their parents' wishes and worship their ancestors. Filial piety is the foundation of traditional Chinese families, the basic principle of the father-son relationship, and even the core standard of family ethics. According to Chan and Tan (2004), Confucianism emphasises filial piety shown by the younger generation to the



older generation, obedience from women to men, and loyalty from servants to masters. In China, 'parents' are usually the oldest grandfathers or great-grandfathers in an extended family. They have the right not only to decide how to use or distribute important assets such as money and property, but also to make decisions about more trivial matters, such as suitable schools or employment for children in the family.

Walby (1990: 20) defines patriarchy as 'a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women' and 'the use of the term social structure is important here, since it clearly implies rejection both of biological determinism, and the notion that every individual man is in a dominant position and every woman in a subordinate one.' She also argues that 'patriarchy is not an ahistoric, universalistic concept' (1990: 176) and that structures within patriarchy will also change at different periods and in different regions. Like Walby, Sechiyama (2013) indicates 'we have to recognize that patriarchy is seen in various forms determined by social conditions related to the historical period and region in which it exists' (2013: 24). He defines patriarchy in the East Asian context as 'a comprehensive set of relationships and norms characterized by, first of all, a gender-based, and also a generation-based, allocation of set roles and an unequal distribution of power' (2013: 24). He argues patriarchy is not a special form of control, but it indicates 'the gender of the subjects holding power and a system that allocates roles based on gender' (2013: 24).

Bai (2009) states that Chinese patriarchy was established in Zhou Dynasty. The rulers of Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BC) opposed women's participation in politics and memorial ceremonies. They emphasised the order of society, which included obedience from women to men in the gender relations. With the full establishment of the patriarchal system under the Zhou Dynasty, women gradually retreated from the public sphere until they completely lost the right to speak in this sphere. Kongzi inherited the views and various restrictions on women from Zhou Dynasty and, as

Confucianism dominated and continued to develop in the ideological realm, patriarchy was increasingly strengthened and consolidated in China.

According to Sechiyama (2013), the mode of family life was the foundation of Chinese traditional patriarchy. Jin (2010) argues the power relations of the patriarchal family have the characteristics of the father-lead and children-comply (*fuzhu zicong*, 父主子从) or men-lead and women-comply (*nanzhu nvcong*, 男主女从) and a series of rules and regulations concerning the gender division of labour, rights and obligations, and inheritance of the family members. She states patrilineage, patriarchy and patrilocality are the three cornerstones of it. She also argues that Chinese rural families have maintained patriarchy for thousands of years, and although the patriarchal system has been weakened by the revolutionary movements and the wave of modernization since the 20th century, it has not disappeared. Johnson (1983:1) states that ‘few societies in history have prescribed for women a lowlier status or treated them in a more routinely brutal way than traditional Confucian China’. Of the status of women under traditional Confucian and patriarchy, the fate of Chinese women was tragic. They were excluded from the public domain and limited in private family, which was the cornerstone of Chinese patriarchal society.

Fei (1939) states the concept of family in China is different from that in the Western because family members in China sometimes includes adult children, adult married children, and even distant patrilineal relatives. He calls the Chinese family ‘expanded family’ because the son does not separate from their parents after marriage, so he expands the family, and members of this group share common property and had a common budget. In the family, vertical relationships, such as father-son relationship, or a mother-in-law relationship play a decisive role, while the husband and wife relationship as horizontal relationship is subsidiary (Fei, 1992).

In this kind of family, when the new wife enters the husband's family, she will find herself in the awkward position:

She finds herself among strangers, but in the most intimate relations with them. Her position is dictated by custom. At night, she sleeps with her husband and she must respond submissively to him. With him alone she can have sexual relations. By day, she shares in the housework under the supervision of her mother-in-law, who has authority over her. She must treat her father-in-law with respect but not with intimacy. She must deal tactfully with her husband's sisters and brothers or they will intrigue against her. She will undertake the cooking and at meals will take the lowest place at table—or even not appear at the table at all. (Fei, 1939: 45-46)

Fei (1992) argues that in the 'expanded family', although the wife's status is low, when the wife gives birth to a child, her situation will improve. He observes a change in the attitude of the husband after his wife gives birth. Before giving birth, her husband was cold to her, at least in public. As long as someone else was present, it would be considered inappropriate if her husband showed some intimate feelings towards her and would this become a subject of gossip. In this case, the couples would not sit close to each other, and they rarely talked. They preferred to talk to each other through a third party, and they did not yet have a proper title for each other. But once a child was born, the husband could call his wife the mother of the child. Since then, they could talk more freely and get along with each other more naturally. The same is true for other relatives. For this change in attitude, Fei (1937) indicates that caring for children was a bonding force in the family.

Kandiyoti (1988) states that within the social structure and cultural restrictions of patriarchy, women, especially women at the margins of society, often adopt strategic bargaining behaviours to maximize their life choices, even though such bargaining strategies tend to be at the expense of long-term interests. I draw the definition of agency from Rahman and Jackson: 'Agency is the capacity for intentional action and

presupposes the human ability to reflect upon situations that confront us and to decide on appropriate courses of action' (2010: 155). Under a patriarchal social structure, although women are in an oppressed position, they can improve their situations through their own efforts and reshape gender relations under specific circumstances. In the study of patriarchy, we should not only see institutional oppression, but also pay more attention to women's agency to understand gender relations. In the Chinese context, Wolf (1972) demonstrates rural women are not victims of blind endurance in patriarchy, but also have agency. Compared with Fei, Wolf (1972) has more analysis of the relationship between women's status in the family and Chinese family reproduction. She argues that Chinese women are in a very embarrassing subordinate position in traditional families. She finds in rural Taiwan, residence is patrilocal after marriage, as a result, a woman's relationship with their husband's family becomes increasingly close, while their relationship with their mother's family gradually weakens in principle and in the husband's family, these women will be oppressed by both male family members and mother-in-laws. Unlike Fei (1939,1992), Wolf (1972) does not only see the low status of women, but also notices the strategies adopted by these women when facing difficulties. She states that in order to change the situation, the first strategy adopted by these women is to form an alliance with other local women in continuous contact. This alliance will improve their situation and rid them of the strict control of the in-laws to form a strong public opinion in the village. Another strategy is to build a 'uterine family' by raising their sons and fostering their loyalty to themselves to acquire and maintain power in the family through this relationship. She states:

Although young women may have little or no influence over their husbands and would not dare express an unsolicited opinion ( and perhaps not even a solicited one) to their fathers-in-law, older women who have raised their sons properly retain considerable influence over their sons' actions, even in activities exclusive to men. Further, older women who have displayed years of good judgement are regularly consulted by their husbands about major as well as minor economic and social projects. (Wolf, 1972: 40)

She argues their actions have achieved positive results because they have opened up a living space for themselves, and gained power in the family, but they had also consolidated the patriarchal family. 'In most cases, by the time she adds grandchildren, the uterine family and the household will almost completely overlap, and there will be another daughter-in-law struggling with loneliness and beginning a new uterine family' (Wolf, 1972: 35). From the perspective of the life cycle of a woman, she has gone through the process of powerlessness, resistance, becoming a mother to obtain and consolidate power, and the gradual losing of power with the entrance of a daughter-in-law.

Patriarchy reveals structural gender inequality from the macro level. However, from the micro level, it is not enough to help us to understand women's colourful daily lives. In the study of women's daily lives, we should pay attention to gendered subjectivities to explore women's practices and relationships. Evans (2007:15) summarizes the process of gendered subjectivities' formation:

Formed through historical and social processes, family dynamics, and unconscious motivations, the gendered subject makes sense of herself through relationships and practices that correspond with and differ from others from her, in contradictory and unpredictable ways.

As Evans (2007: 14) put it in her book, *the subject of gender*: 'the effects of the subjective ...in explaining resistance to or production of change is thus crucial to an analysis of changing gender practice and relationships'. Women's sense of gendered self is not constant and, it has different characteristics in different historical contexts (Evans, 2007). She emphasises women are not responders to surrounding changes, but are 'creative participants' in the process of change. In addition, gendered subjectivities are not only shaped in changes in the external environment, such as social and historical changes, but also related to intergenerational interaction:

as a social and cultural entity, the subject may think about the various stages of her individual gender history as a continuation of already established practices, corresponding with, dependent on, and even defined by the trajectories of previous generation. (Evans, 2007: 15)

She believes: ‘Narratives about the relationship between daughters and mothers reveal powerful ties linking the present and future with the ‘previous premise’ and offer rich insights into processes and meanings of change in understandings of gender’ (Evans, 2007: 17). As she points out, she does not focus on the mother-daughter relationship per se, but to emphasize the crucial effects of this relationship on shaping women’s changing gendered self-identification. She finds: ‘Mothers represent both the constraints on and the urge to challenge normative gender practices, and serve both consciously and unconsciously as key referents in their daughters’ experiences of becoming a woman’ (Evans, 2007: 200). However, women’s gendered self-identification is inseparable from this relationship, and at the same time, it is independent of the mother’s life. Therefore, ‘the search for recognition in this intersubjective bond thus becomes a space permitting the articulation of the same and the different’ (Evans, 2007: 200).

## **EFFECTS OF THE CPC’S POLICY CHANGES ON RURAL WOMEN**

### **THE MAO ERA (1949-1976)**

The CPC inherited the idea of Marxist women’s liberation and believed that women’s participation in public labour was the most crucial means of liberating women. Adhering to this idea, the CPC encouraged women to step out of the family and participate extensively in social labour. The law stipulated that women and men had equal rights to work and equal pay for the same work. Mao (1991) suggested

that the first condition for women's liberation was to walk out from the family, participate in social labour, enter the public sphere from the private family, and gain economic independence.

In land reform, the 'Agrarian Reform Law' (June 1950) regulated the distribution of land by number of people, which gave women the right to own land. This greatly promoted the participation of rural women in agricultural work. The CPC also carried out ideological education, teaching that 'labour is the most glorious' (*laodong zuiguangrong*, 劳动最光荣) in rural areas, to encourage rural women to participate in agricultural work. In 1953, the CPC began to implement the agricultural cooperative system in the countryside. A work point system was implemented in agricultural cooperatives, and a considerable portion of rural women's income distribution was calculated on the basis of 'labour days'. At the beginning of the implementation of this system, there were many problems. Generally, cooperatives despised women's participation in production, because one female labourer was counted much less than a male labourer. This shows that the phenomenon of contempt for women was still widespread in rural areas at that time. Despite women's dissatisfaction with this, in 1958, in rural areas, women made greater contributions to agricultural production than before 1948 (Davin, 1975).

The Great Leap Forward, which was launched in 1958, caused a serious shortage of male labour. Mao (1956) said that Chinese women were a great human resource that must be explored to build a great socialist country. Rural women played a vital role in the movement: 'Women's labour in the fields freed men, not only to work on the short-lived and often ill-fated projects of the Great Leap, but also to develop small-scale rural industries in the years that followed' (Hershatter, 2011: 265). 'The great leap forward, envisioned as a rapid means to build socialism in China by mobilizing masses of people, including millions of women, brought out the relationship between

socialist revolution and women's liberation in a way unprecedented in Chinese or world history' (Andors, 1983: 47).

In the Cultural Revolution, rural women were still encouraged to participate in the production team and earned work points. Under the strong propaganda and mobilisation ability of the CPC during the Cultural Revolution, female labour organisations, such as the 'Iron Girl Bridge Team' and the 'Iron Girl Commando Team' emerged both in urban and rural China. In spite of the working environment and their own physiological characteristics, women expended great physical effort to create the 'Iron Girl' image that matched the politics and propaganda of that era. 'Iron Girls' became heroes who promoted 'social progress' for the socialist construction of China. As some slogans depicted: 'women hold up half of the sky' (妇女能顶半边天) and 'times are different, men and women are the same' (时代不同了, 男女都一样), whether in language, behaviour, or dress, women showed some traditional male characteristics. In addition, although these revolutions broke the traditional gender division in China, which had an important positive impact on the promotion of the status of Chinese women, 'feminist demands were notably absent from the Cultural Revolution' (Andors, 1983: 102). Bailey (2012) states this situation of women as one of 'androgyny'. He explains: 'what androgyny entailed for women ultimately, however, was that they were required to push themselves as never before into the public realm in order to appropriate conventional male roles in politics and production, while little consideration was given in the ideological propaganda, or few concessions made, to easing their marriage, family and reproductive roles (in other words, androgyny meant women becoming more 'masculinised' rather than men becoming more 'feminised')' (2012: 122).

Chinese women were not completely liberated from family affairs because of the CPC liberation movement. The doctrine of the traditional patriarchal family still required them to return home to take responsibility for caring for children, the



elderly, and doing housework. The patriarchal family continued to exist and had not been abolished, all of these phenomena were not only feudal remnants, moreover, many structures of traditional communities and patrilineal network have been reinstitutionalised within the collective pattern since 1949 (Johnson, 1983; Stacey, 1983; Bailey, 2012).

### **FROM THE REFORM ERA TO THE PRESENT (1978- )**

After 1978, the planned economy was transformed into a market economy in China. Deng gave up the people's commune system of Mao's era and replaced it with the HCRS in rural areas. With this reform, working hours within the family increased, while employment opportunities and working time outside reduced, which enhanced the traditional gendered division of labour and adversely affected women's rights (Aslanbeigui and Summerfield, 1989). In order to continue serving family members and to keep the peasant family together as an economic unit, large amounts of domestic work was required; therefore, women either needed to increase previous domestic work or develop new side-line businesses after the reform that did not bring changes to the gendered division of labour, but were more traditional (Croll, 1987; Jacka, 1997).

Moreover, women's land interests were often not protected in practice although, in many places, the policy of 'great stability and small adjustment' (*da wending, xiao tiaozheng*, 大稳定, 小调整) stipulated the equal rights of people who had migrated due to legal marriage to obtain contracted farmland. Under the policy of 'not changing for 30 years'<sup>27</sup>, most villages did not have enough 'mobile land' to supplement the contracted cultivated land for the newly added population, which meant that, after marriage, on the one hand, these women's previous land was cultivated by their natal family and no longer belonged to them; on the other hand,

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<sup>27</sup> In 1997, the rural land contract management right was extended for 30 years, and the land contract relationship was kept unchanged.

they could not acquire land from the village of their husbands. Therefore, a woman's land possession rights, use rights and profit rights were still lost during the marriage process in practice, because a married woman would move to her husband's village. Moreover, the right to use land was based on the family, which in China was generally headed by a male, which made women's individual land rights unacceptable. For family management rights, the land contract did not require both husband and wife to sign, so usually the husband signed it as the head of the household, which greatly damaged the women's actual rights and interests in the land contracting process (Shi and Wu, 2008). Even though women may be allocated land in their husbands' villages with a reasonable expectation after marriage or remarriage, they still needed to wait for an uncertain amount of years and the practices varied widely (Judd, 2007). In 2010, 21.0% of rural women were without land, an increase of 11.8% over 2000, and this was 9.1% higher than that of rural men without land (All-China Women's Federation and National Statistical Bureau, 2010). Not only have women's land rights been severely damaged, but even women's reproductive rights have been controlled by the state.

In 1978, the one-child policy was implemented, and this led to the sustained attention and strong desire for, population control from the senior leadership in the CPC (Greenhalgh, 2008). Socialist birth planning differs from the Western liberal notion of 'family planning' in that the role of the party-state is paramount: births are planned by the state to bring the production of human beings in line with the production of material goods (Greenhalgh, 2008: 46). However, because boys were thought to stay and take care of their parents in old age (Milwertz, 1997), provide labour to do the heavy farm work, provide support for their elders, inherit family property and continue the family line (Becker, 1991; Johnson, 1994), this policy encountered huge resistance in rural areas. The CPC adjusted this policy in such rural areas to allow families whose first child was a girl to have a second child, which was called the 'one and half child' policy.

There was huge pressure from all sides, such that most rural women would face one form of pressure from their husbands' family to require them to give birth to a boy, while another form came from local governments. If the government found that some women were not obeying the rules, these women would face forced abortion or compulsory sterilisation. Rural women, as a vulnerable group had no way to fight against this policy, and the only thing they could do was to be a sacrificial lamb, and to suffer in a silent corner (Wang, 2010). On the other hand, the one-child policy is one of the reasons why women's status has changed. Zhu and Jiang's study (1991) shows that, normally for women in rural areas, their childbearing period is about 13 years, but after the family-planning policy implementation that period reduced to just under five years, meant they can finish their childbearing around the ages of 27–30. Therefore, they are liberated from constant fertility and have more time and opportunities to develop themselves and their own identities.

The one-child policy has also changed the previous preference of boys in rural China to some extent. Bossen (2002) finds, although son preference still remains in Lu village like elsewhere in rural China, that girls obtain more attention than before. She found that villagers in her study intended to become sterilised after having two or even one daughter, while some plan to adopt daughters, and she argues that, despite the rising percentage of missing girls, in Lu village it seemed that girls have better protection than in other rural areas of China. Many peasants who live close to cities have no desire to have more than one child (Peng, 2009). In the singleton family, daughters receive as much attention as sons, and increasing number of young parents are investing more and more in their only daughters and have higher expectations for them (Shi, 2017).

## **RURAL WOMEN IN CHANGING FAMILY STRUCTURES SINCE 1978**

After 1978, China's family structure has changed significantly. According to Yi and Wang (2003), between 1980s and 2000s, the number of nuclear families in China has increased rapidly, and the average family population has declined significantly: 'The proportions of elderly who did not live with children and elderly-couple only households substantially increased' (2003: 96). Yan's (2003) and Hershatter's (2011) fieldwork in rural China reflect this pattern. Hershatter (2011) argues that family changes in rural China began as early as the period of collectivization. She states when collectivization abolished the right to inherit land in the 1950s, it also began to gradually undermine the previous practice of elderly parents living with married sons in a multigenerational family, and the new ideas of modernity endorsed by Chinese Communist Party leaders in the 1980s accelerated the transformation of rural families. Yan (2003) offers a different explanation. He states that in Xiajia village, where he conducted fieldwork, the reason why so many young people wanted to establish a nuclear family was to pursue a more affectionate, intimate, and equal ideal husband and wife relationship.

The earlier research of Fei (1992) and Wolf (1972) were both based on extended families. When this family structure is no longer the mainstream Chinese family, it is obvious to see influences on women in changing family structures. Yan (2003) states that, in Xiajia village, regardless of the extended family or the nuclear family, the relationship between husband and wife has begun to play a decisive role in family life, replacing father-son relationships and mother-in-law relationships. He finds gender relations have changed. Women, especially the younger generation, have more initiative in their lives and have played an increasingly important role in the transformation of family life. He observes that women in Xiajia village can not only get rid of in-laws' control, but also reshape gender relations and family ideals. When nuclear families became the mainstream family model in China, women do not seem to have been able to gain power through the establishment of a 'uterine family', because as the husband-wife relationship has become the main axis, the influence of

the in-laws has been declining, while the influence of the wives on the husband has been gradually increasing. It is worth noting that the great improvement in the situation of daughters-in-law has been accompanied by the declining power of another female group, mothers-in-law.

There is a Chinese saying, ‘after one thousand years torment, a daughter-in-law has finally become a mother-in-law’ (*qian nian de xi fu ao cheng po*, 千年的媳妇熬成婆). ‘One thousand years’ is a hyperbole to illustrate how difficult it is to be a daughter-in-law. The whole saying means that being a daughter-in-law is very difficult, but when you become a mother-in-law, you will be relieved from the hard life. I think this saying is a good summary of the cycle of the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law relationship in a patriarchal family. Now that cycle is finally broken. However, this does not seem fair to the mother-in-law. When she was young, she lived with her parents-in-law looking after them like a servant. Now it is finally her turn to become a mother-in-law, but her son and daughter-in-law no longer follow the tradition. According to Hershatter (2011), older women had maintained the functioning of the family in those years when the family was not of public concern, but now the reconstruction of the family field is achieved by excluding and punishing them. Stafford (2000) and Yan (2003) also expressed similar concerns. It was not only older women who were caught in the crisis of old age and the former heads of households, fathers-in-law have also fallen into the same crisis. Yan (2003) found severe intergenerational conflicts and elder abuse in some families in Xiajia village, and attributed it to the decline of filial piety.

Yan (2003) argues that the main reasons for the decline of filial piety are as follows: First of all, the state no longer guarantees the implementation of filial piety with public power. Even though the current Chinese law provides that children have the obligation to care for the elderly, it has no enforcement power. Secondly, public opinion is increasingly silent on filial piety. Thirdly, the collapse of religious beliefs

makes young people no longer believe that violation of filial piety will be punished by the gods. Finally, a series of values introduced during the reform of the market economy eventually buried filial piety. While Yan (2003) summarized reasons for the decline of filial piety, it should be noted that the filial piety he said refers to is that of the son and daughter-in-law, not the filial piety of the daughter. Some scholars have found that with the decline of sons and daughters-in-law's filial piety, daughters have become more and more filial, and their relationship with their own parents becomes closer (Ikels, 2004; Qi, 2015; Zhang, Guo and Luo, 2014). Hershatter (2011) states that older women complained of their sons and daughters-in-law, while they did not blame their daughters and instead, they were satisfied and happy with the care and financial assistance provided by their daughters. Some scholars have found that older parents enjoy better filial piety and care from daughters than sons (Yi et al., 2016). Shi (2009) argues that the gendered practice of filial piety centred on sons has changed and daughters play an increasingly important role.

To summarise, the traditional 'expanded family' has been replaced by the nuclear family and in the meanwhile, women's roles in family have significantly changed. In the traditional 'expanded family', although they can gain powers by establishing a 'uterine family', the status of women, especially young women, is low. After the rural reform, the relationship between husband and wife has become increasingly close. On the one hand, the relationship between husband and wife becomes the main axis in the family, and the status of young women in the family improves; On the other hand, older women have lost their original power and no longer have the authority over their daughters-in-law. In filial piety, the gendered practices of filial piety have changed. The son and daughter-in-law no longer occupying a central position in filial piety, and the relationship between daughters and their natal families is becoming closer: 'After one thousand year's torment, a daughter-in-law has finally become a mother-in-law', the painful cycle of Chinese women has begun

to be broken. Now, with the passage of time, the daughters-in-law, who featured in the fieldwork of Yan (2003) and Hershatter (2011), have become ‘mothers-in-law’. This cycle was broken by them when they were young. Now, when they become ‘mother-in-law’, how will they deal with their young daughters-in-law? How will these young daughters-in-law deal with their husbands and in-laws? These seem to be pertinent questions.

### **WOMEN IN RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION**

From the late of 1980s, increasing urban-rural disparities and the strong demand for labour in China’s economic development have produced a large number of migrant worker groups. Zhu (2008) pointed out that, because the land provided farmers with the most stable social security, peasants would leave some family members at home. In the sex ratio of migrant workers, the proportion of women was far lower than that of men (Fan, 2003). In the process of rural-urban migration, women were more obedient to men’s interests due to the traditions of ‘men work outside, women work inside’; thus, it was naturally the responsibility of men to go to the cities for work, and women naturally stayed at home to take care of the elderly, children, and household chores (Wang, 2006). Child-care, which is usually undertaken by women, is more compatible with farm work and domestic work (Short et al., 2002). Because of the gender division, men would not usually support their wives to do migrant work and would not want them to leave home, which would make them embarrassed. Women would also agree with comments about men in society in order to defend their husbands’ dignity, by using examples such as the idea that men are not as careful as women. People have consciously formed an internalised gender concept into an experience, making the gendered division of labour a ‘natural’ rule of life (Sun, 2006).

