

**Living apart together (LAT) relationships:  
Intimacy, family practices and agency among  
Chinese women**

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## Abstract

Under the individualisation thesis, people are seen to place less emphasis on lifelong marriage and have more freedom to extricate themselves from fixed social roles and contractual familial obligations, arguably leading to a transformation of intimacy (Giddens, 1992). A growing number of non-cohabiting partnerships, where couples live apart but still keep their heterosexual intimate relationship, has been predominantly documented in Western societies (Duncan and Phillips, 2013) and considered as an illustration of the de-traditionalisation of family life. China's dramatic changes in the socio-economic sphere, coupled with the increasing Western influence of individualisation and modernisation there, have brought about significant changes in Chinese people's relationships and family life. This thesis focuses on the experiences of women in living apart together (LAT) relationships in the context of contemporary China which has a long tradition of the existence of patriarchal families within Confucian culture. Using a qualitative feminist methodology, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 35 heterosexual women (and 4 men), aged between 23 to 57, in China, during the summer of 2016. I explore the underlying reasons for couples living apart together and how women's agency in such relationships is exercised (or not). I also ask how those living outside the conventional family understand and make sense of the changes, overtime, in their intimate relationship and family life. This thesis also examines how the notion of 'family' is practiced when people live their (gendered) daily lives separately from their partner and if, and how they experience intimacy and maintain a sense of togetherness across distance. By looking specifically at the little researched group of LAT in China, this research makes a timely contribution to understanding non-cohabiting partnerships in a rapidly transforming Chinese society.

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## Author's Declaration

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.

A brief summary of Chapter 3 'Researching Chinese people in living apart together relationships' was published in *Discover Society* in Issue 42 in 2017:

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

At the very beginning, the original research topic for my PhD study was to examine the impact of Chinese teenage girls' magazines on their identity formation and attitudes toward dating relationships and marriage, as a continuation of my master's research, where I majored in Media and Public Relations at a UK university. However, two months after my first-year PhD study, I changed my topic mainly due to the transfer of my initial supervisor. For my long-term plan, I decided to carry out a new research area that I always hoped to have an opportunity to do. Situated in the Centre for Women's Studies (CWS) at the University of York, my interest in feminism grew and the doctoral research that I currently conducted - a feminist sociological study of the experiences of Chinese women in living apart together (LAT) relationships - is also fundamentally informed by my personal biographical history.

Being born and growing up in a small city in north China, as a single child in my family, I was given opportunities for high school study in Beijing, the capital of China, when I was 15 years old. Since then, I have been studying far away from home as I obtained my bachelor's degree in southern China and master's degree in the UK. The constant changes in geographical locations due to educational advancement are not uncommon among college students in both China and other societies. During the time of studying in the UK, I personally knew quite a lot of people who were maintaining a heterosexual intimate relationship with their partner whilst living somewhere else, due to jobs or educational location for instance. As a Chinese, twenty something heterosexual woman, my LAT relationship is sometimes utilised in this thesis. Just like many other women in LAT relationships, my partner and I live in different cities in the UK and we meet up each weekend due to education and work demands.

A growing body of literature has noted a rise in the West of couples in non-cohabiting intimate relationships over time, such as commuter marriages (Gersterl and Gross, 1984), weekend couples (Kim, 2001), and long-distance relationships (Holmes, 2006). In recent years, living apart together (LAT) relationships - where couples in a committed intimate relationship without sharing a same household - has gained greater attention in the social

science studies (Levin, 2004; Carter et al., 2016; Duncan and Phillips, 2010). These kind of 'unusual' living arrangements and relationships challenge our taken-for-granted assumption that couples should live together, and that intimacy always entails physical proximity. Some theorists argue that these diverse forms of relationships have served to expedite the dissolution of the stability of conventional social bonds and disintegration of traditional notions of family, leading to a transformation of intimacy as a part of the de-traditionalisation of social life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2005; Giddens, 1992). Under these circumstances, people, it is argued, tend to place less emphasis on life-long partnerships and have more freedom to end unsatisfactory relationships.

Yet, Sigman (1991: 109) has demonstrated that 'social relationships do not necessarily cease to exist when the members cease being in each other's physical and interactional co-presence'. Similarly, Holmes (2010: 186) suggests that 'distance does not always bring intimacy to an end.' In the increasing mobile societies in which we live, people have learned to keep in touch with absent significant others and maintain relationships (Elliott and Urry, 2010). From my own experience, it would seem that people in LAT relationships can attempt to make greater efforts than those in more conventional relationships, in order to maintain their distance relationship and they still highly value commitment.

However, the experiences of Chinese people in LAT relationships over the life course have not yet been systematically researched in the context of a changing China. This is partly because living together as a couple to establish a family remains the ideal and most socially-accepted family arrangement in the contemporary Chinese society. In addition, lacking a standard definition of what a LAT relationship is, and the attendant difficulty in identifying LAT relationships if they happen for short periods of time, also cause the knowledge gap on this non-cohabiting partnership.

With the aim of trying to map out the motivations, attitudes and experiences that shape Chinese people's personal life and intimate relationships, qualitative in-depth interviews with 35 women and 4 men were used to get insight into the complexities of these everyday experiences among Chinese, young and middle-aged heterosexual people in living apart together relationships. Notably, though the focus in the study is on women participants,

men's views will be used to contradict and further explore women's perspectives, especially when it comes to gendered emotional work in a given context.

Therefore, this research aims to explore the changes in personal relationships and family life through the lens of living apart together relationships in the context of a rapidly transforming Chinese society. Noticeably, my focus in this research is not simply limited to young unmarried people, such as college students. Middle-aged and/or married people may also experience living apart together relationships and therefore were included. Due to the unique Chinese traditional culture, characterised as being heavily influenced by Confucian family values, (married) couples who have had a LAT relationship, in particular, might be considered as 'abnormal' if judged by these values and critiqued for lacking intimacy. It is important to figure out why a growing number of couples live apart from their partner in China, where conventional forms of co-residential partnership have been deeply rooted in peoples' perceptions of being a couple.

My wish is that this thesis makes a timely and valuable contribution to research on LAT relationships in China by giving a voice primarily to Chinese women's experiences and understanding of living apart from their partner. To this end, my first research question is: how do women in LAT relationships understand their personal life and any subsequent changes in these relationships? My second question is: how is the notion of LAT families culturally constructed and practiced and how do women negotiate their gender roles in this context? The third research question that I ask is: what is the relationship between structure and agency for women in LAT relationships? The fourth question is: how is intimacy experienced and reshaped amongst couples in heterosexual LAT relationships?

In the next chapter, I review key debates that this research has engaged in, such as those around individualization, intimacy, and family practices. The specific Chinese context is also outlined in relation to historical and current changes for women, in respect particularly of marriage and family life. This is then followed by a discussion of previous research on LAT mainly based on the Western context.

In Chapter 3, I illustrate firstly that this research is informed by feminist methodology and epistemology, which is then followed by an outline and discussion of the approaches that I

employed to recruit research participants and collect data. I also discuss reasons and justifications that were also made in relation to my research methods and sampling. As a researcher, I also acknowledge the importance of self-reflexivity during the research process. Issues regarding data processing and analysis after the fieldwork are briefly summarized.

In Chapter 4, I start with the changing nature of dating practices, spouse selection, and family living arrangement since the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In response to the social and institutional changes after the Chinese economic reform era, the shifts in attitudes and behaviours in marital-related decisions are observed. The gender and generational differences that exist in relation to financial status are noted based on my data. Although China has undergone dramatic changes under individualization and modernization, the consequence of Western modernity has different outcomes in the Chinese context. More importantly, my data show that the changes in family life have to be understood within the specific historical, social, and cultural context in which people are embedded. Due to these dramatic changes under China's economic reform and social transformation, combined with the influence of Western ideas about individualism, the idea of free-choice marriage based on mutual affection has become prominent among people in contemporary China. The traditional matchmaking principle has greatly lost its power, while a reversal of conventional family practices was noted, such as the practice of age hypergamy and the increasing number of extended families. One consequence of this transformation is that Chinese young people's perceptions of marriage and family can be seen simultaneously as both 'modern' and 'traditional'.

In Chapter 5, I consider the motivations behind couples living apart and the interplay between agency and structure in their LAT relationships. Inspired by Burkitt's (2016) idea of relational agency and Carter and Duncan's (2018) research on differential agency in LAT, three different categories (constraint, relationality and strategic) were designed by me based on my data. I acknowledge that these categories are not fixed but share structural constraints and relational ties with different amounts, and types of agency, being available for women. In this sense, how far women in LAT relationships practice agency is rather complex, especially when people are located in different and changing situations and across the life course.

In Chapter 6, I give special attention to the group of study mothers as exemplars to examine how family practices are closely implicated in doing gender and social norms. In addition, how people do family practices is also intertwined with their personal biographical experiences, as they often draw on their own family life in which they grew up, to construct the meaning of family. Central to this case study chapter, is the premise that most of the women presented in this chapter are bound by their traditional feminine gendered habitus into a role which entails the employment of emotional skills to do relational emotion work, as they are (almost all) responsible for the emotional well-being of their relationships.

In Chapter 7, I turn the focus to 'doing' intimacy for couples within the circumstances of not being able to meet each other on a regular basis. With the aid of mobile technologies, two aspects of communicating are examined: text-messaging, and audio and virtual activities. While distance often prevents practical care between couples, gift-giving and practices of filial piety are noted and considered as important to maintain intimate relationships across distance. The emotional aspect of intimacy is also discussed from both women and men's perspectives.

In the Conclusion, I tie the findings together in response to the research questions that I indicated at the beginning of this research. This leads to my assessing the theoretical contribution that this research has made in relation to gender and family relationships in the context of LAT. The limitations of my research and suggestions for other, future studies in this area, are also reviewed.

# Chapter 2 Literature Review: Transformations of Intimate Relationships and Family life

## 2.1 Introduction

In most of the Western world, four elements have been closely connected in defining the marital system before 1970. They were the marriage ceremony, moving in together, having sexual intercourse together, and having the first child about a year later (Levin and Trost, 2004). Specifically, it was thought that the marriage ceremony and moving in together should ideally occur on the same day. In addition, pre-marital sexual behaviour was perceived as taboo, especially for women, and normatively babies should not be born to unwed mothers.

It seems, however, that this normative sequence exerts certainly less influence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A considerable body of research has shown a social tendency towards a what has been termed the Second Demographic Transition, manifested in the growing rates of non-traditional family relationships globally over time. For example, previous Western studies have shown that around two and a half million people in the USA (Guldner, 2003), two million men and women in the UK (Haskey, 2005; Roseneil, 2006), and around 24% of adult Australians not cohabiting or married are living apart together (Reimonos et al., 2011; Upton-Davis, 2012). They live apart for a variety of reasons, such as work opportunities, care responsibilities, and/or a desire for autonomy (Holmes, 2006; Levin, 2004). Although there is lack of data in the non-West contexts, a growing number of one-person households has been observed; for example, in Japan, which has the highest proportion of people living alone, accounting for one third of all households (Raymo, 2015). Young people aged 20–39 in particular have shown an increasing preference for solo living as a consequence of changes in marriage patterns – increasing divorce rates and late or declining marriage over the past 30 years.

When it comes to intimate life and the broader social changes, globalisation is commonly referred to a complex set of processes with a global reach on economic, structural, cultural and political terms. Jamieson (2011) claimed that the changes in intimate relationships are

closely implicated in the processes of globalisation which social integration and reproduction are often involved in. Global intersections with the development of communications and transportation technologies have profound implications for the expansion and the growth of economic capitals and cultural diffusion (Giddens, 2003). One consequence of globalisation is that 'distant events ... affect us more directly and immediately than ever before' (Giddens, 1998: 31).

Under globalisation, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argued that people may face more challenges to remain physically together while trying to meet the demands of the labour market. Bauman (2003) stated that globalised processes of individualization and commodification distance us from each other physically and emotionally and, that makes lasting love difficult to maintain. As a consequence, people's intimate relationships are becoming flimsier, fluid, fragile and contingent (Bauman, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995,2002; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The emergence of diversity form of relationships supports the notion that people are constructing a life of their own in response to emotional and economic opportunities and challenges. Likewise, Gillies (2003: 10) suggested, relieved of their traditional roles, many family members are forging experimental and creative associations out of the new challenges and opportunities with which they are presented.

In order to examine the implications of wider social changes for family life, the concept of individualisation and its consequences - a democratising notion of the 'transformation of intimacy' (Giddens, 1992) has been put forward by social theorists from the 1990s (Beck, 1992, 1994; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). According to the (much debated and critiqued) individualisation thesis, the traditional social relationships, bonds and customs, that once bound families together with roles prescribed by gender, have gradually lost their control in guiding people's everyday life. Instead, more emphasis is being placed on the rise of individual agency in constructing how people shape their family relationships according to their own wishes (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

The increasing number of couples living their daily lives in separate households, but still maintaining their intimate partnership often occurs in post-traditional societies where processes of individualisation, detraditionalisation, and coupled with increased self-



reflexivity has freed people from traditional social ties and family obligations (Bauman, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002; Giddens, 1991, 1992; Roseneil and Budgou, 2004). Some researchers claimed that conventional heterosexual relationships, that is, a married, co-resident heterosexual couple with children, no longer occupies the centre position in society. These changes in family life have led some Western scholars to the argument that we are entering a 'democratic' family situation (Giddens, 1992).

In the same vein, the traditional notion of 'the family' as a social institution, which normally includes two people of the opposite sex – the breadwinning husband and homemaking wife with their dependent children, has conceivably been challenged somewhat in the face of the individualisation thesis. David Morgan (1996, 2011) departs from the traditional definitions of 'the family' as a unitary object to the idea of 'family practices', with a greater emphasis on fluidity, on process and on everyday routines of 'doing' or 'displaying' family (Finch, 2007) in a broader social context (Gabb, 2011). As defined by Morgan (1996: 11), the term 'family practices' refers to a set of practices:

*Which deal in some way with ideas of parenthood, kinship, marriage and the expectations and obligations which are associated with these practices.*

With a focus on active 'doing' through everyday activities, such as doing laundry and preparing homemade meals, family members are not only defined by marriage and kinship for instance, but also are seen as being characterised by routines and practices. In this sense, family is used as a verb and considered as a culture-dependent social construction that is being done through the diverse sets of everyday practices: families are what families do (Silva and Smart, 1999). Therefore, this 'practices' approach enables us to explore how inequalities, power and divisions are practically constituted on a daily basis (Morgan, 2019).

This approach is also useful to examine how agency and structure are implicit in each other when it comes to understanding the complex realities of family living, such as LAT relationships. With a focus on active 'doing' in LAT relationships, multiple interpretations in relation to gender have emerged. Previous empirical evidence shows that for women who had ended up in LAT relationships, they are more likely to have an equal intimate relationship, as they may use it to avoid doing housework, free themselves from male

authority and enjoy personal freedom and autonomy, while keeping intimacy (Upton-Davis, 2012). In this sense, LAT was conceived as a reflexive and strategic way of 'undoing gender' and subverting gendered norms through everyday practices (Evertsson and Nyman, 2013). However, this is not the case in the UK sample conducted by Duncan (2015). He argues that LAT has seen to be associated with the reaffirmation of 'redoing' gender to construct conventional family, as people often 'do' family drawing on pre-existing practices and their agency in doing so are closely bounded with intimate others (Qiu, 2019). Therefore, looking at people's everyday sets of practices can help us to unpack how agency is practiced and exercised and, how far women can practically exercise their agency in LAT relationships.

One related concept in researching the complexities and diversity of family and intimate relationships is intimacy, which refers to 'any form of close association in which people acquire familiarity' (Jamieson, 1998: 8). According to Jamieson (1998, 2013), 'disclosing intimacy', as a way of 'doing' intimacy (Giddens, 1992), includes not only 'a dialectic of mutual self-discourse' but 'close association and privileged knowledge'. This has challenged the common assumption that intimacy was closely related to physical proximity. In fact, distance does not necessarily de-prioritise commitment. Because emotional sharing and performing of practical caring still play a part in maintaining intimate relationships (Holmes, 2004a; Jamieson, 2011).

Drawing on Morgan's concept of 'family practices', Jamieson (2011: 1.2) further develops the idea of 'practices of intimacy' as 'practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other'. By drawing on disclosing intimacy of the self rather than a sexual intimacy, the notion of practice of intimacy also sheds new light on the parent-child relationships. In contrast to the traditional roles of authoritarian parents and dutiful children, the balance of obligations has shifted so that parents are expected to offer appropriate support to help their children in fulfilling their potential (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Practices of intimacy and family practices overlap in cultures that valorise families and intimacy and take it for granted that intimacy is an aspect of family life (Jamieson, 2011: 1.2).

The increasing prevalence of non-conventional family relationships and couples living apart together (LAT's) in particular, provides an opportunity to critically engage in current

sociological debates about modernisation, individualisation, and intimacy. Therefore, in the remainder of this chapter, my core theoretical context of individualisation, globalisation and intimacy debates will be discussed to shed light on how people's intimate relationships have undergone transformations. This is then followed by a closer examination of both transition and continuity in marriage and family patterns in the specific Chinese context, with potential explanations for this examined through recent debates, and considering the extreme heterogeneity of Asian countries. This leads me to then review living apart together (LAT) relationships in more depth in the final section. Drawing on existing research conducted primarily in the Western context, I focus on the socio-demographic characteristics for living apart together (LAT) relationships, such as who is more likely to be in LAT relationships? What are the reasons for doing so? How do people view their LAT relationships? And what are the implications for this growing number of LAT relationships? Because there is a knowledge gap on what we know about LATs in China, these findings based on the Western context play an important role in exploring, in my later data-led chapters in the thesis, whether and how much difference exists between LATs in the Western context and the Chinese context, as many scholars argue that the Western culture of individualism has transformed how Chinese people construct and understand their own family life and intimate relationships.

## **2.2 Debates around Individualisation, Globalisation, Intimacy, and the Chinese Path**

### **2.2.1 Individualisation Thesis, Intimacy and Its Critiques**

The individualisation thesis, formed by theorists within Western cultures with a long history of individualism, has been used to explain the major changes in family life. A large body of existing Western studies, focusing on the effects of individualisation on relationships and familial structures, indicates a disembedding of the individual from traditional family structures and relationship ties (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Bauman, 2001, 2003). Specifically, the individualisation thesis promotes personal choice and the active role that individuals play in creating their own biographies. Consequently, a 'reflexive project of the self' is formed, while pre-given life trajectories and the social ties of kinship

and marriage are weakened (Giddens, 1991: 9; see also, Beck, 1992; Dermott and Seymour, 2011; Duncan and Smith, 2006). From this perspective, people have been freed from externally imposed constraints, cultural customs and moral ethics, and thus personal lives are becoming more fluid and unstable.

Two different interpretations have taken shape when considering the changes to family life that have occurred under the individualisation thesis. Giddens (1992) keeps an optimistic attitude towards the democratisation of personal life and suggests a 'transformation of intimacy'. This is more evident in the separation of sexuality from reproduction, with 'plastic sexuality' being emphasised as a means of self-expression and self-actualisation. In place of older forms of romantic love with emphasis on lifelong commitment ('till death do us apart'), Giddens (1992: 58) then proposes an idealised 'pure relationship':

*A social relation which is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it.*

In his view, 'confluent love', characterised as active, contingent and dependent, features the ideal of the 'pure relationship' which is based on sexual and emotional equality and sustained only as long as both parties are fulfilled. Trust was established through intensive mutual conversation and self-disclosure. Noticeably, Giddens (1991) located individuals, women particularly, at the forefront of this transformation, seeking more egalitarian partnerships and enjoying increased autonomy and greater gender equality.

In contrast to Giddens' positive views, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) insist on the push-pull features of the process of individualisation and emphasise the breakdown of social ties. They point out that the social changes (in employment, welfare, education, and the law) which are pushing families apart (by means of divorce, women's labour-market participation) could function as a reaction to meet individual needs and/or demands for flexibility and mobility in labour markets. In this sense, they are extremely pessimistic about the changes in family forms, arguing that the future of the family is disintegration and

become fragmenting. Modern social conditions will succeed in pulling families part (Smart, 2007: 19).

While Giddens makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the transformation of intimacy, his utopian vision of individual-driven and democratic relationships has been comprehensively and persistently criticised by feminists and others, for lacking empirical and historical evidence. In fact, there is very little evidence to support his claim that we are entering into the democratization of family life, with less value being placed on commitment and familial ties due to the erosion of traditional constraints and ascribed roles. For example, drawing on the US data, Gross (2005: 286-288) makes a distinction on traditions between 'regulative' and 'meaning-constitutive', with the former involving the exclusion of an individual from various moral communities, whereas the latter involving 'patterns of sense making passed down from one generation to the next.' With this differentiation, Gross (2005) concludes that what has declined in the process of detraditionalisation are only certain regulative traditions that characterise the institution of marriage, through which external constraints are placed on social action. Meaning-constitutive traditions of romantic love, however, continue to play a crucial role in structuring contemporary intimacy, at least in the USA, given the data was from there. This argument has been further supported by other scholars who suggest that people still place greater emphasis on commitment (Carter et al., 2016) and value relationships with others, especially partners, parents and children, just as much as before (Jackson et al., 2013; Qi, 2015).

Whatever the changes in family structures, feminist critiques of Giddens' (1992) thesis also include the omission of the stability and continuities of 'traditional' structures, such as social class, ethnic groups, gender inequality, power and intergenerational relationships, as well as forms of collectivism (Heaphy, 2007; Jamieson, 1999; 2011a; Smart, 2007; Smart and Shipman, 2004). In fact, the choices that people make regarding their intimate life are still, to some extent, shaped by culture and social context and informed by lingering traditional values (Jackson, 2015a). The continuing inequality between heterosexual relationships are still there, with men being exercised more power than women in the partnerships. As women expect to obtain a sense of emotional support and closeness while men are often failed to provide emotional reciprocity (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; Hockey et al., 2007).

In this sense, it is important to understand how the pure relationship is mediated by employment, class, and ethnic difference (Smart and Neale, 1999).

In addition, while Giddens suggested that mutual self-disclosure is the basis of intimacy in the 'pure relationship', 'love and care as expressed by a more practical doing and giving is as much the crux of (their) relationship' (Jamieson, 2002: 142). In addition, it has been found that intimacy and gender inequality can coexist in many people's personal lives, as in reality, most women have not fully benefited from the greater individual agency and choice that social change has brought about (Jamieson, 1999; 2011). This leads to the consideration that the consequences of the individualisation process may not be the same (Holmes, 2004a). In reality, social ties and family obligations have still kept people together. In addition, people are still expected to fulfil their gender roles as prescribed by social norms (Jamieson, 1999; Holmes, 2004a).