However, Davin (1999) states that left-behind women have improved autonomy and have the right to make decisions as heads of households, which contributes to their status. At the same time, with the investment in agricultural technology and the promotion of new agricultural production tools, such as planters or harvesters, which not only shortened production time and difficulty but also enhanced agricultural productivity, women were no longer attached to men, but could cope with heavy agricultural production themselves with an improvement in agricultural efficiency, thus contributing to the advancement of women's status (Zhang et al., 2004). It can be seen that the impact of changes in the CPC's policies on rural women are complex. It is difficult to say that the impact of a policy on women is all negative, and it is also difficult to say that it is positive. This has to be analysed on the basis of detailed research.

With development and changes in society, people's ideas are constantly changing. During the early 1990s, the gender ratio of migrant workers began to change with the shift in farmers' views about women's migration work and the increasing educational level of young women in rural areas. According to Jacka (2006), during the 1990s, the proportion of women in the rural-urban floating population was about 30%, although in most cities they only constituted a small part, but female migrant workers dominated some economic sectors, including domestic service, prostitution, health, cleaning, and the textile, toy and electronics industries. In the special economic zone of southern China, women constituted the vast majority of the floating population. In addition, at the national level, the proportion of rural women among migrant workers has also increased.

Pun (2005) applied the perspective of Marxist class analysis to research on *dagongmei* (打工妹)<sup>28</sup> in electronics industries. She argues they are under triple pressure from

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<sup>28</sup> Dagong refers to 'work for...', particularly for a capitalist 'boss' (Pun, 2005: 12). Mei refers to women, especially unmarried young women.



national socialism, transnational capital, and family patriarchy and in the past 20 years, despite the continuous influx of rural migrants to work in cities, they have not been able to form a new working class in China because the market system, as well as the state apparatus, hindered, destroyed and shattered the generation of its class power. As a result, *dagongmei* are subjects created by a mixture of the state and the market. In addition, she also points out the state and the market are not the only sources of power, but also local cultural practices, specifically, the Chinese patriarchal culture that is undergoing transformation and reconstruction. More specifically, the process of gendering, the norms of sex and sexual behaviour, and the dominant position of marriage and family all have a great influence on the process of sexualization. She argues although there is no traditional working-class structure and relationship here, but ‘in the face of the inescapable oppressions, a new Chinese worker-subject is struggling to emerge’ (2005:172):

a worker-subject seeks a space in its own right, surpassing any ideologized resistance projects that often lead to the subsumption of workers’ subjectivity within the movement. A worker-subject project should therefore open up a new cartography of transgressions, taking a multiple front, criss-crossing individual and collective levels, and negotiating not only with economic and political factors but also cultural and psychic experiences. (Pun, 2005: 206)

Pun (2005) also argues the social struggle of *dagongmei* should not be treated as ‘class struggle’ because their social resistance is not only the resistance of the migrant workers to the state and capital, but also the challenge from women to the patriarchal culture. From this point of view, she states this collective struggle is both social and cultural.

Differently from Pun (2005), Chang (2010) did not focus on subjectivation processes and the social struggle of rural migrant workers, but explored the meaning of migration as social mobility: ‘Chinese workers are not forced into factories because

of our insatiable desire for iPods. They choose to leave their homes in order to earn money, to learn new skills, and to see the world.’<sup>29</sup> She finds that it was common for young women to be promoted from assembly line workers to clerks, which is a common means of social mobility, although it requires hard work. In the factory area, at night and on weekends, she saw groups of young men and women studying computer science, English, and office skills in private education institutions. She emphasizes that almost everyone she met in Dongguan started at the assembly line and finally left the assembly line to be promoted. She argues that the life of factory girls is not singular and boring. They have their own social networks and, for example, can pursue love. Chang (2010) argues that in China, factory girls can, like the American middle class, strive to become China’s middle class through their own efforts, settle in the city and take root.

It is worth noting that factory work is no longer the only option for migrant women, Gaetano (2004) explores the reasons why migrant women choose domestic service. Gaetano (2004) argues young migrant women’s agency lie in their ability to balance the contradictions between ‘modern urban women’ and ‘filial rural daughter’. She states on the one hand, they go out to work out of the yearning for the modernity of the city and desire to escape from the countryside; on the other hand, they choose domestic service because it is considered safe. On the contrary, other jobs available to migrant women such as restaurant and clubs are seen as undesirable because these are mixed-sex, in their view, which has a negative effect on those women’s reputation: ‘Migration involves much compromise and exacts from young rural women both sacrifices and rewards’ (Gaetano, 2004: 6).

Over time, rural migrant women have become increasingly inclined to become ‘modern urban women’. An industry that looks more fashionable to them such as

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<sup>29</sup> See: [https://www.ted.com/talks/leslie\\_t\\_chang\\_the\\_voices\\_of\\_china\\_s\\_workers/transcript#t-92980](https://www.ted.com/talks/leslie_t_chang_the_voices_of_china_s_workers/transcript#t-92980) accessed on 3/1/2020

cosmetics sales work, attracts a large number of rural women. Otis (2016) states that, these rural women, traditionally excluded from reigning urban norms of femininity, have realized the benefits of self-improvement through cosmetics sales work, so it is not easy to question the low-wage, low-status condition: ‘Moreover, by learning to replicate dominant urban norms for women’s beauty, the sales reps in this study developed a certain aesthetic authority and even a limited empowerment to redefine aesthetic rules’ (Otis, 2016: 174). In contrast, some rural migrant women have chosen a more radical approach, being sex workers. Ding and Ho (2013) states they employ sexual and body practices in exchange for economic, social and cultural capital and even if they fail to gain the social and economic capital needed for achieving desired goals, they still transform from rural girls into sexy, modern and urban women. According to Tsang (2017), they are in fierce competition with each other and need to tactfully handle their relationship with pimps, police and gangsters but prostitution is still a path to achieve economic freedom.

In addition to the choice of occupation, consumption has become a way for rural migrant women to satisfy themselves as a ‘modern urban women’ (Yan, 1997, cited by Pun, 2005). According to Pun (2005), their desire for consumption is driven by two other eager desires: One is the desire to narrow the gap with the city and the other is the desire to pursue the beauty ideals of modern women. Rofel (2007) states consumption is an aspect of cosmopolitan identity and a self-conscious transcendence of locality through the formation of a consumer identity: ‘consumption is about embodiment, embodying a new self’ (2007: 118). However, in the era of collectivism, consumption is not promoted by the CPC (Yan, 2009). Moreover, during the period of collectivism, the extreme lack of material has led to a frugal consumption idea of Chinese peasants (Huang, 1989). The collision of different consumption ideas has become an important cause of intergenerational conflict as I will analyse in the next chapter.

In recent years, an increasing number of rural women migrate with their husbands. According to the Migrant Population Center and National Health Commissions PRC (2017), there is an increasing family mobility trend in rural-urban migration and in 2016, migrants with spouses or children accounted for 60% in rural migrant population<sup>30</sup>. Choi and Peng (2016) argue that when faced with bargaining from their wives, ‘the migrant men in our study strive to preserve the gender boundary and their symbolic dominance within the family by making concessions on marital power and the domestic division of labour and by redefining filial piety and fatherhood’ (2016: 152). The changes brought about by migration are not limited to families where husband and wife go out to work together. Jin (2010) notices migration has become an important structural force for changes in rural families, and China’s patriarchal families have even been eroded. However, she also argues that family change has a two-dimensional dimension, which can deconstruct and also reconstruct tradition. She explains that so far, although migration has partially changed the family power relationship and gender norms, the core features of the patriarchal family, patrilineal lineage, and the essential characteristics of male dominance have not been fundamentally changed. Family patriarchy continues and rebuilds in migration.

After 1949, China’s rural areas have undergone tremendous changes, especially during the period of ‘building a new socialist countryside’. It has specifically brought great changes to women. With the development of urbanisation in China, the growing income of farmers, the narrowing gap between urban and rural areas, and the increasing mobility of rural women, various changes inevitably affected rural women. According to Jin (2010), the most meaningful change brought by employment mobility to rural women is that they had formed a working group with independent awareness, because women’s mobility not only enabled them to acquire the ability to seek employment and marriage autonomy, but also led to them gaining self-awareness and the ability to fight against gender discrimination and oppression. With the

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<sup>30</sup> See: <http://www.chinaldrk.org.cn/wjw/#/data/classify/population/yearList> accessed on 06/4/2020.

improvement in women's economic status, things are different from the traditional model in which women attached themselves to men; therefore, the relationship between husband and wife within the family has gradually shifted to a more equal interaction mode (Jiang, 2018). However, Qiu (2016) argues that traditional gender roles put rural women in a weak position during mobility, and that their autonomy is still quite limited. These contrasting views allow me to conceive two important questions: How does the experience of women living in rural areas, especially the younger generation, differ from their mothers? What is the relationship with their husbands and in-laws among different generations? I will explore these questions through the data in the next chapters.

# CHAPTER THREE

## ENCOUNTERING THE VILLAGE AND RURAL WOMEN

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My research topic concerns the experience of rural women, especially the young generation, such as how is the life of the younger generation different from the previous generation in Li village, or how does the external context shape them, or what are their struggles and how do they resist? Though my ultimate focus is the young women in Li village, I also pay attention to the narratives and stories of the last two generations of women to explore the impact of intergenerational interaction on the young women.

In this chapter, I will trace back the whole process of my fieldwork by describing how I chose my methods, how and why I chose Li village, a small Han village in southwestern China, as my research field, and how I went about meeting the women who lived there. I have divided this chapter into three parts. Firstly, how I determined the methods I would use and the stage before the research; second, the stage of entering the research field; third, the stage of leaving the field and data analysis.

### PRE-FIELD

#### DETERMINATION OF METHODS

The research method I was looking for needed to be the best to serve my research aim, that is, to explore the experiences of the young generation in Li village. At the same time, my research method also needed to meet my research time limits, and enable me to find answers by listening to the voices of women in Li village and I

also hoped to learn about their situation from their own perspectives. Therefore, the source of my data and the data formation stem from women in Li village, which means that women's experiences and voices and women themselves are the main subjects of my research. An important feature of qualitative methods is that they start from the perspective of the research participants (Bryman, 1989). Moreover, placing emphasis on the collection of primarily non-numerical data is another feature of qualitative research; David and Sutton, (2009: 35) state that 'qualitative data refers to the collection of materials in a linguistic form, a form that has not been translated into a location on a numerical scale'.

The above description of qualitative research is completely in line with my vision and research purpose. Firstly, since the 1950s, the status of rural women has undergone many changes. I needed to capture their experiences and describe them using their own language. Secondly, it is also in accordance with the definition of qualitative research to explore their behaviour, roles and status through their own perspectives. Lastly, as one of my research aims, I also hope that women in rural China can be noticed, their stories can be heard, and their rights can be protected. As Oakley, Bowles and Klein suggest (cited by Letherby, 2015:82), 'there is methodological value in a method (the in-depth interview) and an approach (qualitative methods, more generally) which encourage the production of research *for* rather than research *about* or *of* women and men and girls and boys'. Therefore, I selected qualitative research methods to conduct my fieldwork.

I decided to use ethnography, which is 'a social research method drawing on a wide range of sources of information' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:2), as one of my methods to investigate and study the environment, culture, and living conditions in a small village to show the overall context of the village. 'Ethnography seeks to identify holistic patterns of belief and action within the "culture" of small-scale communities, groups or organizations' (David and Sutton, 2011: 164). A

‘complete/whole’ description (Thornton, 1988; Davies, 2008) of the people and Li village is not only better to help with understanding the current social, economic and cultural context, but will also assist people to comprehend the history of Li village and the changes it has experienced. The ‘cultural description’ (Wolcott, 1973) or the ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) is a requirement of ethnography. As David and Sutton (2011: 147) state, ‘the word “ethnography” is used to describe both a form of data collection (that is, field research) and a form of written account (the monograph or account of fieldwork and analysis)’. I provide detailed description of the overall situation of Li village and the people living there in this chapter and the next chapters through the information I have collected, in order to ‘make sense of the world in everyday life’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 2). Therefore, as an ethnographer, I participated in labour, ceremonies, entertainment, and ate and lived with them. In this way, their social interactions, relationships or actions were captured via participation and observations:

Participant observation is both a humanistic method and a scientific one. ...It puts you where the action is and lets you collect data...any kind of data you want, narratives or numbers. Whether you consider yourself an interpretivist or a positivist, participant observation gets you in the door so you can collect life histories, attend rituals, and talk to people about sensitive topics. Presence builds trust. Trust lowers reactivity. Lower reactivity means higher validity of data. Participant observation gives you an intuitive understanding of what is going on in a culture and allows you to speak with confidence about the meaning of data. (Bernard, 2002: 321-334)

Participant observation in Li village offered me a deeper and wider understanding of the status of women in that small community. With its rich information, it provided me with a relatively complete reference for the future stages of data analysis and reflection. However, due to the limited time of my research, which was the obvious disadvantage of ethnography in my research, I could only choose a few typical events to participate in and chose some events based on my research interests.



Moreover, among qualitative research methods, I considered that interviews and participant observations are the most relevant to my research, especially because it is limited to a small village. Nunkoosing (2005) underlines the significance of the interview for gaining data; it encourages informants to think and describe their experiences, expectations or understandings. An interview is a conversation with a purpose (Burgess, 1984). The purpose of my interviews was to discover the voices of women in Li village, allowing them to interpret their lives and ideas from their own perspectives. The aim of my interviews was to explore through their narratives the impacts of history, culture or other features on the shaping of women in Li village in their family life, including their struggles, resists and changes. From structured, semi-structured or unstructured interviews, I chose semi-structured interviews as my interview method. As Bernard (2002) states:

The semi-structured interview is based on the use of an interview guide. It demonstrates that you are fully in control of what you want from an interview but leaves both you and your respondent free to follow new leads. It shows that you are prepared and competent but that you are not trying to exercise excessive control. (2002: 205)

During these in-depth interviews, I listed my interview topics, as well as some of the main questions, but at the same time I followed my interviewees and adjusted the order of the questions in specific interviews, so that I could leave more room for interviewees, which helped me to collect more information. Even though this method has disadvantages, such as being time consuming, and the personal bias in choosing participants, I still think it is the most suitable approach for my research, because through this method, I have a greater opportunity to ask follow-up questions, and probe for additional information.

## **PREPARATION**

I did my fieldwork in Chongqing between June and September of 2016, with some preparations being conducted in March 2016. However, I did not have much experience of village life and do not have many friends from villages. Before 1980, for most Chinese people, the term ‘peasant’ stood for unsophisticated and honest people. They are hardworking, frugal and lacking a spirit of revolt. However, after 1980, many peasant workers came to the cities and exhibited low-quality<sup>31</sup> (*di suzhi*, 低素质), and people changed their opinions about them. Usually, people in cities think that peasants are uncultured and inferior. People in cities tend to keep their distance from them and few people are willing to get to know them. With the change of the CPC’S rural policy, the income of peasant had increased, and the gap between urban and rural areas had begun to narrow. At the same time, the CPC’s propaganda machine began to promote the importance of agriculture to the national economy and the contribution of rural migrant workers to the Chinese economy. This was all I knew about the countryside at the time.

In my view, if I planned to learn about the lives and relationships of rural Chinese women, I could not choose a village located in a remote region, nor could I choose a village close to developed cities, because these kinds of villages are not typical of contemporary China, and cannot represent the average status of rural areas. Therefore, I needed to choose a village that is influenced by the outside world but still far behind cities in many respects.

First, I searched online and selected five villages near my hometown. These five villages are not far from the city and all of them have nearly 500 households. The number of households and people were important for my research, because when I went back to do fieldwork, if most people were working in cities at that time,

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<sup>31</sup> *Suzhi* (素质), which refers to the innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct, is, in Raymond Williams’s terms, a ‘keyword.’ In its contemporary usage, it has become widespread only since the 1980s (Jacka, 2009: 524).

obviously that would not be a good practical situation. To avoid this situation, I chose a village which has approximately 1500 inhabitants to improve my chances of finding appropriate participants. Another key factor I had to decide upon was whether and how I could live in that village. Living in the village in an appropriate way was the most important requirement for my research. Since I had a direction, I posted some articles through social media to introduce my research and find someone who could be my intermediary. However, this approach was not effective. There were few responses through social media and nearly all of them were not helpful. The reason for this may be that most villagers do not use these kinds of social media, or even if some of them do, they were not sure what my research was and were not interested.

Then I started to use my personal social networks, aiming to find someone who could be my intermediary. I asked my high-school classmates to introduce me to some their friends who work in those five villages as the ‘college-graduate village official’<sup>32</sup>. A few days later, I got a response that my friends had found two college-graduate village officials for me. This also meant that I only had two villages left. I added them through Wechat<sup>33</sup> and introduced my research and purpose. They were very interested about my research and happy to help me to find a place to settle in their village. I was very grateful that they would help me without requirements, but I had another concern that the villagers would not accept me if I contacted them through the college-graduate village official. Because the village official stands for the government or authority, the villagers might think that my research was related to the government, which would make them anxious when I interviewed them. Therefore, they might not talk freely or openly. However, as I did not have any other method to form connections with villages, it seemed that this was the only way I could use.

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<sup>32</sup> Graduates from colleges or universities who work in villages for two years to gain working experience, and then they can work in some government departments.

<sup>33</sup> This is an App that people use to send text or voice messages through the Internet.

Additionally, I also prepared my research themes and questions while I was finding my intermediary. All these questions are open-ended, which were designed to lead my participants to talk more. Beside these questions I had already prepared, I also planned to ask different people the questions in a different order, based on our conversation. David and Sutton (2011: 121) suggest that ‘keeping the set of themes and sub-questions as an aide-memoire and not deciding on the order is a way for returning to issues during the interview’. During this preparation, it was really helpful to talk with my supervisor. My supervisor gave me advice, such as how to question interviewees, and what kind of questions would allow participants to talk more or be interested. Good interview skills can help interviewers to gain more useful data, because it is difficult for people to talk freely when you meet for the first time. However, due to some restrictions of my fieldwork, I need to gain information as much as I can the first time. Interview skills are not only about asking questions, but also about figuring out people’s behaviour or psychological activities. My supervisor also told me how to attract people to my topic or questions, such as asking about their children. These kinds of questions will usually open a door for the interviewer to get close to interviewees. ‘The key to successful interviewing is learning how to probe effectively that is, to stimulate a respondent to produce more information, without injecting yourself so much into the interaction that you only get a reflection of yourself in the data’ (Bernard 2002: 210). Moreover, I assumed that most of my participants would have a low level of education, so they might not understand the interview questions and be very nervous: ‘Power in the interview can be built up and determined by socioeconomic status, educational or professional background, and gender or ethnic identity of the parties involved’ (Anyan, 2013: 2). Therefore, I needed to try my best to explain the questions or intentionally set myself in a powerless position (Hoffman, 2007) in my future fieldwork, to help them relax.

## **IN THE FIELD**

## CHOICE OF THE FIELDWORK'S LOCATION

When I went back to Chongqing in June, the weather was just beginning to get very hot. I kept thinking about which village I should go to and what position or role I should take in the village. Generally, villagers tend to be a little defensive towards people from outside because they have lived in their village as a relatively closed space for a very long time. For my part, I had no conception of village life at that time and wondered how the villagers would treat me. Even though the villages where I planned to conduct my research were all located close to my home city and there were no language or custom barriers between us, would they reject me due to my lack of experience of village life? Furthermore, accommodation was also another big problem for me. I needed to live in the village for nearly three months, because I planned to use participant observation as one of my research methods. I was trying to imagine: what family would allow a stranger to live in their home for three months? I needed to consider these problems and try my best to solve them before I went to my fieldwork site, otherwise they would affect my research work.

One afternoon, my father asked about my research content and purpose and suggested a village for me. He told me there is a mountain village at a height of 1200 metres. He said that he had been to the village three times for its relatively cool weather because Chongqing is very hot. Many people from cities enjoyed holidays in that village, and now the government has invested capital in the village to upgrade its infrastructure and to build a summer resort. In summer, many migrant workers from that village go back home to run their own family business: rural family inns (*nongjia le*, 农家乐), which are like bed and breakfast accommodation in England. Visitors can stay with the hosts in their house for as long as they want, and the inn serves three meals a day.

After my father's explanation, I had a basic understanding of the village. Firstly, its size and population conformed to my requirements. Additionally, if I were to go there, the problem of accommodation and meals would be solved, and I could stay as long as I wanted. It also offered me a greater guarantee of security in the rural family inn<sup>34</sup>. Thirdly, due to the particularity of the village, most migrant workers go back there during the summer, which meant that I would have more choices for interviewees and could easily find enough potential participants. In comparison with other villages, I assumed that this village would have a more welcoming and open attitude to outsiders; due to its being a summer resort, people in this village have become used to strangers. I consider that, as a researcher with no life experience of rural areas, a welcoming and open attitude from the villagers is really important for me. This would help me to save time in building rapport with them, if they often have contact with outsiders. Lastly, and importantly, if I set my position as a holiday research student without an 'official intermediary', local residents would be more likely to treat me as a normal guest. As Bucerius (2013) argues, gatekeepers can be a hindrance to the process of gaining trust, although they are often considered as the entry point into a field setting. This would be a way for me to learn more about their ordinary lives. They would also drop their guard after we became familiar. My father and I made a simple plan and he called the host family that he used to stay with to book a room for me.

## **THE WAY TO THE VILLAGE**

From my home to the village took nearly ninety minutes by bus, at first along a motorway and then spiralling up into the mountains. When the bus reached the suburban area, the views around us changed from high buildings to houses with just two or three floors surrounded by fields. Along the mountain road, there were a few small markets. In rural China, markets form a central place of some villages.

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<sup>34</sup> Every person who stays in a rural family inn needs to show a photocopy of his/her ID.

Generally, these kinds of markets have fixed dates for opening each month. Peasants who live not very far away will come to the market on the fixed date to buy necessities, clothes, fruit and so on. Local people call this kind of market as *changzhen* (场镇). If they are going to these markets, they will say ‘*ganchang*’ (go to market, 赶场). Under normal conditions, a market will be open for around four to five hours (from early morning until noon) in one place and nine times a month. Local people will get up very early on ‘*ganchang tian*’ (market day, 赶场日) to drive their car or take a motorcycle to the market. Usually, people who run market businesses are from suburban areas. They go to wholesale markets to buy things cheaply in the city and retail them for higher prices at this kind of market. They will follow the different market opening dates in different places to sell products to make money. There were fruit, clothes, fish, meat, vegetables and daily consumer goods selling on the market when we went through. This kind of market is quite similar to with supermarkets in urban areas; the only difference is that rural markets are outdoors. As transport has become more and more developed and it has become very convenient to transport goods from the city to the country, so a large number of urban goods have been transported and sold in rural markets. This can be seen to be a result of urbanisation.

In rural areas, most villagers prefer a special kind of backpack (*beilou*, 背篓) to carry products to markets, which is made of bamboo. Normally, this special basket can only be seen in mountainous areas of south-west China, because roads in the mountains are narrow and steep. People invented this way to carry things on their backs, so their hands are free to help them to climb. Some villagers also use this kind of basket to carry their children to lighten their loads. Now it is very rare in cities, but I still saw many villagers using them at the market. As our bus kept going along the mountainous road, the altitude became higher and higher. I noticed that the crops in the surrounding farmland gradually changed from rice to corn. As the altitude gets higher, the temperature gets lower, so rice cannot adapt to the weather. Furthermore,

it is very difficult to find a relatively wide piece of farmland which allows rice cultivation on the mountaintop and irrigation is rarely available. I also noticed that, with the change in altitude, the corn was also different. The growth of corn at higher altitudes was much slower than at lower altitudes such as on the mountainside. Some corn on the mountainside was already in flowers while corn on mountaintop was just around one metre high. Moreover, people who live on the mountaintop and at the foot of the mountain dress differently. People on the mountaintop wore two layers of clothes while people at the mountain-foot wore short sleeves and breeches.

### **ARRIVING IN LI VILLAGE**

Along with the jolting of the bus, I fell asleep. When I woke up, I found that the bus had stopped and some passengers were ready to get off. The driver shouted to me: *'Here is Li village; you had better get off here.'* I put all my belongings together and joined in the queue to get off. After the bus drove away, I found a place to sit down and called the owner of the rural family inn where I was planning to stay. She answered the phone and said that she would come in ten minutes. While I waited, I looked around the village which is surrounded by mountains. Even though it is located on a mountain, there were still many other higher mountains within view. After ten minutes, a middle-aged woman (Shaoxian Liu, 48) with long black hair appeared in front of me. She was wearing an orange cardigan and a white shirt with black trousers and a pair of blue trainers. She was approximately 160cm tall. Her dark skin makes people think that she usually does outside work in the sunshine, probably like farmers or construction workers. From her appearance and dress, it is clear at first glance that she is a typical Chinese farmer or migrant worker.

As we were walking down the mountain road, nearly all houses that had three or four floors on the both sides of the road were brand-new. The doors on the ground floor of those houses were wide open. On the top of the door frame, there was a signboard



which gave the name of the family inn consisting of the owner's family name, such as Wong's family inn. If visitors find a house with a signboard like this, it means they can stay with the family. Generally, on the ground floor of those houses, there are some mah-jong tables, billiard tables, TVs, sofas, chairs and dining tables, and so on. All the way to Liu's home, although all the houses were built by different families, the structures, styles and designs were largely identical and there were no essential differences.

We walked for seven or eight minutes, then Liu stopped to tell me: '*Here's my home*'. While I was looking around, an old lady came out to greet me; she was Shimei Hu (68). When she smiled at me, I could clearly see that two upper front teeth had dropped out. Her dress was a representative style of older people in the mountain areas. She was not tall, but her warm smile told that she was full of energy and vitality. She told me that she had already arranged a room for me and asked me to follow her upstairs to put my belongings down first. I followed this old woman to the third floor, where my room was located near the street. She explained the reasons for giving me the room near the street. She said: '*The wireless router is on the second floor which is directly under your room. You asked for a room where you can connect to WiFi fast and easily, so I arranged this room for you*'.

I put my clothes in the wardrobe and lay down on the bed. This was the first day of my fieldwork, and the development of rural areas gave me a shock. It is hard to imagine a small village in mountain areas with an altitude of over 1000 meters above sea level installing WiFi. Their quality of life seemed not far behind that of people in cities, because rural families in this village have many of the same things as urban families, such as TVs, fridges and WiFi. This clean and tidy village was not what I had expected and totally changed my mind about Chinese rural areas. The per capita income in this village shows that the living standards of the villagers are not very high, but the locals are still affected by modernisation/urbanisation. The village is

not isolated from modern society, but in some respects, it very closes to the cities. Although Gramma Hu, who is a 68-year-old villager with a low educational background, does not know how to connect to the WiFi, she definitely can clearly understand what it is. This indicates that people born before 1970 in Li village are not falling far behind the changes brought about by modern society. If people born before 1970 can accept and understand these modern things, then people who born during the 70s, 80s and 90s should be more influenced by modernisation or urbanisation in the village.

In addition, it also explains the attitude of Li village to ‘outside’ things. The modernity and inclusiveness of Li village made me feel that I could quickly integrate into the village. Regardless of the modernisation/urbanisation, I think another reason for my quick fusion with Liu’s family is because I have the same cultural background, ethnicity, language and gender as them: ‘The authenticity to achieve insider status at times is explicitly connected to one’s demographic profile or cultural roots, where simply sharing the same ethnic background with participants can afford the researcher, insider or semi-insider status’ (Ergun and Erdemir, 2010: 17). Insider research occurs when the researcher and participants have some common base, such as language, identity or experience (Asselin, 2003). Because I have similarities with the people in Li village, although it was my first time in the village, they put me into an ‘insider’ position, in some extent, by judging me from my language or appearance.

On the other hand, other aspects of my identity might push me outside of the village (being a research student, my lack of rural life experiences or my overseas background) and these conflicts with my insider status. Although it is generally believed that similarity with the research participants creates the ability to be trusted, Snow, Benford and Anderson (1986: 381) argue that ‘trust in the field does not have to rely on insider status, and researchers with different roles can also achieve

different trust and get different information'. The acquisition of trust does not depend entirely on having an identity as an insider. My language, ethnicity, and cultural background were beneficial for me to gain access, but the researcher's abilities or roles will also determine the acquisition of trust (Adler and Adler, 1987). Bucerius (2013) suggests that investigators do not necessarily need to avoid outsider status in order to strive for an insider role. Moreover, my outsider identity gives me a benefit called 'stranger value' (Goldstein, 1964). This benefit leads participants to expose their privacy more easily. Study participants would like to expose more privacy to an outsider, as there is lower risk to compare with exposing to an insider (Chen, 1997).

For me, gaining trust in the research process was the most critical thing, while the problem that bothered me was not the identity of the insider or the outsider, because both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' can gain trust. Though of course it is important to be aware of the insider/outsider status and how that can change during fieldwork. To gain trust from local people, the best way is to build a rapport with them: 'Fluency in the local language improves your rapport' (Naroll, 1962: 89-90; cited by Bernard, 2000), which is my advantage in this research. Also, sharing the researcher's own experience, knowledge or values with participants is another way to build rapport (Oakley, 1981). At the same time, listening to villagers' views, opinions or things of which they are proud could also establish rapport. Therefore, building rapport and gaining trust were my first tasks in Li village, even though I was a 'betweenner' in the village. I consider that the insider and outsider status was dynamic for me in Li village, so that my research can be seen from two perspectives: the emic perspective and the etic perspective. According to Naeke and Kurylo et al. (2010), an insider takes an emic perspective and an outsider adopts an etic view. To blend the etic (outsider) perspective with the emic (insider) perspective assists the investigator in immersing her/himself into the culture that he/she is studying (Headland, Pike, and Harris, 1990). As I was able to establish contact with Liu's family without conflicts,

this encouraged me to search for potential participants in Li village, and gave me more confidence to approach the village.

## **BASIC INFORMATION OF THE VILLAGE**

Li village is one of villages in the township of Getan (not its real name), located in north-east Chongqing. It is 43km in a straight line from the nearest county (*xian*, 县), and 300km from the city of Chongqing. In 2015, Getan town has jurisdiction over 16 villages, 28849 people and 8536 households. Among these, 820 people live in non-agricultural households, which account for only 2.84% of the total population. In 2015, the total social output value was 0.12 billion yuan. The primary industry value was about 23 million yuan, the secondary industry value was 76 million yuan, and the tertiary industry value was 21 million yuan. The local fiscal revenue was 3.98 million yuan and the one-year per capita net income of rural residents was 1708 *yuan* in 2015. In Getan town, the total grain output was 9336 tonnes and the average grain output of peasants was 491 kilograms. In this area, rice, wheat, corn and potatoes are the primary crops. Some cash crops, such as rapeseed, chilli, peanuts and sesame, are also cultivated in this town. The total forest coverage is 3646 hectares, which is 53% of the total land area<sup>35</sup>.

Li village<sup>36</sup> is in the northeast of Getan town. There are five villager groups, 498 households, and 1675 people in Li village. The area of this village's territory is 1877 square kilometres, including 1217 square kilometres of farmland<sup>37</sup>. The average altitude of Li village is 1100 meters and the annual mean temperature is 20 degrees. This village as a resort attracts a large number of tourists in summer every year, because of the fresh air and the agreeable weather. Nearly 70% of the villagers

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<sup>35</sup> All data of Getan town comes from the public notice board of the town government and the website of the local county government, but in consideration of ethical issues, I do not give the resource link here. The name of the town has been changed.

<sup>36</sup> This village is a Han Chinese gathering village.

<sup>37</sup> I saw this information on a notice board in Li village.

choose to work in cities as migrant workers<sup>38</sup>. However, due to its special location on a mountain and its pleasant temperature in summer, some migrant workers come back to Li village from June to September every year to run their small family businesses. This kind of small business run from a peasant's own home is called 'nongjia le' (rural family inn, 农家乐) and caters to the tourist trade. Rural tourism uses the seductions of country life, such as fresh vegetables and free-range poultry, to attract urban residents to travel and stay in villages. According to Gilbert and Tung (1990), rural tourism is a travel style which offers food and accommodation to tourists, in order to provide them with a rural environment, such as farmland or rangeland, to engage in various leisure activities. He and Li (2002) state that the notion of rural tourism has two aspects: First, rural areas are bases for this kind of tourism; second, the most important attraction is the country feel. Neither of these two aspects is dispensable. The rural tourism project has gained strong support from the Chongqing government, because it is a way to emerge from poverty and enrich the peasant families in local villages. Due to the pandemic of Covid-19, I cannot go to the village to conduct supplementary fieldwork about more information of Li village. I have tried to find the source of this aspect from the Internet, but it is a pity that further demographic information and the history of Li village are still missing.

#### **GAINING ACCESS AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**

As an ethnographer studying small Chinese villages, eating, chatting, and hanging out with local people is a way of 'becoming the phenomenon' as the first step in participant observation, which will quickly build connections and rapport. Jorgensen (1989: 65) concludes that: 'becoming the phenomenon is a participant observation strategy for penetrating to and gaining experience of a form of human life. It is an objective approach insofar as it results in the accurate, detailed description of the insiders' experience of life.' While we were eating, Gramma Hu asked: *'do you like*

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<sup>38</sup> My own estimation.

*these dishes? We don't have good cooking skills, all of these are made in the peasant way.' I said: 'All of these dishes are very delicious, especially the vegetables. They're very fresh and were likely taken from the vegetable field in this morning. And the texture of pork is different from what I buy from the supermarket.' Hu laughed and said excitedly: 'You can tell the difference. These vegetables were grown by me. Every morning, I go to my vegetable field to pick some. The pork was bought from the market in town, where it's sold by local farmers.'*

When I learned that this old woman still grew vegetables by herself, I was shocked. I asked: *'Oh, you still grow vegetables. That surprises me.'* She answered: *'Right. I have nothing to do at home. Especially when my children are working in the cities, I need to find something to do in order to pass the time. If I only stay at home with nothing to do, I feel very uncomfortable, like I don't know where to put my hands and feet. I'm a luckless person.'*<sup>39</sup> I said: *'It's because you're used to hard work. If you have time, could you show me your vegetable field after our dinner?'* *'No problem. I can take you there after I clean the bowls and plates.'* As Bernard (2002: 337) suggests, one should 'spend time getting to know the physical and social layout of your field site. It doesn't matter if you're working in a rural village, an urban enclave, or a hospital. Walk it and write notes about how it feels to you.' He states that:

Hanging out builds trust, or rapport, and trust results in ordinary conversation and ordinary behaviour in your presence. Once you know, from hanging out, exactly what you want to know more about, and once people trust you not to betray their confidence, you will be surprised at the direct questions you can ask. (Bernard, 2002: 346-347)

Another benefit of hanging out is that it is a way to know when to or not to question, and what questions to ask (Whyte, 1989). I finished my first meal in the village with

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<sup>39</sup> This does not really mean that Hu is unlucky. Chinese people show their modesty by speaking in this way.

talking and laughter, which left a very deep impression on me. I went outside to wait for Hu for our first hanging out together.

After half an hour, she came out from the kitchen. When she noticed me, she spoke loudly to me: *'Thanks for waiting. I was just helping my daughter-in-law clean all the bowls and plates. Let's go to my vegetable field. It isn't big, usually there's only me at home, so I grow some vegetables for my daily consumption. I also raise some chickens and pigs, but these are only for my children. When they come back in the summer time or at the Chinese New Year time, we slaughter some chickens and pigs. I also use the pork to make sausages and they will take sausages when they go back to the cities.'* I said: *'So you generally need to buy meat or rice in the market?'* *'Yeah. I usually don't buy vegetables. On market day, you know, I have two freezers at home, so I often buy meat which I can eat over ten days. But I don't go to the town centre often, because my youngest daughter normally buys these things for me.'*

From her answers, I wondered that whether we can still call these people peasants if they only grow vegetables and raise livestock for their own consumption. These situations reveal that their way of life and quality of life have totally changed, which is not how I imagined it. It seemed that Hu read my thoughts, because she smiled and continued to speak to me: *'Many peasants in my village don't do farm work anymore. Daily food and other supplies can be bought on market day. It's also very convenient for us to go to the town centre now, only 20 minutes by motorcycle.'*

Gramma Hu continued: *'About 16 or 17 years ago, the Chinese government enacted the "tuigeng huanlin"<sup>40</sup> policy. Under this policy, approximately four-fifths of the farmland in this village was planted with trees. The government bought some farmland from us, and gave us money and rice to secure our income and lives.*

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<sup>40</sup> The 'tuigeng huanlin' policy: From 1999, this project and policy has been used to convert degraded farmland into forests and grassland. For example: the conversion of degraded farmland into forest (grass), the enclosure of mountains to increase the greenness, offering grain to peasants instead of relief subsidies, and recognition of the land rights of individuals who conduct the afforestation by contract.

*Moreover, at that time, nearly all the young people in every family went to the cities to find work, so even if there was no “tuigeng huanlin” policy, these farmlands would have been abandoned. But I can’t stay idle. If I see some unused farmland, I feel waste and guilty. I’m a peasant forever.’* Following her explanation and guidance, we arrived at her vegetable patch. She said: *‘This is my vegetable field. The pumpkins and broad beans that we eat are from this field. Now I’m growing pumpkins, green peppers, potatoes, lettuce and Chinese cabbage.’* I stood in her vegetable field, which is located on a small slope, and looked around. The mountains around this village are green and full of trees, mostly are pine trees. Furthermore, this village is like a long strip. Generally, there is some land in front of and behind each house, like the houses in the UK. The difference is that in this village people use this land to grow vegetables or raise livestock, while people in the UK use their gardens to plant flowers and trees. The style of houses in the distance is bungalows, which is a kind of traditional village house in southern China. Except for the land near these houses, other places are filled with trees, and the whole village is at peace. I hardly saw any people working in the farmlands.

After a while, Hu said to me: *‘I’ll take you to have a look around the village.’* I was more interested after she said this; having a local person to show me around would be the best way to help me become familiar with this village. We walked down the small slope and along the main road of the village. After we had walked beyond the ‘family inn area’, the houses were not very close together, basically only one or two houses every 100 or 200 metres. As I had seen on the small slope, these houses were bungalows. Three or four rooms linked together, the kitchen, bedroom, living room and toilet. There were also pigpens, which were built near the toilet in some houses. Some houses had beehives in their front yard. After I had seen staying in the village longer, I realised that the working hours of people here are not the same as those of people in cities. They are used to getting up in the early morning around 4 or 5 am to work in the fields until 10 or 11 am, when they come back for lunch. The whole



afternoon they usually stay at home, until 4 or 5 pm, then they go outside to work again.

I found a little outdoor brick factory which had one man and two women working in it. All the bricks had a hard texture and were neatly stacked. They put big stones and cobblestones, sand, and cement slurry together into a machine which is called a baking free brick machine. This kind of machine breaks stones in a crusher and mixes sand and broken stones with cement slurry in a blender. Finally, bricks come out of the machine one by one. The workers put all the bricks in order. I was very curious: *'Why is there an outdoor brick kiln?'* Hu said to me: *'Many villagers want to build a new house, but if they buy bricks or other things from cities, the cost will be higher. Some people transported this machine to the village to make bricks with natural materials, therefore they can make money and local people will buy these bricks in order to save money. If you rented a machine like an excavator, it would cost you at least 100 yuan per day.'*

I heard some very loud music and saw a place covered by a black shade cloth. I asked: *'What is this place used for?'* Hu explained to me: *'This place is a mushroom farming base. It's surrounded by pine trees and the temperature and humidity are very suitable for mushrooms.'* I realised that peasants do not use the way of *'mianchao huangtu, beichao tian'* (面朝黄土, 背朝天)<sup>41</sup> to make money. They have more choices for earning a living, not only working in cities, but also using machines and scientific methods. Hu told me that if we kept walking, we would arrive in another village. If we went through that village, we would reach the town. *'So there is only one road in this village?'* I asked. *'No, there is another road which is near our house. We can walk back and I will show you that road.'* Jorgensen's (1989: 49) point that 'gaining access to a setting is one of the most difficult and

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<sup>41</sup> Literately, this means that people work in the farmland, their faces towards the land and their backs towards the sky. Usually it describes people who use the most original and the most traditional way to survive or make money.

demanding aspects of participant observation' is pertinent here. Grandma Hu took me out into Li village and introduced me to the life of the villagers, which was the start of my gaining access to Li village.

After Grandma Hu took me to visit her vegetable field, I found that I had a better understanding of Li village. This understanding was no longer like my previous findings from online data and information from other people. I had direct feelings about Li village after that visit. I wrote down my first field diary entry. Sanjek (1990) advises keeping a note-pad to take field notes, which provide the researcher with a trigger to recall details. Moreover, 'a diary will give information that will help me interpret the field notes and will make me aware of my personal biases' (Bernard, 2002: 370). I found that Li village has experienced great changes due to urbanisation and government policies, which are not like I had imagined. After these changes, it can be said that, in this village, farmers/peasants who conform to the traditional concept no longer exist due to 'semi-urbanisation<sup>42</sup>' (Wang, 2006), which can be clearly seen in Li village. I consider that it is not correct to call them 'farmers' or 'peasants' any more. A better name for them is people with a rural *hukou*. The 'feminisation of agriculture' presented by some researchers (Drauw, et al. 2012) is not obvious in Li village. Secondly, the rural family inn, brick kiln and mushroom farming plants reveal that many farmers in Li village have a strong sense of entrepreneurship. From this point of view, in the process of urbanisation, they are not passively accepting the changes brought from outside, but are actively investing and participating, which indicates that the inhabitants of Li village are generally open minded and have the courage to try new things. In addition, I found in my observations that rural women play a positive role in the transformation of the countryside and of their own lives, because most workers in the rural family inns, brick kiln and mushroom cultivation are women. These direct impressions and

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<sup>42</sup> Semi-urbanisation: this means rural areas in the process of urbanisation and modernisation, but still having undeveloped aspects.

sources helped me to find entry points and topics in my future contact with the villagers, which helped me to establish a close relationship with them more quickly and easily.

When I thought about ways to establish a closer relationship with the villagers, an invitation from Shaoxian Liu (48) unexpectedly met this need. After I had been staying in Li village for a few days, because they lacked one person to play mah-jong in Liu's rural family inn, she invited me to participate in their activities and I was really delighted to join them, because this is one of my favourite games: 'The rules for presentation of self are simple: be honest, be brief and be absolutely consistent. In participant observation, if you try to play any role besides yourself, you will just get worn out' (Jones, 1973, cited by Bernard, 2000: 73). Soon, I built a closer relationship with this group of people through playing mah-jong. During my field work, I participated in this activity almost every week. Through playing mah-jong, I met lots of women in Li village. Through my conversations with them, I gained rich research data, about such issues as relationships with in-laws, which constituted a very interesting supplement to the information I obtained through interviews. Moreover, the participant observation of playing mah-jong also gave me the opportunity to explore the attitudes of their husbands and in-laws about it, which was very helpful for understanding the family life of women in Li village. Jorgensen (1989: 16) indicates 'taking the role of a participant provides the researcher with a means of conducting fairly unobtrusive observations'. During my stay, I also participated as a guest in the 100-day feast of one woman's daughter in Li village. I observed the attitudes and opinions about the baby regarding her gender, and participated in discussions with villagers about the family. I also participated in their assembly and ate with the local villagers together.

During my participant observation, such as eating, chatting, playing and gathering together with the villagers, everyone knew that I was taking pictures/writing notes

for my study. They were interested in my notes/pictures and I gave them to people to have a look. I consider that their interest or alertness about my work (notes and pictures) was because they treated me as an outsider when I conducted overt participation as a researcher (outsider). It reminds me Bossen's (2002: 111) fieldwork:

But even in the late 1990s, when alluding to famine during the Great Leap Forward, an old women with a very clear memory of the past muttered a private remark to my Chinese assistant saying she thought they were not supposed to talk about it (even though we assured her that it was internationally known that millions starved during that period and it was no longer a 'state secret').

Bossen was treated as an outsider (sometimes) due to her ethnicity, language and identity as a researcher. However, later on, most of the villagers had few interests and were less defensive about my work and did not care what I was doing during my participant observation. With the building of rapport and trust, they became less guarded and accepted me as an insider. For instance, when I interviewed Gramma Hu later, she talked about her father's death, the famine during the Great Leap Forward, and her husband's vasectomy without my asking. The participant observer may perform a variety of roles over the course of a study (Jorgensen, 1989: 60). In my own case, I consider myself as a 'betweenner' but more leaning towards an insider during my fieldwork.

### **APPROACHING POTENTIAL INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS**

During the evening of the second day, I planned to take a walk after dinner and I was thinking that if I were to meet an interviewee it would be very nice. However, I did not see any people on my route, perhaps it was just dinner time while I was walking, and local villagers were all eating at home. After a long walk all around the village in a circle, I saw four or five villagers standing together in a group and chatting. The age of the oldest people in the group looked like about 25 years old and the age of

youngest people looked about 20 years old. In terms of these people's ages, they could be good interview targets for the groups whom I planned to interview. I hoped to talk with them, aiming to find an interviewee. However, it would be a little rude if I interrupted their chatting by just walking up to them directly and saying 'hi'. It seemed as though they were enjoying their conversation. While I was considering, surprisingly, they noticed me and all looked at me. It seemed as though they were more interested in me, a foreigner in their village, than their conversation. As Merriam and Jhonson-Bailey et al. (2001) state, the researcher usually brings their own particular assumptions to data collection when they investigate a phenomenon, observe situations and interview people. For me, this is true. I did have some assumptions about this village and its villagers, even though the villagers and I are of the same racial group and the same culture, I knew their dialect, and was the same gender as my interviewees. Nevertheless, even after I had gained a brief knowledge about this village, I was still worried that I was actually an outsider to them.

Before I greeted them, one of the women first spoke to me, saying: '*Are you xieliang (歇凉)*<sup>43</sup> too?' I said: '*Yes, I am "xieliang" and also trying to find some interviewees for my research*'. They were very interested when they heard the word 'research'. '*Research? What kind of research? Are you a college student?*' they asked me. I smiled and said: '*I just want to know about the country situation, especially the situation of female villagers in the countryside, things like family, marriage, life and so on. Actually, there is nothing special, just chatting with you guys and looking for some material for my research to reflect the situation in the countryside and for women.*' After this introduction, it seemed as though they had roughly understood my research proposal and also showed a desire to talk to me, but they were more interested in me rather than my research. They kept asking questions about me, like my hometown, my age and my educational background.

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<sup>43</sup> 'Xieliang' is a word in Chongqing dialect, which means walking outside after dinner time to enjoy the relatively cool weather outside. In summer, the temperature indoors is much higher than outside in the evening.

One day, I met a very nice elderly person whom I have called Uncle Gong<sup>44</sup>. He went to another villager's house and invited two people to join my research, who were also very nice and very glad to join me for an interview. They said: '*What are you talking about? It looks very jolly. I like chatting and enjoy it.*' They showed lots of interest in me and my research, which meant that I could not just choose one of them to do an interview, so I decided to talk with them together first. I asked them about changes in living standards over the past decades and years. After chatting with them, I asked whether they would like to be my participants and have an interview with me on the next day. Three women accepted my invitation, and I made appointments with them.