The individualisation theory has also been criticised for its top-down, abstract vision of generalisation without considering the specific social and cultural context. Duncan and Smith (2006: 169) maintained that: 'if there is individualisation, it is within social bonds, not away from them'. Instead of the individual becoming disembedded from the social, how people behave and make choices is closely shaped by the specific social, historical and cultural context in which they are embedded. Feminist literature has shown the continued importance of the interdependence of kin, gender and forms of collectivism in contemporary family practices (Jamieson, 2012; Morgan, 1996; Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Smart, 2007; Smart and Shipman, 2004). For example, in the specific context of China's rapid economic development and the rise of the individual, while on the one hand urban young people from the one-child generation embrace the Western idea of individualism in relation to choosing marriage partners and setting up their own homes, rather than living in extended families, on the other hand, they are still influenced by collectivism whereby filial piety, as central to traditional Confucian teachings, continues to organise people's everyday practices (Croll, 2006; Hansen and Pang, 2010; Yan, 2009; Jamieson, 2011). Instead of considering alternatives to individualised 'free-choice' marriage as a way of catching up with Western individualisation, the practices of intimacy in a non-Western context can be regarded as 'different ways of *doing* family' (Smart and Shipman, 2004: 496).

In this sense, attention needs to be paid to the specific cultural traditions when it comes to individualisation in a non-Western context (Smart and Shipman, 2004). Similar claims are made by Jackson (2013: 36), who focused on gender and social life in the context of East Asia, arguing that 'any aspect of human life is to be understood as constituted through and bounded by the social conditions of its existence'. This requires further examination in relation to social change and intimate practices beyond Western individualistic traditions.

### **2.2.2 Individualisation within a Chinese Context**

When considering whether and how far Chinese society has undergone individualisation and transformation of intimacy as described in Western societies, numerous previous studies have often concentrated on three developmental stages: The Mao era (1949-1976); The Reform era (1978-1991); and The Postreform Era (1992 onwards). It is important to understand the changes in the wider social, historical, economic and cultural context before examining the possible implications for people's lives.

In terms of the first stage, since the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the chairman Mao Zedong on 1 October 1949, Chinese family structures and women's status began to change. The First Marriage Law in 1950 legally replaced traditional arranged or forced marriage with free-choice monogamy marriage, which has played an important role in improving women's status. With the central aim of constructing the wealth and power of the nation-state under Maoist socialism, the Communist Party encouraged women to 'walk out of the house' (Jin, 2006; Wolf, 1985; Zuo and Bian, 2001) in order to participate in employment under the slogan 'women hold up half the sky'. Chinese women's contribution to productive work was recognised and their position relative to men also improved (Weeks, 1989; Wolf, 1985). This can be seen from the discourses, throughout the Maoist period, about gender equality, such as 'the times have changed, men and women are the same' and 'women can do anything that men do'. Gender equality was also promoted as a result of economic development in the 1950s. At that time, women often dressed in the same androgynous way as men, cutting their hair short, wearing uniforms, and having wide shoulders with strong arms, in order to minimise gender differences and

celebrate sexual equality (Finnane, 1996). During the Cultural Revolution<sup>1</sup>, the image of ‘iron girls’ was culturally created and referred to female model workers participating in productive labour and performing physically demanding jobs, such as working in the iron and steel industries. In this regard, the socialist transformation project, to some degree disembedded the individual from the constraints of the traditional gender roles and family values (Yan, 2010b). Instead, they were called upon to participate in party-state-sponsored political, economic, and social campaigns in public life (Yan, 2010b: 493). Undoubtedly, historical comparisons of Chinese women’s status have drawn the clear argument that a great improvement has been observed in many social and economic aspects of women’s lives. Consequently, Yan (2010b) argued that some collectivist programmes under Maoism ironically resulted in a certain form of individualisation of Chinese society.

Under Mao’s era, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) controlled the economic power through the planned economy and its collective re-distribution system (Yan, 2010b). This meant that an individual biography was strictly fixed and conditioned by the institutional constraints, as under this system individuals were assigned employment to a given *danwei*<sup>2</sup> (*work unit*) in urban areas. In 1978, the Chinese government opened up their market to a market-based economy, which since then has had profound implications for China’s economic development, social changes and cultural values. The growth of private labour markets, alongside rural-urban migration of labourers, had untied the individual from the socialist planned economy and the party-state monopoly over resources allocations and life chances had come to the end. With the authoritarian state being challenged, the individual has gained more power to pursue a life of one’s own (Evans, 1997; Yan, 2009).

After the reform era, China has experienced rapid urbanisation and enormous economic growth, which creates ‘a massive force to push Chinese marriages and families away from tradition’ (Xu et al., 2014: 32). One prominent change relating to family structure is the

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<sup>1</sup> The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) was a decade-long mass movement, during which universities were shut down entirely from 1966 to 1972. The propaganda of ‘knowledge is useless’ led a whole generation of Chinese youth to be less-educated. For detailed accounts of the implications of Chinese Cultural Revolution, see Bernstein (1977) and Lee (1978).

<sup>2</sup> The *danwei* system has been dismantled in the early 2000s, and that the state’s intervention into people’s personal lives was significantly weakened. For more discussion about how the *danwei* system controlled personal lives and relationships, see Liu (2007).



sharp decline in the total fertility rate (TFR), which is related to the implementation of the one-child policy<sup>3</sup> in late 1970s. The fertility rate dropped sharply from 6.123 births per woman in 1965–1970 to 3.0 in 1975–1980, while further declining to below replacement level (2.1) since the 1990s (United Nations Population Division<sup>4</sup>, 2017). It was reported that the TFR in China was 1.6 in 2010, although it was still the highest compared to other Asian societies (Raymo et al., 2015). A remarkable demographic transition was seen in China from a country with high fertility, high infant mortality and low life expectancy to a country with low fertility, low infant mortality and high life expectancy by the 1990s (Xie, 2011). This demographic transition has further reflected on the substantially decline in average Chinese family household size (persons per household), from 4.41 in 1982, and 3.44 in 2000 to 3.03 in 2017. Noticeably, more attention needs to be given to the recent introduction of China's universal two-child policy in late 2015 (Zeng and Hesketh, 2016). The effects of this new policy have been argued to have far-reaching implications in relation to fertility rate, the ageing population, gender equality and economic development (Qian and Jin, 2018).

As a result of the weakened governmental intervention in people's personal lives, nowadays, there is clear evidence that an abundance of choices in relation to conducting personal relationships and family arrangements are available for Chinese people than during the reform era (Yan, 2009). For example, more and more married couples tend to reside neolocally, which means separated from either set of parents. In addition, a continuing tendency towards an increase in one-person households over the past three decades was noted, rising from 4.9% in 1990 to 14.5% in 2010 (Cheung and Yeung, 2015). Under these circumstances, some researchers have demonstrated that the traditional Chinese patrilineal extended family has been gradually replaced by the nuclear family – two-generational

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<sup>3</sup> Under the one-child policy, Chinese couples were only allowed to have one child (although some couples in which both partners were single children were exempted from this limitation). The governmental restriction has had particularly profound implications for controlling population growth. The national birth-rate declined rapidly from 23.33‰ in 1987 and 16.57‰ in 1997 to 12.43‰ in 2017. Furthermore, a substantial decline was also apparent in the national population growth rate, from 16.61 ‰ in 1987 and 10.06‰ in 1997 to 5.32‰ in 2017 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> United Nations Population Division. World Population Prospects 2017 Revision. For more information about total fertility rate. Available at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/world-population-prospects-the-2017-revision.html> [Accessed 05 Jul 2019]

households – under the process of socio-economic changes and rising individualism (Xu and Xia, 2004).

Economic transformation from a planned to a market economy, together with changes in social and political structures over the past several decades, have made China a fruitful setting in which to examine the extent to which individualisation is applicable to societies beyond the Western world. Some scholars take Western individualisation and modernity as a benchmark and predict that China will follow and ‘imitate’ family modernisation in Western industrial societies (Wu and Li, 2012). This is particularly evident when the similarities in the changes in family life between West and East were observed, such as: later marriage, lower birth-rates, more divorce, and higher female participation in the labour market (Castell, 2009; Jackson et al., 2013; Zeng and Wu, 2000). For example, Zheng and colleagues (2011) argue that the concept of ‘detraditionalisation’ applies well to the Chinese context, based on the changes in people’s attitudes towards sexual behaviours. In the process of modernisation, familism, which has dominated in most Confucian societies, has often been criticised as outdated and conservative. In contrast, individualism is seen as highly praised and, at the same time, the importance of marriage and family are seen to have declined, accompanied by weakened filial piety and familial collectivism (Davis and Friedman, 2014).

However, others claim that it is not rational to assume that the consequences of individualisation and Western modernity have the same outcome for intimate life everywhere; nevertheless, although we live in a globalised and late modern world and similarities in relation to the changes in family life are widely acknowledged (Jackson et al., 2013; Jamieson, 2011; Qi, 2015; Rofel, 1999; Tanabe and Tokita-Tanabe, 2003; Yan, 2008, 2009). Taking Britain and Hong Kong as an example, even if both do, to a large extent, share some similarities in aspects of family-related activities, the consequences of these features are variable in the light of cultural distinctiveness, the socio-economic environment, political circumstances and material conditions. In particular, non-marital sexual activity (except extra-marital or among those deemed ‘too young’) and single parenthood rarely attract opprobrium in countries such as the UK (Jackson and Ho, 2014). Whereas the situation in East Asia is rather different: the high value placed on women’s virginity and Asian familism, with its emphasis on family harmony and lineage continuity, does make it

difficult to accommodate single mothers and same-sex relationships (Chang and Song, 2010; Jackson, 2015b; Jackson and Ho, 2014; Yan, 2009). In Jackson and Ho's (2014) research, they found that advice and admonitions from Hong Kong mothers to their daughters in relation to keeping their virginity before marriage were not seen in a British sample, where mothers are more likely to provide advice regarding safe sex and contraception. It can be seen that the consequences of Western modernity do not always fit neatly into East Asian countries and western modernity is not everyone's modernity due to differences in social conditions.

In addition, when linking the individualisation thesis to the Chinese context, it often neglects the 'process of reinterpretation and re-negotiation of filial obligation' (Qi, 2016: 39). Family bonds and filial piety have long been considered a central feature of Confucian ideology, even though dramatic changes have taken place in personal lives in relation to attitudes towards and perceptions of intimacy and family life since China's economic reform. With the immaturity of the social welfare system and the absence of cultural democracy or classic individualism, reciprocity and intergenerational exchanges of support have found to continue to play significant roles in contemporary transforming China (Yan, 2010b), and women still are expected to undertake primary responsibility for caring for family members in their everyday lives. The continuity and influence of 'traditional' customs, divisions and inequalities have caused that family practices throughout China, and indeed most of East Asia, remain heavily influenced by the patrilinealism of Confucianism (Jackson, 2008, 2011; Tam et al., 2014).

Transformations in intimacy and families during the social and economic development of China may have unique patterns and trajectories as 'grand social changes are mediated through local cultures' (Hareven, 2001: 35, see also Jackson, 2015b; Rofel, 1999; Yan, 2009). In order not to confine ourselves within the Western European perspective, the differences in social and cultural conditions between the West and East have led me in my analysis to see of necessity how China has established its own specific form of modernity, which is based on a different relationship between tradition and modernity. This reveals that unique social, historical, economic and cultural factors and their interactions should be taken into account when understanding the gendered character of everyday life in China under the patriarchal and patrilineal family system informed by traditional Confucian ideology (Xu and Xia, 2004).

## 2.3 Marriage and Family Life in China

### 2.3.1 Women in Marital Relationships

There have been many discussions in the literature that attempt to examine the changing patterns in marriage and family life in China since the twentieth century, due to the spread of Western influences, particularly the process of individualisation and modernisation combined with internal campaigns (such as the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the implementation of the one-child policy and the 1978 economic reform) (Jankowiak and Moore, 2017; Jones and Yeung, 2014; Raymo et al., 2015). Historically, marriage and family, in both China and other Asian societies shared a Confucian ideology of patrilineal family formation, which were seen as the bedrock of national development, facilitating social stability and harmony (Guo, 2010; To, 2013). Extended family with multiple generations living together has a long tradition in Chinese history and was seen as a typical and ideal Chinese family. Under this tradition, people often organised their family lives in the light of Confucian ideology, placing emphasis on the needs of the collective over those of the individual (Jackson et al., 2008). In the context of patriarchal, patrimonial, patrilineal, and patrilocal organisation of Chinese families, women were required to strictly follow the 'three obediences and the four virtues'<sup>5</sup> (Wei, 2011) and for centuries they were regarded as dependents and subordinate to their male partners (Raymo et al., 2015; Thornton and Lin, 1994).

With respect to the formation of the marital union, marriage especially in traditional China, was not ostensibly connected with love and mutual affection; rather, it was the union of two families (Pan, 2010). As a social institution, marriage was often arranged by parents or matchmakers and people were married very young (Davis, 2014; Raymo et al., 2015; Thornton and Lin, 1994; Xu et al., 2000; Xu and Whyte, 1990). Only after a matchmaker's introduction and when parents considered that the two families' status (such as wealth and social status) were similar and could be matched, would the marriage go forward (Croll,

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<sup>5</sup> In ancient China, 'three obedience and four virtues' (in Chinese: *san cong si de*) required a woman to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage and her sons in widowhood. The four virtues refer to fidelity, physical charm, propriety in speech and efficiency in needlework.

1981; Yuen et al., 1998). This implies the importance of status matching in the process of mate selection. In addition, young people, especially women, had little autonomy in relation to their own marriage in traditional Chinese society because the agreement about whom to marry and the timing was often made according to their parents' desires (Parish and Whyte, 1978). Therefore, it has been argued that traditional marriage was often viewed as a way to maintain and improve family interests by connecting the political, social and economic resources between two families.

The founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on 1 October 1949, together with the effect of the First Marriage Law in 1950, played a fundamental role in changing the condition of women and shaping marriage practices (Croll, 1981; Evans, 2002; Hannum, 2005; Jacka et al., 2013). The 1950 Marriage Law prohibited 'feudal' marriage based on exchange and calculations, but instead, legislated free-choice monogamous marriage based on conjugal companionship among people (Yan, 2003). It has been argued that the First Marriage Law has shaped the family institution by empowering women in their marital relationships (Li, 1994; Lu, 2004; Whyte and Parish, 1984).

In reality, however, nearly half of couples still relied on introductions from others (such as co-workers or relatives) to meet a potential spouse, approximately half of whom were introduced by parents, especially in rural areas (Whyte and Parish, 1984; Yan, 2003). This implies that traditional arranged marriage remained common because of 'the persistence of conservative notions concerning the roles of women and the family' (Dillon, 2009: 123). At that time, practical functioning in marriage was emphasised and the meanings that people attached to 'love' were subject to various interpretations in accordance with the State's needs (Liu, 2004). For example, due to political and social transformations in a particular social context, 'sharing the same political and ideological outlook was the most basic condition of love' (Evans, 1997: 91) and, for women, finding a politically 'promising' man became the top choice between the 1950s and early 1960s in China (Whyte and Parish, 1984).

The anthropologist Yunxiang Yan carried out a 10-year-long fieldwork in a village in North-eastern China. He (2002: 41) observed that, during the 1960s and 1970s in rural China, a 'decent person' (in Chinese: *laoshi ren*), who had a good temper and was obedient and

honest, was considered an ideal spouse and was therefore welcome in the marriage market. It was certainly an advantage if the man's family was in good shape financially and he had good physical strength (to do farm work). At that time, the opportunities for young men and women to spend time together before marriage were still few. It was not a common practice to say, 'I love you' (in Chinese: *wo ai ni*), in a face-to-face situation, as a way of expressing love and mutual affection. Instead, other forms of expression, such as practical actions, sharing a political ideology, and bodily gestures, were more acceptable and regarded as a signal of love. Therefore, Dion and Dion (1993) argued that intimacy and personal fulfilment are less emphasised in non-Western marriage than in Western marriage. Due to expectations of women's virginity before marriage, pre-marital sex before the reform was very rare. In addition, married women were socially expected to follow the patrilocal arrangement – moving in with the groom's family. Divorce was very complicated due to Party-State interference (Ma et al., 2018).

Even though women's status has greatly improved since the 1950s as a result of high participation in the labour force, it is not fully true to suggest that Chinese women enjoyed gender equality, because little change in relation to women's roles have been found in the domestic sphere (Wolf, 1985). According to Evans (2002), women were, on the one hand, devoting themselves to socialist construction during Mao's era and, on the other hand, they needed to serve their own small families (see also, Yu and Xie, 2011). This view is also shared by Manning (2007: 144), who demonstrates that women were regarded as 'mothers at home and labourers with special needs'. It should be also noted that women's labour-force participation was 'economically and ideologically driven', given that China's economy at that particular time had nearly collapsed due to the chaos of war (Wei, 2011: 47). Once economic recovery was well under way, women were expected to return to the domestic sphere and make the family their priority, and consequently, their participation in the labour force was often seen as supplementary. Therefore, some scholars have argued that Mao's remarks were simply justifying the exploitation of women's physical labour as well as men's, for the revolutionary cause (Jin, 2006; Zhang, 2003).

Moving to the 1980s, when China adopted an 'open-door' policy and shifted from a planned to a market-based economy, the influx of information and romantic imagery of love from Western films, television and other mass media enriched people's understanding of

intimate relationships (Evans, 1997; Yan, 2002). With the influence of Western idea of individualism as I have defined above, coupled with the less parental involvement in their children's marriage-related activities, young people were given a greater freedom in choosing their partners. There was a subjective consciousness conveying that love is a personal thing, and should be decided by people's desires, not controlled by the State.

Partner choices are constantly subject to various socio-economic, historical, political and cultural influences in a specific context. In comparison with their parents' generation, when people often lived in a relatively closed socio-cultural society and prioritised the practicality of love, younger generations who were born after the 1980s and established their dating relationships during the 2000s, are more open and vocal in expressing love and doing intimacy in more 'Western' ways. The importance of men's physical strength (to do farm work) has lessened, whereas the individual's compatibility with undertaking skilled work (such as non-agricultural jobs) and a strong educational background have greatly increased during the process of mate selection. These generational differences are also manifested in relation to attitudes towards premarital sex, cohabitation, divorce and extramarital love (Higgins and Sun, 2007; Yang, 2017a). As several studies on the sexual revolution have shown, premarital intercourse seems to be seen as a private affair and fairly acceptable behaviour among both engaged couples in rural areas (Pan et al., 2004; Yan, 2002; Whyte and Parish, 1984) and couples in urban areas (Farrer, 2002). The revision of the 1980 Marriage Law makes divorce easier when couple's emotional relationship [in Chinese: *ganqing*] has ruptured (Huang, 2005).

There was a tendency of increased expression of sexual love, rather than romantic love, among Chinese youth to seek for sexual freedom (Yan, 2010b). The rise of sexualised forms of love supports Jackson's (2013: 36) argument that 'love is thus produced and reproduced through socially located interactions and practices, through the "doing" of love in given relationships'. This shifting pattern of how love is practised and felt has been named by Yan (2002) as a transformation towards intimacy in couple relationships in China (see also Farrer, 2014). In addition, since the housing market opened up, with more attention being paid to a prospect partner's financial resources in the formation of marriage, people, in fact, have become more materialistic since the 1990s (Yan, 2002). More and more married couples tend to reside neolocally, which means separated from either set of parents.

### 2.3.2 Delayed Marriage and Social Institution of Marriage

Situated in the broader context of rapid socioeconomic development and globalisation, the social institution of marriage in China has been confronted with challenges. One example of this can be seen from the declining rate of marriage<sup>6</sup>, which had reached the lowest point at 7.2 ‰ in 2018 over the past decade. In addition, a growing number of studies have witnessed a modest increase in the timing of marriage for both Chinese women and men in the past decade, with the mean age at first marriage rising from 23.3 for women and 25.1 for men in 2000 to 24.7 for women and 26.5 for men in 2010 (Jones and Yeung, 2014; see also, Cai and Feng, 2014; Gao and Wu, 2012; Jones and Yeung, 2014; Raymo et al., 2015; Yu and Xie, 2015a). As a consequence of this, some argued that Chinese families have become more similar to Western families, leading to the decline in the institution of marriage as manifested in greater tolerance to premarital sex, increasing divorce rate and age at first marriage, and declining rate of marriage (Zheng et al., 2011).

However, without looking into reasons underlying the changes in marriage patterns, we cannot engage in the debates about whether the institution of marriage in China is in decline. The rise in age at first marriage as one key aspect of the changing patterns of marriage can be taken as an example of this. Studies suggest a clear link between the timing of marriage and an individual's socio-economic characteristics, such as gender, educational attainment and employment (Cai and Feng, 2014). Economic prospects (such as employment status) have increasingly played an important role in marriage formation, as a result of China's rapid economic expansion, which simultaneously bring pressures on young people to survive in the competitive labour and marriage market (Mu and Xie, 2014; Yu and Xie, 2015a). In conjunction with market-oriented reform, education is also found to have direct effects on the timing of marriage (Cai and Feng, 2014; Thornton and Lin, 2004). This is mainly because of the expansion of China's higher education since the 1980s, which causes people to spend more time in school. In addition, the one-child policy has empowered

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<sup>6</sup> National Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Available at: <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/06/WS5ca86cf6a3104842260b4a77.html>



(urban) daughters to have access to education as they do not have to compete with their brothers with educational resources (Fong, 2002).

Consequently, Chinese women's educational attainment and growing participation in the labour market since the reform era have significantly empowered them with economic independence (Ji, 2015a). For some urban professional women, career development is reported to be more attractive at a certain stage in their lives than getting married, as a way to seek financial resources. Even though it should be also aware that they may still face challenges, both from the 'gender double standard of aging' and increasing discrimination on the labour market (Ji and Yeung, 2014). From the perspective of economic independence theory (Willis, 1987), building upon family exchange theory, an increase in women's labour-force participation and earning potential can reduce their financial dependence upon their husband, thus deprioritising the importance of marriage for women (Qian and Qian, 2014). In addition, the place of origin can also lead to delaying marriage, with cities such as Shanghai and Beijing clearly seeing a rise in the age of marriage in recent years due to housing problems, financial pressures, and competitive work environments (Ji, 2015b; Ji and Yeung, 2014).