After a period of contact and communication, I found that the people in the village were enthusiastic and talkative, which was very helpful to gain data. I became familiar with many villagers, and they even invited me to be their guest at home. The first villager's house I visited was Jing Liao's. She is granddaughter of Grandma Hu and is the first young woman I met in this village. Basically, every day, she would bring her child to stay in her natal family. When she found out that I was also a mother and my daughter was about the same age as her child, she was very happy. This commonality had given us many common topics to talk. I could see that she loved her child very much and wanted to do what she can to give her child the best. She was curious about life in the UK and often asked me questions about it, especially about childcare. She did not really trust a domestic brand and was very interested in the milk powder, food supplements, and clothes my children use in the UK. She even politely asked me to help her buy some British baby products, which means she trusted me. In China, many people will turn to trusted friends in the western countries to help them buy some baby products such as milk powder. I

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<sup>44</sup> A pseudonym. All people's names in this thesis are pseudonyms. The interviewees' age was calculated in 2016.

promised her because I would occasionally buy baby products in the UK for my relatives and friends. Jing Liao was very happy. Perhaps it was out of gratitude to me, she offered great help to my research. Not only did she provide me with her rich data, she also introduced me to many of her young friends in Li Village to do interviews. I knew Dan Wu, JiaoJiao Zeng and Yingqi Tao through Jing Liao.

## **ETHICAL ISSUES**

When I conducted participant observations, I informed the villagers that I would take notes and pictures. After their consent, I conducted my observations. Berg (1998: 47) states that ‘informed consent means the knowing consent of individuals to participate as an exercise of their choice, free from any element of fraud, deceit, duress, or similar unfair inducement or manipulation’. Before each interview, I informed my interviewees about the purpose of the interview and their risks and rights. I told them that I would record the conversation, informed them about the ways I would protect their privacy, and their right to suspend the interview if they wanted to, as well as gaining consent and signed consent forms, for example (Kavle and Brinkmann, 2009).

However, although my interviewees were open-minded, when I asked them to sign the consent forms, some of them felt uncomfortable and nervous, and a few even asked me to help them to sign as they are poorly educated. For instance, Xucui Liu refused me to sign the consent form at first. She thought that a signature stands for ‘something’, especially as she had a low level of education and did not understand the reason for signing a consent form for an interview. In her view, it was not necessary to sign it; especially since I only planned to have a ‘conversation’ with her. Signing a form made the ‘conversation’ seem more formal to her. She told me later when we had a greater rapport and had established trust between us, that the reason she refused to sign at first was because she was worried about whether the

form was a fraud, as I was a stranger to her at the beginning. However, after I explained the reasons for signing consent forms and how I would protect their information, all of the women agreed and signed. I have given all my interviewees a pseudonym instead of their real name in my thesis. I acknowledged power relations between me, the researcher, and them as participants, given that in some ways I was in a more privileged position than them, but I realised they were subjects, not objects of research. I respected their choices and rights, rather than treating them as research objects.

Another issue I encountered during my research was that some questions were apparently sensitive for them, such as the issue of abortion/forced abortion. When these questions appeared in my interviews, I usually put them in a euphemistic way and approached them slowly as topics in the interview. If they did not want to talk about it, I respected them and did not push. For example, when I asked Dingtao Wang (61) questions about gender preference, she said she thought daughters are better:

*Me: Why? Any reasons for it?*

*Wang: (stopped for a while) My daughter 'understands things' (dongshi, 懂事)<sup>45</sup>, but my son does not.*

*Me: Could you explain more?*

*Wang: ...(sigh and say nothing)*

I realised that the sigh and silence meant that she did not want to answer the question. Then I continued on to other questions and left room for her. Later, when we talked about old-age support, Wang said that she depends more on herself and that her daughter offers more care. Then she introduced her son to me without my asking. Finally, I figured out the reason for her sighing and stopping; it was because her son was addicted to drugs for a few years. This was also the reason why a daughter is better than a son, in her view.

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<sup>45</sup> Dongshi, dong refers to understanding, shi refers to things/matters. It means a person who is sensible and thoughtful.



## LEAVING THE VILLAGE AND WRITING UP

Three months later after I arrived the village, the news that I had to leave the village became known to many villagers. In the three months I spent with them, although it was a short time, I think that I established a good relationship with the villagers and gained a variety of information, such as their daily lives, relationships with their family members and so on. Jing Liao expressed her reluctance and blessings for my departure and she even hosted a party to send me off. Jiaojiao Zeng, Yingqi Tao and some other young women joined this party. We went to a karaoke bar in the county to drink together and sing. Until now, I still keep in touch with some young women in Li village on WeChat. I was very moved Ning Liao mailed me pickles marinated by her grandma. They provided a wealth of data for my research, which made me feel obliged to continue my friendship with them. In the process, I received more updated information from the young women in Li village. Ning Liao gave birth to a second child in 2018 and Yingqi Tao was sent to Australia by her company in 2019. What surprised me most was that Dan Wu was divorced in 2019. When I conducted my fieldwork in 2016, the young women called her husband ‘model husband’ because he was particularly good to Wu Dan. In the interview with Dan Wu during my fieldwork, she also expressed she had a good relationship with her husband. I started to think about whether to add this updated information to my research. Finally, I decided to analyses data which only come from my fieldwork out of the rigorous academic attitude that a researcher should have.

Feminist researchers often mention that reflexivity and reflection are an important part of the analysis stage. As Letherby (2015: 90) states: ‘within research, subjectivity is inevitable and reflection on the significance of this adds to the accountability of the research product’. During my fieldwork, I chose to ‘forget’ about my feminist researcher identity, and was only an ordinary person while

collecting their stories and information about their lives. However, while doing data analysis, I tried to withdraw my personal feelings and emotions and interpret the data critically. Feminist research is not research only about or of women but, more importantly, research for women. However, I think I should admit that I have strong feelings and emotions to women in Li village. I was surprised and happy about the changes and development in the rural area, which was not as bad as I imagined. I have attempted to do justice to the diverse voices of the women of Li village as accurately as I can.

When I returned to the UK, I started to organise my data and transcribe it. Although my fieldwork notes were organised nearly every day during my fieldwork, I still reorganised them again, based on my main topics, and divided them by different age group and issues. However, the premise of doing these analyses is that I need to convert the recording to text.

Transcription is a time-consuming phase. Because my mother tongue is Chinese, first I converted all the recordings into Chinese instead of English. But even during this process, I still encountered the problem of language translation. As I conducted the interviews in Chongqing dialects, I needed to transcribe my recordings into Mandarin first and then to find some suitable words for the dialects. For example, ‘*chendou*’ (抻抖) is a Chongqing dialect word which has two meanings: (1) making things clear (*qingchu*, 清楚); (2) comfortable (*shufu*, 舒服). In different dialogue contexts, ‘*chendou*’ (抻抖) stands for different meanings. This required me to find a suitable Mandarin word. Many more dialect words are like ‘*chendou*’ (抻抖) and have several meanings. During my organisation of the fieldwork notes and the transcription, memories of my fieldwork reappeared. I found that during the fieldwork I did not have much time to think about the actual meaning behind the stories and events in Li village, while reorganising and listening while I typed the records offered me more time to taste women’s lives in Li village. But sometimes, as

Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) point out, transcription can be emotional for researchers, and during my transcription, some of my participants' narratives made me feel sad. Moreover, as I transcribed interviews into Mandarin Chinese first, as I wrote my thesis, I needed to translate the quotes into English. I translated these quotes without using formal English, because I tried to retain the original meaning of my interviewees. However, some small details cannot easily be transcribed, such as their facial expressions or the interview atmosphere, which are really important for data collection and analysis, but I still have tried to bring these things out at times when I use the data in the thesis based on my memory and fieldwork notes.

Because I adopted ethnography as my research method, the sources of data are very diverse. However, massive data are disordered because they are not from interviews with well-designed themes. For example, when I play mah-jong with villagers, I cannot control the subject of the villagers' chats, but even the subject of their conversation is disordered, their conversation does include very attractive topics, such as consumption and in-law relationships. To solve this problem, after converting all the recording materials into text, I first classify all materials according to different person. For example, I conducted interview with Dan Wu and I also collected data from her when I played play mah-jong. I combine the data from different occasions under her name, but I also made note about different sources. After this process, I classified all women by generation. Even though my research focuses on young women, I still need data from their mothers and grandmothers to compare. In addition, I also classified the information obtained through my observations to different names.

In the next process, I carefully looked through the data concerning every young woman and made notes according to different themes. I have found all data are around their lives and relationships. Compared with their mothers and grandmothers, the young women's lives have undergone great changes. The changes they talked

about mainly focused on these themes: childhood, consumption, migration experience and education. In relationship, they more tend to talk about their husbands, in-laws and natal parents. Correspondingly, I also analyse the data according to these themes. I grouped these materials from the young generation again according to different themes.

In order to discover these changes in rural women's lives and relationships, I need to choose comparable references. Moreover, it is also important to explore influence of the older generation on the young women. Therefore, I sorted the data from the older generation according to the same themes to examine evidence of changes. Moreover, I also pay attention on the specific relationship between different generations such as mother-daughter or in-laws. I chose several mother and daughter pairs to explore how daughters' perceptions of their mothers' and grandmothers' lives affected their own views and practices. I also picked several pairs of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law to compare their different status in their husbands' families.

## SUMMARY

During both in-field and post-field research, I think my findings responded to the research method I chose and I gained answers to the questions that I wanted to explore. Throughout the research, I was able to explore the issues I wanted to discuss, which gave me a lot of flexibility and freedom in the methods I chose. At the same time, through these methods, I could describe the changes and developments in the countryside and the current status in the countryside. During the analysis, everything I experienced in Li village was once again presented to me, so I wanted to draw a vivid picture of young women in Li village to the readers through some detailed descriptions in my thesis. In qualitative research, I found the joy of dry academic work, and my personal feelings and emotions also changed and developed with my research.

From my fieldwork, I have gained experiences about how to be a skilful researcher in the field, and how to build relationships with participants. I think that I now have a deeper and greater understanding of rural areas and rural people. I was surprised by the developments in rural areas and the changes in young women's lives. I was touched by their experiences and stories. Therefore, in the following chapters, I would like to present changes in their gendered subjectivities and explore reasons for these changes.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# YOUNG WOMEN'S LIVES IN THE VILLAGE

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‘Chinese society since 1949, and especially since 1980, has been undergoing a cultural transformation that is reshaping not only the structural aspect of ordinary lives but also their cognitive, emotional, and ethical spheres’ (Jankowiak and Moore, 2017: 18–19).

As a result of growing up in a changed society, young women have very different lives from previous generation of women. The young women in Li village grew up in families with a richer material life, and affected by the family planning policy, even though there are some families that violate the family planning policy, most them have only one or two siblings, and some are the only child in their families. Transformation in social culture and different growth environments have had a profound impact on Li village’s young women. Their lives have changed dramatically compared to their grandmothers and mothers. This chapter will explore the new lifestyle of these young women compared with the previous two generation in Li village. First, son preference and gender equality will be discussed to explore young women’s childhood. Secondly, I will explore young women’s ideas about consumption compared with their mothers and grandmothers and analyse the meaning of consumption. Thirdly, the different migration working experience will be analysed. Lastly, I will focus on the group of women in Li village who obtained higher education and discuss the effects of family planning policy on the difference in the educational level of boys and girls in Li village.

## GENDER EQUALITY OR INEQUALITY ?

A young woman gave birth to a daughter while I was conducting my fieldwork. Many villagers went to her house to congratulate her. They joked with her and said, *'congratulations, you have a Merchants Bank now'*. Then they talked about their expectations when they were having children. The connection between a daughter and a 'Merchants Bank' comes from a famous joke from the Internet. A daughter is called a 'Merchant Bank', because it is not necessary to provide a house or car for her when she marries. She also can receive a high bride price. 'Merchant' refers to the bride price, the houses and cars which will be gained by the daughter. In contrast, a son is called a 'Construction Bank', because as a man he must have a house or car for marry. This house or car is normally provided by the man's parents. 'Construction' refers to the contributions offered by the man's family, such as bride price, houses and cars.

Some villagers said that they were very disappointed when their second child was a son, because they all expected that the second one would be a girl. One middle-aged villager also said that, during her pregnancy, because she and her husband were looking forward to a girl, all the clothes for the upcoming child were girl-style. Then she smiled and pointed at the son in her arms, saying *'look at the clothes my son's wearing, they're all girl-style. Sometimes we take him out and others think he is a girl.'* From conversations between these villagers, it becomes more apparent that residents of Li village have changed their gender preferences, especially for those born after 1970 and 1980.

When I asked young women in Li village whether there was a preference for boy in the village, I received a consistent answer: *'I don't think so'*. Some women with boy siblings told me they received the same attention and love from their parents. Even

in Jing Liao's eyes, 'value boys over girls' is just a gimmick made up for ratings in Chinese TV shows:

*I did not think my parents treated me and my brother differently. When I was a child, I could get anything my brother receive. My parents would always buy two of something of equal value for us...Now the TV series shows 'value boys over girls' plot, which makes people angry. But in fact, this is a deliberately created contradiction, otherwise no one will look at it. Anyway, it's not just me, even my friends in childhood didn't meet this phenomenon. (Jing Liao, 22)*

After graduation from the junior high school, her brother did not want to go on to study in high school. Three years later, Jing Liao's parents asked her to go on to study, but Liao Jing did not want to because she thought studying was boring. In general, daughters in Li village enjoy the same care and love of their parents as boys in the family. However, this change is not absolute in Li village. When I played mah-jong, I heard a tragic true story:

*There was a man in our village. He already had five or six daughters, but he firmly wanted a son. He and his wife raised three or four daughters, and gave two or three girls to someone else. In my view, this is absolutely 'value boys over girls'. He would not give up until he had a son. At that time, because of the birth-planning policy, people had to pay a fine if they violated the policy. But they would rather pay a fine. If they had a daughter, they were not willing to care for her. His parents would not cook anything for his wife to eat after she gave birth to a girl. No one cared about his wife. It seems that if she gave birth to a daughter, she had no honour. But after his wife gave birth to a son, his family was really happy. After his son's birth, some villagers said to him that if he wanted to give a name to the child, they could help. The man's surname is Zhen, some villagers said that his son*



*could be named Zhen Manyi<sup>46</sup>, because when he finally had a son, everyone was satisfied. Now his son has grown up, and sometimes we laugh at him by calling him Zhen Manyi. Like him and his family, they are typical 'value boys over girls' in my impression. Very few people of my age are like him. Like people in my life, these extreme examples are very few now (One informant, around 40).*

Although this informant stated that *'these extreme examples are very few now'*, son preference still exists among some people in this age cohort in Li village. However, from the informant's attitude and the name given to this man by some villagers, it can be seen that the concept of 'value boys over girls' has already been abandoned by most families in the village. In Lu village, Bossen (2002) has similar findings that daughters in Lu village have higher values than other places in China. She argues variety and diversity are characteristic of Chinese villages: 'although gender among Han population is often contrasted to that of China's ethnic minorities, the Han gender system is not monolithic. Beneath the general rubric of patriarchy, Han gender relations are complex and variable' (2002: 11).

Li village is located in the southwestern part of China where a unique culture unique culture in history has formed (*Bashu culture*, 巴蜀文化)<sup>47</sup>. This area is surrounded by mountains, and the flow of people was not large in ancient times. There is an ancient poem that describes the dangerous terrain of this area<sup>48</sup>. Therefore, the influence of the concept of hierarchy that stems from Confucian culture is not as popular as in the northern regions, such as Henan and Shandong. Moreover, this area had its own guiding ideology in ancient times, Daoism. Daoism does not have the

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<sup>46</sup> The pronunciation of his surname *Zhen* (甄) is the same as another Chinese word 真 (*zhen*). 真 refers to real or true in Chinese. *Manyi* (满意) refers to satisfaction. *Zhen Manyi* (real satisfaction) as his son's name has an ironic meaning to his 'value boys over girls'.

<sup>47</sup> In this culture, men are ardent and tough, and women are tender and heroic. Ba is the abbreviated form of the name of Chongqing and Shu is the abbreviated form of the name of Sichuan in China.

<sup>48</sup> The name of the poem is 'the daunting route into the region of Shu', by Bai Li (701-762 AD), from the Tang Dynasty. Please see the full poem at: <https://28utseprojects.wordpress.com/2011/01/15/079/>.

doctrines of ‘three from four virtues’ and ‘man is superior to woman’ that appear in Confucian ethics, while it puts forward the idea of ‘respecting yin and yang’ and ‘equality between men and women’, which leads to a respectful attitude towards women (Li, 2004). There are many female immortals in the Daoist fairy lineage. These female immortals occupy a lofty position among the Daoist gods and form an important part of the Daoist immortal system, forming a unique belief feature of Taoism (He, 2014). In addition, it can also be seen from the local dialects of the *Bashu* area such as ‘*pa erduo*’ (耙耳朵)<sup>49</sup>, ‘*la meizi*’ (辣妹子)<sup>50</sup> and so on, that the local female status is higher than in other places. In Chinese tradition, parents are generally referred to as ‘*die niang*’ (爹娘) or ‘*ba ma*’ (爸妈), which puts father in front of mother. However, in the *Bashu* area, this tradition has been changed to place mother in front of father. They call parents as ‘*ma laohan*’ (妈老汉). In ‘*ma laohan*’, ‘*ma*’ is a formal and respectful appellation for mother, while ‘*laohan*’ is a humorous and informal appellation for father. This way of naming parents is really rare in other Chinese regions. Due to the fusion of Daoism in this area, the traditional male centred culture is decreased and the phenomenon of ‘value boys over girls’ is less common.

From the economic aspect of history, the advantage of men over women in agricultural production is not very large. This is because the *Bashu* area has been called ‘*tianfu zhiguo*’ (天府之国)<sup>51</sup> since ancient times. After the building of the Dujiangyan Irrigation System<sup>52</sup>, stable yields were ensured despite drought or floods in ancient times. Such superior farming conditions allowed people in Sichuan and Chongqing to obtain the same or even better harvests without the huge energy

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<sup>49</sup> Pa means soft, erduo refers to ears. This comes from a phenomenon that a wife usually pulls her husband’s ear when she is angry. It means a man who is afraid of his wife.

<sup>50</sup> Women in Bayu area like eating spicy food. La means spicy, Meizi means woman. People use La meizi to describe the characters of women in Bayu, such as independent, daring and resolute.

<sup>51</sup> This means the land of abundance.

<sup>52</sup> This system is a large-scale water conservancy project comma built circa 256 to 251 BC, which is still being used today. The Dujiangyan project is mainly based on diversion irrigation and has comprehensive effects such as flood control and sediment discharge, water transportation and urban water supply.

invested by people in other regions. Therefore, the physical strength of men compared to women was not as great an advantage in agricultural production, as in other regions. Moreover, the agricultural advantage allowed the people to have more leisure time which could be used to develop side-line businesses. For example, the price of the long-established and famous textiles *Shujin* (蜀锦)<sup>53</sup> is comparable to that of gold. People, mostly women, in *Shujin* engaged in weaving; through the textile industry, they could earn money to support their families. Therefore, the advantage of men in providing the family's economic benefits is not as obvious as in other regions. On the contrary, women's economic contributions to a family are significant. Generally, in the aspects of culture and economic, this area has created less of a 'value boys over girls' phenomenon. However, the influence of Confucianism in this area cannot be denied. Therefore, it can only be stated that the status of women was relatively higher than that expressed in Confucian culture in China, especially the Central Plains culture which stands for the main culture of China.

I am gratified by the love of parents in Li village, the improvement in daughters' status within families and the changes in gender preference. Because, from the perspective of women themselves, at the micro level, the data I have gathered show the changes in their lives indeed, not only material, but also spiritual. However, by continually examining their narratives, I discovered their recognition of the socio-cultural patriarchal model in today's China and the stress of their inability to change this model. Most scholars study women's fertility willingness and gender preference through women's education, economic income growth, the family-planning policy, or old-age support by daughters (Shi, 2017; Yan, 2003; Jankowiak, 1993). Although these changes have indeed brought transformations in some people's fertility desires, most of them neglect the result that the decrease in fertility rate and the change in

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<sup>53</sup> *Shujin* is a kind of brocade in the Bashu area which has a long history (more than 2000 years) and unique craftsmanship. It has the top reputation of the four famous brocades in China.

gender preference are also due to the interaction between capitalism, the socio-economic culture and patriarchy. In the meantime, as individuals and families do make choices in response to market and non-market economic factors, such as resources or endowments (Folbre, 1980), decreased fertility desire and changes in gender preferences are perhaps the passive change made by women and their families. The passive change means that this change is brought by external reasons, for example, for some women they feel that they have more pressure to raise boys, because they have to offer houses to their sons for getting married in Chinese social culture, which makes them think it is better to have a daughter:

*We just think that if we have a boy, the pressure will be bigger. At least, we'll have to fight for a house for our son. Not only supporting his study, but also affording to buy him a house, these pressures are obvious. But, if we have a daughter, it is relatively easy. Because if we don't provide a house for her, there is nothing to be said by others, and the daughter would still marry a good man. However, if a son doesn't have a house or a car, others would judge. It would definitely not be easy to find a wife for him.*  
(Guoqiong Gan, 40)

From their accounts, which reflects the persistence of patriarchy at the socio-cultural level and its continued acceptance by ordinary people regarding the number of children and gender preferences, some women and their families' fertility decisions do not seem to be entirely spontaneous. The tremendous pressure brought about by raising boys has made some rural families begin to passively change. They are not proactive in the choice but are at the mercy of economic and other changes/patriarchal views. In Chinese society, the structure of families is still influenced by the patriarchy-patrilineage-patrilocality to some extent, which identify men as the owners and providers of material resources to demonstrate their masculinity. Therefore, although the status of women within most families in Li village has actually been greatly improved, the tradition of marriage still maintains

that men are the ‘providers’ of a family. Meanwhile, the lopsided sex ratio has turned women into a scarce resource, especially in rural communities.

Even though respondents expressed the same view that their parents did not ‘value boys over girls’ but treated their sons and daughters equally, love from parents is still gendered:

*My parents never had the concept of ‘value boys over girls’...For example, my mum often bought me some new clothes, while my brother had only one set or none. My parents said that girls need more clothes while boys do not. They think if a girl only one or two set of clothes has, others would laugh at her. My parents treated me very well. (Zhanghui Chen, 39)*

It can be seen that although her parents tried to treat her and her brother equally, the love from their parents differed according to gender. Niao Liao gives me an example in order to prove that her parents treat her and her brother ‘equally’: ‘As long as my brother obtain something, I will obtain something equal. If he received a car toy, I would receive a doll’. Why is it a car for boys and a doll for girls? This shows in Li village, there is a conception of gender that boys and girls are different. Zuofang Sun’s experience reveals this difference further:

*I remember that when a movie played in the village, boys could go out to watch it, but usually girls weren’t allowed. At least, my parents wouldn’t let me go. The society at that time was like that. At that time, parents were afraid that girls would suffer bad things outside, while they didn’t worry about boys in this respect. Parents at that time worried that if girls went out with boys something might happen. They wouldn’t let us play with boys, unless there were many people and many other girls... I really wasn’t allowed to go outside by myself. (Zuofang Sun, 36)*

There is a poem circulating today in *The Book of Songs* (*shijing*, 诗经)<sup>54</sup>. It describes how, if parents gave birth to a boy, they would give him a piece of jade in the hope that he would exhibit the good qualities of jade in the future, and to hope that he could become a nobleman in the upper class; if parents gave birth to a girl, they would be given a component of the spinning wheel in the hope that she would be good at needlework in the future (*naisheng nanzi, zainongzhizhang; naisheng nvzi, zainong zhiwa*, 乃生男子, 载弄之璋; 乃生女子, 载弄之瓦). This reflects the different expectations and requirements of parents for their children in ancient China according to gender. Now in Li village in current times, this method has not changed. In their view, compared with boys, girls should love beauty and be more vulnerable. Though young women said that their parents treat boys and girls same, it was still gendered and not equal in practice.

### YOUNG WOMEN'S IDEAS ABOUT CONSUMPTION

Jing Liao is the daughter of the owner of the family hotel where I live. In 2013, she married a man who lived in the same village. She does not live with her parents in law and the couple own their own house in the village. She tells me that if she looks after her son alone in her house, it is very boring so almost every daytime, when her husband work outside home, Jing Liao brings her child, a two-year-old boy, to her mother's family inn. She basically does not participate in the work of the family inn and all her job is to look after her son. It is a very relaxing work, because sometimes, her mother and grandmother share the responsibility to do this and Jing Liao does not need to cook food because her mother offers free lunch and dinner. Sometimes, her husband also goes to the family inn to eat lunch and dinner.

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<sup>54</sup> *The Book of Songs* is the earliest collection of poetry in China, collecting more than 300 poems from the 11th century BCE to the 6th century BCE. Many of these works describe the life of civilians at the time.

In the second day after I began living in the family inn, I heard a quarrel between this mother and daughter. Jing Liao planned to buy a new iPhone6s, which cost around 7000 yuan while her mother thought it was totally unnecessary, because the iPhone5 which Jing Liao was using was in good condition and just bought two years ago. Neither her mother nor Jing Liao could convince each other of their position. Jing Liao's tone was not very kind, saying *'I will not use your money, it is not your business'*. Her mother was speechless for a while, just saying *'I am thinking for you'*. Jing Liao's grandmother did not join the quarrel, but she kept sighing. Obviously, she also disagreed with her granddaughter's idea of buying a new mobile phone. A few days later, despite her mother's objection, Jing Liao bought a new iPhone 6s and gave her old phone to her mother.

Rofel (2007:118) states in urban China, young middle-class women are eager to consume and consumption is not only one of the means by which young women achieve freedom, but also 'a postsocialist technology of the self by which Chinese young women and, by metonymic association, the Chinese nation, enable themselves to transcend the specificities of place and identity and be part of the world'. From the situation of Li Village, the desire of young women for consumption has expanded from urban to rural China. The quarrel between Jing Liao and her mother reflects the conflict of consumption ideas between generations. In terms of consumption, from their daily dress and accessories, young women's consumption level in Li village is significantly higher than their mothers and grandmothers. Young women are pursuing specific brands when consuming, unlike their mothers and grandmothers, who are more concerned about quality and practicality with consumer items. Similarly, the young women in Li Village have also joined the trend of buying iPhones. Most young women are using iPhones and the rest are using other expensive smart phones such as Samsung and Huawei. Additionally, Jing Liao is not the only one who has bought a new phone for fashion trend reasons when the original phone is not broken. In contrast, most their parents in Li village are using

feature phones or second-hand smart phones which are discarded by their adult children.

According to Hung et al. (2005), Chinese urban young women have given new meanings to consumption objects and tried to combine different consumption objects. Rofel (2007:111) states consumption is an aspect of cosmopolitan identity: ‘this cosmopolitanism consists in two aspects in tension with one another: a self-conscious transcendence of locality, posited as a universal transcendence, accomplished through the formation of a consumer identity; and a domestication of cosmopolitanism by way of renegotiating China’s place in the world’. Although young urban Chinese women have global consumption potential and are willing to buy global products, they are looking for balance between local and global identities (Hung et al.,2005). Now in China, this cosmopolitanism is not only manifested in the elite female class in cities, but also extends to ordinary young women in rural China. The desire of young women for consumption is not only expressed in the desire for smart phones, but also extends to all aspects of life. The brand of nappies used by Jing Liao is pampers, an American brand, which she bought from JD.com, one of the two massive online retailers in China. The brand of milk powder that some babies in Li village drink is Cow&Gate, a British brand. I did not find that the young women in Li Village who used luxury bags themselves, but they were very familiar with these luxury brands, such as Dior and Louis Vuitton. In recent years, booming e-commerce and private logistics companies in China have provided these young rural women with as many shopping options as urban women. In the eyes of young women in Li village, with the help of the Internet, in terms of consumption, the gap between them and urban women has been narrowed dramatically. Although they may not even realize that online consumption not only brings material pleasure, they also enjoy the same shopping platforms as urban women.



The push from the state and capitalism has further boosted rural women's desire to consume. One of the distinctive features of China in the post-Mao era is the development of a consumer society and a conspicuous consumption environment (Hooper, 1994). In recent years, China strives to expand consumer demand among residents, vigorously enhance the role of consumption in promoting economic development, build a consumption-led development model and place consumption at the forefront of promoting economic growth (Liang, 2010). From the perspective of the Chinese government, the rural consumer market has great potential and local governments have even used subsidies to encourage rural residents to purchase household appliances.

China's consumer product manufacturers and e-commerce platforms spare no effort to promote consumption and women have become their primary targets. I learnt an interesting sentence from Jing Liao's husband: '*except Qingming Festival<sup>55</sup> and Dragon Boat Festival<sup>56</sup>, other festivals have become Valentine's Day, because I have to give a gift to my wife*'. Although this sentence is somewhat exaggerated, it also highlights a phenomenon in the current Chinese society: in order to obtain benefits, capitalists have vigorously promoted gifts for women on social media and traditional media such as television and radio. Under this situation, the most typical case is the event of International Women's Day. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020), the day is a great event to celebrate progress in achieving gender equality and empowering women and it is also an opportunity to critically reflect on these achievements and strive to achieve fuller gender equality around the world. However, under the propaganda of the capital, this day is called 'Goddess Day', or 'Queen's Day'. Jing Liao informs me on 8 March,

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<sup>55</sup> This festival is on the fourth or fifth April of the Gregorian calendar and is a traditional Chinese folk festival used to worship ancestors.

<sup>56</sup> This festival is a traditional Chinese folk festival on the fifth day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar to commemorate the patriotic poet Qu Yuan.

she would receive 520<sup>57</sup> *yuan* or 1314<sup>58</sup> *yuan* from her husband on Wechat for her shopping and some young women would post the screenshot of the transfer on social media. According to Chen (2018), what capitalism has to do is to sell commodities for maximum profit, so whether women have obtained legal rights and whether men and women are equal are not its fundamental concerns. This is why merchants can promote almost every holiday, such as Spring Festival, Valentine's Day, Mid-Autumn Festival, for example, as a shopping festival.

Looking back on the activities and reports related to Women's Day in recent years, it can be found that the term 'Women's Day', although used in some official documents and official media reports, has a low probability of appearing on other occasions (Chen, 2018). The focus of most ordinary women on this day is not the rights of women themselves, but how many gifts they have received from men. 'Consumption does not only enable the enthusiastic embrace of neoliberal economic policies that favour consumerism over socialism' (Xu and Feiner, 2007: 320), but also dispelled women's concerns about their rights and gender equality to some extent

According to my observation when I was doing fieldwork in Li village, different views on consumption are an important reason for the intergenerational conflict. Jing Liao complained to me:

*My mum and my grandma often tell me to be thrifty, because they have suffered a bitter life. But I totally cannot understand their feelings of bitterness, my family has offered me nearly everything I want since I was born. I like shopping and shopping makes me happy, which my mum and my grandmother cannot understand. I can make money by myself, so I think I can buy the things I like. Actually, my mum and grandma can only talk about their views by my side again and again, they can't really stop me. I don't want to*

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<sup>57</sup> 520 means 'I love you'.

<sup>58</sup> 1314 means 'forever'.

*change to the way they wish, because in my opinion this is my lifestyle and I use my own money. (Jing Liao, 22)*

Her complaint reflects the voices of most young women in Li village. No one mentioned to me the lack of material goods in their childhood. For them, childhood was really full of sweet memories, such as being able to eat as much they wanted or wear any clothes they liked. Rofel (2007) points out that young urban women's narratives of the sacrifices of the previous generation are not heard from their mothers but come from 'scar literature'<sup>59</sup> or films based on it. Not only do the young women in Li village not know the details of the poor lives of the previous two generations, they are also not interested in scar literature. In addition, an interesting phenomenon for this generation is that they hate to hear the word 'bitterness'. My participants told me that their parents or grandparents often reminded them of the 'bitterness' of their lives. The purpose of their parents or grandparents is to encourage these young women towards thrift. Traditionally, Chinese people prefer saving money rather than spending it due to the bitterness of life in previous years. However, young women in Li village treat it as outdated 'nagging'. Like urban women, for Li village's young women, 'consumption is about embodiment, embodying a new self' (Rofel, 2007: 118). In the perspective of the last two generations in Li village who had experienced collectivism, this is contrary to tradition. Their frugal consumption ideas stem from their tragic experience.

Grandma Hu is Jing Liao's grandmother, a woman who has suffered many setbacks in her life. Her full name is Shimei Hu, who was born in 1948. Her biological father was executed when she was only two years old in the campaign which aimed to suppress counterrevolutionaries after the CPC gained national political power, because he was classified as a landlord. Her mother remarried and died when

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<sup>59</sup> Scar literature is mainly to show the great spiritual and material harm brought about by the Cultural Revolution and the reflection on the future of the nation.

Grandma Hu was 12 years old in 1960. Then her stepfather passed away, leaving a sister who was five years younger than her. Grandma Hu and her sister lived together and ate in the public kitchen of the rural people's communes in the Great Famine period caused by the Great Leap Forward. If there was nothing to eat, they went together to pick wild vegetables for food. She did not marry until her sister grew up. She summed up her life before marriage in one word: bitterness.

Like Grandma Hu, young women's grandmothers basically lived through hard days when they were young. When I asked the question: '*Can you tell me about your childhood?*', their first answer was strikingly consistent and impressive. '*We were very bitter when we were little,*' which is a summary of their childhood. In the descriptions of their childhood, 'bitterness' was mentioned repeatedly. Basically, everything before marriage is centred on 'bitterness'. This bitterness represents not having enough to eat and nothing warm to wear.

Young women's grandmothers have at least four or five siblings in their natal families. This situation is one of the factors that increased their suffering. When a family has a large number of children, while not having the corresponding financial ability to raise so many children, eating and clothing is extraordinarily precious. Xucui Liu, Grandma Hu's neighbour who grew up in Li village, told me about her tragic experience in the Great Famine:

*Usually I took my younger siblings to find something to eat in the hills. I'm three or four years older than my brother who was the third child in my family. I still remember him who was died at that time... We ate in the public kitchen and everyone only had a piece of cold sweet potato. How can a little child bear it? ..... After his death, we put him in a dustpan and covered him with a tattered cloth. ..., My mum took the dustpan to the hills to bury him. There is a custom in our village that parents cannot bury their children. However, my mum still buried him by herself, because my parents thought that if no one knows about my brother's death, the rest of*

*the family still can have his food from the public kitchen every day. ... Many people went on hills to find things to eat, and then they dug out my brother's body. They said that you buried him secretly, because you wanted to eat his ration. (Xucui Liu, 64)*

Grandma Hu and Xucui Liu, like most of the elders in the village, dress very simply with no accessories, and the clothes are faded after many washings. Obviously, they have been wearing them for many years. Grandma Hu believes that, as long as they are clean, warm and comfortable to wear, there is no need to spend a large amount of money on clothes. Even though her sons and daughters give her money regularly, she would rather save it, and is reluctant to give herself new clothes. The hardships and sufferings of her childhood have deeply affected her and have brought her the simplicity of asceticism and the pursuit of security from savings. These have not changed even though her living conditions have significantly improved in recent years.

Shaoxian Liu was born in 1968 in Li village and she did not experience an era of extreme material scarcity like her mother-in-law. At least, the problem of food and clothing had been solved. 'Better than bitterness' could be this generation's key words when they talked about their childhoods. This is a relatively broad statement and it means that life was no longer as bitter as the last generation. At least, they were not worried about their daily food consumption. The difficulties in their pre-married lives were no longer about finding food and clothes, but this does not mean that their living conditions were good enough. Their living conditions were still poor even though they had improved. Although Shaoxian Liu no longer leads an extremely frugal life like her mother-in-law, it is still far from being comparable to her daughter's consumption ideas. Shaoxian Liu complained to me:

*Young people have never experienced hard times. They throw away the things which are still good and buy new ones. When I*

*was young, I only made one new suit a year. Good clothes, only to be worn when outside, change quickly as soon as I go back home. There is a proverb to describe: clothes can go for three-year new, three-year old, and another three-year in patches. ... My first cell phone was bought for my business and I have used for three years. How can she save money when she spends so much money? When I just married, I bought a scarf. My mother in law and my own mother still blame me for spending money. Now these young people, just buy a phone, spending one or two months of income. Although my life has been not bad, I am very economical.*  
(Shaoxian Liu, 48)

Obviously, Shaoxian Liu still leads a relatively frugal life which is very representative of the women of a similar age in Li village. Although the young women in Li Village have similar consumption practices to young women in the city, middle-aged women's ideas about consumption are still different from those of the same age in urban China. Urban middle-aged women devote considerable expenditure to the pursuit of beauty and youth (Yang,2011; Wen,2013). As Yang (2011: 333) states: 'Older, ripe women become younger and more tender by consuming fashions, cosmetic surgery technologies, and beauty and health care products and services because tender women represent the ideal active consumership that celebrates beauty, sexuality, and individuality'. In contrast, I did not find a middle-aged woman in Li village who had spent money in the beauty industry in Li village.

In addition to the different life experiences between generations, the CPC's propaganda in different periods is also an important reason for the difference in consumption ideas between generations. During the period of collectivism and the 1980s, the CPC propaganda presented frugality and saving as extremely important virtues. The ideals of the planned economy era were hard work and thrift, and at that

time, the role models officially established by the government had little personal consumption other than the basic needs of life (Yan, 2009). From 1990s, especially in recent years, the frugal lifestyle has been incompatible with the CPC's commitment to creating a consumption-oriented economic development model. Yan (2009) argues reform advocates had to fight against the anti-consumption ideology and the ascetic ideological tradition of the first thirty years of socialism. Women were the main targets in the drive to encourage consumption. Xu and Feiner (2007: 320) argue that, 'tacit and explicit encouragement of the consumption of beauty products as well as the objectification of women as things of beauty soften China's traditional hostility to the West, and enable the enthusiastic embrace of neoliberal economic policies that favor consumerism over socialism'. At the 18th National Congress of the CPC in 2012, thrift was not included in the Core Socialist Values<sup>60</sup>.

The CPC attempts to recruit China's population into consumerism for economic development inevitably brought about the decline of traditional and socialist moral values. According to Yan (2003), after the end of collectivization and the state's withdrawal from various aspects of social life, socialist morality collapsed, and there was no tradition or socialist morality. He states that under this situation, farmers quickly accepted the late capitalist morality characterized by global consumerism and individuals only emphasize their rights and ignore their obligations to the public or others, thus becoming 'uncivil individuals'. At the same time, the CPC shores up filial piety, the core of traditional morality, which has created a contradiction inherent in the project of building a prosperous socialist civilization.

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<sup>60</sup> The Core Socialist Values are 'prosperity', 'democracy', 'civility', 'harmony', 'freedom', 'equality', 'justice' 'rule of law' 'patriotism' 'dedication', 'integrity' and 'friendship'.

## **‘HARDWORKING WOMEN’ AND ‘ROMANTIC DREAMERS’**

‘What distinguishes emerging adults from those who are wholly adults is their having not quite reached a point in their lives where they can claim economic self-sufficiency nor a capacity to make independent decisions about how to organize their lives’ (Jankowiak and Moore, 2017: 162). As for migration experience, if I call these young women’s mother and mother in law who are migrant workers ‘hardworking women’, these young women could be ‘romantic dreamers’. ‘Hardworking women’, in order to get rid of poverty, try their best to go to work in the city, even if they are engaged in tiring work. ‘Romantic dreamers’ refers to these young women who enter the city with their dreams and expect to experience a new urban life.

Most young women’s mothers have experienced migration work or are now working in the city. For them, the most important reason to engage in migration work when they were young, was because they could help their family to reduce its financial burden and make money:

*At that time, it was too poor. The village was full of mountains and there were not many fields... I didn’t finish junior high school and went to work in Fujian. I worked in an electronics factory and earned 800 yuan a month, which was higher than the salary of people who worked in the county government. I mailed all the money I made home, and my family built a new house with it.*  
(Tianchun Zha, 45)

Although migrant women in this period could obtain much higher income than by farming at home, they were also under the triple pressure of family, state and capital (Pun, 2005).

*In 1993, I went to work in Guangzhou. At that time, social security was poor, and there were many thieves on the train. I brought 200 yuan, and I was very afraid of being stolen by a thief. I took the train for almost two days and one night. When I arrived in Guangzhou, I slept for two nights in the square of the train station until I saw my cousin. I worked in a garment factory and work 12*



*hours a day. It was so hard at that time. Now, the state can promote the protection of the rights and interests of migrant workers, but at that time, we didn't have any security in the city.*  
(Hongzhen Wang, 46)

The migration experience of the previous generation of women in Li village was very hard. By contrast, the young generation's migration experience has dramatically changed. Past research (Gaetano, 2004; Pun, 2005; Rofel, 2007) indicates that older generations of women migrants yearned for an urban life, but this has become more central to Li village young women's reasons for seeking work in the city. They gave up studying themselves with reasons given such as not being good at learning, or it was seen as boring:

*When I was 16, I did not want to continue my studies. Many classmates of mine went to cities, and I admired them, because it seemed that they were more fashionable and had a wider view when they came back. I thought I could also become like them in cities.* (Ting Liu, 26)

For the previous generation, despite their longing for urban life, the main reason for migration is to obtain a higher economic income for their family than farming (Pun, 2005). For the young generation, the purpose of migration work is no longer to subsidise the family, but to pursue personal experiences in cities or follow personal dreams.

A majority of interviewees said that they did not need to use the money they earned from migration work to support their families. Some young women even mentioned that they still needed their parents' support when they were working in cities, because they could not afford it themselves just by using their own salary:

*At the age of 17, I went to Guangdong and worked in a garment factory to make jeans. I did not have any savings when I came back at 20. I spent all my earnings while I was in Guangdong, because I did not need to send money to support my family. Even*

*so, it was good enough, because I did not ask my parents to support me. (Jiaojiao Zeng, 26)*

*I went out after I finished the junior high school. I told my father that I didn't want to study anymore and wanted to make money in cities.... The life in cities is wonderful, but the expense is really high. I can't afford my life in the city, because I'm really a good buyer. I had to ask my dad to send me money. (Dan Wu, 20)*

Unlike the previous migrant generation in Li village and the hardworking migrant women, Pun (2005) and Chang (2010) described, these young women no longer choosing to drift along in the city or work hard for low wages, as was typical in the past (Gaetano 2004; Pun, 2005). When they encounter difficulties in the city or find that working in the city is not as they imagined it, most of them do not continue to work, but to escape from the cities, such as returning home:

*I think working in the factory is too boring, because I do the same thing every day. I keep changing jobs, hoping to find a less boring job. I finally found a job in nail art and insisted on doing it for a year. Later, I think that's how it is in the city, not as good as I thought. I didn't save money, and I missed home. So I came back. (Dan Wu, 20)*

In Li village, cases like Dan Wu are not rare. For the young generation, migration work is a way to know cities and to enrich their personal experiences, or they believed that they could achieve their dreams in cities. This could be a path of cosmopolitanism for the young generation (Rofel, 2007). Even they had no clear ideas about migration work at first, they just followed others to go out for work for yearning to urban life.

However, having hardest work with the lowest income is far from meeting the demands of these young migrant workers. In contemporary China, fusions of city and village and the narrowing gap between city and village have decreased the attraction of cities for the new generation of migrant workers. The 'semi-

urbanisation' (Wang, 2006) of the villages can satisfy some young generation's demands. The new generation of migrant workers is not like the generation of their mothers, who had to take labour-intensive jobs. The economic development of China's rural areas and the popularity of the Internet have allowed a young woman who stay in the countryside to realize her cosmopolitan dream<sup>61</sup>.

The ways for rural women in this generation to make money are not only limited to migration work, but they also have many other methods to increase their incomes. Convenient transportation, fast logistics and highly popular Internet all provide these young people with opportunities to run their own businesses. During my fieldwork, I met two young people who are self-employed and came back from cities. One runs an Internet-based business selling local specialities, such as cured meat and wild mushrooms. The other is also making money from the Internet. Her business is filming her cooking procedures and uploading them to a Chinese social media platform-vlog. She uses local food materials from Li village to cook in a wild place, such as cooking a dish on a riverbank, or cutting bamboo to make into pans and bowls to cook dishes. On that social media she gains thousands of hits, which brings her money for every single hit. Moreover, she can also receive tips directly from people who watch her video on that social media.

These new opportunities not only give them more options to make money in Li village, but also offer them a chance to stay with families. There are many young returning migrant workers in villages, which makes the phenomenon of 'Chenggui Zu'<sup>62</sup>, increasingly common. According to National Bureau of Statistics (2019), in recent years, China's migrant workers have shown an obvious aging trend and the supply of new generation migrant workers is no longer than that of the older generation. This creates a situation in cities such that migrant workers have been

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<sup>61</sup> Another important reason is that consumption in the city is becoming less attractive to them because of E-commerce as I discussed in relation to young women's ideas about consumption.

<sup>62</sup> This means returning villagers from migration work.

hard to find in recent years. This situation is called ‘*Yonggong huang*<sup>63</sup>’. According to Li and Liang (2011), this labour shortage appears especially in labour-intensive industries. The increasing demands of labour and decreasing attractions of east-coastal cities leads to fewer migrant workers in cities. The increase in self-employment and high expectations of employment from the new generation of peasants, especially people who were born after 1980, has resulted in this situation. Moreover, the childcare responsibilities are still mainly undertaken by these young women after marriage. This is also a reason for young women to return home, even though some of them find an ideal job in the cities.

### **EDUCATION AND THE PRIDE OF LI VILLAGE**

According to my statistics during my fieldwork, the education level of the younger generation of women in Li Village is significantly higher than the previous generation. Moreover, the educational level of young women is basically equal to that of young men. In last generation, a considerable number of women dropped out of junior high school and there was no woman who received bachelor’s degree. By contrast, thanks to the ‘Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China’<sup>64</sup>, in Li village, a young woman with the lowest education level also completed junior high school education and there are some young women who obtained bachelor’s degree.

During my fieldwork in Li village, I met some young women who grew up in Li village, gained higher education, and then worked in the city. They settled in the city and would visit their parents on weekends. According to my statistics, about 20% of

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<sup>63</sup> Yong Gong Huang: Labour shortage. It means that it is difficult to find people to work in factories or construction sites that mostly employ migrant workers.