Admittedly, Chinese young people's agency and power in deciding when and whom to marry is significantly greater than it was for earlier generations. However, it should be also noted that conventional assumptions about family obligations and gender roles have seen little changes, leading to delayed marriage. The 'marriage package', in traditional Chinese marriage system, includes multiple expectations on women, such as intensive mothering for raising children and responsibility for taking care of two sets of parents, alongside an asymmetric division of housework (Bumpass et al., 2009). Although lessening over time, the traditional gender roles regarding obedient daughters, virtuous wives and kind mothers remain central in practical and cultural terms (Hu and Scott, 2016).

Nevertheless, recent statistics on marital status reveal that marriage, which was seen as a robust institution, is unwavering in China, even though in urban areas, such as Shanghai, anxious parents gather together at the 'Marriage Market' to trade information on their adult unmarried children (Wong, 2014). Even though the 1980 Marriage Law has increased the legal minimum age of marriage to 22 for men and 20 for women, the mean age of entry

into marriage remains earlier in China in comparison with other East Asian societies<sup>7</sup> (Ji and Yeung, 2014; Jones and Yeung, 2014). As the Table 1.1 below shows, about 95.5% of Chinese women aged between 30 and 34 were married in 2013, whereas the same proportion dropped sharply to 65.4% and 62.5% for Japanese and South Korean women respectively in 2015 (United Nations, 2017).

**Table 1.1. Marriage Patterns in China, Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea**

% ever married	Aged 25–29	Aged 30–34	Aged 35–39
PRC Men	63.7 (2010)	87.4 (2010)	93.6 (2010)
	64.5 (2013)	89.6 (2013)	95.2 (2013)
PRC Women	78.4 (2010)	94.7 (2010)	98.2 (2010)
	78.5 (2013)	95.5 (2013)	98.7 (2013)
HK Men (2011)	17.4	50	71.2
HK Women (2011)	32.3	65	77.4
Japan Men	28.2 (2010)	52.7 (2010)	64.4 (2010)
	27.3 (2015)	52.9 (2015)	65 (2015)
Japan Women	39.7 (2010)	65.5 (2010)	76.9 (2010)
	38.7 (2015)	65.4 (2015)	76.1 (2015)
South Korea Men (2005)	18.3	58.7	81.6
South Korea Women	40.9 (2005)	81.0 (2005)	92.4 (2005)
	22.7 (2015)	62.5 (2015)	80.8 (2015)

Indeed, changes in social patterns of marriage in China, characterised by the rising age of marrying, increasing rates of premarital sex, cohabitation and divorce can be viewed as a sign of the deinstitutionalisation of marriage. At the same time, the younger ‘marriageable ages’ reflects that marriage continues to be a strong social institution, which was deeply rooted in kinship systems to favour the practices of patriarchal and patrilineal families (Cai and Feng, 2014). The paradox in marriage values and behaviours, as argued by Yeung and Hu (2016), is derived from the tension between rapid economic and social change and the

<sup>7</sup> In 2010, the mean age at first marriage in Japan was 29.7 for women and 31.2 for men; it was 30.1 for women and 32.9 for men in South Korea, and 30.4 for women and 32.7 for men in Taiwan (Jones and Yeung, 2014).

continuity and limited changes in expectations of gender roles and family responsibilities (Bumpass et al., 2009; Parish and Farrer, 2000). In addition, the persistence of traditional status hypergamy practices – the tendency of young women to marry up with regard to education and higher social status- remain common in contemporary China (Croll, 1981; Mu and Xie, 2014; Xu et al., 2000). This has put Chinese women with ‘three highs’ (high education, high income, and advancing age) in a very disadvantaged position in the marriage market to find a ‘capable’ partner, because some women are reluctant to experience downward mobility (Cai and Feng, 2014; To, 2013; Zarafonies, 2017). The intricate transformation of marriage patterns that China has been undergoing makes it distinct from those in Western societies.

## **2.4 ‘Unconventional’ Family Relationships: Living Apart Together (LAT) Relationships in Western Countries**

### **2.4.1 Definitions and Popularity**

The phrase living apart together and its acronym, ‘LAT’, was first used by a Dutch journalist, Michel Berkiel, who wrote an article about it in the *Haagse Post*, in the Netherlands in 1978 (Levin, 2004). Since then, LAT has been widely used in the Netherlands and has become accepted in the field of social science studies. Although non-residential partnerships (such as commuter marriage<sup>8</sup>) and same-sex relationships are gaining visibility both in number and in cultural terms, unfortunately, to date, it remains difficult to establish a standard definition for the term ‘living apart together relationships’ (LATs), given that scholars interpret and measure LATs differently. According to Levin and Trost (1999: 281), LAT relationships refer to ‘a couple which does not share the same household; both of them live in their own households, in which other persons might also live’. This relationship implies that living in the same household is no longer important, as ‘one can still be a couple, and it is that to which the new term, LAT relationship, refers’ (Levin, 2004: 224). In addition, the

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Commuter marriage’ was first studied by Gerstel and Gross (1984) to describe dual-career couples separated three or more nights a week during which they lived in their own residence. The terms LAT and commuter marriage are often used interchangeably. However, one distinction between LATs and commuter marriages is that LAT refers to both married and unmarried people who each have their own address.

term includes both married and non-married couples, and refers to both heterosexual and same-sex couples. However, some scholars exclude married people from LATs (Haskey, 2005; Strohm et al., 2009). In his research, Haskey (2005) stresses that LAT is a monogamous partnership in nature and reserved for non-married couples living in separate households. This research draws on the general agreement on the definition of LATs, which involves two heterosexual individuals living in separate households while maintaining an intimate and committed couple relationship (Duncan et al., 2014).

Literature shows that most studies on living apart together relationships (LATs) have predominantly been carried out within in the context of Western Europe and North America<sup>9</sup>, such as Britain (Carter et al., 2016; Coulter and Hu, 2017; Duncan, 2015; Ermisch and Seidler, 2009; Haskey, 2005; Haskey and Lewis, 2006); France (Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009); Sweden (Borell and Karlsson, 2003; Evertsson and Nyman, 2006; Levin, 2004); Canada (Kobayashi et al., 2017; Milan and Peters, 2003; Turcotte, 2013) and the USA (Strohm et al., 2009). In Australia, research on LATs has also been observed (Reimonos et al., 2011; Upton-Davis, 2015); Therefore, it becomes essential to draw on findings based on Western research before outlining LATs in the Chinese context.

Sweden was one of the first European countries to study LAT relationships (Levin and Trost, 1999). According to the 1993 Omnibus survey in Sweden, 4% of respondents considered themselves to be living in a LAT relationship. However, due to the respondents' unfamiliarity with the term and the vague definition of LATs at that time, Levin and Trost (1999) conservatively estimated that about 2% of the population (60,000 couples) were living apart together. More recently, the number of LATs has been substantially increasing; in 2001, 14% of the respondents who were neither married nor cohabiting saw themselves as living in LAT relationships (Levin, 2004).

Similar figures have been reported for other European countries. Using data from the Generations and Gender Survey, Liefbroer et al. (2015) analysed ten European countries (Norway, Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Russia, and Georgia) pointing out that less than 10% of adults (aged 18 to 79) were in a LAT relationship.

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<sup>9</sup> For an overview of LATs between European countries, see Ayuso, 2019; Bawin-Legros and Gauthier, 2001; Liefbroer et al., 2015; and Stoilova et al., 2014.

More specifically, LATs are more common in Western European countries such as Belgium, France and Germany. In Britain, there were no specific analyses of LATs until Haskey (2005), who drew on the 2002 Omnibus Survey to examine whether LATs really exist in Britain. The results show that the phenomenon of having a regular intimate partner who lives elsewhere does exist – around two million men and women aged 16–59 years were in LAT relationships in Britain, the same number as were co-residentially cohabiting. More recent empirical research on couples living apart has been further developed by Simon Duncan and his colleagues, who point out that around 10% of the population live apart from their partner in Britain (Duncan and Phillips, 2010, 2011). In line with Duncan and Phillips' finding, Coulter and Hu (2017) provide a statistical analysis that 9% of adults were in LAT relationships.

Regarding LAT relationships in North America, in Canada in 2011, 7.4% of people aged 20 and over were single, widowed or divorced but were in an intimate relationship with someone living elsewhere, which are known as LAT couples (Turcotte, 2013). A recent 2017 General Social Survey<sup>10</sup> shows that nearly 1.5 million people aged 25–64 in Canada were reported to be in a LAT relationship. In the USA, data from the 1996 and 1998 General Social Survey shows that about one third of US adults not married or cohabiting are in LAT relationships, but they were usually fell into the category of 'single' in conventional studies (Strohman et al., 2009).

Regarding the prevalence of LATs in Australia, quantitative evidence from the 5<sup>th</sup> wave of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics shows that 9% of the adult population were in non-cohabiting relationships, representing 24% of those who were neither married nor cohabiting (Reimondos et al., 2011). Based on the statistics that I listed above, empirically, LAT seems to become another relationship type alongside marriage, unmarried cohabitation, and singledom.

Although the number of people who live apart from their partner is small in relative terms, the increasing body of research on LATs indicates that being a couple without sharing the

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<sup>10</sup> General Social Survey (2017) Available at: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/190220/dq190220d-eng.htm>

same household has been a steadily growing phenomenon in many countries in recent years. The normative expectation that two heterosexuals will enter into an intimate relationship in the order of marriage, cohabitation, sexual intercourse and childbirth has lost its power in the wake of the institutionalisation of non-marital cohabitation (Budgeon and Roseneil, 2004). LAT is sometimes seen as the next stage, after cohabitation, in the development of an individualised 'post familial family' and of do-it-yourself life history (Carter and Duncan, 2018: 138). With the attempts to explain the possible reasons for the emergence of new forms of relating and living arrangements, Levin (2004) suggests that several factors may help to make LAT relationships more visible in many Western countries and the first factor is related to the mortality rates. Previously, high rates of early mortality to some extent meant the dissolution of marriage. However, the lower the early mortality rate, the greater the likelihood for a person to live longer, experience separation from a marital cohabitation, and thus, the greater likelihood for the person to enter into a LAT relationship, or some other new relationship.

In addition, labour market opportunities, along with women's participation in the workforce (Holmes, 2006), have also contributed to the increase in LAT relationships. This is in contrast to the past, when women were more likely to follow their partners and find a new job where they relocated. It is now difficult to do so since labour markets have become less localised but instead more globalised. Economic independence and self-development also play a more important role than previously in women's lives. Due to the development of IT communication technologies and the increased ease of travel, the number of people who travel for business or leisure has dramatically increased. This means that people now find it easier than before to generate and maintain relationships with others at a distance. A central aspect of my research will be to provide a much needed and lacking account regarding the influence of new technologies in LAT relationships, specifically in the Chinese context, through analysis of my data in Chapter 7.

In the context of China, the first descriptive study on married couples living apart was conducted based on survey data in late 1990s, in order to evaluate the effect of job-related marital separation on their marital quality (Abbott et al., 1993). Given that jobs<sup>11</sup> were once

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<sup>11</sup> For more discussion about job assignments, see Bian (1994).

assigned by the Chinese government to guarantee people's right to work and to balance regional development, it was estimated that about 50 million Chinese people had their spouse living somewhere else as a result of job allocation (Bonavia, 1982). Since then, to the best of my knowledge, unfortunately, very little research on couples living apart has been conducted in the ever and rapidly changing Chinese society (Hare-Mustin and Hare, 1986). I speculate that this is partly because people at that time were reluctant to talk about their intimate relationships publicly. In addition, official figures often do not allow us to 'distinguish the different types of one-person households by demographic or socioeconomic characteristics' (Yeung and Cheung, 2015: 1102). More importantly, due to the late 1970s economic reform that the state no longer allocated jobs, this enabled previous LAT people to reunite with family members. This would, to a large extent, decrease the number of couples choosing LAT relationships. Lacking a standard definition of LAT relationships also makes it hard for social researchers and policy makers to collect statistical data in China, especially given its geographical size. Therefore, it remains unclear how many people are in couple relationships, but physically living separately in their everyday lives and why they do so in a changing Chinese society.

#### **2.4.2 Who Lives Apart Together?**

Several Western studies have examined whether LATs are different demographically and socially to married, cohabiting, and single people. Generally, people from all age groups and with varied socio-economic backgrounds can be found in LAT relationships (Duncan and Phillips, 2010; Haskey and Lewis, 2006; Rosenil, 2006). In terms of age, LATs as a whole are over-represented among the younger age group. One plausible explanation for LATs in the younger age groups is that they are in the early stages of their relationship (Duncan et al., 2013). Drawing on the ONS Omnibus survey – the first survey to investigate LATs in Britain – the results show that 47% of people under 25 are reported to have a partner who lives elsewhere, accounting for the highest proportion in the overall age profile (Ermisch and Siedler, 2009; Haskey, 2005). Similarly, data from France reveals that the probability of being in a LAT decreases with age, as the highest prevalence of LATs for both men (72%) and women (68%) is in the age group of under 25s, followed by 38% of men and 33% women between the ages of 25 and 29 (Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009). For people aged over 60, only

4% are reported to have non-residential relationships. Although only a small proportion of elderly people engage in LATs after divorce or widowhood, it is not uncommon and a slight increase in couples living separately was observed. In Britain, 13% of respondents between the ages of 55 and 64 are in LAT relationships (Duncan and Phillips, 2008). In Canada, the number of elderly people who live separately from their partner has increased slightly compared to 2001, although only 2% of those aged 60 years and over were involved in a LAT relationship in 2011 (Turcotte, 2013). Therefore, it could be generalised that the probability of being in a LAT is closely associated with age and the different stages of the relationship.

Regarding education and socioeconomic status, the UK data reveals little difference across socioeconomic status as people with either professional or manual occupations can all be found in LATs (Duncan and Phillips, 2010). However, Haskey and Lewis's (2006) analysis, based on both quantitative and qualitative data, indicate an interesting comparison between those who live apart from their partner and those who are in co-residential relationships. Again, it is a matter of degree. Compared to those who are currently living with their spouse in Britain, people in LATs aged 25–44 seem to be more likely to have high levels of education and relatively high-status occupations. The positive relation between the probability of being in a LAT and educational background is also found in the US data (Strohm et al., 2009), with people in LATs, regardless of gender, having more schooling. This finding also applies to European countries, where people with higher education who have grown-up children or no children are more likely to be in LAT relationships than in a marital or cohabiting union (Ermisch and Seidler; 2009; Duncan and Phillips, 2010; Lieffbroer et al., 2015; Reimondos et al., 2011). An attempt to explain this was made by Holmes (2004), who investigated dual-career, dual-household academic couples based on the assumption that, if individualisation processes are extending to women, this will be most obvious amongst elites. She argues that women's growing economic resources, with flexible working patterns, have freed them from fixed obligations, while the effects of individualisation for women on their intimate relationships are still limited.

With regards to ethnicity, there is no clear message about whether people in LATs are more heterogamous regarding this variable than those in other relationships. However, the US data indicates that women in LATs are more ethnically diverse than those in either marriage or cohabiting relationships (Strohm et al., 2009).



### 2.4.3 Why Do People Live Apart Together?

According to previous Western studies on LAT relationships, the reasons for living apart from partners are diverse and are always subject to variations. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 100 people aged between 20 and 80 in Norway and Sweden, Levin (2004) summarises that people who live apart together can be divided into two sub-groups. One sub-group consists of those who would not wish to live together even if they could do so, and still want to remain as a couple living apart together (Levin, 2004: 233). The 'preference' for LAT relationships is evident in the group of divorced people because they believe that 'living together, in itself, will change the way each of them relates to the other and that those changes could threaten the relationship's survival' (Levin, 2004: 233). By living apart, however, they can have more control over their lives and gain more autonomy. In this way, LAT relationships have been viewed as a strategy to avoid repeating and experiencing the same mistakes from a previous relationship again (Duncan et al., 2013; Haskey and Lewis 2006; Roseneil, 2006). Additionally, Levin (2004) also mentions that older people, such as retired couples, even though neither partner is working any more, do not need to worry about jobs and are likely to have sufficient financial resources to live apart in order to secure autonomy and facilitate contact with adult children (Haskey and Levin, 2006; Karlsson and Borell, 2002).

The other group is people who would like to live together but cannot do so in practice due to external constraints. Caring reasons, the feeling of responsibility for *significant others*, such as children and elderly parents, can keep people from living together with their partner (Levin, 2004: 231. See also Duncan et al., 2013; Haskey and Lewis, 2006). Women, in particular, are expected to stay with and take care of children, while living apart from their partner. In this sense, LAT has been viewed as a strategy to prioritise and protect the well-being of children. Levin (2004) further points out that caring for elderly parents also serves as a driving factor for couples living separately, with the sense of 'repaying' parents for what they have done in raising them. In this way, LAT relationships can be viewed as a solution that allows people to both maintain their already-existing relationships by caring for children or aged parents, and at the same time sustain an intimate relationship with their partner. Therefore, this 'both/and' solution to partnerships is appreciated, in particular, by those who have young children and/or older relations to care for.

Similar to the Western context, caring plays an important part in organising Chinese people's everyday life. The long-standing influence of traditional Confucian values in relation to filial piety, combined with the under-developed social welfare system, have transferred the caring responsibility from institutions to families (Zhu and Walker, 2018). Therefore, people are expected to provide primary care for their children and elderly parents. However, in general, there is a lack of research on LAT in the Chinese context, let alone the extent to which people end up in LAT relationships due to caring responsibilities. More in-depth discussion on reasons for couples living apart will be examined, in Chapter 6, through the lens of 'study mothers' who accompanied their children to study and took care of their daily lives, while leaving their husband behind.

In addition to caring for others, Levin (2004) also claims that working or studying in different places can cause couples to live in separate households. Because people do not want to choose one over the other, they have to live separately in order to maintain both their careers and intimacy with a partner (Holmes, 2004a, 2006; Lampard, 2016; Levin, 2004; Liefbroer et al., 2015). This is particularly evident among students, due to different educational locations. As I mentioned in the Introduction, as a junior researcher, I was in a LAT relationship during the time that I was pursuing my PhD degree in York while my partner pursued his at a university in northeast England. We met up every weekend. However, we are not unusual in having this relationship. Based on my experience and that of others I know, some people in the same situation as me, both in the UK and China, often live on campus or at home with parents, while having a partner living elsewhere. In terms of future plans, many young people have high expectations of living together after graduation and finding jobs near their common home (Levin, 2004).

However, the above two groups (preference and constraint), regarding orientations towards cohabitation suggested by Levin, did not fit neatly into other available UK data. For example, Roseneil's (2006) data based on small qualitative interview data (22 participants) categorised LAT into three groups. She suggests that the small group (3 participants in the cohort) in *regretfully apart* relationships, often give more emphasis to their individual careers, although still being committed to their heterosexual relationship. A larger group (8 participants) in *gladly apart* relationships were on the opposite side of a willingness to cohabit, as people were seen to express strong desires to protect their own time, space

and relationships. The largest group (11 participants) in her study were the *undecidedly apart* group, with people being more ambivalent about their current relationship.

More recent research in the UK identifies five main reasons for couples to live apart, based on survey data and qualitative interviews (Duncan et al., 2013). These are: too early/not ready; financial constraints; situational constraints; obligated preference; and preference. Their research data shows that the most prevalent reason for people (32%) to live apart from their partners is that it is *too early* in their relationship to live together, while 30% of respondents are *constrained* by external circumstances from desired cohabitation. Specifically, 18% of them are reported to live apart due to affordability, and the rest do so because of their partner's jobs location or the demands of employers. In addition, some (8%) are labelled as having an *obligated preference* for LAT due to obligations of care for others, such as children and aged parents. Only a minority (22%) choose LAT driven by personal 'preference' because they just want to keep their own homes. This left 8% who give other unclassified reasons for LAT.

#### **2.4.4 Risks and Benefits**

Several scholars claim that living apart together relationships challenge the conventional belief that two individuals have to physically live in the same household to be considered a couple, and this may have risks (as well as providing opportunities) (Bauman, 2003; Beasley et al., 2012; Gerstel and Gross, 1984). Although distance does not always mean the end of intimacy, this non-traditional form of being a couple without living together has been criticised for lacking structural commitment and intimacy, based on the pervasive assumption that intimacy always entails physical proximity (Holmes, 2004a; Roseneil, 2006). Some go further, to argue that lack of proximity may cause emotional distance (Bauman, 2003), creating sexual difficulties for the couple as well as opportunities for sexual relations with others (Beasley et al., 2012).

Couples living apart may be misinterpreted by others as a sign of sexual availability, but it is not clear that these couples are trying to subvert monogamy (Beasley et al., 2012). In fact, LAT has much in common with cohabitation as a monogamous partnership (Haskey, 2005) and 'considerable commitment to the relationship' is needed to maintain intimacy at a

distance (Holmes, 2004b: 254; see also, Ermisch and Seidler, 2009). This is evident from the attitudes of people in LATs towards sexual exclusivity. The data from the 2000 National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles shows that, in Britain, about 75% of people in LAT relationships between the ages of 16 and 44 thought that having sex outside of a LAT relationship is wrong (Duncan and Phillips, 2010). Similarly, Carter and her colleagues (2016: 581), making a closer examination of the conceptualisation of commitment in LAT relationships, suggest that 47 out of 50 interviewees agreed that 'sex outside their relationship was wrong, no matter what form the relationship took'. Such evidence indicates that LAT couples are subject to the same expectations about commitment as cohabitating and married couples.

Similarly, Lehmillier and Agnew (2006) found that, relative to people in traditional relationships, individuals tend to express more commitment if they are in marginalised relationships, such as same-sex relationships, age-gap partnerships, or interracial relationships. Emotional support appeared to be crucial in upholding commitment and maintaining a sense of togetherness for couples when they continued to be physically separated (Holmes, 2006). A recent qualitative study on the constructions of commitment in LAT relationships conducted by Kobayashi et al. (2017) also supports this view, arguing that LAT involves both emotional negotiation and reflexivity in the couple's daily lives.

Additionally, many other benefits offered by LATs were reported based on previous Western studies. For example, LAT relationships not only bring intimacy and satisfaction to couple relationships but also allow individuals to retain their individual autonomy and pursue personal identity (Borell and Karlsson, 2003; Holmes, 2006; Liefbroer et al., 2015; Roseneil, 2006; Upton-Davis, 2015). As Levin (2004) proposed in her pioneering study, LAT allows 'both/and' – both autonomy and intimacy. In some cases, LAT relationships have been considered a possible way of combining gender-equal intimacy with personal freedom and independence (Evertsson and Nyman, 2013). Empirical evidence based on the UK data also found that LAT relationships, to a large extent, offer people room to restore and pursue their own friendships (Duncan et al., 2010, Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). Most importantly, relating across distance can also allow for better communication, fewer trivial conflicts and a renewed sense of romance (see also Gerstel and Gross, 1984: 74–77).