<sup>64</sup> China’s education system is composed of primary schools (6 years), junior high schools (3 years), high schools (3 years), and universities (4 years). In 1986, the ‘Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China’ was promulgated, and nine-year compulsory education was formally implemented in mainland China. The law stipulates that all children and adolescents between six and fifteen years old must receive compulsory education.

young women in Li village were admitted to university and stayed in the city to work. The villagers mark them 'the pride of the village'. Compared with their mothers and grandmothers, education has become a very important issue in rural families in Li village. Neither the economic conditions of the family, nor gender, is any longer a stumbling block on their educational path in Li village. Those who graduated from college or university not only had strong support from their families for their education, but have also made a choice of their own:

*Although I grew up in the countryside, my usual time was basically for studying. I did less housework and farm work which were mostly done by my parents. The only thing my sister and I needed to concern ourselves with was studying. My parents were very supportive about our education, so we had a lot of time for it. I graduated from a Normal college. (Yunyan Deng, 34)*

*My only responsibility was studying when I was young, and I generally did not need to do any housework or farm work at home. My home was far away from school at that time, but my mum usually cooked every morning and prepared my breakfast and lunch. When I came back home after school, my mum did not ask me to help her with housework or farm work. The only request was hard study. I think the reason for the support from my mum is that she regrets her own low educational level and does not want me to be the same as her. (Min Gao, 31)*

It can be seen from these descriptions that, although they are daughters, the whole family supports them in their education. This change is not only because of the improvement in the peasant's economic level, but more importantly, because of the change in the consciousness of rural families regarding education and girls. This change is due either to regrets about lack of knowledge in their own experience, or to the innovation of understanding of women in rural families in Li village. Since the 1980s, girls' education has been drawing many scholars' attention, as they generally believe that girls were disadvantaged with less investment in education from their families, because of the different expectation of returns and old-age support between sons and daughters (Wolf, 1985; Honig and Hershatter, 1988; Jacka, 1997).

However, in Li village, there are a large number of women with higher educational backgrounds. Their supportive families broke with the traditional impression about the investment of rural families regarding sons and daughters.

In 2000s, the difference in the educational level of Chinese boys and girls has become much more subtle (Fong, 2004; Hannum 2005; Connelly and Zheng 2007; Hannum et al., 2009). Fong (2004) states that under the family planning policy, only daughters in urban families have received similar investments to boys and when there is only one child in the entire family as ‘the only hope’, the traditional Chinese view of ‘values boys over girls’ are gradually disintegrating. Although in Li Village, if the first child is a girl, a couple is allowed to have a second child, which is different from this policy in urban China, family size in Li village has declined. Not only does this mean that families can more easily afford to educate children, but also that girls have fewer (or no) brothers to compete with for parental investment. Hannum et al. (2009: 474) argues parents in rural Gansu have high expectations for both their sons and daughters in education, and ‘at least in Gansu, rural parental educational attitudes and practices toward boys and girls are more complicated and less uniformly negative for girls than commonly portrayed’. However, Zhang et al. (2007: 154) state ‘mothers hold higher aspirations for boys whom they think are engaged in schooling, but this is not the case for girls’. Li village’s parents hold the same expectations for their boys and girls:

*I remember that the main thing I did when I was young was study. There was nothing else for me to concern myself with. I did not pass the university entrance exam the first time, and I wanted to give up studying but my dad did not want me to give up and told me about my cousins’ experiences of education. My cousins found very good jobs in cities because they completed university education. My cousins told me that if I want to find a good job like them, I must have a university degree. If I only finished high school, I could not have a good future like them. Then I decided to take the exam again and I succeeded. My parents are really proud of me. (Hui Lü, 30)*

*I am good at studying and enjoy it. My parents are the most supportive power for me. My dad said only that, if I wanted to study, he would support me, no matter how expensive the fee is. After I received the offer from my university, everyone in my family was happy, especially my parents. In the village, if people receive an offer from a university, especially a very good university, it is a glory for their family. My parents have no other thoughts about education for girls; they only think the more the better. (Yingqi Tao, 28)*

After graduating from university, Hui Lü successfully passed the national civil service examination and worked in the customs in Chongqing. Yingqi Tao joined a foreign company in Shanghai and was promoted to director in her department in 2015. They have become role models for students in Li village. After the economic reform, the gap between urban and rural areas has widened. Many rural families are looking forward to changing the status of farmers to be the same as that of people in cities. Receiving higher education is one way for them to change their peasant identity. If they completed higher education, they can find a job in the city. Then they have a chance leave behind the rural *hukou* and gain an urban *hukou* to enjoy its benefits. This is of huge interest for ordinary rural families. In addition, the interest in education is not limited to ridding themselves of a rural *hukou*, but can also bring glory to rural families. Going to college and finding a good job in the city is a very honourable thing for rural families in Li village. If a family has such a child, regardless of gender, the entire family will do their best to support their education.

Most studies that exist have focused on rural left-behind women and migrant women, rural women, as I illustrate here, were paid less attention. This group of women who grew up in rural areas and gain social mobility through education should not be ignored. Although many of them live in the city for a long time, their childhood and adolescence were spent in the village. Most of their parents, relatives and friends still live in rural areas, which means they are inextricably linked with

rural areas. This group of women demonstrates the gender shifts in rural households and the increased investment in girls. I assumed that their agency in the family and the society may be higher than other women in Li village. However, as these women normally have stable jobs in cities, it was difficult to meet them in the village. During my fieldwork, I have only seen four such young women and the conversation with them is very short, so this group of women's voices is relatively lacking in my research.

## SUMMARY

The young women in Li village grew with the love of their parents, but they were still treated by their parents according to traditional Confucian ideas on gender roles, which has a great impact on gender relations after their marriages as I will explore in the next chapter. They are no longer thrifty nor hardworking as their mothers and grandmothers, which are regarded by them as good virtues for rural women. On the contrary, the young women in Li village pursue consumption practices and regard consumption as a way to embody a new self (Rofel, 2007) encouraged by the state and capital. In addition, the migration working experience has different meanings for them because it is a path towards cosmopolitanism for the young generation (Rofel, 2007). Other young women gained higher education qualifications, settled in the city, and became the pride of Li village. Li village's parents hold the same expectations for their boys and girls.-Comparing their grandmothers and mothers, the young women's lives in Li village have undergone a fundamental transformation, which can impact the relationship with their husband and in-laws, as I will explore in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER FIVE

# GENDER RELATIONS IN LI VILLAGE

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The young generation of women in Li village already has a very different life experience than the previous generation of women. Therefore, it might be expected that their relationship with their husbands and in-laws will also show different characteristics from the previous generation of women. This chapter will explore gender relations in Li village, especially among the young generation. Firstly, young women's ideas of spouse selection will be discussed, exploring social media and their parents' influence on them. Secondly, I will analyse the relationship between husband and wife including the distribution of family power and the gender division of labour to discuss the issue of gender equality in both private and public spheres. Thirdly, I will address in-law relationship exploring the causes of these changes. Finally, the relationship between daughter-in-law and their natal families will be considered exploring the shift of filial piety.

### IDEAS OF SPOUSE SELECTION

In Li Village, the marriage age of young women varies according to their education level. Women with higher education tend to marry relatively late, while women who drop out of high school to do migration work, generally married before the age of 22. I did not find any 'leftover' women<sup>65</sup> (*shengnü*, 剩女) in Li village. According to Ji (2015), faced with the pressure of parents urging marriage, 'leftover' women have maintained their pursuit of love and do not lower their standards in spouse selection. Even though the average age at first marriage of women is low and there are no 'leftover' women in Li village, this does not mean that they do not pursue love.

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<sup>65</sup> 'Leftover' women refer to women who have passed the age generally considered suitable for marriage, but still unmarried. Most of them have a higher education.

According to Jankowiak and Moore (2017), today, Chinese people believe that satisfaction in life comes from the emotional support of both parties in marriage and love is a bond which helps the status of women. For most of them love is essential in marriage. 'Dating' is a necessary way to test their feelings. In the process of dating, they can discover any problems or conflicts that they encounter as a couple, and then they have the right to decide whether to go ahead with marriage.

*My husband and I have known each other since we were young. Later, we went out to work, and we didn't meet each other for several years. But, one year, we returned to the village and met, since then on, we stayed in contact. We feel that both of us have the same personality and interests, and then we started to fall in love. After dating about a few years, we felt that we should get married. ....In this way, we get married but not through the introduction of the matchmakers (meiren, 媒人). I think that the matchmakers are not reliable... My mother also feels that as long as the child is satisfied, the basis of marriage must be firmer. After all, people know whether the one they are looking for is suitable. (Zhanghui Chen, 29)*

In Li village, the young generation has fully realised the importance of dating and it is difficult for me to find any existence of arranged marriage in the young generation during my fieldwork in Li village. Moreover, I have found social media provides women with more opportunities to communicate with the opposite sex:

*My husband and I were classmates when we were in middle school, but we really understand each other by chatting through QQ<sup>66</sup>. We often chatted online at that time, and he asked me out after a while. My parents had no problem with my marriage, I decided by myself. There were no parents who controlled their children's marriage in our village. Basically, young people in our village all went dating first then decided to get married by themselves. (Jing Liao, 22)*

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<sup>66</sup> A Chinese social media similar to WhatsApp.

It is the social media that allowed them to become familiar and love each other. It has become very common in China to get to know people of the opposite sex through social media. McDonald (2006:114) indicates: ‘the incredibly strong horizontal integration of QQ, plus the functions allowing discreet one-to-one conversations with nearby strangers, made it a particularly ideal venue for conducting romantic relationships.’ With the popularity of smart phones, the Internet users in China have increased dramatically. According to the China Internet Network Information Centre (2016), the number of Internet users in China has reached 731 million, with a penetration rate of 53.2% in China’s population and mobile Internet users accounts for 95.1%<sup>67</sup>. With the development of Internet technology in China, social media is becoming more and more popular. In Li village, every young woman uses social media, which greatly expands her interpersonal circle and significantly increases women’s chances of getting to know the opposite sex. Jing Liao tells me that she and her ex-boyfriend also meet through QQ and it is a common way to get to know the opposite sex among her friends. However, McDonald (2016) also states young married couples usually prefer to communicate with each other by phone or text message, because although social media enables love relationships through online interaction with strangers, as soon as marriage is legalized, people discourage the use of social media as it is seen to be a threat to this intimate relationship. In Li village, the young women still prefer to communicate with their husbands by social media because in their view, the price of a phone call and text are much higher than the mobile Internet.

The popularity of social networks has led to an increase in cross-regional marriages. According to my statistics, now the percentage of cross-regional marriage in young generation in Li village is approximately 40%, while it was rare among the last two generations in Li village:

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<sup>67</sup> [http://www.cac.gov.cn/2017-01/22/c\\_1120362500.htm](http://www.cac.gov.cn/2017-01/22/c_1120362500.htm)

*My son and daughter-in-law got to know each other by chatting on their mobile phones. Now these young people have mobile phones to go online and know everything. If you decide for yourself, you would know whether this one is suitable for you. My daughter-in-law is not from Chongqing. She is from Yunnan Province.*  
(Hongzhen Wang, 46).

Traditional marriages are often made in the same village, or a village not far away. In the long history of China, rural women have been encouraged to marry men from nearby villages (Fan and Li, 2002). Fan and Huang (1998: 230) point out: 'Poor transportation infrastructure, patriarchal lineage, and the strong desire for kinship networks are among the reasons for short-distance marriages.' In Li village, the majority of parents of these young people grew up in Li Village. With the development of China's rural transportation infrastructure and instant messaging software, young people's activity space has been greatly expanded, and there have been increasing opportunities for contact with the opposite sex in different regions. Moreover, migration experience is also an important reason for cross-regional marriage in Li village: Ning Liao's sister-in law met her husband (Ning Liao's brother) in Shenzheng during migration work and is from Guangdong province. Wang Quan's husband is from Liaoning Province and they met each other when they worked in the city of Guangzhou.

The pursuit of love by the young generation is not only reflected in cross-regional marriage, but also in the autonomy of marriage. Young women in Li village do not have to listen to their parents in term of mate selection. However, this does not mean their parents have fully given up their interfering in their daughters' marriage. Parents in Li village still offer suggestions or restrictions to their adult daughters on the choice of dating and marriage partners, but these suggestions have no longer been the decisive factor. Young women now have the right to make own decisions about marriage. Some young women choose to follow their parents' suggestion while others refuse:

*My ex-boyfriend and I met online. I thought he was a romantic man. At that time, I had a good relationship with him, but my parents opposed my dating with him. My mum asked someone to enquire about my ex-boyfriend's background finding he lived in a single-parent family with his mother, whose private life was chaotic. My mum told me it would have bad effects on my ex-boyfriend and if I got married to him, it would be difficult for me to deal with the relationship with his mum. I thought my mum was right and then broke up with him. Now I heard he had divorced. I'm glad I listened to my mother's suggestion. (Jiaojiao Zeng, 26)*

Jiaojiao Zeng followed the advice of her mother and broke up with her ex-boyfriend. When I asked the reason why she would listen to her mother's suggestion, she explained: *'I think my mother is very visionary about people. Moreover, she listened to my grandma's advice, so the marriage is very happy.'* Jiaojiao Zeng's mother is Dingtao Wang, 61 years old, who married a man following her mother's advice. At the beginning, Dingtao Wang did not want to marry her husband, even though many matchmakers came to persuade her. But her mother admired her husband and told her that he was an honest and hardworking man:

*I looked down on Zhu laoda (朱老大)<sup>68</sup>, because his family had very heavy burden, that there are seven siblings in his family. My husband is the eldest one, which means he needs to take responsibilities and take care of younger siblings. I thought that if I married him, I would not have a relaxing life. However, my mum told me that: 'if you marry him, you can't be wrong. I'm good at recognising whether the man is good or not. Zhu laoda is a hardworking and honest man with strong body, that he can raise the whole family after you get married. I hope you can find a good man to treat you well. I'm your mother and I choose him for you well-being'. My mum mainly admired his personality. She thought that Zhu laoda is down-to-earth who would treat me well and I would not in an unfavourable situation in his family. Although*

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<sup>68</sup> Her husband. *Laoda* (老大) refers to the eldest child in a family. Zhu is the surname I give to her husband in the thesis.

*their family conditions were not good, but it is not my mother's main consideration, she just likes him. (Dingtao Wang, 61)*

Dingtao Wang has a happy marriage, which could influence her daughter, Jiaojiao Zeng, to accept her suggestion. Evans (2008: 199) states ‘the mother exercises an enduring power in shaping her daughter’s formation as a person and a woman’. Even though young women’s lives in Li village have undergone tremendous changes compared to their mothers, the influence of the mothers on them cannot be ignored. Jiaojiao Zeng’s mother did not order her to break up with her ex-boyfriend, but only advised it, and the decision was made by Jiaojiao Zeng. The experience of their mother’s marriage will inevitably affect the daughter’s view of marriage. In Dingtao Wang’s view, romance is not important in marriage, but a hardworking and honest husband makes marriage happy, according to her experience, which had a subtle influence on her daughter.

In Li village, I have found this influence is not only reflected in the view that a daughter learns successful experiences from her mother, but also in that a daughter will not let her mother’s tragedy happen again. For example, Wang Quan resolutely rejected her father’s interference in her marriage because she did not want to repeat her mother’s mistakes:

*I met my husband when we were working in a same factory. He is 10 years older than me. I can feel he loves me. When he was dating me, I thought he treated me like a princess. After one-year dating, I brought him to my home to see my parents. At the beginning, my parents did not like him especially my dad, because the big age gap between us. But I love him, and I insist he is my Mr. Right. My parents changed their mind. (Wang Quan, 29)*

Wang Quan told me her father was very opposed at first, and what embarrassed her was that when her husband first visited her family, her father was very unfriendly to her husband:

*My dad went out without saying hello when my husband entered the door which is very impolite. It wasn't until lunch that my mom asked my brother to call my dad, and he didn't go home. At dinner, my dad said to my husband, 'even you are a little boss, I don't like'. ....After my husband left, my father asked me to break up with my husband. (Wang Quan, 29)*

Faced with the great pressure from her father, Wang Quan did not succumb. She tells me *'I would rather die than live like my mother when I was a child'*. Her mother is Dan Zhou, a woman with an unfortunate arranged marriage. An arranged marriage is mainly based on the choice of parents or other elders; normally the feelings and concerns of the bride or groom are not thought to be important or taken into consideration. Since 1950 in China, arranged marriages have been declared illegal under the 1950 Marriage Law and the new government launched a series of rules to regulate it as it was seen as the oppression of women in feudal society (Zhang and Li, 2015). However, as some anthropologists indicate, even though the Marriage Law was implemented in 1950, adult children marriages were still controlled by their parents for decades in some villages (Jankowiak and Moore, 2017). The same situation was found in Li village, that the marriages of women born before 1970 in Li village were basically arranged by the elders<sup>69</sup> at home.

Dan Zhou's marriage is typical of arranged marriages, in which her personal feelings were considered to be totally unimportant. Her parents made their decision just based on her age, because in Li village in the early 1980s, a woman who was 24 years old

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<sup>69</sup> Normally their parents, but some villagers' marriages were arranged by their uncles or the head of their family due to some special reasons, such as their parents having passed away.

and still not married would be unacceptable. She described her experience as: *'it was as a nightmare for the first 15 years of my marriage and I often struggled in it'*:

*I did not understand what marriage was at first, but I learned it slowly after I had children. But there is no way to change it and it was impossible for me to change at that time. If I had got divorced in the early stage of my marriage, I was worried about my children, who would be greatly hurt. My husband had only graduated from junior high school, he has no foresight. Moreover, he did not understand or support my ideas at all at that time, so it was very difficult to communicate with him. He always thought that he was right, and I was doing the wrong thing. He is a very traditional and patriarchal man. He always considered that women cannot take the big deal (bandashi, 办大事).(Dan Zhou, 59)*

Wang Quan sympathizes with her mother: *'I will never let my mother's tragedy happen to me!'*, she decisively tells me. It is obvious that Dan Zhou's unfortunate marital life has had a great impact on her daughter. Wang Quan hates arranged marriages and dislikes interference from her father. She did not compromise over her father's view in the matter of spouse selection:

*When I was young, I saw my parents kept quarrelling. She did not divorce because she thought it had very bad effects on me and my brother. I think my mother is a competent mother and wife, but she is not happy. It's all because my grandparents made the wrong decision, which ruined her life. I won't be obedient like my mother. (Wang Quan, 29)*

Wang Quan' persistence gained support from her mother, Dan Zhou. This was an important reason for his father to compromise, because Dan Zhou reshaped her relationship with her husband in recent year:



*I studied some pharmacology when I was in high school, and I wanted to run a pharmacy shop, but my husband did not agree. Later, I learned how to make clothes in the garment factory and would have liked to open a small shop to make clothes, which he also did not support. He firmly tied me to our home and just wanted me to do housework and plant crops. At that time, I thought the children were too young, so I decided to stay at home. When my children became older, I ran a brick kiln against my husband's obstruction, but I bought a house with the money I made from it. My husband started to change some of his views about women after I made money and bought a house for our family. With the opening-up policy, the idea of a rural family inn came into my mind. I have run this inn for 12 years now. All of the rural family inns in Li village were developed under my leadership. My husband didn't support me to stop the brick kiln business at first, but I also ignored his opinion. He was very angry and fought with me nearly every day. However, when he knew running an inn was more relaxed and easier making money than the brick kiln, he finally stopped fighting. My husband and his family were very patriarchal and looked down on women at first. But after I used my knowledge and foresight to make money, they did not think that women had 'long hair but short vision'. My husband often says, 'you make a really good point' and he doesn't follow his parents' advice anymore. Therefore, now I'm in charge of all the family affairs. (Dan Zhou, 59)*

Finally, Wang Quan's father give up his interference and respected his daughter's own choice. Wang Quan tells me:

*When I was a kid, everyone had to listen to my dad, and he could not tolerate anyone in the family against him. However, under the 'leadership' of my dad, our family is very poor. Finally, my mother began to rebel against my dad when I was probably in junior high school. She might think that I was old enough to be less affected by their quarrel. Since my mother insisted on her own ideas and started doing business, my family's economic conditions have become better and better. I am very grateful to my mother.*

*Her experience told me the importance of resistance. Therefore, I would not follow my dad's advice. I am not afraid of arguing with him.*

Although the decisions of Jiaojiao Zeng and Wang Quan are opposite ones, both of them have been affected by their mothers' different marriage experience: 'Given their place in the formation of their daughters gendered selves, mothers have a particular significance in this' (Evans, 2008: 200). The effects are both positive and negative. Jiaojiao Zeng learnt from her mother's happy marriage so she gave up her romantic ex-boyfriend and chose a hardworking and honest husband; Wang Quan did not want to make the same mistake as her mother, and was resolutely opposed to her father's intervention. More importantly, they all made their own decisions. This fully reflects the autonomy of young women in Li Village in spouse selection. As Wang Quan said: *'I may make a wrong decision, not as good as my parents thought, but this is my own marriage. If my choice is wrong, I will not regret it, because it is my own decision'*.

## **YOUNG COUPLES' RELATIONSHIPS**

The self-confidence of the young women in Li village has been enhanced and they have recognised that their abilities are no worse than their husbands'. As a result, they require an equal family status at the beginning of their marriage, which means that these women will not obey their husbands or surrender their rights at home like a traditional woman:

*Both my husband and I earn money to support our family. I make no less than he does. I also take care of my daughter, so I think I make more contributions than my husband does. For example, sometimes when we quarrel, I say to him 'I'm not relying on you'. Women in our generation could earn money to support themselves, unlike the previous generation of women, who could*

*only stay at home and depend on men. So, if both of us make the same contribution, or I do more, why should I obey my husband?*  
(Yunyan Deng, 34)

From Deng's description, it can be seen that women's economic independence is a significant reason for their improved family status. As Deng said, *'I'm not relying on you'*, the implication being that her husband cannot control her, and they are two individuals who are relatively independent. However, women who work outside are a minority of young married women in Li village. The majority of young married women stay at home to look after children.

Some young women who stay at home emphasize that they are not making money outside because they have to take over the child-care, then their husbands have more chance and time to make money outside. They all believe that the contributions made to a family cannot only be measured through how much money they earned. In their opinion, the contribution of the husband who earns money to support the family is no more vital than taking care of children at home. Their contribution to the family is also major, perhaps even greater than their husbands make, because they gave up the opportunity to work outside the home. As a result, they think they should have the same status as their husbands. Moreover, it is not young women who have recognised their contribution, but also their husbands. Jing Liao and Jiaojiao Zeng's husbands say they really appreciate their wives sacrifices for the family and it is difficult to imagine what would happen if the roles were reversed.

I also notice these aspects in Li village during my fieldwork, in that the young women no longer undertake heavy housework:

*My relationship with my husband is relatively stable. Among the people around me, in general, the husbands love and care about their wives. Now these men are basically caring about their wives, not like men used to. My mother-in-law prepared the bathing*

*water, meal, and clothes for my husband before. But after he married me, he needs to prepare these for himself. I wouldn't serve him like his mother did. To be honest, now, there are a few wives who will obey their husbands. In the past, the man worked in the fields, very hard and tiring, so when he got home and asked his wife to serve him, the wife had to prepare the bath and the meal, as if she did nothing at home. It's different now. The man works outside and gets tired, when he returns home, he needs to do housework like his wife. His wife will not serve him. Everyone is tired. Taking care of children at home is also tiring, which is not like before, just put the children there and the adults could do anything they wanted to. The expectation is high for children now, so it costs time and energy to take care of them and teach them. It is much harder than work outside. So who would serve the husband? (Dan Wu, 20)*

Dan Wu (20) said that, during her pregnancy, she followed her husband to the city. Her husband not only made money, but also did all the housework, while she lay in bed and waited for meals. After the birth of their child, her husband treated her in the same way as during pregnancy, and if she wanted something to eat, he would bring it home for her immediately. Dan Wu thought that her husband loves her and that she has a higher status in the family. She said her husband knows her temper, so he generally complies with her and does not want to make her upset. Dan Wu also mentioned that if she exchanged roles with her husband, she could make as much money as her husband did to support her family, but that he might not be able to look after the child at home as well as she does. A similar situation is also found among other interviewees:

*Basically, my husband complies with me in everything. I could do whatever I wanted. I felt like I was basically in charge of everything anyway. My husband will ask me for advice. Usually we make a decision together, but in nearly all his decisions he listens to me. (Jiaojiao Zeng, 26)*

As showed in the data, these husbands of young women were significantly more involved in housework than the previous generation and more tended to follow their wives' advices. However, not all husbands are willing to do housework:

*If I knew earlier that my husband was so lazy, I would not marry him. He was diligent when he was dating with me. At that time, every time he came to my house, he would help me and my mom with housework. Unexpectedly, after married, he became lazy. He did not cook or clean. If I asked him to do these, he said that there was a division of labour between men and women. Women should do some housework such as cooking and cleaning. Men should be responsible for repairing and gardening. It was ridiculous, because cleaning and cooking are required every day, but repairing and gardening are only required once a month. I can't stand his laziness at all, because if I live my whole life according to his division of labour, I will be insane! Because of the division of housework, I kept arguing with him. On several occasions, we almost divorced. In the end, he compromised with me. Now, even if he goes to work during the day, he has to do housework. (Jing Liao, 22)*

Jing Liao fully demonstrated her agency in trying to establish a relatively equal relationship with her husband. She is not the only young woman who argued with her husband to share the housework burden. While I was playing mah-jong, I heard an interesting way to share housework in Li village:

*My husband and I are reluctant to cook. Because of this, we quarreled many times. Once, we saw an interesting way on TV, that is, rolling dice to decide who would do the housework. We found it very interesting and decided to try it. The effect is good. Since then, we rarely quarrel over who do the housework. (One informant, around 30)*

Although the results are random in this way, in the long run, the housework undertaken by the husband and wife is indeed equal. This method demonstrated women's agency in the distribution of housework in Li village again.

In addition to housework, the young women's views in Li village on divorce have also changed a lot. I found some young women who had chosen divorce because they could not bear their husbands or had no feelings between them. Some scholars also point out that young women are increasingly despising their marriages and as soon as they think they have no love, they can quickly divorce (Yang and Wang, 2017). The difficulty of male remarriage and the ease of women's remarriage further exacerbates the imbalance between men and women in the marriage market (Liu, 2009). Because men are afraid of remarriage, they are more obedient within marriage, which makes them vulnerable to some extent. The main reason causing more divorces in Li village is migration work. Due to rural-urban migration, many couples have less time to spend together and have more choices about their mates. Villagers told me that some women had got divorced because they discovered that their husbands had cheated on them. They could not bear this kind of thing, so they divorced. Some other women chose to get divorced because they found someone better than their husbands in the cities during their migration work. However, no matter what the reason is that has caused more divorces in Li village, it can be said that women of this generation have started to not put their family first, instead, putting their own personal happiness first. These divorce cases illustrate that marriage has begun to transform from a whole family affair into a two-person affair. At this point, different views about marriage from the two generations of women in Li village have formed a sharp contrast:

*Now young people divorce casually. This is really irresponsible. Marriage is not simply the union of two people, but the connection of two families. More importantly, divorce is really harmful to children. Therefore, the two people must be cautious when making divorce decisions. (Zhao, 65)*

Zhao is a friend of Grandma Hu. She often goes to the family inn where I live to chat with Grandma Hu. Sometimes, I joined their conversation. Zhao is a woman who was deeply hurt by domestic violence. During the first few years of her marriage, she basically was beaten by her husband every two or three days. Sometimes it was because her husband met unhappy things, while sometimes there was even no reason. At last, this woman could not bear him any longer, so when he beat her again, she grabbed a hoe and chased him from their home to the house of the village director. Almost all the villagers have seen that he was being chased and beaten by his wife. However, he did not feel embarrassed or beat his wife back. Instead, he never beat her again, and became submissive to her. He followed his wife's arrangements in everything, and the woman had established her status in the family from then on. No matter what kind of situation, Zhao never came to think of divorce. Her attitude towards divorce is representative of the older generation of women in Li village. With the development of China's economy, the conservative idea of marriage in the period of collectivism has gradually disintegrated. Young people are increasingly influenced by individualism and have begun to pursue their own freedom (Yan, 2003). In Li village, the pursuit of love by the young women makes them no longer afraid of divorce because they believe that if there is no love, marriage does not have to continue. Although the two generations of women in Li village have very different attitudes towards divorce, they hold same views on financial management in family. The young women in Li village believe mastering financial management in family is an important way to improve their status in family.

Shaoxian Liu introduced me to an interesting phenomenon at a wedding in Li village. 'Grabbing the key' is a popular part in a wedding ceremony. The host puts the key in his hand and ask the bride and groom to stand one meter away on each side. When he counts to three, the bride and groom will grab the key and the winner will be in charge of financial management. Even this part is only an interesting joke in the wedding ceremony to entertain guests, young women are still active in

grabbing keys, causing guests laugh. Generally speaking, women often win the keys in the end. Although this is only a game session at the wedding, it reflects at one level the independence of women. Just a few decades ago, this event would not appear at the wedding at all. Now in public, a young woman can show her determination to be the boss in her marriage although in a joking way.

When I asked young couples in Li village the question: '*who is in charge of family finances*', generally the answer from husbands and wives was 'women':

*Although I do not work now and take care of children at home.  
But my husband must hand out his salary to me then I will give  
him some pocket money. In our village, women are all in charge of  
money. (Jing Liao, 22)*

Finance is an important part of a family in Li village. Basically, every married young woman is in charge of 'economic management' at home in the village. In the eyes of Li villagers, men tend to spend money quickly, while women are likely to save money. Moreover, they also think men are prone to develop bad habits like gambling and prostitutes when they have money not regulated by their wives. If a husband wants to use money, he must obtain his wife's consent, which has become the consensus of Li village. Although women's control of family finances helps women gain greater decision-making power, financial management is part of their household labour (Vogler and Pahl, 1994). Moreover, it strengthens the family gender division of labour. 'Handing' money to wives may imply that women's main place is still in the 'house' because their control of 'economic management' is still the management of family affairs. This is actually not fundamentally separated from the scope of family affairs, but an expansion of it.

In the whole village, there is no man who chooses to stay at home and take care of children, while his wife goes out to work. No matter how the status of women in



marriage is promoted in Li village, the gender division of labour has not changed. When a family has to choose one person to stay at home to take care of their children or do housework, this person always to be a woman. Young women still have been obeying the pattern of ‘women rule the inside and men rule the outside’ (*nanzhuwai nvzhunei*, 男主外女主内)<sup>70</sup>. Before giving birth, all young women have jobs. However, once they have children, the responsibility for raising children ‘naturally’ falls on them. I asked Jiaojiao Zeng (26), who tells me her husband complies with her over everything, has she considered asking her husband to stay at home whilst she works outside, she responded:

*Although my husband obeyed everything, I know that if I make such a request, he will not agree. I will not make such a request, because I know this is the bottom line he can tolerate me. He treats me well, so I won't embarrass him. This is the case in this society, where women look after children at home and men go to work. (Jiaojiao Zeng, 26).*

Even though Jiaojiao Zeng thinks that her status at home is higher than that of her husband, she does not want to challenge the gendered traditional division of labour because she knows her husband's ‘bottom line’. In Li village, it is unacceptable for a man to look after his child at home while his wife goes out to work, because he will be ridiculed by public opinion in the village. Public opinion in Li village can accept and even praise a husband for being good to his wife, but it cannot accept breaking the traditional gender division of labour. For a marriage to last, neither husband nor wife can trample on the other's ‘bottom line’. I asked a lot of young women who stayed at home and they complained to me that it was boring to take care of children at home, and then said that as long as the children could go to school, they would go out to find a job. This shows that these young women are eager to escape the

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<sup>70</sup> This means that men are mainly responsible for making money and socializing outside, while women are mainly responsible for maintaining the family, such as caring for children and parents, and domestic housework.

constraints of childcare and enter the society to work. However, they have to suffer from the traditional gender division of labour and give up their work.

Yi (2017:1) states now the Chinese society is undergoing complex institutional and cultural reconstruction, which is characterized by ‘mosaic temporality’. As Yi’s (2017:3) analysis about this gender division of labour:

the temporality of gender and the family in contemporary China is characterized by a resurgence of Confucian patriarchal tradition that goes hand-in-hand with the neoliberal rhetoric of individual responsibility. This hybrid discourse emphasizes, on the one hand, women’s role as wife and mother and their obligations to the family as the traditional virtue, and on the other hand, a modern viewpoint ascribing women’s sacrifices to their own, personal choice.

Despite complaints about this gender division of labour in the family, young women did not intend to challenge it. It has been regarded as the self-selection of women and the phenomenon has been ignored: they can only do so for the maintenance of marriage. Liu (2014:31) states: ‘explicitly embracing certain aspects of femininity may represent informal power even though it remains trapped within and helps to perpetuate patriarchy’. Ning Liao does not cook breakfast for her husband and she usually gets up around 9am, while her husband gets up at 7am then goes out to work. About 10am, she goes to her mother’s family inn and eats lunch and dinner there. She does not need to help her mother to run the business and it looks like all her job is to look after her son. However, in fact, according to my observations, most of the time she is playing with mobile phones and watching TV and her mother and grandmother would look after her son. Similarly, even though Jiaojiao Zeng is staying at home, she tells me when her husband returns home, he needs to wash plates and bowls which she left after lunch then cooks dinner for her. It seems to be the answer why in Li village, some young women tell me it is ‘boring’ to stay at home, but they are not ‘tired’. It could be argued that this division of labour gives

women the right to compensation from their husbands and even their natal family. On the one hand, it really reduces the burden on the young women in house; On the other hand, it undoubtedly strengthens this gendered division of labour and gradually separates women from the public sphere of society. If they divorce, women would be in an extremely disadvantaged position. Moreover, this gendered labour division is not just in the private sphere, but also seen in the public sphere:

*I'm taking care of my child at home and my husband runs a logistics business outside. Both of us take our own responsibility and contribute to our family. It's hard to say who contributes more or less. But, to some extent, I think men have more advantages in society. For example, like our logistics business, my husband has advantages to run it, because he is a man, who can drink wine with others to negotiate the business. If women did the same thing, they would be judged in this society. This is universal in society; you know what I mean. This is unfair to women. Therefore, I return to family and take care of our child. However, in my opinion, no matter whether you're men or women, after getting married, the first thing is putting the family first and contributing to the family (Ting Liu, 26).*

From Ting Liu's narrative and from the perspective of women themselves, we can see that some women do not think that women are weaker than men, so they wanted gender equality. However, once gender is located within the social context, women are still not treated equally, which they are certainly aware of. Gender is still not equal for most women in China, and this will still limit most women to the family. As Ji et al. (2017:74) state:

With the impressive improvement concerning Chinese women's status particularly in the public sphere under socialism, the traditional gender ideology in the private sphere was never eradicated; the decline of Marxist ideology is likely to create a vacuum for the rejuvenation of patriarchal Confucian tradition.

The shaping of gendered self-identification for men in relation to traditional ideas of masculinity in the Confucian tradition makes many men choose not to return to their families, and take care of their children at home. This can only lead to women not being able to go out, and therefore continuing to suffer from gender inequality in this way specifically. Although women's agency is apparent in some respects, and there are many professional women and women in cities, the journey towards changing gender inequality still has a long way to go. As I have already said, the existence of gender inequality in society still confines women to the private sphere of the family. We can see that they are reluctant to stay in the family to take care of children. Such gender roles in the home are socially constructed as feminists have argued. The young generation of women cannot break out into society in practical terms, even though their status in the family has already significantly improved. The lack of social policy to protect women's interests and the maintaining of social norms means that these rural women are still expected to serve their family and be obedient in the gender-unequal society. Yi (2017) states when understanding women's choice to return home in urban China, it is important to note during the period of social transformation, the dual state system of the danwei system and the Marxist gender ideology collapsed, which has not been replaced by the new welfare system and ideas of gender equality. In rural China, the existing welfare system is even more imperfect than in cities and rural areas have also preserved more traditional gender ideas, which makes rural women more inclined to return to the private sphere of the family.

### **RELATIONS WITH IN-LAWS**

As a Chinese woman, the relationship with her mother-in-law is very important to her. Wu et al. (2010: 497) indicates 'a significant negative main effect of conflict with the mother-in-law on the wife's marital satisfaction'. As I mentioned in the last chapter, Jing Liao goes to her own mother's house almost every day. After a period

of contact with her, I found that she did not like her mother-in-law very much. On several occasions, her mother-in-law called her and invited her to have a dinner in her mother-law's house, but Jing Liao would make excuses to refuse:

*Frankly speaking, I don't like my mother-in-law because I think she is not good to me. I still remembered when I just got married, she came to my house and saw my husband washing my clothes<sup>71</sup>. I knew at a glance that she was not happy at the time. She couldn't see my husband treat me well. I knew that after I bought a new phone, she was very upset. I guessed she just thought it was the money her son made, and I should not had used it to buy a very expensive phone. She bought a motorcycle for my husband, but she never bought anything expensive for me. (Jing Liao, 22)*

When Jing Liao was telling me this, her neighbour, Juhua Zeng (69), expressed her different views:

*Don't be dissatisfied, I think your mother-in-law is not bad. She raised a pig for you, and the expenses are all hers. If the pig is raised, it will be given to you. She does not interfere with you and you are free to do anything. You are much happier than me. (Juhua Zeng 69)*

Jing Liao and Juhua Zeng are the representatives of Li village's daughters-in-law in different eras. When Juhua Zeng was young, she lived with her in-laws. She needed to do a lot of housework and take care of her parents-in-law. At that time, the situation of the daughter-in-law would not change even if she was pregnant. The pregnancy was not particularly paid attention to by the husband's family, because it is generally believed that pregnancy is common for women. It is a duty and an obligation for a woman to have a baby in the traditional patriarchal family. Moreover, the mother-in-law has also experienced the process of having a baby, so pregnancy could not be used as a reason or excuse to refuse to labour at home.

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<sup>71</sup> Although many rural households in China already have washing machines, Jing Liao did buy one but still washed clothes by hand.

Several women told me that they still planted crops in the fields while they were pregnant. Juhua Zeng even gave birth to the baby in the fields:

*I needed to help to farm and feed the pigs at that time. I was pregnant, but I still did these things. In the village, these things must be done every day, from morning to the end of the day... I still remember that it was summer, and I was planting and packing up in the cornfields. At that time, it was my first child. I didn't know what was going on. I felt like I was peeing suddenly. I didn't feel anything then. I was shocked and couldn't figure out the situation. Then I realised that I might be having a baby. I was shouting in the cornfields and didn't dare to move. Isn't it funny? Then the people who farmed in the nearby fields quickly came over and asked me to lie down. Some other people ran back to my home to inform my family. I lay in the fields, and then waited for the family to take me home. I don't know how long I waited, maybe one hour, and my family brought a board and took me home. (Juhua Zeng, 69)*

In a patriarchal family, the daughter-in-law can only obey the authority of her parents-in-law or her husband (Kristeva, 2010). This is the reason why Juhua Zeng thinks Jing Liao has a not bad mother-in-law. In traditional China, when Juhua Zeng's son married, her situation would be improved because she could order her daughter-in-law. However, her daughter-in-law refused to accept this arrangement. Tianchun Zha (45) is Juhua Zeng's daughter-in-law. She and her parents-in-law once had a big quarrel over a debt:

*My in-laws asked my brother-in-law and my husband to pay off the debt for them. I was definitely not willing; how could I pay them debt as soon as I got married? ... I told my husband that, since neither of us knows farming, how about we ask for a family division. Before the family division, my father-in-law still asked us to pay his debt, but I denied his requests.... After the family division, I left home for a while. When I came back, my neighbours told me that, after I left home, my father-in-law came to my home and argued with my husband about his debt. When we visited him,*

*he usually reviled us in an indirect way. The general meaning was that we didn't want to pay his debt and we're unfilial. He often cursed my husband, such as 'you'll be struck by lightning...' One day, I couldn't bear him anymore. I told him: 'that's your debt, we don't need to pay it! Don't curse your son. I make it clearly, the daughter-in-law isn't born and brought up by you. You can't curse me! If your son dies from your curse, I can remarry tomorrow!' After that, he rarely said anything. (Tianchun Zha, 45)*

The resolute attitude of Tianchun Zha, who refused to pay her father-in-law's debt, illustrates the resistance of this generation of women to the patriarchal family. She used the strategy of family division to weaken the father-son relationship in a patriarchal family and promoted the husband-wife relationship to the central position. Family division was the main trend from the late-1980s onwards in rural areas (Shang, 1997; Yan, 2003; Gong, 2012), which is not only about dividing the family's property, but also about dividing the obligations for family elders. Once brothers are separated, their rights and obligations also become separated and clear. Elderly parents live alone after such family division. The transformation of society has resulted in a new family model (the nuclear family) in Li village. Since the 1990s, empty-nest families have started to appear on a large scale after sons were married in rural China (Gong, 2012). Wives and husbands have more rights in their married life under this family model, which also offers the daughters-in-law more freedom as they do not need to live with the husband's family. The 1990s were a contradictory period for intergenerational relations, because parents wanted to retain the traditions, while young couples struggled for their freedom and rights.

Yan (2003) states women in Xiajia village cannot only break away from the control of their in-laws, they can also reshape gender relations and family ideals. Women born in 1960s in Li village also have this ability. However, different from Yan's (2003) study, the major reason for this change in Li village is rural-urban migration. In addition, social-cultural transformation, self-growth, increased educational levels,

resistance to the patriarchal family, the decline of parental control and some reshaping of women's gendered self-identification are the factors that gave them strength to encourage them to control of their own lives and fate. Not only could they rely on their own abilities to gain better economic status, but because of the changes in marriage, their relationship with their husbands had become closer, which in turn enabled them to negotiate their status in the husband's family.

Tianchun Zha has a tough character. When her son married, many villagers thought she would not have a good relationship with her daughter-in-law because of her bad temper. What surprised the villagers is that Tianchun Zha met the requirements of her daughter-in-law as much as possible. Dan Wu (20), Tianchun Zha's daughter-in-law, likes eating meat and at nearly every meal she requires meat. If there is no meat, she will not eat anything at that meal. Therefore, Tianchun Zha cooks meat on a daily basis:

*I have to do because everyone is like this. Now a daughter-in-law is just like a biological daughter. You have to do lots of thing for her. Times have changed. Dan Wu does not know how to cook, and my son is busy in working. If I do not cook for them, they have nothing to eat. In the past, where did the mother-in-law cook for the daughter-in-law? Now it is quite common. (Tianchun Zha, 45)*

The relations between in-laws and daughters-in-law has seen a dramatic change in the young generation. Daughters-in-law from the 1980s and 1990s do not do nearly as much housework in their mother-in-law's house. Almost all the young wives said that they hardly did any housework for their in-laws after they got married. Moreover, the more dramatic change is that some mothers-in-law have begun to help their daughters-in-law. We can also see the change in this relationship from the fertility desires of young women and the attitude of mother-in-law towards them.



The young women are no longer treated as a tool for reproduction (male heirs) to carry on her husband's family line. Women had more power in the family and were no longer a production tool, which also marks the decline of patriarchy in the family. My interviewees who had given birth to daughters agreed that her husband's family did not treat her badly because she had a daughter; instead, the mothers-in-law took good care of them. Whether the child was a son or a daughter, generally, the in-laws would help the daughter-in-law to take care of the child. If the child was a girl, the in-laws would not ask the daughters-in-law to have another child, which by implication means asking her to try to have a son:

*I didn't think they had any opinions about me because I had two daughters. At least they never said it in front of me, and I didn't hear them say anything to others. I was also issued the 'one-child certificate' at that time, which means that after my first daughter was born, my husband and I did not want to procreate again. My in-laws did not have any objections. These things were also decided by me and my husband. (One informant, 35)*

*My husband's family has never had such an idea, and my parents-in-law did not care about these things. For instance, when I was pregnant with another child later, they did not say they wanted to have a grandson. They only told me they could help me to take care of the baby as long as they were healthy. (Weitao Li, 38)*

It can be seen that the requirement to reproduce is not as strong as before. The demands made on their children by the husband's family are no longer the same as traditionally. For families with daughters as their first child, their husband's family did not require them to have a second child. Patrilineal and gender values are now less traditional (Hu and Scott, 2014). Moreover, mothers-in-laws expressed their thoughts more carefully on this issue, so as not to be misunderstood by their daughters-in-law. Tianchun Zha and Dan Wu had quarreled because of this issue:

*Before my husband and I got married, I put a condition on his family: I cannot be asked to have a boy. I am very sensitive to this aspect, because I love both boys and girls. I don't want to marry into a family which holds 'value boys over girls'. In this case, if I have a daughter, it is very unfair to her! After I gave birth to my daughter, my mother-in-law once persuaded me to give birth to another child. At that time, I was unhappy and quarreled with her. I thought she was suggesting that I should try to give birth to a boy. Since then, my mother-in-law has never spoken to me about this. (Dan Wu, 20)*

The daughter-in-law has the decisive power in the desire to give birth. They resented their mother-in-law's interference in this regard.

In Juhua Zeng's generation, a daughter-in-law was like a servant in husband's family. In Tianchun Zha's generation, a daughter had begun to reshape the relationship with her in-laws. In the young generation, the daughter-in-law has begun to take the initiative in the relationship. Although young families and their in-law's family are divided at the beginning of a marriage, many young villagers still have meals at the in-law's house or at the wife's parents' home, because young couples do not cook. As I observed, in some villagers' families, the meals they cook are matched to the tastes of the daughter-in-law. Moreover, taking care of children is also not undertaken by daughters-in-law alone. The mother-in-law will help to take care of her child, or the husband's family will find someone to help her, or the natal family will help her. Furthermore, except for 'taking care' of their children, some daughters-in-law spend most of the rest of the spare time playing with their mobile phones, surfing the Internet or sleeping:

*Now even my son's family's clothes are washed by us. My daughter-in-law will wash clothes if we are not at home, but she only washes her own clothes rather than ours. I go to work in the*

*daytime and wash my clothes after I take a bath in the evening. Anyway, the times are different now, so the daughter-in-law has also changed with the times, which is much more relaxed and comfortable than the daughter-in-law was before. They don't have to do the housework, and they just need to take care of their children. Whether she wants to go out to work depends on herself as the child gets older. It's quite different from us. Unlike the previous daughters-in-law, who as soon as they entered their husband's house, they had to start doing housework, such as cooking and washing clothes. However, now, my daughter-in-law just keeps her child at home, and usually stays at home and sleeps with her child for a whole afternoon. (Hua Zhou, 59)*

Like Hua Zhou, many mothers-in-law also believe that their daughters-in-law are different from themselves when they were young wives and daughters-in-law. Daughters-in-law now have their own right to make decisions, while their mothers-in-law can only express their support, rather than object. Many interviewees admit that they follow their daughters-in-law's arrangements. This was rare in previous traditional relationships, because such daughters-in-law were often considered as unfilial. However, the villagers have also changed their ideas about the practice of filial piety. If a daughter-in-law has a disagreement, villagers will normally exhort the mother-in-law not to interfere with the young people. During the pregnancy of a young wife, the husband's family pays more attention to the daughter-in-law, as the young husband generally goes out to work and the in-laws consider that it is their responsibility to look after the pregnant wife. Daughters-in-law also believe that it is normal for their husband's family to take such good care of them, because almost every family in Li village does the same thing:

*I think it depends on the situation of the family. Different families have different status. I think I'm much better than my mum. When my mum was a daughter-in-law, my grandma would not care for her. Even after my mum was diagnosed with heart disease and couldn't wash our clothes, she asked my grandma to help us, but my grandma didn't come. However, I usually don't do any*

*housework at home. Most of my daughter's clothes are washed by my mother-in-law. Not to mention cooking, basically it's my mother-in-law's work. I don't know how to cook and all of them know it. I usually play on my mobile phone and surf the internet, or sleep. (Dan Wu, 20)*

In Li village, young wives believe that, if the in-laws love their son, then they must be nice to the daughter-in-law, so that her son will not suffer from both sides.