Noticeably, since more and more women across the world, if to different extents, now have economic capacity and have gained more autonomy and social sanction to live their personal relationships, some scholars maintain that LAT's has the potential to change women's lives for the better. For example, Borell and Karlsson's (2003) research indicates that LAT tends to be seen as an exclusively female strategy to avoid an unequal division of household labour. This finding is supported by Upton-Davis (2015), whose research was based on interviews with 20 women aged over 45, with a good education and higher social status. She considers LAT to be a political act that subverts and transforms the gendered norms of cohabitation. Financial independence and separate housing in particular liberate women from the bond of economic subservience and domestic service to the men with whom they share an intimate relationship. Though not always, it can provide women with opportunities to escape male authority and the unequal gendered division of labour and, more importantly, offer the possibility to 'undo' gender (Upton-Davis, 2015).

However, others (Duncan et al., 2013, 2014) question the extent to which women can actually 'undo' gender or subvert gendered norms. Even though the choices that people make regarding intimate relationships are becoming detraditionalised, there are still potential negative aspects of gender inequality in LATs informed by traditional values. As I will discuss in later chapters, how Chinese people construct their family relationships are conditioned by how gender is practised and the wider social context in which people are embedded. Perhaps because the individualisation process is not an even one, relationships involving gendered forms of compromise with respect to emotional involvement still exist, leading to women making more sacrifices at some point (Holmes, 2004b). This implies that their 'choices' are not absolutely autonomous, but instead involve 'a reaffirmation of gendered norms' (Duncan, 2015: 589). There are still higher expectations for women to be family-centred while deprioritising their own personal fulfilment. In this way, the continuing prevalence of traditional ways of 'doing' gender and family remain among LAT people.

#### **2.4.5 LAT: A New Family Form or a Temporary Stage?**

The question of whether this kind of intimate relationship involving non-residential couples is a new family form or not has attracted a great deal of attention, at least in relation to Western LAT relationships. For those who regard LAT as 'a historically new family norm', it

provides a 'both/and' solution to partnership, in which people can keep their couple relationship, and at the same time continue with their pre-existing commitments, such as responsibility and care for others (Levin, 2004). Interestingly, older people are most likely to see living apart as an alternative living arrangement, and many reported no plans regarding moving in together in the future (Duncan and Phillips, 2010; Reimondos et al., 2011). Similarly, Roseneil (2006) also views LAT as a new form of relationship through which people tend to de-prioritise sexual/love relationships and instead increase the importance of friendship, changing the meaning of coupledness itself. These findings demonstrate that LAT could be considered a new way of conducting democratic personal lives that is beginning to move beyond the dominant heteronormative framework, where life-long conjugal relationship has long been given prominence, which accord with Giddens' (1992) notion of 'pure relationships', Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) emphasis on individualisation and Bauman's (2003) metaphor of 'liquid love'<sup>12</sup>.

In contrast to Levin (2004) and Roseneil (2006), who regard LAT as a new family form, others (Haskey, 2005; Haskey and Lewis, 2006; Ermisch and Seidler, 2009) hold a more 'continuist' perspective, asserting that LAT is just a temporary stage or a 'stepping stone' on the way to cohabitation and marriage. In Haskey and Lewis's (2006: 43) research, the respondents, especially divorced LATs, are conservative about their relationships and lives, and rarely express 'an explicit desire for an alternative form of partnership or even a rejection of marriage or cohabitation'. In addition, the never-married LATs, in particular, tend to have plans regarding living together in the future, if possible. From this continuist perspective, LAT couples in many respects are not radical pioneers, but may merely reflect a new mode of living in practice that is characterised more by 'caution and conservatism than radicalism and individualism' (Haskey and Lewis, 2006: 46).

However, more recent studies on LAT relationships support both 'new family form' and the 'continuist' perspectives, although the latter is more evident in quantitative research. In this way, a 'qualified continuist' position emerges (Duncan et al., 2013). For example, based on

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<sup>12</sup> According to Bauman (2003), people are now living in a world characterised as being one of precarious uncertainty, and traditional romantic relationships and communities which were seen to provide solidity and security, have been liquefied by individualisation.

the extensive range of attitudinal data from the 2006 BSAS survey, Duncan and Phillips (2010) take this discussion further to explore whether LAT couples hold different attitudes towards families, personal life and relationships, compared to married people, cohabitants and singles. Indeed, on some issues, LAT couples tend to be more liberal and permissive than other groups, as Roseneil (2006) describes. But only a minority expressed a positive preference for being apart or keeping their own home. However, in the view of Duncan and Phillips (2010: 131), this is a matter of degree rather than a radical departure from traditional married partnerships. As the British evidence shows, like cohabitants, LAT couples do emphasise friendship and often discuss personal problems with friends, whereas it is married people who pay relatively less attention to friends. As with attitudes towards partnering, again, it is married couples who stand out as disapproving of homosexual relations and, conversely, cohabitants are the least traditional about marriage. All this supports a continuist perspective, in which little in the way of a 'pioneer' attitudinal position about relationships and families is found among LATs.

Likewise, using survey data collected from 2004 to 2010 on LAT relationships in ten European countries, Liefbroer et al. (2015) also suggest that for most people in their study LAT is mainly a temporary living arrangement driven by practical reasons and financial constraints, as the majority of respondents intended to live together within the following three years. Only specific groups, such as the highly educated and the divorced, may see LAT as an alternative to marriage or cohabitation.

Although the 'qualified continuist' perspective is easily found in statistical surveys, in later studies, Duncan et al. (2013: 326) question this position, arguing that various personal 'choices' and 'constraints' were often intertwined within a LAT relationship, which inevitably make them 'difficult to unpick from survey evidence alone'. To revise and reflect the range and diversity of LATs in Britain, they combined data from the 2011 national survey with 50 qualitative interviews and suggested that LATs should be better understood as a flexible pragmatism which combines elements of both 'new' and 'continuation' or 'tradition'. This combination stems from an assumption that 'people draw on existing practices, norms and understandings in order to adapt to changing circumstances' (Duncan et al., 2013: 337). Although some women in their study showed a certain degree of 'preference' for living apart (such as 'obligated preference' in caring for children and aged parents), in fact, an

ambivalence about 'choices' and 'constraints' was often involved because people's choices were inevitably bounded by the social norms in which they were embedded. In other words, these constraints limit even those who appear to have considerable resources for the pursuit of autonomy (Holmes, 2004b).

In addition, caring and connections sometimes cannot be regarded as active choices because self-sacrifices are often involved at some points (Bauman, 2003). Therefore, LAT does not just carry on conventional relationship forms under a different name; it is not simply a temporary stage between singlehood and marital formations. Instead, it allows flexibility for individuals in conducting and maintaining their relationships. People can use the autonomy that LAT offers to manage different needs and desires around personal autonomy, job advancement, emotional closeness and other family commitments, or as a response to external circumstances.

To sum up, the existing research evidence described above is mainly based on the Western context, with many attempts being made to evaluate the prevalence of and motivations behind couples in living apart together relationships in Western societies. These pioneering studies are mostly based on data collected from surveys and qualitative interviews, although some research has employed both types of data. Specifically, the quantitative studies tend to provide demographic and social incidence information concerning who lives apart and how different they are, whereas the qualitative studies tend to reveal the diverse reasons underlying couples' living apart with the aim of understanding the meanings that people attach to LAT. In terms of those based on both forms of data (Haskey and Lewis, 2006; Duncan et al., 2013), there was still something missing in relation to how people at different life stages negotiate gender roles, experience intimacy, and 'do' family across distance, which I will address by situating the empirical research in a non-Western context and by looking in more depth than many previous studies regarding the everyday practices, activities and experiences of those in LAT relationships.

## **2.5 Summary**

In this chapter, a general theoretical context on the discussion of individualisation for understanding the changes in people's family life has been given. Under the



individualisation thesis, personal lives are becoming more fluid and unstable, characterised as the disembedding of the individual from traditional personal and relationship ties.

I acknowledged that China has undergone significant shifts over the past several decades, such as: lower marital fertility rates, later ages at first marriage, and the increasing acceptability of divorce and premarital cohabitation. These dramatic changes in relation to marital practices in China are closely associated with its major social and institutional changes in the post-reform era, alongside the influence of Western individualisation and the process of modernisation, which together have facilitated a transformation of the long-standing patriarchal familial system that positioned women at the bottom of the family hierarchy in traditional Chinese society. Consequently, younger cohorts, due to their greater exposure to Western culture and individualism, may develop preferences for marriage and family in a different manner from the previous generations. These shifts in attitudes, behaviours and lifestyles towards new marital norms present challenges for the institution of marriage in China, in the context of the forces that led to the deinstitutionalisation of marriage in Western societies (Hatfield and Rapson, 2006; Pimentel, 2006; Zhang and Sun, 2014).

However, some scholars argue that the 'deinstitutionalisation' of marriage has not been fully seen in contemporary China, due to the long-standing traditional family values under Confucian ideology (Chen and Li, 2014). For example, in a collectivist society of China, the traditional familial culture places strong emphasis on extended family, in which couples living together with dependent children to establish a 'family' is a socially accepted practice. Far less emphasis was given to the individual, and especially for women who were traditionally ascribed as subordinate to men. Although the improved social status of women may affect preferences for marriage and spousal choice, as well as changed family practices, it is also necessary to recognise that these preferences develop within a cultural context in which Confucian patriarchal tradition remains strong. Similarly, although young people are more open to cohabitation, non-marital cohabitation is still viewed as a precursor to marriage, rather than an alternative lifestyle to marriage (Yu and Xie, 2015b). In fact, empirical research shows that marriage still serves as an almost universal practice for Chinese people (at least until very recently) (see also, Davis, 2014; Ji and Yeung, 2014; Xu, 2010; Yu and Xie, 2015a; and Zarafonetis, 2017). In addition, long-standing norms such as

filial obligation are still a salient element of Chinese culture (Chu and Yu 2010) and may also influence preferences for marriage and family patterns (Fincher, 2014). That is to say, researchers need to be cautious when considering the applicability of individualisation beyond the West context, due to the differences in social, political, cultural and economic aspects from the West (Davis and Friedman, 2014).

In the final section of this chapter, I reviewed the rising phenomenon of living apart together in the Western context. The social and demographic characteristic of LAT couples are summarised based on statistics taken from Western data. Although all age groups of people may experience LAT relationships, young people with flexible working patterns are most common among couples in LAT relationships. In addition, the reasons for non-traditional family arrangements and their potential influences, both negative and positive, are summarised, again, drawing on data from Western research. Some scholars view LAT as a new family form that provides people with a 'both/and' solution – both taking on familial responsibility and maintaining a couple's intimacy; whereas others tend to see LAT as a temporary stage preceding cohabitation or marriage. These different interpretations to non-coresidential partnerships have shown that we cannot simply consider the increasing number of LAT relationships as an indicative of an increase in individualisation, or even of the spread of the 'pure relationship' and 'liquid love' (Bauman, 2003; Duncan and Phillips, 2010), as people in LATs do value commitment as much as those in cohabitation and marriage relationships.

Drawing on the Western ideas of individualisation and transformation of intimacy in particular, my central concern in this research is to address the gaps in the literature I have identified, and to examine whether and to what extent the Western theorising of the transformation of intimate relationships applies to and can be used to interpret the incidence of LAT in contemporary China. Given that there is a lack of research on LAT relationships in China, when it comes to why Chinese people live apart and their perceptions of LAT relationships, careful considerations should be given to the specific historical, social and cultural settings, as well as gender differences within Chinese society generally, and within LAT relationships specifically, because without it the complexity of marriage and family life cannot be fully understood. In so doing, my research will not only fill a research gap by providing empirical data on LAT in Chinese society, but also add a

much-needed global perspective to Western theorising on the key debates around intimacy, individualisation, family practices and gender relations.

# Chapter 3 Researching Chinese People in Living Apart Together Relationships

## 3.1 Introduction

A number of existing texts concerning intimate and personal relationships have focused on the theoretical grounds and research findings, while a few studies pay attention to the research process of these areas in particular (Gabb and Finch, 2015; Jamieson et al., 2011). Given that epistemology (theories of knowledge) and methodology (getting of knowledge) are intimately related (Stanley, 1997), in this chapter I shall initially illustrate my philosophy of research practice, which is essentially influenced by feminism and feminist theories of methodology. As I illustrated in the previous chapter, there is a lack of statistics on the number of LAT couples in China, let alone an understanding of their experiences of and motivations behind living apart together. As this is my main focus in the research, I chose qualitative methods to delve into the lived experiences of people in LAT relationships, although I was aware that it might be problematic to collect qualitative data due to the transitory nature of people's life stages in relation to LATs.

As described in further detail below, further discussion will take place about research methods in general and my focus on qualitative research, in particular. This is followed by a discussion of recruitment strategies, conducting interviews with people from different social backgrounds, ethical considerations, and power imbalances between the researcher and the researched. My personal involvement during interviews is both recognised and examined given I was in a LAT relationship during the course of this research. The final section of this chapter concerns what was involved in data processing and analysis.

## 3.2 Before the Fieldwork: Feminist Methodology and Research

### Methods

#### 3.2.1 Epistemological Issues and Feminist Methodology

Epistemology is concerned with the relationship between knowing and being (Harding, 1987; Stanley and Wise, 1993). Historically, the way in which people knew and understood the world in which we live was through the experiences of men, while women's voices and experiences were often 'excluded' from mainstream research (Smith, 1987). Accordingly, the research focus within all disciplines was initially on men, in particular, white, middle-class, heterosexual men (Spender, 1980). MacKinnon (1982) has referred to knowledge grounded in men's experiences as the 'male epistemological stance'. Smith (1987) shared a similar view on male-centred knowledge, claiming that the approach to the social world was coloured by a masculinist bias, based on which objective 'truth' was formed.

Those who advocated for scientific research viewed what is studied as an 'object' and believed that 'reality/truth/facts' were waiting to be discovered and investigated, existing independently of the knower (Letherby, 2003; Oakley, 1998; Stanley and Wise, 1993). This approach was identified as *positivism*, with the focus on deduction, and was often associated with quantitative methods. According to Maynard (1994), quantitative research methods were seen to present a 'masculinist' form of knowing, which placed emphasis the detachment and non-involvement of the researcher and the collection of 'objective' social facts through a (supposedly) value-free form (Wolf, 1996).

However, this historical, male-defined way of knowing has been soundly critiqued by feminist researchers since the late 1960s and early 1970s for viewing women as the 'other', the outsider, and therefore failing to hear women's voices (Letherby, 2015; Mies, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1993). In contrast, feminist epistemology argues for an alternative way of knowing which gives greater emphasis on the lives of women and other marginalised groups and is concerned with gender in a reflexive way with an emphasis on personal involvement and reflexive, emancipatory, collaborative, and participatory methodologies (Eichler, 1997; Letherby, 2003; Oakley, 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1990, 1993). There is a recognition that

‘the nature of reality in western society is unequal and hierarchical’ (Skeggs, 1994: 77) and woman, as a social category, faces power imbalances within different social contexts.

This is a feminist-driven piece of research, and I am keen to reflect on the power hierarchies and exploitative relationships that have often traditionally existed between researchers and the researched in practice, and I have a feminist desire to strive for equal research relationships by empowering research participants where possible (Cotterill, 1992; Millen, 1997; Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2009; Wolf, 1996). While I acknowledge that there are no methods that can specifically be called ‘feminist methods’, what makes feminist research different from other types of research is the ways in which methods are used and the frameworks in which they are located (Harding, 1987; Nielsen, 1990). Though as I acknowledge later, this ideal is also problematic in practice.

Inspired by feminist methodology, my research strategy is based on an inductive approach, with the aim of constructing knowledge from individuals’ accounts during interviews (Smith, 1990; Stanley and Wise, 1993). This approach, as Stanley and Wise (1990) maintained, specifies a model of research in which theory is systematically drawn from the actual experiences of individuals, and is often referred to as ‘grounded theory’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The idea behind this is that there is no single ‘truth’ or ‘fact’ waiting to be discovered; the truth and the way in which individuals understand it might be different in different contexts. With reference to the experiences of women, despite a commonality of experience (and oppression), the complexity of subjective experiences means that researchers need to be aware that ‘there are multiple realities and therefore multiple truths’ (Taylor, 2001: 12; see also Stanley 1997; Stanley and Wise, 1990, 1993). This allows me to seek diverse accounts and knowledge from the individuals’ experiences, and I, as the researcher, undertake the responsibility of representing the voices of all participants, rather than one objective account (Brooks and Hesse-Biber, 2007; Stanley and Wise, 1993), based on which a certain type of theory situated within a local social and cultural context is generated.

### 3.2.2 Research Methods

My criteria for the choice of qualitative over quantitative research methods were in line with Ann Oakley's (2004: 191) argument, suggesting that the use of research methods should 'fit with the question being asked in the research', and the theoretical position in which the researcher is located (see also Reinharz and Davidman, 1992). As outlined in the Introduction chapter, this research aims to explore the implications of social changes for people's understandings and experiences in their personal intimate relationships, through the lens of living apart together relationships. A central concern is that people at different life stages in the life course with diverse social and educational backgrounds may have different experiences of LAT relationships. Given that people's experiences cannot be reduced to numbers (Scott, 2010; Stanley and Wise, 1993), qualitative research methods are primarily, but not exclusively, employed in feminist research approaches. In accordance with my epistemological stance that knowledge arises from intellectual engagement between the researcher and people who share their stories, a qualitative approach, therefore, was employed in order to access the subjective experiences of LAT women of different cohorts in-depth and based on which patterns and relationships were identified (Mason, 2002; Maynard, 1994; Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Scott, 1998).

Drawing on Andrew Sayer's (1992) 'intensive' research design, in-depth interviews, which were seen as 'emblematic of qualitative research' (Gabb, 2008: 50; see also Maynard, 1994), were used to gain 'access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words' (Reinharz, 1992: 19). The reasoning behind choosing qualitative interviews was for understanding an individual's lived experience in certain, specific settings from the subjects' own perspectives (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Maynard, 1994) and further generating theory (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992).

Specifically, considering the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and the researched, an interactive form of semi-structured interviews were employed. In contrast to the structured interview, in which researchers often have total control over asking the same, and a fixed number of questions to obtain standard answers, the semi-structured interview has been identified with greater flexibility (Gabb, 2008). For example, in some cases, participants recounted their personal life history in a way that was not very relevant

to the question I had asked in that moment or mentioned something very personal that I had never thought about, but which still had value for me to explore. In such a situation, the flexible form of semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask follow-up questions as a response to what they had told me and/or to re-arrange the order of questions. Without my disruption, the 'rambling' and tangential information that the participants provided in a given situation gave insight into what was relevant and important to them (Bryman, 2016; Mason, 2002; Riessman, 2008; Snyder, 1992). It can be argued that this flexibility can contribute to a power relation which is characterised as negotiated and fluid within the interviewing settings between the researcher and the researched (Cotterill, 1992; Letherby, 2015; Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2009; Smith, 2005).

Bear in mind that, although I intended to achieve and maintain an equal and non-hierarchical relationship, as informed by feminist methodology, I, as a researcher, retained the ultimate control over both the participants and the research process (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011; Letherby, 2003). This was particularly evident because I had the privilege to control the pace of the interviews and to leave once all the questions had eventually been covered and collected. Issues about power dynamics between the researcher and the researched will be discussed later in this chapter in more depth.

Although semi-structured in-depth interviews are welcomed by scholars conducting feminist research, the limitations of employing qualitative interviews were well noted during and after the research process (Fontana and Frey, 2000; Hermanns, 2004; Kelly et al., 1994). Some critics have questioned the ability of the researcher to ask questions and cope with unexpected issues if they are not well-trained. Others have noted that interviews are restricted to those who are accessible and will cooperate, which may lead to biased results (Webb et al., 1966). In addition, others have been concerned with the generalisation of small-scale interview findings to the wider population and criticised that such research findings are easily influenced by the characteristics of the researcher (such as age, gender, social status, and ethnicity and so on) (Bryman, 2016). Although the purely personal account, as a reference object, is limited, a justification is made that by putting people's accounts in a wider context as my research shows, it could provide a 'direction' for people who are in similar situations, and therefore could have value in explanatory terms (Clyde Mitchell, 1983).



In addition, a case study approach was also employed in this research to exclusively interrogate contemporary real-life phenomena at the micro level within an individual setting and across settings, so as to represent the subtleties and complexities of an individual's unique experience in their own right (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). As I will discuss later in Chapter 6, in my data, there are six 'study mothers' who lived apart from their husbands whilst accompanying their children to study. The cases studies were therefore employed to generate an intensive examination of *why* a specific group of women live apart from their partners, and to gain a sounder comprehension of *how* they make sense and understand the changes in their personal life. Although I am aware that this is a fairly small sample and these cases cannot represent all Chinese women in LAT relationship, the primary aim of this empirical research is to interpret the meanings underlying LAT relationships, through the lens of Chinese study mothers, so as to engage in a theoretical analysis and enrich studies on gender and family practices.

Originally, I also planned to conduct a small-size focus group discussion with young prospective participants with the purpose of identifying 'conflicting ideas' and understanding how individuals collectively make sense of their experiences (Bryman, 2016). With this idea in mind, I tried to contact some young women who were living in Beijing during the time of my fieldwork. In reality, when I checked some prospective participants' available time for interviews, their spare time was not suitable for the others. The common reason is related to the high demands of work. Although the phenomenon of working overtime still persists universally in China (and even in the rest of the world), people's responses made me realise that the work pressure on young people is relatively serious, particularly in modern cities such as Beijing. Such working conditions, to some extent, occupied people's legitimate leisure time (in some cases, people do not get extra pay when they work overtime in China). Therefore, in practice, it is hard to call people, particularly young women, together at a fixed time in a certain place. As Sprague (2005) maintained, it might be difficult to conduct qualitative interviews with less privileged people due to their having less control over their time. Even though the interview time I arranged was at the weekend, rather than during the working day, it remained impossible for them to make it, and finally I gave up this idea.

As I state above, this thesis is organised around an examination of the experiences of Chinese women in LAT relationships. In line with my research questions as I outlined in the Introduction, I was particularly concerned to find out about four different aspects: dating, partner choice and marital practices; agency and constraints; family practices and identity construction; and communication and everyday practices of intimacy. Investigating these particular experiences within a certain group of people determined that the type of interview questions which I devised are specific rather than generalised. Therefore, I designed a list of (open-ended) interview questions under four different key themes before the interviews (See Appendix 1 for details of the potential questions).

### **3.3 In the Fieldwork: Doing Feminist Research**

In line with my research stance, as outlined above, the aim was to establish a reciprocal researcher/ researched relationship (Gabb, 2008; Miller et al., 2012; Letherby, 2015; Reinharz, 1992). Therefore, the people being researched in this study were called 'participants' and were regarded as active collaborators, rather than passive subjects, during the knowledge co-construction process. Qualitative interviews with a sample of 39 people (including four men), between the ages of 23 and 57, were conducted to shed light on couples living apart and the meanings that those in LAT relationships had for them. Bear in mind, although my focus in this research is on women's experiences in LAT, men's voices were also included where it was possible and appropriate, albeit this was a small percentage of my overall sample. I discuss the inclusion of men later in this section.

With reference to the research process specifically itself, in the first section, I explain in detail the three different ways through which the total number of 39 research participants were recruited. Due to the research context being China, personal networks, in particular, become crucial to recruiting people who were not easily accessible, at least for me, and therefore emphasis is placed on this aspect here. A critical reflection is also made later in the chapter on the potential risks of using informal personal networks to contact the research participants and how the sensitive nature of the research by Chinese standards, due to personal relationships and family life being involved, may prevent people from being engaged as participants. This is then followed by discussion on how I built rapport and

conducted interviews with people from different social backgrounds. The final part in this section details my changing position and research roles in relation to the participants and argues that the researcher's positionality was subject to changes as it was often seen as fluid and negotiated during the research process.

### **3.3.1 Recruitment Strategies**

It is important to note that how the participants were enlisted has an impact on the diversity of data that I collected. In order to hear more 'women's voices' for covering as diverse a sample as possible, purposive sampling was applied (Mason, 2002). I recruited the prospective participants in two places – Beijing and my hometown in Liaoning province – based on my personal familiarity with both places. I was born and grew up in a small town in northeast China, Liaoning province, and later moved to Beijing to study during my three years at high school. Beijing is the nation's political, cultural and educational centre, with a per capita GDP in 2015 reaching RMB 106,284 (USD 17,064)<sup>13</sup>. According to Beijing Statistical Information Net<sup>14</sup>, the total number of permanent residents of Beijing was 8.715 million in 1978, with a permanent migrant population of only 218,000. By 2015, however, the population had dramatically increased to 21.705 million permanent residents, including 8.226 million migrants, which means 38% of residents are from outside Beijing.

In contrast to the first-tier cities such as Beijing, where much sociological research has been conducted within the profound socio-economic changes that have taken place over time, very little attention has been paid to north-eastern areas such as my hometown. According to China Business Network (2019)<sup>15</sup>, my hometown was classified as one of the fifth-tier cities, due to having fewer advantages in geographical location, natural resources and

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<sup>13</sup> Statistical Communique on the national economy and social development of Beijing in 2015 and during the '12th Five-Year Plan' period, <http://www.bjstats.gov.cn/English/SC/201603/P020160311540646422189.pdf> (Accessed: 15/10/2016).

<sup>14</sup> Beijing Statistical Information Net, [http://www.bjstats.gov.cn/English/MR/Population/201603/t20160303\\_337912.html](http://www.bjstats.gov.cn/English/MR/Population/201603/t20160303_337912.html) (Accessed: 15/10/2016).

<sup>15</sup> Financial media outlet China Business Network (CBN) released its 2019 rankings of China's 337 cities, including the big four first-tier cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen; 15 new first-tier cities; 30 second-tier cities, 70 third-tier cities, 90 fourth-tier cities, and 128 fifth-tier cities. For more information, see <https://www.yicai.com/news/100200192.html> (Accessed: 05/07/2019).

cultural development, with a per capita GDP of RMB 65,521 (USD 10,520)<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, the regional (for instance, economic) disparities between them enabled me to capture the different ways in which people reflect on their personal lives, due to participants having different status and educational, cultural and economic capital, for example. Besides geographical locations, I used three different approaches to find prospective participants to obtain a ‘purposive’ sample, rather than ‘generalised and representative’ data.

### **3.3.1.1 Social Networking Application: WeChat**

The first approach I chose was China’s most popular mobile-based social networking application – WeChat (in Chinese: *weixin*; literally meaning: micro message). The application is not limited to a communication channel for sending instant messages but enables users to share ‘Moments updates’ by posting images, texts and articles, as well as commenting and expressing ‘likes’ (Mao, 2014). According to the statistics from the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC)<sup>17</sup> (2017), WeChat, as a cross-platform instant messaging service developed by *Tencent* in China in 2011, has a massive base of users. As of the first quarter of 2019, WeChat has attracted 1.1 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2019). The Penguin Intelligence<sup>18</sup> published the first Weixin Impact Report in 2015, showing that the majority of WeChat users are relatively young – with an average age of 26 and almost 90% (86.2%) of users are less than 36 years old while 97.7% of them are below 50 years old (see also Liu, 2011). Regarding employment status, WeChat users mostly fall into four categories: private enterprise, self-employed or freelancer, student and public sector.

With reference to my own experience, I am an active WeChat user, having nearly 300 ‘friends’ in my contacts since I signed up for a WeChat account in 2011. Most of them are my friends, colleagues, family members, and those whom I have met and known by their real names in my everyday life. Therefore, WeChat became my primary choice to find young prospective participants, based on the demographic features of WeChat users, and my

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<sup>16</sup> Liaoning Statistical Information Net, Available at: [http://www.ln.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/ndtjgb/201605/t20160509\\_2196738.html](http://www.ln.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/ndtjgb/201605/t20160509_2196738.html) (Accessed: 05/03/2018).

<sup>17</sup> The 39th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China. [Online] Available at <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/201706/P020170608523740585924.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Weixin Impact Report (in Chinese: 微信影响力报告) Available at: <https://tech.qq.com/a/20150127/018482.htm#p=1>

personal user experiences mentioned above. (Discussion about how I contacted older participants is discussed later in this chapter).

To approach as wide a range of participants using this method as possible, firstly, I had to register a personal public account (subscription account<sup>19</sup>) so that I was able to post a message as a call for research participants. I realised that writing in an accessible way, rather than in a strictly academic style, and, if necessary, inserting some interesting pictures, was more welcomed among WeChat users. In addition, it was also important to highlight the key points using different font colours and sizes so as to attract people's attention. Bearing all this in mind, I drew up the message regarding my research project in Chinese as clearly as I could. With my contact details attached under the main text, I expected that people would contact me in the same way. Finally, I posted the 'looking for participants'<sup>20</sup> call on 25 April 2016 (two months ahead of the start of my fieldwork) while I was still in the UK. At the same time, in the hope that more people might find out about and be interested in my project, I forwarded this article to the Moments feature in my personal WeChat account. Thus, the more people knew about this research, the easier it would be for me to reach a wide variety of participants.

Over the following month, I finally recruited 12 people (including two men) who were willing to be my participants, while I was still in the UK. Noticeably, this was the first time that I came across the male participants during the research process. Although I was initially looking for female participants, some valuable insights came out of my data by including male participants, especially when I examined the power dynamics during interviews. I acknowledge that the small number of men participants means I cannot illustrate or represent LAT men in general, but they are used at some points in the analysis chapters to supplement and/or contradict women's perspectives. Therefore, the inclusion of male participants will be examined later in this chapter, when useful to methodological discussions.

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<sup>19</sup> According to WeChat, if you are registering as an individual, you can only register a subscription account (in Chinese: 订阅号). A subscription account can be used to post one message or piece of content per day to followers.

<sup>20</sup> <http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?biz=MzI0NjM0Mzk2OQ==&mid=2247483656&idx=1&sn=f33a8134c645cf8fb8f537a1587255bf#rd>

Of these 12 people, the average age is 26.8, with the youngest being 23 years old and the oldest 34 years old, which could be considered in line with the general overall WeChat user age (26 years). In terms of their education, all those I recruited had received higher education, and some had obtained a master's degree. In addition, there were three graduate students and a self-employed entrepreneur, while the rest were employed full time in different institutions, such as corporations, the government, schools, and the public sector. Half of my participants were married with an average age at first marriage of 29.3, which is rather later than the average age of the overall national population at first marriage, which was 26 in 2015<sup>21</sup>. Apart from one of my participants, Xiaobo, who was born and brought up in Beijing, they all came from other parts of the country but worked in Beijing. Based on the above information, it could be deduced that the participants whom I recruited from WeChat can be described as well-educated and work-oriented young people who, for whatever reasons, are able to live alone and maintain their couple relationships.

However, it should be noted that my goal in sampling was to cover a wide range of participants in terms of age, educational level, and marital status. Therefore, I will show in the following section how I gained a wider sample through different means in both Beijing and my hometown, Liaoning province.

### **3.3.1.2 Fieldwork Rewards: Meeting Participants through Chance**

You can never know what will happen during your fieldwork until you really enter the field. This is partly as fieldwork is a messy business and not everything can be planned for. It was a normal afternoon on 8 July 2016 in Beijing, and I was sitting in a Costa coffee shop. On my right-hand side, two women were chatting with each other. Even though I was wearing headphones while transcribing interviews, I could still hear clearly what they were saying if I really wanted to. At that time, I overheard a muffled voice from them about a lady who lived in the USA with her son and, given this revelation, I supposed that one of them might be a prospective participant. Then, I immediately took off my headphones (but kept my eyes focusing on the screen) and listened intently in order to further make sure that she was the

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<sup>21</sup> In 2015, the All China Women's Federation published a report on *Happy Marriage & Household* (中国幸福婚姻家庭调查报告) drawing on a nationwide year-long survey, with 10,000s of questionnaires distributed in ten different provinces. The data indicates that the average age of marriage in China is still younger. For more details, see: [http://www.women.org.cn/art/2015/11/27/art\\_19\\_35732.html](http://www.women.org.cn/art/2015/11/27/art_19_35732.html)

person I was looking for. A few minutes later, I understood that this woman (whom I have given the pseudonym of Rosy), in her mid-40s, was talking about her own experience as a 'study mother' who had accompanied her son to study in the USA, and therefore leaving her husband alone in Beijing. Because it was the summer period, she had brought her son home to China and they were reuniting with family.

I had never come across a 'study mother' during my initial stage of fieldwork and felt very excited to unintentionally 'overhear' her story, especially in a public place. However, I hesitated when it came to actively speak with a stranger who was older than me, asking for a favour while she was chatting with her friends. Therefore, I wavered back and forth, but finally decided to give it a try. I was very nervous at first, fumbling for words, even though Chinese is my mother tongue. I told them who I was and what I was doing there. As I had not scheduled any interviews on that day, any written documents about my research project had been left in my apartment. To gain their trust, I took my university student card out of my purse, and then tried to open my personal profile on the university's website. While I was trying to type 'CWS' (Centre for Women's Studies where I am a student) into the search engine, the woman, Rosy (46, married), laughed and said: *'Okay, I believe you. I'm a Christian and will help you.'* We then set the interview time and place. As agreed, I interviewed Rosy at the same coffee shop just one day after we first met. Our interview lasted over two hours, and afterwards she also introduced me to her friend, Miss Liu, who asked her older sister, Jiangling (47, married), to be my participant as she fitted the profile.

Given this successful experience, I became a 'bold researcher' and grasped every single opportunity I came across to have a try. This helped me to approach another participant while I was staying in a hotel in Beijing during my fieldwork. Every time the receptionist, Xueyi (25, unmarried), smiled at me, due to the requirements of her role I thought, I appropriately smiled back at her out of courtesy. One night I initiated a conversation with her after I noticed she was not busy. During our conversation, I learned that she was alone working in Beijing, while her boyfriend worked in their hometown. Partly because we were both from the northern part of China and of a similar age and, most importantly I thought, because of the shared gender, she agreed to being interviewed without asking me to show any identifying documents. Due to her restricted working timetable, our interview location was the hotel lobby.

Following my interview with the receptionist Xueyi, I guessed that there might be other migrants working in the hotel, whereas their partners, if they had one, lived outside the hotel. Therefore, I decided not to go out one day, but instead, I stayed in my room so as to get a chance to meet the cleaner 'by chance'. As expected, I met Jieyu (45, married), a cleaner in her mid-40s, who was not a very talkative person. Faced with my invitation, she gave me an equivocal answer because she thought she was just an ordinary person, with nothing to say about herself. She also stressed that she did not know how to say anything of importance due to being less educated. In this instance, I then downplayed my researcher's position to that of a junior-age woman and expressed my desire to listen to her life experience. Nevertheless, I was also aware that, even though feminist researchers attempt to achieve equal relationships through showing respect and acting in a friendly manner, other social attributes such as age, educational level and family background play a part in the decision-making process in relation to whether or not the participants would be involved in my research. Therefore, due to my transformation from a nervous to a bold researcher, I found four participants (Rosy, study mother; Jiangling, migrant worker; Xueyi, hotel receptionist, and Jieyu, hotel cleaner). It can be seen from my experience, as a researcher, that we cannot sit there waiting for people to find us; on the contrary, we have to negotiate our own location and role with attempts to approach more people and gain their approval and trust. Even though this raised ethical issues in being a feminist researcher, such as having to downplay my own status sometimes, and therefore, I withheld certain information about myself, to the participants.

### **3.3.1.3 Personal Networks**

Although I acknowledged that I benefited a lot from the social networking when it came to recruiting participants, this strategy only applied to the younger generations, which I attribute to their heavy involvement in social media. Due to cultural specificities, being Chinese, I was fully aware that personal connections in China often play an important role in everyday life in terms of meeting new people and building trust (Gold et al., 2002; Liu, 2006). Therefore, in this section, I will explicitly take into consideration the specific Chinese social and cultural context when it comes to doing interviews in China. In particular, as opposed to the Western context, the importance of personal connections in approaching



the potential participants in China were illustrated through looking back at my personal fieldwork experience, which I documented in field notes.

Specifically, during the time of staying in Beijing, 10 people (2 men included) were recruited via snowball sampling and personal networks, being referred by people who had participated in the study or my friends and older sister's introductions. It should be noted that due to the social attributes of people in my social network (such as age), the participants were mostly in the category of the younger generation. In other words, this method failed to attract all ages groups. Even though I had lived in Beijing when I was a high-school student, my social circle was largely based on my peer group and my connections with wider society in Beijing were limited. This inevitably led to the formation of group monotony in this sample, while I struggled to find 'triangulation of subjects' (referred to specifically as older participants in this context) (Rubin and Rubin, 2005: 67). Therefore, in some ways, the social characteristics of both the researcher and the intermediaries may have an impact on the variety of the potential participants who are enlisted in the research project.

With the idea of obtaining a more diverse sample to represent various 'voices' and broaden my conceptual base regarding age, class and educational levels of the sample, the nursing homes, as a general location, came to mind as a possibility to find older LAT people in Beijing. Through searching on the internet, I finally targeted an apartment which indicated on its website that it welcomed people of all age-ranges to come and have a look. When I got there, however, I was stopped by a security guard for lacking an entrance permit. I was confused about the requirement of the document for entrance. Therefore, he refused me directly and I called reception with the hope of booking a reservation to let me in. But I ultimately failed to get access to the apartments even though I told them that I was there because of research. The reason they gave was that this organisation did not accept any students, scholars, or commercial organisations to investigate them unless they got permission from their headquarters. Although, ethically, it could be argued that I should have gone down an official route, his answer made me wonder why institutions such as nursing homes in China are so cautious about outsiders, particularly people such as scholars and reporters. Although in recent years there has been a considerable amount of news reporting bad service attitudes towards elderly people in nursing homes.

At that time, I realised that this formal way to find (older) people in the Chinese context was not easily achievable, especially when my research, in some ways, was seen as sensitive by Chinese standards due to an investigation of personal, intimate relationships and family life being involved. A similar viewpoint is echoed by Liu (2006), whose research focuses on Chinese women who were made redundant, who argues for the importance of personal connections in finding potential interviewees, especially when the research topic is seen as sensitive for political reasons. With (older) family members being around at home, I decided to return to my hometown, in Liaoning Province, where potential (middle-aged and older) participants would be more easily approached through my informal networks. In doing so, I asked my parents and older relatives to keep their eyes open for people who could be interviewed and eventually interviewed 13 people with the oldest being aged 57.

Bear in mind, the method of recruiting people through personal networks can be also problematic, as the decisions about whom to include and exclude in the research were largely in the hands of intermediaries and the snowballing method (my participants provided the contact details of the potential participants to me) had the potential to only attract participants who share similar characteristics (Mason, 2002). For example, one of my relatives had contacted four women with an average age over 48 years old. One was retired, and the others were all housewives, whilst their husbands were going away to work. Based on their accounts, I classified them all as working-class families. Likewise, my father asked his friend Fuyue, a local community director, to find prospect participants who were in LAT relationships. Consequently, Fuyue offered me five 'study mothers' who accompanied their children to study while their husbands were working away to provide financial support for the family. These five women were all in a similar age group, from 37 to 46, and born into relatively poor families with little education. They had already moved from the countryside to my hometown where the key school<sup>22</sup> was located. Each of them rents an apartment near the key high school. During the interviews, they all, to different extents, emphasised their role as mothers by putting their child's development in first place and, conversely,

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<sup>22</sup> In the Chinese context, three-year high school was seen as a key stage for students, because whether one can access to higher education is largely dependent on the student's final scores at the final year of high school study.

downplayed their own role as wives with a married life. As a result, they constantly talked about their children rather than their relationships with their living-away husbands.

Followed the traditional Chinese culture of showing respect for older people who, in this case, spent time and made efforts to help me find the prospective participants, I, sometimes, felt out of control with respect to being introduced to a range of similar participants by them. However, unexpectedly from this method, I was benefitting from recruiting the group of 'study mothers,' and this allowed me to design the cases studies based on their experiences in LAT relationships, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 6. Nevertheless, when I understood fully that the diversity of data would be conditioned by the recruitment process, I addressed this during the course of doing fieldwork, by ensuring that I had wider social connections where possible, in order to gain as much diversity in the sample as possible.

In addition, looking for participants through personal connections has often given the intermediaries' power in 'interpreting' my research in his/her own way, and making their own decisions about who would be most appropriate to involve. Initially, I talked about my research to the intermediaries in exactly the same way as I illustrated it in the information sheet (see Appendix 2), hoping to avoid or minimise misunderstandings between me, my intermediaries and the prospective participants. However, things did not always go smoothly as I expected them to. One day, my aunt, who has a wide friendship circle, had contacted a group of 'fake participants' who intended to invent stories to become my research participants. With hindsight, this was partly because she viewed my research interviews as being like school homework that teachers often ask students to finish during the summer period. At that time, I realised that the ways in which people understand and interpret certain things in the process of fieldwork are different.

More importantly, the reasoning behind finding 'fake participants', I speculated, is in relation to the social bias and attitudes towards couples living apart in China, particularly in rural China where my hometown is based. Given that a stable and 'normal' family should be seen to include two heterosexual people with dependent children living in the same household, people, especially in my parents' generation, told me that it would be shameful if a woman's husband did not go home every day. Even though they lived apart for better

living standards, in fact, it was more about not having a choice. There is a famous saying in China that 'family ugliness must not be aired' (in Chinese: *jiachou buke waiyang*). Therefore, the potential 'real' LAT participants might have some reservations about being part of the research, due to the sensitive nature of LATs. In addition, they may also feel reluctant to talk about their private lives especially to me, a stranger to them, and thereby, my aunt tried to help me find people who were 'making up stories'. Although I really appreciated my aunt's kindness, unfortunately, I had to rectify this mistake and refuse to interview them. At this point, I then realised how sensitive my research topic was for married Chinese women.

Considering this, I slightly altered my explanation of my research to my intermediaries who were helping me informally, saying that I was in fact studying the life experiences of women whose partners work and live away from home. I also gave some illustrations of couples living apart, such as 'study mothers' and military wives. The idea behind this was to minimise the sensitivity of my research and clarify that the focus of my research was on women's different life histories, rather than on personal privacy and intimacy specifically. Although I was aware of the ethical dilemma involved in this tactical change of wording, sometimes the 'specific contexts and circumstances' in where we are embedded informed our decision (Mauthner et al., 2002: 6). As Gabb (2008: 10) states about her research: a balancing act has to be achieved between wanting to give accurate information about the study (an ethical necessity) and not wanting to scare people off (so for me, pragmatically, I needed participants to want to take part). This means that the term 'sexual intimacy' needed to be carefully used in descriptions of the project so as to prevent it from raising anxieties with participants.

After slight changes had been made in terms of wording, 13 participants, were recruited in my hometown, Liaoning province. Mostly they were located in the category of working class due to unemployment and a lower educational level. It can be seen that my personal fieldwork experience further corroborates the idea of the importance of using personal connections in approaching the potential research participants. The intermediaries, in particular, played an important role not only in initially approaching these somewhat inaccessible, to me at least, people, but also in linking and building mutual trust between the researcher and the researched, considering my identity at the time of the interviews, as a young unmarried woman who had spent years in a Western country studying for a higher

education degree. For example, this was evident when participants read the informed consent form (see Appendix 3) before interviews, as those who were recruited by myself, my sisters, or my parents signed the form without hesitation. On the contrary, people tended to be more cautious if they knew little about me or knew that I was not close to the other intermediaries involved, and thus they spent a little more time in reading and considering all the list of conditions.

**Table 1.2 Table of Participants' Information**

Locality	Gender	Age Group	Child(less)	Relationship Status	
Beijing (N =22)	Women, N =18	23–34, N =15 35–44, N =0 45–57, N =3	Children, N =4 Childless, N =14	Married LAT, N =11	23–34, N =8
					35–44, N = 0
					45–57, N = 3
				Dating LAT, N =7	23–34, N =7
					35–44, N =0
					45–57, N =0
	Men, N =4	25–34, N =2 35–44, N =1 45–57, N =1	Children, N =3 Childless, N =1	Married LAT, N =3	25–34, N =1
					35–44, N =1
					45–57, N =1
				Dating LAT, N =1	25–34, N =1
				35–44, N =0	
				45–57, N =0	
Liaoning (N =17)	Women, N =17	23–34, N =5 35–44, N =6 45–57, N =6	Children, N =13 Childless, N =4	Married LAT, N =13	25–34, N =1
					35–44, N =6
					45–57, N =6
	Men, N =0			Dating LAT, N =4	25–34, N =4
					35–44, N =0
					45–57, N =0

Therefore, in total, 39 participants (including four men), aged between 23 and 57, were recruited through WeChat, meeting by chance in the field, and personal networks (as seen in Table 1.2). They varied in social backgrounds, age, educational level, and marital status, which has provided diverse experiences in relation to LAT relationships for my sample (more

detailed information about all the participants' demographic information can be seen in Appendix 4). Although 'there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry' (Patton, 2002: 244), the number in a sample is subject to external constraints, such as time and financial resources. I stopped recruiting, and later interviewing, on the grounds that I felt I had enough participants and subsequent data to allow me to answer my research questions in an informed manner (Bryman, 2016; Guest et al., 2006; Mason, 2010).