Mothers-in-law think that, as long as the young couple has a good life, this makes them happy. Most villagers admit that, as long as their children have a happy life, this is filial piety to them.

All these changes in this generation are can be seen as, arguably, the results of the decline of patriarchy and the awakening of right consciousness of young generation. Additionally, the increased bargaining power of the daughter-in-law, which has been caused by the high cost of marriage, is another reason for these changes.

Before these young women married into the husband's family, patriarchal relations in their husbands' family had been weakened by their mothers-in-law. 'After one thousand years torment, a daughter-in-law has finally become a mother-in-law' (*qian nian de xi fu ao cheng po*, 千年的媳妇熬成婆) is a good summary of the cycle of daughter-in-law and mother-in-law in a patriarchal family. However, the painful cycle of Chinese women had been broken by these young women's mothers-in-law, and the power order in the husband's family has been subverted. It would be seen as ridiculous for the mother-in-law of a young woman to demand the young daughter-in-law treat herself by the standards required in traditional in-law relationships, because it is she who broke the rules.

Young women have been treated nicely by their biological family. In particular, these young women are no longer instilled in the native family with the idea that

‘men are superior to women (*nanzun nvbei*, 男尊女卑)’. Most of their mothers were born in the 1960s and they had not been servants of the husbands’ family. Even some young women have seen their mothers quarrelling with their grandmothers when they were young. The relationship between in-laws when they were young have had a profound influence on them. Moreover, young wives have a closer relationship with their natal families, which is also a barrier to potential terrible treatment by their husband’s family.

Along with the dramatic changes of in Chinese society, from the planned economy to the market economy, more people are now concentrated mainly on personal interests. Women shifted from ‘family centred’ to ‘individual centred’ in this generation. At the same time, migration has also resulted in changes in the practice of ‘filial piety’ in Li village. Rural-urban migration led to leftover elders and young children during the 1990s; filial piety was hard to practise in a traditional way. Individualism and decline of filial piety were the characteristics of people during the 1990s (Yan, 2003). Nevertheless, Qi (2016: 39) argues the individualism argument ignores the process of reinterpretation and renegotiation of filial obligation because ‘contemporary filial relations are less concerned with authority, and more directed to financial and emotional support for parents.’

### **TRANSFORMED FILIAL PIETY**

Some villagers mentioned that some women treat their natal parents and in-laws totally differently. When they visit their natal parents, they help them to do all the housework or other chores. In contrast when they visit in-laws, they do nothing. One of my informants told me a story that a daughter-in-law lived with her in-laws at the beginning of her marriage. It may be that her husband’s family asked her to do the housework, and she was not happy. Although she did not say anything directly, she clattered the pots and bowls when she was cooking, or deliberately overcooked

meals. Then she went away to work with her husband and only came back at the Chinese New Year. However, when she was back in Li village, she usually assisted her parents with housework or farm work, but it was rarely seen that she did the same for her in-laws. Some of my participants also considered that daughters are more intimate with their natal families:

*When I was pregnant with our second child, my husband and I wanted to have a girl, especially my husband. He thinks daughter is better than a son. Because he compares families with and without daughters, he thinks daughters are closer to their parents. My husband has two sisters, and they treat my in-laws better. Although they give the same amount of money to my in-laws and their in-laws because if they gave a different amount there would be disharmony in the family, they often call back home to inquire about my in-laws' health conditions or just chat with them. Although, traditionally, sons offer old-age support, fewer people follow the tradition now. I know that many daughters also support their parents. Like my husband's two sisters, wherever they were, they always cared for my in-laws. My husband also has two brothers, and their wives also took on their obligations to their natal parents when they were ill or died. My husband's brothers' wives have no difference to their brothers. I think daughters are more careful than sons. (Mingzhi Chen, 43)*

Usually, in traditional China, after a woman married, her physical and spiritual home was transferred to her husband's house. A daughter was no longer a member of her natal family after her marriage, because she was not obligated to her natal family, such as no longer giving support to her parents, no longer taking care of her own family, but having to show filial piety and care for her husband's family (Watson, 1991). Some scholars believed that, even though daughters had legal obligations in China to support their natal parents, the married daughter had been excluded from the expectations of parents (Cong and Silverstein, 2012). However, from the descriptions of the villagers, it can be seen that married daughters had not cut off the

close relationships with their natal families because of the traditional ethical norms. Most of them either offer material support or give emotional care to their parents.

With the decline of patriarchy and more balanced gender relationships with their husbands in this generation, the young women's filial piety to their own parents has been significantly increasing. These young women offer at least the same as they offer to their in-laws, but usually with less requirement of reciprocation from their parents. According to Liu (2017: 1044), 'a relationship bound by obligations therefore requires symmetric reciprocity at its core, whilst an intimacy-based relationship condones asymmetric reciprocity'. In Li village, the young women retain intimate relationships with their own parents especially their mothers, while the relationship with their in-laws is 'bound by obligations'. Therefore, daughters-in-law's filial piety in Li village requires rewards from in-laws:

*She is not my own mother, and she didn't give birth to me, or raise me. Why should I treat her well? If she is kind to me, I will be kind to her. When I just married, my relationship with my mother-in-law was not good. Later, I gave birth to a child, and my mother-in-law took care of the child for me, so I treated her better. (Min Gao, 30)*

Min Gao's natal family is in the town next to Getan town. Generally, she takes around 30 minutes bus to visit her own parents weekly and chat by video call with her mother daily. She told me that basically all her friends have a very close relationship with their natal families, especially their mothers. I often hear some women complain that their mothers-in-law are not good to themselves, but I have seldom heard women complain about their own mothers. The saying: 'married daughters are like spilled out water (*jiachuqu de nver, pochugu de shui*, 嫁出去的女儿, 泼出去的水)' is not a norm for their natal families now. Some scholars have found that with the decline of sons and daughters-in-law's filial piety, daughters have become more and more filial, and their relationship with their own parents

becomes closer (Ikels, 2004; Zhang, Guo and Luo, 2014; Qi, 2015). Through an analysis of the data, a new practice of filial piety shown by married daughters appeared in Li village. It should be noted that Yan's (2003) account of the 'decline of filial piety' refers to is that of the son and daughter-in-law, not the filial piety of the daughter. As Shi (2009) argues that the gendered practice of filial piety centred on sons has changed and daughters play an increasingly important role. Jackson et al. (2013) call this change a 'matrifocal shift' in filial piety because the daughter-mother relationship is central to it.

Jackson et al. (2013: 679) argue that in Hongkong, 'the lack of welfare provision and the strength of parental expectation' possibly contributed to this shift. Though the CPC has started to build a welfare system in rural China in recent years, Li village's welfare system is far worse than that of Hong Kong. Now, China's rural old-age support model is still mainly dependent on adult children, which is why the Chinese government has strongly emphasized filial piety. With the implementation of the family planning policy, the young generation of women in Li Village are either only children or have only one or two siblings. Under this situation, natal parents hold strong expectations of filial piety from their daughters. In addition, as I mentioned in last chapter, the young women in Li village generally believe that their parents do not 'value boys over girls', and in their view, they have received 'equal love' with their brothers from their parents. Therefore, they are more likely to maintain an intimate relationship with their parents and would offer material support or give emotional care to their parents.

The increasingly strengthened intimate relationship also challenges the traditional patriarchy and traditions of China (Liu, 2017). Following Liu, I suggest that the change in the pattern of filial piety of married daughters will reshape the daughter's gender role within families, which may change the traditional gender preference of



Chinese families to some extent and result in the improvement of their family status. As Jackson et al. (2013) indicate, the shift of filial piety to a more matrifocal pattern is an instance of tradition reshaped within modernity. Because the families value the emotional and material benefits of these new relationships, it will also have influence on patriarchy within the family. Women's educational success is likely to be contributing to this pattern (Jackson et al., 2013). However, this change has caused me to speculate that the gendered division of labour may be further aggravated or made even more apparent, because daughters may be more restricted within the family as they are given the same function as the son in terms of old-age care. This view requires further research and analysis in the future.

## SUMMARY

Chinese society is characterized by 'mosaic temporality' (Yi, 2017). Young rural women are inevitably affected by multiple ideas in 'mosaic temporality'. They have constantly to struggle with, compromise with and take advantage of these different ideas so as to maximize the benefits. Meanwhile, as gendered subject, their gendered subjectivities are also shaped both in the external environment and intergenerational interaction (Evans, 2007). They refused arrange marriage and pursued love and desire to shape more equal gender relations. However, they have to compromise with traditional gender divisions and in exchange for maximum benefit in the family. In relationship with in-laws, on the one hand, they completely broke the painful reincarnation of Chinese daughters-in-law and have gained decisive power in this relationship; On the other hand, they have not realized this is just a power switch among women because there is no fundamental change in the traditional gendered labour divisions. Similarly, influenced by individualistic ideas, son's and daughter-in-law's filial piety have declined, while it transfers from parents-in-law to natal families. The 'matrifocal shift' in filial piety possibly further confine women in private family, thus strengthening the current gender division of labour.

## CHAPTER SIX

# CONCLUSION

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My study on the young generation of women in rural China was initially inspired by the *diary of Ma Yan: the struggles and hopes of a Chinese schoolgirl*. I grew up in the city, and my family's economic situation is relatively good. In China, the ability of parents to afford the expenses of sending their children to study abroad is a reflection of their wealthy family status. I was shocked by the poverty that Ma Yan suffered. I was worried about the poverty encountered in rural China in this book, and resented the gender inequality recorded also. The *diary of Ma Yan* was published in 2002, and Chinese society has been undergoing rapid changes. I have thought, after more than a decade of changes, what will happen when the 'Ma Yan' grow up? After conducting fieldwork in Li village and a careful analysis of young women's story in relation to their experience in daily life, I was surprised by the wealth of Li village and the improvement of young women's material life. But what surprises me even more is changes in the experience of these young women have shown in their daily lives.

There are many issues about the young generation such as sex and fertility that I have not explored in this thesis. I also did not have more time to conduct more fieldwork about the women who were 'the pride of Li village'. They work in cities and have urban *hukou*, but grew up in Li village. It would be attractive to conduct specialized research on them.

Since the founding of New China, China has undergone tremendous changes. Chinese women firstly, as liberated persons, moved from private families to the public domain under the leadership of the CPC. The old feudal marriage system was completely abolished, and women participated extensively in public labour. After the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy by the CPC, although the

employment rate of Chinese women was still the highest in East Asia, there was still a trend of women returning to their families (Sechiyama, 2013). The mainstream family structure has transferred from 'expanded family' to nuclear family and the husband-wife relationship has become the main axis instead of vertical relationships, such as father-son relationships, or a mother-in-law relationship (see Chapter Two). In the context of 'mosaic temporality' (Yi, 2017), patriarchy, women's agency, gender practice and relationships of young women have also changed.

I chose Li village to conduct my fieldwork about young women because of language communication and cultural familiarity. We need to pay attention to the particularity of Li village. Unlike northern China, thanks to the geographical and cultural environment of Southwest China where Li village is located, the traditional Chinese view of 'values boys over girls' is not as prevalent as in North China. After the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy, the material living conditions in the countryside have been improved, and the young women in Li village have been able to spend a relatively affluent childhood. Due to the implementation of the family planning policy, most young women are either the only child or have one or two siblings. These young women think they have the same love as their male siblings from their parents. However, the 'love' is still not equal but gendered. It can be seen, for example, with the different toys for boys and girls that their parents still hold the gender bias that China has had since ancient times, which shows that traditional Confucianism idea on women still had a considerable influence on these young women when they were children and would impact them when they grew up. In addition to traditional Confucianism, the young generation has also been influenced by consumerism.

The younger generation of Li village differ in their consumption practices from their parents. This is certainly related to the Chinese government's vigorous advocacy of consumption for economic development and the promotion of capitalism for profit,

but it also reflects changes in rural women's subjectivities. Unlike middle-aged women in the city (Yang, 2011; Wen, 2013), Li village's middle-aged women are still thrifty in consumption. However, the young generation has demonstrated the desire for consumption. Li village's intergenerational tensions around consumption highlight the change in the self-identification of rural women among two generations. My data has shown that in a mother's view, a rural woman should be frugal, while in a daughter's view, consumption is a necessary way to pursue beauty and fashion and more importantly, it enables them to narrow the gap with urban women. With the further improvement of living standards in rural China and the development of e-commerce, it is foreseeable that young rural women will further satisfy their consumer desires, which will impact on their identities as rural women and dilute the differences between urban and rural women.

Apart from 'thrift', 'hardworking' is considered to be another important virtue of rural women in China. From the migration experience of the last generation of women in Li village, I can really see this quality. However, in the young generation, migration work is no longer a means for them to support their families, but a way to realize their dreams of urban life. Compared with the last generation, thanks to their parents' experience as migrant workers, they have richer family conditions, which makes them lack the quality of diligence. However, their short city life experience broadened their horizons. I have seen, for example, some young women who use the advancement of the Internet technology to start a stylish business. In rural China, influenced by Li Ziqi's<sup>72</sup> phenomenal success, there is an increasing number of young women who have given up their migrant jobs in the city and returned to rural areas to start businesses. With the shrinking income gap between urban and rural

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<sup>72</sup> She was raised by her grandparents and grew up in a village of Sichuan Province. At the age of 14, she became a migrant worker. When she was 22, she returned to the village to start her business. In 2016, she became popular on short videos published on social media showing the original rural ecology. She not only has a great number of fans in China, but also has 11 million followers on YouTube.

areas in China and the increasing availability of the 5G network in rural China, there will be more and more young women who will choose to return to rural areas to start businesses. Although these young women do not look as diligent as the previous generation, their minds are more flexible. Unlike the previous generation, they no longer identify themselves as manual workers in the city. When they find a huge gap between dreams and reality, they will return to the countryside, which shows that their attitude towards the countryside is different from the previous generation. The previous generation of women still regarded the countryside as being synonymous with poverty and backwardness, but the young generation has begun to view the countryside as a platform for opportunities.

Nowadays, with the further development of urbanization in China, the original dual system between urban and rural areas has begun to be broken. Taking Li village as an example, agriculture is no longer the main source of income that Li villagers rely on: Most of the villagers do migrate work all year around; the family hotel industry is growing day by day; although Li village still has fields, agriculture has become a sideline for the villagers. Under such circumstances, the self-identification as rural women by Li village's young women is bound to change. They have begun to challenge the image of thrifty and hardworking rural women. Consumption has become their way of shaping a new self, and returning from the city to the village has proclaimed their new understanding of the village, which is different from the previous generation.

In terms of education, the education level of young women is significantly higher than the older generation. Due to the implementation of the family planning policy, the family population of Li village has significantly decreased, and at the same time, the family income of Li village has dramatically increased due to migration work. Under these circumstances, girls in Li village could receive the same educational investment in their families as boys. The improvement of women's education level is

beneficial to get rid of the traditional Confucian ideology about women and enhance their agency to weaken patriarchy.

They pursue love and regard dating as a necessary way to find a suitable partner. The popularity of social media has greatly increased the opportunities for young women to meet men in different regions, which has also contributed to the increase in cross-regional marriages. More importantly, although the young generation of women has completely taken back the autonomy of spouse selection, parents, especially mothers, still have a subtle influence on their spouse selection. This influence is not directly imposed, but comes from a reflection on the mother's marital life. Although affected by the rapid changes in China's economy and society, and despite their differences from their mothers, the young generation of women's subjectivities is inevitably affected by their mothers.

In relationship with husband, the young generation has showed their agency in trying to establish an equal relationship and are fully aware of their value in the family. With their efforts, the husbands began to do more housework and also recognize their value in housework and childcare. However, they still inherited the gender division of labour within families from the previous generation 'women rule the inside and men rule the outside'. As I point out earlier in this chapter—the young generation of women were reared as gendered as children, which makes them take the division of labour for granted in the family. Some interviewees told me that their husbands treated them well and would obey them on almost everything. However, it is not the manifestation of gender equality in the family, but compensation for their sacrifices. Like their mothers, they still identify themselves as 'ruling inside'. Even though they are in charge of the financial power at home, it is still is part of their household labour. The young generation of women only received more compensation from their husbands. This gendered labour division reveals that Li village is still patriarchal. Even though young women are eager to establish equal

gender relations, and make progress in domestic work, they have to obey their husbands in terms of division of labour. Their husbands can make concessions in other ways, but ‘women rule the inside and men rule the outside’ is the bottom line they can compromise. In addition to their husbands’ attitudes, along with the reform and opening policy, the decline of Marxist ideology in Chinese society created a space for the revival of the patriarchal Confucian tradition (Ji et al., 2017). The role of women in the family is believed to assist the husband and take care of the children.

In the previous generation, the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law began to be reshaped, and the painful cycle for the Chinese daughter-in-law was broken. In the young generation, my data has shown that through their agency, they have occupied a stronger position compared with their mothers in Li village. It should be noted that, this amounts only to a transfer of housework between female generations. The burden of housework on young women has been greatly eased, but their mothers-in-law have undertaken more housework. Young women do not think they should take such responsibility for in-laws in the filial piety of traditional Confucianism. On the contrary, they have assumed more responsibility on themselves for their natal families and have kept intimate relationships with them. The self-identification as a daughter-in-law and daughter has been reshaped. Filial piety has been transformed from in-laws to natal parents (Qi, 2015).

The heart of the issues raised in my study is the characteristics of young rural women that are different from those of previous generations, especially when we consider the profound changes that are taking place in rural China. The younger generation of rural women is the subject shaped by the multiple ideas in Chinese society and intergenerational interactions. This research raises issues for feminists in the future; in particular, in the accelerating urbanization process in China, gender practice and relationship of young women in rural areas requires further investigation.

# APPENDIX

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## INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Could you tell me your childhood and adolescent lives?
  - a. Do you have any siblings?
  - b. How your parents treated you and your siblings?
  - c. What was your school life and could you tell me something you have a deep impression?
  - d. Do you have any migration work experiences and how do you think about it?
  
2. Could you talk with me about your marriage life?
  - a. How long have you been married?
  - b. How did you meet your husband?
  - c. What do you think about your relationship with your husband?
  - d. How do you and your husband make decisions?
  - e. Do you live with your in-laws? Why?
  - f. What do you think about the relationship between you and your in-laws?
  - g. Is there any change you think about today's daughter-in-law (compare to yourself)?
  - h. How do you arrange your everyday life?
  
3. Could you tell me your family life (childbearing, children, old-age support...)?
  - a. How many children do you have?
  - b. How do you think about sons and daughters within the family?
  - c. How a family will be if the family with no sons? Why?



- d. During the ordinary lives, which one is better, the son or the daughter?  
Why?
  - e. Did you face any pressure from your husband and his family during your childbearing? How do you deal with it?
  - f. Who is/will be the old-age support in your family? Why?
4. Could you talk about the influence of the birth-planning policy?
- a. How do you think about the birth-planning policy? Why?
  - b. Is there any influence brought by it for you? Why?
  - c. How do you think this policy for your family?

# GLOSSARY OF CHINESE TERMS

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Entries are in alphabetical order, regardless of word and syllable breaks.

*ba ma* 爸妈: *father and mother*

*bandashi* 办大事: *take the big deal*

*Bashu wenhua* 巴蜀文化: *Bashu culture*

*beilou* 背篓: *backpack*

*changzhen* 场镇: *market in a town*

*dagong mei* 打工妹: *young female migrant workers*

*da wending, xiao tiaozheng* 大稳定, 小调整: *the great stability and small adjustment*

*di suzhi* 低素质: *low-quality*

*die niang* 爹娘: *father and mother*

*dongshi* 懂事: *understanding things*

*duo zinv* 多子女: *multi-child*

*funv nengding banbiantian* 妇女能顶半边天: *women hold up half of the sky*

*fuzhu zicong* 父主子从: *father dominating, son following*

*ganchang* 赶场: *to go to a market*

*gaoji nongye shengchan hezuoshe* 高级农业生产合作社: *the advanced agricultural production cooperatives*

*gonggong shitang* 公共食堂: *the public canteens*

*hong weibing* 红卫兵: *the Red Guards*

*hukou* 户口: the household registration

*jiachuqu de nver, pochugu de shui* 嫁出去的女儿, 泼出去的水: married daughters are like spilled out water

*jiating lianchan chengbao zerenzhi* 家庭联产承包责任制: household contract responsibility system

*jianshe shehuizhuyi xin nongcun* 建设社会主义新农村: building a new socialist countryside

*junzi* 君子: the people with a noble personality and good moral character

*Kongzi* 孔子: Confucius

*la meizi* 辣妹子: daring/independent/resolute girls/women

*laodong zuiguangrong* 劳动最光荣: labour is the most glorious

*ma laohan* 妈老汉: mother and father

*mianchao huangtu, beichao tian* 面朝黄土, 背朝天: work in the fields

*naisheng nanzi, zainongzhizhang; naisheng nvzi, zainong zhiwa* 乃生男子, 载弄之璋; 乃生女子, 载弄之瓦: if parents gave birth to a boy, they would give him a piece of jade in the hope that he would exhibit the good qualities of jade in the future, and to hope that he could become a nobleman in the upper class; if parents gave birth to a girl, they would be given a components of the spinning wheel in the hope that she would be good at needlework in the future

*nanzhu nvcong* 男主女从: men dominating, women following

*nanzhuwai nvzhunei* 男主外女主内: men work outside, women work inside

*nanzun nvbei* 男尊女卑: men are superior to women

*nongjia le* 农家乐: the rural family inn

*pa erduo* 耙耳朵: soft men

*qian nian de xi fu ao cheng po* 千年的媳妇熬成婆: the daughter-in-law became the mother-in-law

*sancong side* 三从四德: three obediences four virtues

*sanji suoyou, duiwei jichu* 三级所有, 队为基础: three classes of ownership, based on teams

*shao zinv* 少子女: fewer-child

*shengchan dui* 生产队: the production team

*shengchan dadui* 生产大队: the production brigade

*shengnü* 剩女: left-over women

*shengsi zhuang* 生死状: the life and death contract

*shidai butongle, nannv douyiyang* 时代不同了, 男女都一样: times are different, men and women are the same

*shijing* 诗经: The Book of Songs

*Shujin* 蜀锦: a kind of brocade

*tianfu zhiguo* 天府之国: the land of abundance

*xian* 县: county

*xiaoren* 小人: the inferior men

*xieliang* 歇凉: walking outside after dinner time to enjoy the relatively cool weather

*yasui qian* 压岁钱: the money is given by elders to the younger generation during the Chinese New Year time

*yigongcunong, yichengdaixiang* 以工促农, 以城带乡: promoting agriculture through industry, bringing up the countryside by cities

*zhongnan qingnv* 重男轻女: value boys over girls

*zili kouliang* 自理口粮: the self-care rations

*Zhu laoda* 朱老大: the oldest child in Zhu's family

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