However, as I have already commented on, I was also aware that there was a lack of the voices of men, but also children in particular, in my sample, as the scope of this research is confined largely to women's experiences. Due to time limits, children were not included because they were under 18 and remained at school studying. Therefore, limited knowledge was known to me in relation to their opinions on their parents living apart and how this family living arrangement may influence their perceptions to marriage and family life. However, this could be another future direction for my research to engage in.

### **3.3.2 Conducting Interviews**

I returned to China in June 2016 to do my fieldwork and finished data collection in September 2016. In total, 39 people who had a partner living somewhere else were recruited, with 22 people being interviewed in Beijing during June and July of 2016 and the rest (17) in my hometown, Liaoning province, from August to September 2016. Interviews took on average ninety minutes. Specifically, people who had actively contacted me and expressed interest in my research talked for much longer than those who were approached through multiple layers of intermediaries. But, in general, because they had all agreed to be interviewed, they tended to be cooperative. Some participants, such as Rosy, Hua, and Mei, clearly expressed their interest in my research findings once I finished my PhD study, and were willing to keep in touch with me after the interviews if any further information was required.

#### **3.3.2.1 Scheduling Appointments**

Normally I proactively contacted people three to five days in advance to set the interview time and place whenever and wherever they felt it to be comfortable and convenient. With regards to the people I enlisted through WeChat, they were young, well-educated people

with paid jobs (also referred to as 'white collar'). Therefore, public places such as coffee shops were the primary choice for them, apart from two participants who met me in their offices due to time constraints. When we met in a coffee shop, I often offered to buy them a drink to show my respect and appreciation. Some interviews were conducted in their own homes. Some participants chose places near to them, whereas others found a halfway point between us, considering that I was not local and thus might not be familiar with public transport routes in Beijing<sup>23</sup>.

When it came to people recruited by chance, I introduced myself and the research project in a polite way when we first met. In general, they were seen to want to be cooperative, otherwise, they could have refused my invitation to take part in the research interview. With regard to the people I recruited through personal social networks, it was often the intermediaries who arranged the interview time and place with the prospective interviewees, and then informed me. Although I had no idea about my participants' backgrounds until I met them on the day of the interview, they still expressed a sense of trust in me and were willing to talk about their personal experiences if they knew I was close to the intermediaries.

However, if there were several links between me and the prospective participants, to some extent, this created barriers to proceeding with our interviews, characterised by providing brief information and having ambiguous attitudes to being involved. For instance, one of my intermediaries was a friend of my father, Fuyue, whom I had never met. She gave prospective participants' contact details to my father, who passed them on to me, leaving me alone to contact them to arrange interviews. Under these circumstances, building rapport became particularly important during the first phone call. However, some people asked me to introduce the research project over the phone as they were still not sure about what I was going to do with the interviews. Obviously, there was a gap between information receiving, reproducing and the second transmission. The reason why people were reluctant to talk openly was partly due to the unclear information that the intermediaries gave them,

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<sup>23</sup> Beijing Subway has extended from 7 lines in 2008 to 18 lines and 334 stations at the time I conducted my fieldwork in 2016.

or because of the several links connecting us, which caused people to view me as less trustworthy.

Owing to the salient role played by the first impression (Goffman, 1959), it is important to acknowledge that our sex, age, skin colour, accent and so on are all likely to have an effect on how we are seen by respondents, and this will subsequently affect the data we collect (Letherby, 2003: 109). Even though my interviews were conducted over summer, I avoided wearing crop tops or flip-flops to show my respect to my research participants. Instead, I dressed appropriately with the aim of expecting them to take me and my research interviews as seriously, though I realised that such decisions taken on what to wear for an interview have gendered implications. I also paid extra attention to punctuality. In most cases, I arrived at the interview venue<sup>24</sup> at least ten minutes earlier than the arranged time, to go through my topic cards in case I forgot any questions that I should ask. However, one time, I was 10 minutes late to meet Mei, a 34-year-old professional engineer, in a restaurant at 6pm. This was because I got lost in a modern shopping mall where the restaurant was located. I started with a sincere apology when I saw her. Yet her reaction was really understanding, and she said that being 10 minutes late does not count as 'being late' in Beijing.

Unexpectedly, she offered me a proper dinner, perhaps because she knew I was a young full-time doctoral student. In that situation, it was really difficult for me to refuse such kindness, so I accepted it. I ought to have been pleased because my participant (a stranger to me) wanted to spend more time with me, rather than just a short time for a cup of tea. However, her paying put me in her debt, and therefore, I invited her to have a drink after dinner so that I could not only carefully listen to her stories in a quiet atmosphere but also return her favour. We spent nearly six hours together that evening, and after knowing that I was alone in Beijing for research, she even gave me a ride home for my safety after our interview finished at midnight. So, out of courtesy, I accepted her offer and thanked for her kindness.

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<sup>24</sup> This only refers to the places where interviews were conducted outside participants' homes and offices.



### 3.3.2.2 Building Rapport

Rapport building was seen as important for feminist research to break the stereotype of unbalanced power relations between the researcher and the researched (Oakley, 1981; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Reeves, 2010). As I never met them before (except Nan, 24 and Yunyue, 24), I started with casual conversation topics, such as: How did you get here [the place of interview]? Where are you from? Do you like Beijing? The idea behind this was to make the participants feel relaxed and comfortable. However, as for people recruited through WeChat, initial rapport building was developed when I could access their profiles and check out their current status on Moments (in Chinese: peng you quan) for example, if they felt comfortable presenting their social life. In the same way, they might also have a first impression of me, before the interviews, by checking my activity log on WeChat Moments. The reciprocal nature of sharing with the aid of digital communication technology potentially facilitates rapport building and has implications for how the usage of social media can change the research process (Lunnay et al., 2015).

Then, I gave a brief introduction about myself and my research project, alongside a detailed information sheet (see Appendix 2). Noticeably, interviewing for academic purposes in China is quite new to people, especially those who are under-educated or older (Liu, 2007). Some people treated interviews seriously and assumed it would happen to 'successful people' who need to be presented and reported in the media (Tang, 2009). Therefore, some of my participants questioned their skill in narrating stories, whereas others thought that their personal stories were not worth being interviewed about, and thus they were afraid of bringing troubles to me. In these cases, I assured them that the interview was more like a 'conversation' and there were no right or wrong answers in relation to the questions I asked.

Throughout the interviews, we communicated in Mandarin Chinese and in the local dialect, particularly with my hometown (older) participants. At the start of each interview, they were asked to give a brief introduction about themselves, as well as their partner. This was meant to put them at ease by creating an atmosphere where the participant clearly knew all the answers and thus 'felt knowledgeable' (Reinharz, 1992: 25). In addition, I also kept a notebook with me so as to write down any important clues that they mentioned or non-

verbal indicators such as facial expressions and body language. I then started by asking about their own stories of meeting their partner. I always reminded myself that the main task for me was concentrating on the interview process and, if necessary, probing, hinting, and asking questions allow me to gather as much data as I could.

### **3.3.3 Positionality and Reflexivity**

In feminist methodology, reflexivity, which involves 'self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self', is often seen as crucial in understanding and making sense of the lives of others (England, 1994: 244; see also Cotterill and Letherby, 1993). Through reflexivity, one of the common issues for researchers is to examine the extent to which similarities or differences between researcher and researched in characteristics such as gender, age, class and sexuality influence research relationships and knowledge construction (Cotterill, 1992; Finch, 1984; Ribbens, 1989; Song and Parker, 1995). In this research, my self-reflections were evident in the choice of research topics, the methods of doing research, recruitment strategies, as well as the process of data analysis. However, some scholars are critical of placing more emphasis on the researcher's own positionality (Finlay, 2002) as this may potentially cause the silence of the researched (Smith, 1987). Therefore, a balance was sought of necessity between a desire to listen to the stories of those being researched and reflecting on my own as a researcher (Jamieson, 2011).

There is a very established and still growing body of research on positionality and the researcher/researched relationship in qualitative research (Corradi, 1991; Letherby, 2015; Stanley, 1993). Stanley (1993: 49) argued: 'research is contextual, situational, and specific, and [...] will differ systematically according to the social location (as gendered, raced, classed, sexualised person) of the particular knowledge-producer'. As previously mentioned, the participants in this research possess a wide range of social attributes in terms of age (23–57 years), occupations (for example, graduate students, professionals, housewives, nurses, public servants, teachers, and the retired), educational background (from primary school to university degrees), marital status (for example, unmarried or married), and family background (ranging from a rural farming family to an upper-middle-class family). It should be noted that, during the fieldwork, I was a twenty-something unmarried doctoral student

who had been studying in the UK for many years. The wide differences in participants' social attributes made me aware, both during and after the interviews, that my positionality as a researcher was not fixed, but fluid, subject to constant negotiation between all parties. Therefore, it was not reasonable to play a 'one-size-fits-all' role regarding my own identity and location within all 39 interviews, but instead, more roles than expected were needed (Jamieson et al., 2011).

### **3.3.3.1 Insider/Outsider Issues: Chinese Woman Interviews Chinese Woman**

During the research process, as a Chinese woman who has some similar experiences of a LAT relationship, I was more of an insider than at other times, who through my own experience can empathise and understand their feelings better. Once participants realised that I was not a totally objective information-collector, my insider identity gave me numerous advantages, such as easy access to my research participants, rapport and trust-building, as well as being able to raise follow-up questions related to sex that are potentially sensitive given the Chinese context of the research. For example, Hua, a 31-year-old high-school teacher, talked about the potential influence of living separately on her intimate sexual relationship:

*I think in real life, the most straightforward influence on couples living separately is on sex. In my inner heart, I do feel that demands are not satisfied, especially when we don't have a child. But I can't do anything about it, sometimes, you know, I simply watch pornographic movies for relief (laughing). I can't do illegal things, and I have no idea how to resolve this stuff. Because the person is irreplaceable; he's a substantive subject. If you want to solve it, then you have to find replacements. But you know, we're too traditional to go outside to buy that kind of stuff [sex toys?].*

Despite these advantages of being seen as an insider, it sometimes made me experience particular quandaries, thereby changing the research relationship (Ryan-flood and Gill, 2009). For example, Yunyue was a 24-year-old woman studying foundation courses at a university in the north of England, while her boyfriend was working in Beijing. I was considered an insider, partly because she and I are the same age, and we have a mutual male friend, A. In addition, she was going to pursue a postgraduate degree at the university where I have studied before. These commonalities, to some degree, help me to develop a

sense of trust and openness, and therefore facilitate generating an equal and reciprocal relationship between me and Yunyue (Merriam et al., 2001). This can be seen from her openness to talk about her innermost thoughts and emotional feelings, as shown in below:

*I regret not accepting A at the very beginning. In fact, I should have accepted him when I was in the UK. I should be with him because I like him and then break up with my boyfriend.*

As she said, because I was a PhD student in women's studies, in some ways, she hoped that I could help her understand men's thoughts and further deduce whether '*He really loves me*'. Although I had informed my participants of their rights, such as asking questions, I felt vulnerable and uncomfortable with her 'demands', and therefore, a sense of being 'out of control' was generated. A possible explanation of this example, as Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry (2004: 364) noted, is that 'power is understood as not only top-down but dispersed throughout both research relationships and the research process'. In this case, Yunyue (24) expected that I, as a friend of A, could help her in her love life and therefore she treated me as a 'counsellor'. However, there is a tension here based on friendship or family affection sometimes in other cases in a research relationship, because 'the researcher's goal is to gather information' (Letherby, 2003: 126) rather than be a confidante, for example. However, what I could do in that situation, as Letherby (2003) suggests, was to tell her: 'I'm here to listen your experiences rather than giving you a straight answer in relation to your relationship issues'. Even if the researcher possesses counselling skills, research relationships are not counselling relationships (Letherby, 2003: 127).

In addition, it seems that shared gender plays a crucial role in establishing rapport and the social distance becomes potentially closer if a woman is interviewing women (Oakley, 1981). However, not everybody in the study felt able to talk freely to me simply on the basis of our shared gender, language, culture, and nationality (Riessman, 1987). In fact, other important social characteristics such as age, marital status, educational level, class, and geographical position, for example, may also influence how others see the researcher during the research process (Merriam et al., 2001; Ribbens, 1989; Riessman, 1987; Tang, 2002). In some cases, social attributes, such as family background, rendered me more or less of an outsider, especially when I interviewed rural, poor, or working-class people. Moreover, different

geographical locations of myself and the participants sometimes gave them an impression of viewing me as an outsider. For example, Xiajie, 27 years old, working in Beijing after she finished her postgraduate degree, stated:

*You, probably, as you're now in the UK, you may not understand the confusion and feelings of non-confidence in the future under such huge pressure on housing prices in cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou.*

Nevertheless, sometimes, my identity as a stranger and outsider for the participants can facilitate them talking about their relationships. For example, my interview with Anli (41), who married a divorced man with an 18-year-old daughter, served as a good illustration of this. I did not expect Anli to open herself up to me, as someone who clearly shares little (if any) in common with her in terms of age, education, and life experience. When I interviewed her at her home, I was quite surprised that she lit a cigarette and angrily flung the lighter aside, when she recalled her sadness of not getting pregnant after tubal sterilisation due to ectopic pregnancy. Then, she continued talking about how furious she was at her husband for refusing to attempt a test-tube baby. This made me aware that my outsider position can also become an asset with regard to eliciting detailed information from participants (Letherby, 2003). Another example of this can be seen from my interview with Linjuan (32), the only one with a boyfriend among her single-status female colleagues, worked as an accountant in Tianjin (a coastal city near Beijing) for three years, while her partner was in Beijing. At the end of the interview, she said that she had felt relaxed talking with me and that she has never talked about her personal stories to colleagues. This is consistent with Cotterill's view (1992: 596), who argued that respondents may feel easier talking to a 'friendly stranger' for exercising some control over the relationship. In this sense, it seems that my status, as a 'friendly stranger', 'otherness' in the sense of having studied abroad and being unlikely to meet her again in the future, that made her feel stress-free to offer lengthy explanation about her love relationship.

The above examples suggest that how I constructed myself did not always correspond with how others perceived, located, or positioned me. Instead, my position during interviews was more flexible and relational with the participants as the research progressed (Haraway,

1988, 1991; Wolf, 1996). That is to say that a researcher's role-playing (for example, 'insider', 'outsider', or 'friendly stranger') was subject to constant negotiation between all parties depending on social attributes and geographical location.

Although being an outsider may encourage participants to give more background or detailed information to researchers, one of the drawbacks that we should bear in mind is creating barriers to revealing full stories. This was more evident when I interviewed older and under-educated women. They were more likely to view me as an 'outsider' considering my status as an unmarried and well-educated young woman who has spent years in a Western country. Consequently, this prevented some of them from giving me detailed stories relating to their daily lives. In such cases, this form of the interview I have conceptualised as just like 'squeezing toothpaste' – I initiated a question, then they simply replied to it without elaborating at length. In this case, I needed to further prompt and ask follow-up questions.

### **3.3.3.2 Power Dynamics: Interviewing Men and Professionals**

As I stated earlier, originally, I did not plan to recruit men due to the scope of this research. But I decided to include them due to the valuable insights they offered to supplement and/or contradict women's opinions. Among four men participants, only one was aged under 30 while unmarried, and the rest all married with the oldest being aged 52.

Feminist researchers are critical of the positivist models of research, which characterise the detachment of the researcher, the exploitation of the research participants, and a one-way hierarchical process between the researcher and the research subject. The presumed dominant assumption that only the researcher can exercise power over the researched has historically been challenged, with the argument that, in fact, the researched can and do exercise power (Maynard, 1994; Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry, 2004), such as deciding what to talk about or refusing to answer.

Interview, as Plummer (1995) claimed, involves complex flows of power. Although I was aware of the potential impact of the power asymmetry between women and men in the research process (England, 1994; Wang, 2006), my inferior gender position due to age and socio-economic status, which some Chinese men believed to be the case, would be

somewhat redressed by my educational level as I had much greater knowledge on this research subject than those who were being researched. Indeed, my status as a doctoral student in the UK was often perceived as prestigious, which has led to the amplifying of our social distance. For example, during the course of interviewing with Qingshu (male, 30, married), I found out that both he and his wife attained postgraduate degrees a few years ago in the UK. They had dual careers and lived in two different cities in China. When talking about children's education, he claimed:

*Education, of course, is important to children. In fact, I'm not sensitive to it, and I think it doesn't matter where you study or what learning resources you have. It mainly depends on yourself. In other words, it remains useless to offer you high-quality educational resources if you have no talent for learning. So, I think parents should take on more responsibility in guiding them with a healthy view on the world, rather than cultivating or training them to be a person who is at the top of the class. They don't necessarily have to pursue a PhD degree like you (laughing).*

Letherby (2003) suggested that seeing things through others' eyes is highly valued in feminist research; however, it was I, the researcher, who took a leading part in initiating or altering interview questions and finally decided whose accounts would be presented. For this reason, to avoid a continuing focus on my education, I intentionally shifted topic at that particular moment, by asking 'Does your wife have the same attitude as you towards children's education?'

The unbalanced power dynamics also occurred in very visible ways when interviewing women of senior age groups with profession status. According to Merriam et al. (2001: 408), 'Chinese highly value education' based on the tenet that knowledge can bring about a change in fate. Children, especially those born during the one-child policy, have become the only hope for the whole family. In order to provide a good learning environment for her only son, Rosy's (46, married) family moved from their hometown to Beijing, when her son was around two or three years old. This reminded me of my past experience – I was also the only child in my family, and my parents sent me to Beijing when I was 15 to receive a good education. Therefore, I assumed that I might have been seen as an insider who very much understood the thoughts and values she had as a mother. However, Rosy said:

*Because you're not a mother, then you might be unlikely to understand our age of people's minds. You might even not be able to understand how I, as a Christian, view my family, work, and children. As a Christian, we see problems from a different perspective [compared to non-Christians]*

Her account reflected that, in reality, the researcher's identity can be counteracted by other differentiations, such as age, religious belief, marital status of the people being interviewed. More importantly, we need to take a specific cultural context into account when considering how the researcher is positioned in relation to the research process. For example, in the Chinese culture, older people are used to offering suggestions or exhorting young people by drawing by their own existing past experiences (Liu, 2007). On several occasions, female participants treated me as a 'pupil', or 'daughter' without a lot of life experience. For example, Rosy further suggested:

*I mean, seriously, when you get married in the future you must remember that the most important principle within a family is figuring out primary and secondary issues. A woman must admire, look up to, and obey her husband [...] only if you insist on this principle, there won't be any problem in your marital life.*

Considering traditional Chinese culture and customs, especially in terms of showing respect to people older than you, I did not interrupt or refute her argument, even though deep in my heart I completely disagreed and felt disappointed. On the contrary, I maintained a dignified silence and was modest to listen to her. Under such circumstances, I felt that the power between myself and the participants was negotiated throughout the interviews, where the researcher may have had the ultimate control in asking questions but the researched could express their attitudes through their accounts and questions, or even instruct me at times. In retrospect, I wondered how much control I could exert in that situation in particular and, ethically, what kind of choices I was able to make due to this shifting power relationship.

### **3.3.3.3 Research Place and Space**

In addition to the social attributes that I have discussed above, the places of interview also have a significant effect on the power dynamics between the researcher and researched



(Tang, 2002). In this research, it was up to the participants who determined where an interview was conducted and where they felt to be most comfortable and convenient. Therefore, our interview places not only include private settings (for example, the participant's home or office) but also public places, such as coffee shops and restaurants.

However, it is important to be aware of the potential risk of interviewing people in public places where both the researcher and the researched may experience some degree of vulnerability. One afternoon in Costa Coffee in Beijing, when Yunyue (24, unmarried) and I had been talking for nearly 15 minutes, a young salesman disturbed our conversation by saying: *'Can I borrow you five minutes to allow me to introduce a magical product?'* At that time, I was immersed in work, while my participant was trying to recall her memories in relation to the hard times she had when she first went to the UK in 2015. So, it was, indeed, an annoying moment and I straightforwardly refused his request. To be honest, I have no idea why he approached us, as obviously we were not the only customers at that moment. I assumed that my determined look and attitude had scared the salesmen off. But much more surprisingly, about 20 minutes later, another salesman came to us to promote his product, while Yunyue was describing her story about a 'scumbag' guy she had met and knew. Perhaps because she had seen my attitude to the last interruption, or she also felt annoyed, but this time it was Yunyue who first said *'Sorry, we're busy with interviewing'*. Although Yunyue continued narrating after being interrupted again, the sense of feeling out of control over the choice of the interview venue made me very worry that this group of people would come again. These experiences of being interrupted allowed me to realise the potential issues that could arise between gender position and a (public) research location, in that I doubt the men would have approached us and acted as they did, if I was not a woman.

Moving interview places to somewhere where people might be less likely to be bothered (such as the participant's home) is also problematic, though the participants may often feel empowerment. When my aunt took me to her friend Yafang's (51, married) home, there were already two of her relatives there chatting to each other. As the interview started, I still did not see their intention to leave. I could not wait but started the interview while having two 'spectators'. It was quite strange when my participant recalled her memories while asking her relatives to double check and trying to bring them into this interview. To

some degree, the presence of other people during interviews can often 'contaminate' the whole process or turn the interview into a collective enterprise (Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry, 2004: 375). Although I asked each research participant to decide where they would like to be interviewed and where they felt comfortable, this sometimes had placed me in a vulnerable position regarding the control of the interview space.

Another example of this can be seen from the interview with Liangjing (45, married) who lived with her 17-year-old son in a beauty salon which she ran. Our conversation was interrupted three times by different customers who came to receive regular acupuncture treatment for weight loss. To be fair, unlike the case of the salesmen, when I could turn people out of the door, in this situation, neither I nor Liangjing could stop customers receiving treatment. Under such circumstances, I felt completely powerless and a clear hierarchical relationship existed, especially when my participant realised the value of herself – to her customers who relied on her treatment, and to me, who was waiting for her stories. Therefore, what I could do was to pause the recorder, hoping she would finish the work as soon as she could. Meantime, I needed to re-negotiate the interview process by thinking and, if necessary, adjusting the way in which questions were asked in the hope that she could somehow articulate her own responses. Although feminist researchers have argued that household space has traditionally oppresses women, in some situations, domestic space is also a site of resistance where the respondent often feels powerful (Thapar-Bjorkert and Henry, 2004: 373).

Likewise, when I was invited to conduct an interview in the participant's home, people treated me in different ways than if it were in a public place, which can reflect the relationship between the researcher and researched. Sometimes I was treated as an 'important guest' and served with drinks and fruit because I was told that I was the first doctoral researcher visiting her home. However, others treated me in a quite different manner. For example, I interviewed Pingping, a 45-year-old housewife living by sewing at home, while her husband worked away. During the interview, she continuously sewed a dress for at least 15 minutes, without having eye contact with me. I could not ask her to stop sewing as it is seen as an impolite behaviour to ask people, particularly those who are older than me, to do something against their will. This made me wonder about the reasons why she agreed to be interviewed. Was it about doing the intermediary a favour? Or

perhaps my young age gave her the impression that I was an unimportant person who came to her home to 'steal' or 'peep' into her private life.

As an example of having to respond to a situation, on the spot, I knew that talking about children is a topic that any mother is unlikely to refuse (Tang, 2002). Thus, I tried to avert her gaze by talking about her daughter, whose age was similar to mine, with the hope of gaining her interest and getting back on track. She finally glanced up. This familiarity with the Chinese context, indeed, helped me in balancing the power relationship between the interviewees and myself. Although she then bent her head and continued with her sewing, her reactions at least told me that this interview was not putting her under pressure.

Through thinking back on the tensions between being viewed as an insider and outsider that I have felt in my experience interviewing LAT people, I found that the researcher may encounter challenges and feel vulnerable to unexpected events, while the participants can exercise power in a number of ways. I realised that the fieldwork site itself may constantly throw up issues that the researcher has to deal with on the spot and it is only afterwards that they can reflect on how the methodological issues actually played out during the research process, and consider the ethical aspects potentially raised (Elwood and Martin, 2000; Leyshon, 2002).

### **3.4 After the Fieldwork: Data Processing and Analysis**

The first thing I did after each interview was to write down field notes as this offered me the opportunity to document my initial feelings and views on the whole interview process from the perspective of a researcher. It also enabled me to stand back to review and amend the interview questions if necessary (Arthur et al., 2014). Carter (2010: 57) noted that this method can support the claim that any argument made by the researcher was 'taken in the context of how it was said and meant by the interviewee.'

Normally, I recorded for myself general impressions on the interviews, issues that may have implications for later fieldwork, and, if possible, any new ideas or topics they generated. In this way, through continuously reviewing my field notes, together with carefully listening to the recorded interviews, I re-arranged and tailored the interview questions in order to refine my research. For example, questions about self-sacrifice, and domestic labour were

added as these topics were frequently referred to by my (middle-aged married) participants and I presumed they would be worth exploring. However, on several occasions, I was not able to immediately take notes because of three successive interviews in one afternoon. In such cases, I used voice memos on my phone to quickly record some initial thoughts.

Regarding the 39 interviews, on average each interview lasted 90 minutes, with the longest being over three hours. Despite the time-consuming process of transcription, I transcribed audio recording to text verbatim and word-by-word in Chinese, thereby being aware of the similarities and differences between the recordings and the text.

As I noted at the start of this chapter, in accordance with my research questions and methodological stance, an inductive thematic analysis approach was employed to analyse the qualitative data. Although thematic analysis is widely used, especially in qualitative research, there is little agreement about the approach and the detail of analysis has rarely been reported until recently. Therefore, the approach to thematic analysis that this research takes is inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006). During the process of transcription, I highlighted some quotes in different colours and manually generated initial codes that appeared interesting and were relevant to my research questions. Codes were also generated meticulously in light of repetitions, similarities, and differences from the texts by reading them thoroughly (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). In addition, I was also aware of Chinese idioms and cultural connotations emerging from the data under the specific research context of China. The combination of transcription with coding development was efficient and informed the early stages of my data analysis.

However, the coding process is not linear; instead, it involves a constant moving back and forth between each interview and across the subsequent data. When all the interview data had been transcribed and codes produced in the local language, I read through the transcripts line by line, and a closer examination of the texts was required to make sure that all the data had been coded and the relations between codes were collated. This was then followed by identifying potential common themes. By doing so, I created a new document using Microsoft Word in which I listed all the codes that I had created from the transcripts. In order to form different themes (and sub-themes), they were grouped and classified in light of *internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity* (Patton, 1990). This means that

‘data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 20). Again, this was done through carefully re-reading the transcripts and re-examining codes. As a result, four themes (dating and marital practice, agency, family practices, and intimacy) were generated.

Before I proceeded to further data analysis, one important step was to ‘refine’ the essence of each theme and ‘define’ what the scope of each theme captures and why. The purpose of doing so is to think about how these themes may fit into and answer my overall research questions. Since ‘neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society would be understood without understanding both’ (Mills, 1959: 3), I located each participant’s account within a certain social and historical context, in order to understand the meanings behind separation in contemporary China.

As a native Chinese-speaking researcher whose research participants are all Chinese, we communicated in Mandarin Chinese during interviews. Therefore, translation of participants’ accounts to (British) English was crucial for the purpose of data analysis and thesis writing. This is to say that the decisions regarding how to translate and what to translate have become a methodological issue (Chin, 2018; Temple and Young, 2004). However, I found that the practice of translation in qualitative research has been largely overlooked. My triple role as researcher, transcriber, and translator allowed me to re-consider the power relations between the researcher and the people being researched.

Due to the increasingly mobility of both the researcher and researched, it is not rational to assume that the ‘researcher, the researched, and the audience are from the same ethnic background or live in the same country’ (Kim, 2012: 133). When I read the Mandarin transcripts, I was critically reflexive about how I translated a Chinese word into English and decided to retain specific cultural implications by capturing ‘conceptual equivalence’, where the meanings of the text in my study in both Chinese and English are conceptually the same (Phillips, 1960; Mangen, 1999; see also Smith et al., 2008). This method, I think, was effective, especially when some words articulated by participants have no literal translation in English. To keep the nuances of the original data, literal equivalence was also offered by carefully transliterating (transcribing a letter or word into corresponding letters of a

different alphabet or language). The rationale of combining conceptual equivalence with text equivalence is to preserve both the reliability and the validity of the data so as to avoid linguistic difficulties in understanding (Smith et al., 2008). For example, there is no English equivalent of '*guo rizi*', so, I transliterated this term first as 'to pass the days to live' and then gave literally the meaning with the consideration of the context this word was given. When selected quotes were used to interpret meanings in this research, I use quotation marks to indicate that this is a direct quote from participants, with his/her name being given.

### **3.5 Summary**

Thinking back to my fieldwork, I found that there was a significant gap between theoretical knowledge on doing research and the dynamics and changeable research process in practice. On a personal level, no matter how many methodological textbooks I had read regarding doing qualitative social research, I was 'surprised' sometimes by events when I physically entered into the 'field' work. As researchers, we have to take on the challenges and consider our reactions to any obstacles encountered. This was evident when I was leaving for China regarding contacting the prospect participants and carrying out the interviews. Although my data collection process re-affirmed the importance of personal connections in approaching the research participants in the Chinese context, I challenged this method, as it could place researchers in a vulnerable position, due to specific Chinese culture and conventions regarding showing respects to people who are older and offer you a favour (by contacting potential participants). My finding also suggest that research location and sites can have an impact on power relations between the researcher and the researched and because of this, researchers need to be reflexive about processes and the contexts they are embedded in.

Throughout my interviewing experience, I realised that the researched can also exercise power in the ways they decide where to be interviewed and what to (or not to) talk about throughout the interview. In the meantime, I also acknowledged that the researcher does have ultimate control over the research process as a whole, especially when it comes to presenting research findings in a language that is different from the one used to collect

data. Moving between languages indicates the necessity of and significance in describing the translation procedures such as the choices and decisions that researchers make (Birbili, 2000). Therefore, I would argue that doing interviews in a context which is different from the one you present your findings needs to take the wider social and cultural context into account- both in practice in the field and in reflecting on the process afterwards. In the next chapters, I will present a panoramic view in relation to people's experiences of LAT relationships via four parts: the transformation of love and family relationships; agency and structure in LAT relationships; family practices and gender roles; and doing intimacy at a distance.

# **Chapter 4 Traditions and Modernities in Chinese Family under Individualisation: Dating Practices, Spouse Selection and Family Living Arrangements**

## **4.1 Introduction**

As I demonstrated in the literature review chapter, several social revolutions, such as the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the 1950s Marriage Law, 1978's economic reform and opening up policy, and the implementation of the one-child policy in 1979, have all had a profound effect on traditional family structures and patterns (Xie, 2013; Yan, 2003). In addition to this, it is incontrovertible that the wider context of globalisation, modernisation, and the processes of Western individualisation with an emphasis on the rise of the making of the individual also play a key part in shaping the differences in Chinese people's experiences in family life. Being exposed to these marked changes, the experiences of Chinese peoples' family lives have become a central focal point to research on how individualisation has taken place in collective Chinese society, with little (if any) previous exposure to the culture of individualism.

In response to recent transformations driven both by internal and external factors, this chapter aims to unpack the intricate ways in which people are faced with contradictions when ideas of 'traditional' and 'modern' values regarding marriage and family are implicated with each other. Informed by Carter and Duncan's (2018) framework on bricolage where people react to new circumstances by re-assembling both tradition and social division, I focus on the changes and continuities in relation to people's dating and marital experiences that have occurred in the rapidly changing Chinese society, which divided this chapter into three sections. In the following sections, I, firstly, interrogate the changes in dating practices by looking at how people 'search' for a marital partner across generations, and argue that the deinstitutionalisation of marriage, observed in some Western societies as a result of individualisation, where democratic forms of intimate relationships are widely celebrated, along with shaky prescribed gender roles, has not been seen under China's recent individualisation process. Instead, the historical and ideological



shifts in dating practices have, ironically, strengthened and further reinforced the social institution of marriage in Chinese culture. Given my special focus on the social and cultural context of China, I then revisit the cultural legacy of ‘status matching’ and interrogate how Chinese young people’s mate selection is shaped by and in turn, shapes the practices of marital hypergamy by looking at three aspects: material conditions, *hukou*<sup>25</sup> (household registration system), and age. This chapter concludes with a discussion on family living arrangements, with the intention of understanding how an individual’s autonomy in living their lives is often implicated within the hierarchical family system, where women may often face contradictions. By taking gender into account, this chapter, through the examination of women’s dating practices and family patterns, enriches the research on gendered experience within the process of individualisation in the collectivist Chinese context. This is especially in the context where traditional Confucian values on family can still dominate, but are also undermined, and thereby, this informs a wider Western literature on marriage and family life when it comes to the application of individualisation beyond the Western context.

## 4.2 Dating Practices across Generations

People’s experiences of family life have long been given great importance by researchers due to the primacy of the family (Jankowiak, 2002; Kam, 2015; Yan, 2003). Marriage, as a social institution, was seen as a universal practice and overwhelmingly patriarchal in the collectivist culture of China, where traditional family values were dominant. ‘The marriage is arranged on the orders of the parents through the words of the matchmakers’ (in Chinese: *fu mu zhi ming mei shuo zhi yan*) used to be a common regulatory principle of mate selection in traditional China (Wang and Nehring, 2014: 585). Once the agreement was made, lifelong marriage was greatly approved of and people were seen to be together until death departs them. Of the 39 participants in this research, over half of them (20) met their partner through introductions either by their parents or relatives. The following narrative from Jiangling (47, married), mother of two, serves as an exemplar of an arranged marriage

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<sup>25</sup> Hukou system was first implemented in 1951 to ask all households to be registered in the locale where they resided, with the aim of monitoring population migration and movements (for more details on the hukou system, see Chan and Zhang, 1999).

that has been predominant in traditional Chinese society, where parents often played the decisive role in their children's selection of marriage partner (Pimentel, 2000; Riley, 1994; Yan, 2003). She recounted:

*I'm from a small village in Baoji, Shanxi province. Due to my mum's traditional views, she arranged a wawaqin<sup>26</sup> for me when I was very young and received 480 RMB (around 56 GBP) from the groom's family, as my family was financially poor. I couldn't stand my classmates talking about this behind my back, so I dropped out of school after completing the third grade in primary school<sup>27</sup>, although I studied well and loved reading. After that, I went out to work. I had roasted melon seeds for living and earned 100 RMB (around 12 GBP) per month. But I hardly saved any money to return the bride price, because I also needed to eat and live. Therefore, I failed to break off this engagement. At that time, he [her husband] was 25, three years older than me, and said that he would do something unexpected if I did not marry him. I was afraid that he would hurt my family. For the sake of my family's happiness and safety, I decided to sacrifice myself, and married him at 22. Although I barely knew him, he was good to me, so we had our first child within a year of our marriage. Since my natal family and my husband's family lived near each other – it's about reputation – I told myself that 'now I'm married, so, I'm gonna become a good daughter-in-law, be nice to my husband's parents and my husband'. A year later, we had a daughter.*

Noticeably, even though Jiangling got married after 1950 when arranged marriage was officially abolished by the Chinese government, in reality, parents arranging a marriage for their children remained common, especially in the countryside. This reflects that how young women at that time negotiated and reacted to the implementation of the 1950's Marriage Law varies depending on personal and collective circumstances. In the above narrative, Jiangling was particularly vulnerable because she barely had any autonomy in her own marriage, either about the timing or about her choice of partner. Instead, the marriage was under the near-absolute control of her mother. Guided by the long-lasting Confucian tradition, family members were expected to fulfil the roles prescribed by gender relations under the traditional patriarchal family system. Therefore, the collective nature of marriage

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<sup>26</sup> *Wawaqin* (child marriage) was once popular in Imperial China, where parents pre-arranged a marriage for their children during their childhood, mainly as a way out of poverty. Since the founding of the PRC, it has been abolished legally, but it still exists, especially in some poor rural areas.

<sup>27</sup> The Chinese government did not initiate nine-year compulsory education until 1986, which includes six years of primary education and three years of middle school.

was emphasised by which people's marriage choices were shaped, whereas the desires and interests of individuals involved were largely marginalised during the early foundations of China (Yan, 2009). Therefore, marriage for Jiangling was not a personal issue; rather, it was in relation to family interests.

Considering that Jiangling was born into a poor family with other sisters and brothers, arranging a *wawaqin* and marrying her off could be considered a way of reducing the family's financial burden. The 480 RMB bride price given, therefore, was used to compensate Jiangling's family for the loss of her productive labour because, in rural China, women are an important source of labour just as much as men; they need to farm the land, do housework, and take care of the extended family, as well as, of course, have children, especially sons, in order to keep the family lineage alive, as demanded by the traditional patrilineal family system (Chu and Yu, 2010). Meanwhile, the bride price is also associated with women's subordinate status compared to their male counterparts, and society in general (Chambers, 2012).

In Confucian Chinese societies with a long tradition of patriarchal and patrilocal families, it was common practice for married women to move into their husband's household following a virilocal pattern (Jin et al., 2005). Therefore, even though Jiangling's natal family lived in the same village as her husband's family, she had to detach herself and move into her husband's family home after marriage. Given the fact that she was married, as she said, she persuaded herself to become a good wife and daughter-in-law. The changes in her attitude towards family between the time before she married (trying to break off the engagement) and afterwards (being nice to her husband and parents-in-law) were closely associated with the traditional Confucian ideology of gender relations. Under the patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal family system, Chinese women have historically been expected to become a 'virtuous wife and good mother' (*xian qi liang mu*), taking good care of their husband and children, as well as the family elders (Smits and Park, 2009).

Even though Jiangling was the only one of my participants who had been in an arranged marriage at a young age, the majority, especially those born before the reform era, entered an arranged marriage at 'marriageable' age – mostly in their early 20s. They often had only one relationship before they married. At that time, young people were still passive about their own relationships, and the most common way for people to meet their potential

marital partners was being introduced by relatives, colleagues or professional matchmakers. Although free-choice marriage has officially been promoted since 1950, marriage was often practised in a traditional way, where love or intimacy was not given emphasis and parents' role in their children's partner-selecting and marriage-related decisions was decisive, at least until the post-reform era (1978 onwards) (Xu and Whyte, 1990; Yang, 2017b). One plausible reason for the popularity of being introduced to a prospect partner is related to the 'transitional period' when young people were on the one hand deeply influenced by traditional arranged marriage and, on the other hand, had to 'adapt to the new values in marriage formation' (Yang, 2017: 119b).

Under China's transformation in economic, social and cultural terms since the opening-up policy in late 1970s, the government's intervention into individual private life has greatly weakened, with more autonomy and freedom in relation to marital experiences being exercised by people. For example, dating before marriage has become a common practice for young people in contemporary China, whereas this did not hold a central place during Mao's era (Whyte and Xu, 1990). In reality, arranged marriage has been overwhelmingly replaced by free-choice marriage based on mutual attraction and love, at least in China's modern cities (Xu, 1994). My data with people in the younger generation support this argument. The rest of my participants (19) preferred to meet their prospective partner by themselves naturally either in schools, workplaces or on other occasions. Most of them were born after the 1980s and established dating relationships during the 2000s. For example, Linjuan (32, unmarried) and her boyfriend were business partners and later established a dating relationship. She commented on blind dating and dating via other's introduction:

*I would never ever agree to this. I always felt uncomfortable when other people introduced someone [potential partner] to me. I just can't accept this kind of purpose-oriented dating. It's fine when two people get to know and become familiar with each other unconsciously.*

Noticeably, Beibei (28, married) a local Beijinger, met her partner via an introduction, but she agreed that dating someone by this method was not as common as it used to be:

*Only a few people like me may accept xiangqin (a blind date) or rely on introductions to find a marriage partner. People in my age group often*

*reject and disagree with this way [of dating]. They prefer meeting [potential partners] by themselves or through attending parties.*

Compared to Jiangling's generation, the younger generation, who are more likely to be exposed to an increasing individualism and Western culture, reveals more subjective desire to self-select a prospective partner based on freedom of choice (Blair and Madigan, 2012). The generational differences in dating practices are particularly pertinent to the 'increased participation of women in the paid labour force and greater equality in educational opportunities' (Piotrowski et al., 2016: 130). In conjunction with economic reform, education in China also experience massive expansion in 1980s. Previous studies have shown that women now exceed men in terms of the numbers of enrolment and competition rates in Chinese colleges and universities (Li, 1994; Wu and Zhang, 2010). Improving access to education for women, combined with a significantly rising rates of female labour-market participation, make women becoming more economically independent and in practice having more egalitarian attitudes concerning gender roles. This sentiment was further echoed by Beibei (28), who described her views on caring:

*I like a man who can take care of himself. My ideology is that don't count on me to take care of you. Of course, I will look after you, but the prerequisite is that I want to. You can't leave everything to me naturally. You [her husband] should realise this.*

While Chinese young people seem to have a clear picture regarding how to 'search' for a marital partner, the emphasis on self-selecting and meeting prospective marital partners does not mean parents' introductions are being excluded. In urban China, parents still have a say in their children's marriage, and some even go beyond just an actual introduction of a potential spouse (Riley, 1994). In my data, Beibei (28), married her husband who is a military officer in the northwest of the country, through her mother's introduction. When she reached 26, her parents, she said, were 'crazy' to find potential marriage partners for her 'before she was left behind [on the marriage market]'. One time, when Beibei's parents went on a trip, they met other people who had a son of 'marriageable age' and they exchanged their children's WeChat accounts in the absence of the two children. In this way,

both sets of parents acted as the go-between and provided their children with the time and space to get to know each other privately.

Indeed, Chinese parents' involvement in their adult children's love relationship still exists, and their advice on spouse selections is still sometimes also valued by their children (Pimentel, 2000; Yan, 2016). This has been witnessed by the rising popularity of Chinese dating TV reality shows (for example, *Chinese dating with the parents*<sup>28</sup>) where unmarried men and women can be seen to bring their parents together on the stage to observe and give advice about their date. In addition, recent years have also seen the rising incidence of 'Marriage Markets' in metropolitan settings, including Shanghai, where anxious parents gather together at the People's Park to trade information about their adult children of 'marriageable age'.

Within the context of increasing choice of a dating partner, one plausible reason for the revival of traditional dating practices, characterised as being introduced to one's prospective partner, can be linked to the lack of a dating culture in urban China where demanding work schedules often prevent people from expanding their social circle. Illouz's (2007, 2012) work on love and 'cold intimacies' gives an explicit explanation for the impact of consumerism on people's process of decision-making in relation to intimate relationships. She argues that the abundance of 'free' choices (enabled and encouraged by diverse dating sites and apps, for example) has irrevocably incurred a sense of insecurity and uncertainty, especially in big cities, that the possibilities for people meeting 'Mr or Mrs Right' are incredibly low, whereas the possibility of making wrong decisions are increasingly high. Under such circumstance, people tend to make a romantic decision largely based on rational and instrumental calculations.

However, it is not my intention to support Illouz's account of people's coupling decisions where an individualised and purposeful approach is emphasised, without the consideration of wider frameworks. As shown in my data, how people make decisions regarding whom to date and marry with is not completely de-embedded from, but is related to the contexts

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<sup>28</sup> *Chinese dating with the parents* (in Chinese: *Zhong guo shi xiang qin*, which literally means Chinese-style blind date), was first broadcast in 2016. The show provides young people with a platform to find a marriage opportunity, during which in-depth communications on partner choice between parents and their young-adult children can be seen to take place. For discussion on the reality dating TV shows, see Yang (2017b).

they live within. The framework of bricolage is useful here in understanding how people make decisions by drawing on both 'traditional and 'modern' practices. As Carter and Duncan (2018:211) refer to bricolage as 'the piecing together, assembling and combining of multifarious resources and types of information to reduce cognitive effort in creating something new as a response to change.' In this study, Beibei aspires to and is still keen to develop a romantic love relationship, and so, her parents' involvement and advice was often welcomed and appreciated. In addition to strong and close familial relations, she considered her parents' introduction as a reliable and functional way to meet a potentially 'right' dating partner, so as to eventually secure a husband. Therefore, she was grateful to her mother for the introduction. The combination of traditional dating practices -being introduced to her partner, and new ways of developing relationships with the aid of social media, offers them more autonomy and personal space to get to know each other. 'After texting each other three consecutive days, Beibei said, *I looked forward to meeting up when possible.*' This shows that the final decision regarding whether to start a love relationship and how far their relationship can go is largely dependent on each party's willingness. Thus, prominence was given to mutual affection and love in a dating relationship, leading to intimacy being maintained, instead of being perceived as 'cold'.

Ironically, the ideological shifts in dating practices suggest that the social institution of marriage in China still has strong purchase, so that young people, who remain single at 'marriageable age', may feel pressured to have a (heterosexual) love relationship and end up getting married, ideally before 30. Under this circumstance, some parents would even take a full part in their adult children's relationship by introducing potential partners and arranging meetings for them. Yuqing (30), who was engaged at the time of interviews, openly criticised how the marriage norm has 'tailored' people's lifestyle:

*Because that [marriage] is a must-to-go life stage for most people, including giving a birth, bearing children and dealing with family issues. DINK<sup>29</sup> family hasn't been recognised in China, but commonly seen in USA and other more freedom countries. These societies are more open to individuals with different characteristics, but China holds lower tolerance toward individuals like that. Those people [who haven't got married] will be questioned by their close relatives. So, I think it is not always good to be like that [not getting*

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<sup>29</sup> DINK, an acronym for 'double income, no kids' family, is known as 丁克 (in Chinese: *ding ke*).

*married]. I was constrained by the Chinese social situations as a whole. If I can choose, I'll wait until 35 to get married, having more work experiences or doing a master's degree. But the Chinese society basically doesn't accept this [way of living].*

Yuqing's account shows that how people experience love relationships are closely linked to the wider contexts in which people are embedded. Although traditional marital formation primarily for the purpose of procreation has been abandoned, marriage and parenthood, in the context of Confucian familism are closely connected and seen as a rite of passage for the overwhelming majority, especially for women (Jones and Gubhaju, 2009). Non-traditional couple relationships, together with a diversity of forms of familial practices which have gained increasing visibility in some Western postmodern societies as a result of individualisation, can hardly get a foothold in societies where traditional family values on relationships are still pervasive.

### **4.3 Spouse Selection**

Love is often seen in the Western societies as the driver in the formation and development of intimate relationships. Therefore, this section goes further in this respect, and makes a closer examination of people's practise of partner selection. Firstly, I look at how the Western notion of 'love' is understood and experienced in a patriarchal society and through which gendered differences in values on mate selection are captured. This is given that the wider social and cultural context in which people are embedded has considerable implications for their dating practices and mate-choosing values (Chen et al., 2009; Yan, 2003). In the second half of this section, I take a closer examination of how material conditions, *hukou*, and age have an impact on contemporary Chinese people's spouse selection. In particular, generational differences in viewing men's material conditions were found in my data, with possible reasons being given in my interview data with people across generations. The examinations of to what extent Chinese people's intimate relationships have been transformed and how people's mate selection is negotiated, requires special attention to the specific social and cultural context where the traditional ideology of Confucian familism, and the rise of the individual, are placed together.



### 4.3.1 Love

Historically, the formation of a conjugal partnership in Chinese society was guided by the traditional matchmaking principle of ‘*men dang hu dui*’ (a marriage between families of equal social status) with a preference that the man’s family background should be slightly superior or hypergamous to that of the woman (Croll, 1981; Ting, 2014; Wang and Nehring, 2016). As I illustrated earlier in this chapter, being introduced to a prospective partner with a similar family background was often viewed as the common way before China’s economic reform era to start a marital relationship. This conjugal partnership was seen as formed largely based on practicality and the principle of primarily being for reproduction as informed by traditional family values (Jackson, 2013; Yan, 2010a; Wang and Nehring, 2014). As such, young people’s desire for developing love relationships before agreeing to a marriage was undermined and, instead, their partner choices were often subject to parents’ judgement and consent (Jankowiak et al., 2015). Therefore, some argue that love (*aiqing*), in a heterosexual relationship was largely missing before China’s reform, which was implemented in the late 1970s (Hsu, 1981; Zang, 2011).

In my data, many examples, especially from interviewing people who were born before the economic reform era, support the deprioritising of love experiences before marriage, while placing a great value on the matchmaking principle of ‘*men dang hu dui*’. For example, Wangyang (38, married) had a stable job in a local power-supply company and eventually married her husband, eight years older than her, who had a well-paid job as an oilfield worker, when she was 29 through her colleague’s introduction. They gave birth to a son in one year after their marriage. Wangyang’s parents agreed to her marriage considering that they were matched in terms of stable employment. However, before this, she had two relationships but were both eventually ended due to her parents’ objections. As she said:

*The first one had a job but soon became laid-off owing to reform<sup>30</sup>; the second one was doing business which they [parents] thought was not suitable.*

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<sup>30</sup> The reform of state-owned enterprises (SOE) started in late 1978, due to poor performance and labour redundancy. Life-long employment was no longer guaranteed. For more information on SOE reform, see Lin et al. (1998); Moore and Wen (2006).

In her case, Wangyang's marriage was detached from her personal feelings but followed the matchmaking principle through which 'unmatched' prospective partners who were not in close social and economic proximity to their own would be 'filtered out'. Another example can be seen from Hongli's (40, married) story. She was introduced to her future husband by a relative when she was 22. At that time, Hongli's husband was an electrician in a factory far from his hometown and went back specifically for this blind date. They spent two days together, and after that, they communicated in letters and a few phone calls and ended up marrying just three months later. Because there was a lack of dating culture throughout the Mao period, it was a common practice for people to try to get along with each other after they marriage – 'the dates came after the decision to marry' (Xu and Whyte, 1990: 716; see also Zarafonitis, 2017). When I asked her 'What did you value most from your prospective marriage partner?' she said, without thinking, '*having the skills to raise himself and [he is] in a good physical condition*'.

Taken together, the above examples seem to reaffirm that people in the pre-reform era of China barely linked love and intimacy with marriage, even if a lifelong heterosexual monogamous marriage was greatly practised as the social norm and was considered the ideal type of intimate relations in China. In this collectivist culture, love, which serves as the foundation of a marriage and marital stability in modern Western countries (Coontz, 2006; Lewis, 2001), at best, was seen as a necessary but not a sufficient prerequisite for a lasting relationship (Dion and Dion, 1988; Zang, 2011).

At that time, Chinese people often started a relationship with consideration of whether an individual had similar aspirations for their future (marital) life and if he/she had a determined motivation for working 'at it' (Hershatter, 2007). In this sense, practical love – 'counting certain considerations as reasons to act' was engaged and prioritised throughout marriage life (Frankfurt, 1999: 129). As illustrated by Xutong (40, married), who was also introduced by her relatives to her husband and ended up married without having any dating experience. She described her criteria for spouse selection with a commonly used idiom in spoken Chinese - '*guo rizi*' (transliterally meaning: to pass the days for live; literally meaning: living a life for fortune), which implies her expectation that a marital partner will work hard for a better life together in the future. In light of this practical form of love, young adults before the reform era often put familial responsibility first and thereby any consideration of

love and romantic relationships were placed within the wider context of their familial and societal obligations (Blair and Madigan, 2016). This suggests that how the idea of love is practised and understood are conditioned by specific social, historical and cultural contexts.

As a result of China's remarkable changes in social policies, cultural diversity and economic growth over the past several decades, some scholars have identified China's shifting practices of mate selection with a decline in the role of the traditional matchmaking principle of '*men dang hu dui*' (Blair and Madigan, 2016; Farrer, 2014; Mu and Xie, 2014). With women's increasing educational and employment attainment, the idea of getting married to ensure financial security is losing its power, whilst individualised values are identified and personal development and companionate love are highly prioritised (Yan, 2009). My data with people in the younger generation substantiate this argument. For example, Zhonglan (24, unmarried) was born into a well-off family and gave her own understanding of status matching, as the following excerpt shows:

*Men dang hu dui mainly applies to parents' resources. My parents are doing business. His [her boyfriend's] father is an official. Perhaps they're not rich compared to my family, but it doesn't only refer to money, it also includes human resources, social status and so on. Personally, I don't care much about this [...] it depends on whether and how much you want to stay with this man.*

A recent report<sup>31</sup> on the attitudes of Chinese young adults (18–35) to love and marriage indicates that people now prefer to find their future partner themselves to start a couple relationship, based on mutual affection and Western notions of love, with special emphasis on an individual's personality (*xingge*) and moral quality (*renpin*). In my study, for example, a *haokan* (good-looking) person who shares *gongtong yuyan* (common language) or habits could be of interest to many young people (such as Yuqing, 30, unmarried, and Xiajie, 27, unmarried, in my sample). In addition, Beibei (28, married) was attracted by her husband's sense of humour, although she was introduced to him by her mother.

Although the plurality of values in marriage and dating relationships can be seen as a signal of a transformation of intimacy, with desires for autonomous partner choice and love relationships being emphasised, there are gender differences regarding the desired

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<sup>31</sup> <http://sns.qnzs.youth.cn/css/docs/qnzsresearch0523.pdf>

characteristics or attributes of a partner. A national report (2017)<sup>32</sup> on Chinese people's values on marriage reveals that women, in general, are seen to pay more attention to men with sincerity, a promising career and good temper; whereas men seek out women with a perceived physical attractiveness, although they also highly value women with sincerity and a 'soft' personality. As revealed in my data, many young women during the interviews expressed a greater preference for more pragmatic qualities in a male partner, such as men's capacity for career progression and potential income. For example, Xinyi (27, married), working as a counsellor in a primary school, expected her husband, who was four years older than her, to have a steady and promising career path. She had even set goals and a plan for his career because, from her perspective, a man's career prospects were more important for the wellbeing of a family in the future. As she said:

*He's an attending doctor now. [I hope] he can progress to associate chief physician and then become a chief physician. I hope he can have higher aspirations. As for me, I don't care about my professional development and job titles. But he has to care. Because this is what men are supposed to do. He should take more responsibility and be more ambitious, especially professionally.*

Another example of gendered differences in career expectations is expressed from a male participant's perspective. Qingshu (30, married) graduated from the UK with a master's degree and was working in Beijing, while his wife stayed at home caring for children but later worked in an international accounting firm Deloitte in northern China. The following shows his attitude towards his wife's desire towards work:

*I'm probably a traditional man. I think it's good for you [his wife] to stay at home taking care of children. Because we don't lack money for living. How comfortable it is to stay at home. If you go out to work, it would be very hard due to work-related pressure. But I think she is the kind of person who has long-term plans, and she is a capable woman. If I ask her not to work, it may be unfair to her. So, I thought twice and decided to support her.*

In addition to men's low expectations of the career development for their female partners, ironically, women themselves also can be seen to have a lower level of ambition, although

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<sup>32</sup> <https://zj.qq.com/cross/20170829/80lpm4y2.html>

none of the women in my study wanted to be a full-time housewife, confining themselves entirely to the domestic sphere. Some participants do show a preference for gendered life patterns that men should be the breadwinner in the family and women should rely financially on their partner, with more emphasis being placed on housework for them, as informed by traditional family values and prescribed gender roles. For example, Beibei (28, married), working in a state-owned enterprise with relatively comprehensive welfare services compared to the private sector, claimed:

*It would be good if girls were not work-oriented. When I give birth, it's not a problem if I take maternity leave. However, you really don't know [what it is like to be] If you work in a private company. My work is not that busy, so I have time to take care of my family. I'm not a career-driven person and I just wanna to be a xian qi liang mu [virtuous wife and kind mother]. I think family is the key [in my life].*

A similar idea was echoed by Zhonglan (24, unmarried). At the time of our interview, she was preparing for the postgraduate admission test in Beijing. When talking about her career plan to become a teacher, she said:

*This is also good for my boyfriend. Because I'll stay at college [if I've been accepted], while he steps into society. He will progress faster than me and make a living in the society when I graduate, so, I can rely on him. He doesn't want me to be unemployed as I'd be lagging behind socially. He wished that I could find teaching-related job which [is seen to] have little pressure, no extra workload and very intellectual in nature.*

A national investigation report on Chinese people's dating and marital experience (2010)<sup>33</sup> found that male 'gong wu yuan' (civil servant) and female teacher roles have become increasingly popular, although men's overall expectations of their ideal female partner's career prospects and advancement are relatively low. The data, based on 32,676 survey responses from people aged 20–60, showed that nearly 40% of men wished their partner to be a teacher, partly because more flexible hours are available for women to take care of the family, whilst over half did not see that women's career development was important. Over

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<sup>33</sup> 2010 中国人婚恋状况调查报告 available at: <https://www.slideshare.net/dingli8888/2010-20111>

40% of women chose a civil servant as the ideal career for their partner, with the desire of having a stable family life.

Based on the above statistics together with my data, it seems to suggest that how people perceive their career path has often included consideration of the wellbeing of the family as a whole, and in doing so, a life-long marriage is established and maintained. Although I acknowledged that some women in my data indeed expressed strong career ambitions and work commitment, gendered expectation of a partner's career development has become a part of mate selection. I would argue that this is mainly due to the tension, between rapid economic development leading to the economic prospects of men being given prominence and the stability of familial obligations and roles prescribed by gender. Consequently, the gendered pattern of men working outside the home, whereas women remain confined to the domestic sphere, has reinforced and contributed to couples being involved in living apart together relationships. More detailed reasons for couples in LAT relationships will be discussed in the next Chapter 5.

### **4.3.2 Practices of Status Matching after Reform Era**

#### **4.3.2.1 Material Conditions**

Clearly, Chinese people's attitudes to mate selection values are undergoing significant changes, with more attention now being paid to a partner's 'internal' (*neizai*) qualities, such as personality, rather than 'external' (*waizai*) ones, such as family backgrounds (Pan, 2016). However, my data indicate that in reality, the ways how people select their marital partner are more complicated, in that their desire for intimacy and autonomy were socially sanctioned on the one hand while at the same time the idea of a compatible family background, originating from traditional matching values remain influential and are experienced by them.

Status hypergamy, an asymmetrical selection in which women marry men with a higher status in social and economic terms (Thornton and Lin, 1994; Xu et al., 2000), was historically achieved by women marrying men of higher education (Xie, 2013). In contemporary Chinese society, it is still seen as a desirable marital practice, especially after the economic reform era. The importance of a dating partner's material condition has exemplified in the following story from Zhonglan (24, unmarried). In spite of the long

distance (Zhonglan was in Beijing to pursue higher education while her boyfriend stayed in their hometown, Yantai, in Shandong province, after graduating with a bachelor's degree), they have been together for five years. During her interview, Zhonglan talked about her older cousin's marriage before her own love relationship. From the perspective of others, her older sister's marriage was seen as 'perfect', partly because she married a man with strong economic capital, living in a luxury home with a Rolls-Royce. When comparing her cousin's marriage, Zhonglan's mother hoped that she could at least find someone of equal social status to allow her to maintain her privilege, as the following extract shown:

*My mum asked me to find someone older than me, in other words, who had already survived in society with some financial savings. In doing so, at least my life wouldn't be very hard. As parents of a girl, their thoughts are understandable. For me, I don't deny that I would change in the future if I meet someone who's richer than him [her current boyfriend]. But now I haven't met them yet.*

The rise of autonomous partner choice and desire for fulfilling love relationships since the reform era does not exclude the impact of traditional values of matchmaking from people's mate selection criteria. Considering the roles that Chinese parents have traditionally played in their children's mate selection, some continue to actively engage in their dating relationships by passing on their thoughts, informed by traditional matchmaking principles, to their children, especially female offspring, by offering 'suggestions'. Even when faced with the disapproval and proffered 'suggestions' of others, the younger generation seem to have more autonomy in choosing their prospect marital partner, in comparison with Wangyang (38, married), who, as I note above, had to end her previously chosen relationships due to her parents' objections. However, Zhonglan did not deny the possibility of starting a new dating relationship in future with someone she loves and who is also rich. In line with the traditional matching principle of '*men dang hu dui*', her mother's suggestion regarding finding a materially successful man was not completely excluded, but has been taken into account. As Zhonglan (24) claimed:

*I still advocate love, and I won't marry someone just for his money. But I won't marry only for love either, [as] material conditions take up 50%.*

The transformation of China's socialist market economy has caused generational differences in viewing a potential partner's financial status, with greater weight being attached to it by the younger generation, as opposed to older ones, regarding the formation of marital bonds. For example, Hongli (40, married) believed that people in her generation considered moral values to be more important and demanded less of the material resources of a marriage partner, as she said:

*People in my generation seemed not to pay much attention to [men's] financial conditions, like houses or cars, as people usually do nowadays.*

The more recent orientation to a prospective partner's economic capital, as some empirical research indicate, has a close relation to the growing consumerist culture in the quick changing Chinese society (Mu and Xie, 2014; Yu and Xie, 2013; 2015). Rapid economic development since the economic and opening-up policy, combined with urbanisation, has significantly increased people's living quality and standards while generating pressures for both the younger generation and their parents, such as the expensive housing prices and living expenses in urban China (Wu et al., 2012). Therefore, a prospective partner's financial resources become important in present-day Chinese marriage market.

Education was viewed as one of the important factors in relation to status (Mu and Xie, 2014). However, practices of hypergamy in relation to education have become difficult to achieve due to women's educational advances, so that same-aged men and women may have similar educational attainments and be at similar points in their careers. Nevertheless, it may have re-emerged with a different meaning, that is, the husband tending to be older and economically better off than the wife. A tension and ambivalence between pursuing individualistic romantic love and looking for a financially capable mate to secure a better life has emerged, which young people may find hard to balance. In this case, parents' strong preference for a rational economic calculation not only reflects the 'traditional' familial marriage practices of gendered pattern of hypergamy – 'women marrying up', but also can be linked with a sense of responsibility as parents of only one-child. Under the implementation of one-child policy in the late 1970s, Chinese parents often spare no efforts emotionally and materially for their children and, urban singleton daughters, in particular, are seen to have benefitted from gaining parental investment, as there is no need to



complete with brothers (Fong, 2002). Zhonglan's mother wished her to date someone who is financially better off than her, as she would concern over whether or not Zhonglan would 'have the same family safety-net via marriage in the future' (Ji, 2017: 30).

#### **4.3.2.2 Hukou**

In addition to the prospect of men's financial condition, as I illustrated above, my data indicate another key aspect of the practice of hypergamy, which is related to an individual's place of origin. *Hukou* (Chinese household registration system), which divides people into two categories - urban and rural *hukou* - based on their parents' place of origin, was used as a means of controlling labour mobility. But it has now become a crucial point of reference in perceptions of whether the 'doors' of the families of the partners match (Hu, 2016). This is partly because *hukou* system provides individuals with varying access to welfare benefits with more advantages being given to the urban *hukou* holders due to the difference in regional development (Chan and Zhang, 1999; Hu, 2016). Therefore, some urban families tend to maintain their status by matching people with urban *hukou*, rather than marrying 'downward' into rural families (Li et al., 2010; Lui, 2017; Qian and Qian, 2017). For instance, the story of Xinyi (27, married) illustrates how her family background is different from her husband's and, because of that, her dating relationship was faced with opposition from her father:

*His [her husband's] mum didn't recognise Chinese characters. In addition, he was born outside the birth-control plan, so, his dad had been demoted in the fishery company from an office worker to a fisherman for having a second child [...] they [parents-in-law] are now living by collecting land rent. My parents have their own jobs, though my mum is retired now [...] my dad is a civil servant working with the court [...] so, he often deals with civil cases which have mostly taken place in his [her husband's] town where some villagers never paid the money they owed. So, my dad probably had some bias [against people living in that area including my boyfriend's family]. My grandpa worked in a police station and my grandma was an accountant in a hospital. My uncles and aunts are all civil servants [...] though his [her husband] family may have an economically comfortable life because of collecting higher rent. Our family backgrounds are rather different, and my family will never do business.*

Even though both Xinyi and her husband were born in the same city of Xiamen, in Fujian province, they came from different regions – urban community versus a village-based

community in the city (*cheng zhong cun*) – which comes with more symbolic meanings – such as educated family versus less educated family; urban *hukou* family versus rural *hukou* family. Despite Xinyi and her husband, who is four years older than her, worked in a same hospital, these differences in family backgrounds and *hukou* status that prevented Xinyi's parents from agreeing to their marriage at the start for not conforming to the social norms of 'marrying up', particularly in a persistently patriarchal society (Ji and Yeung, 2014; Tian, 2013). Yet, eventually, Xinyi's parents respected the choice that she had made to pursue a more individualised romantic form of love and agreed to her marriage, since they had been dating for over four years.

During the interviews, finding a potential marriage partner in local area (by implication with the same *hukou*) was frequently mentioned, and most commonly expressed as desirable by young women who were born and had grew up in Beijing. For example, Beibei (28), a local Beijinger, talked about her attitudes toward a prospect partner's *hukou* origin:

*I have two conditions [to start a love relationship]. One is that he has to be a local Beijinger. It's okay if he is from outside Beijing, but has to transfer his hukou to Beijing, and buy a house to settle down in Beijing. I'll not move to other cities. Secondly, his parents should also live in Beijing, and that we don't need to travel [for caring and visiting].*

Recent research indicates that Chinese women, as their social status rose, have a strong preference to 'marry up' rather than down with regards to family backgrounds (To, 2015; Zhang and Sun, 2014). A social implication of this is linked to class status. Beijing, as a first-tier city and the capital of China, is not just a term stemming from a geographical location; it equally signifies a privileged identity and constitutes a powerful metaphor in the dating market. Therefore, the value of a local Beijing *hukou* is salient here and that this leads to the consequence that people are not free from the constraints of class and a hierarchical family system. In my study, singleton urban daughters, whose partners are non-Beijinger men, had often received objections to their relationships, either from their parents or friends, although one of my participants (Xiaobo, 26) had already married. For example, Yunyue (24, unmarried) is a local Beijinger with a postgraduate degree from the UK. Her love relationship with her boyfriend had suffered strong opposition from her parents, because, firstly, he is from outside Beijing; and secondly, his family's (economic) situation was not

seen as good enough. Similarly, Tiantian (26, unmarried), the only child in her family, was born and grew up in Beijing. Her parents were very disapproving of her dating a man who came from a small village in northern China and whose parents lived by farming. Instead, her parents wished that she could date someone who also came from Beijing. She had also planned to date a local Beijing man, but *'I just happened to meet him'*.

Another participant, Linjuan (32, unmarried), who was born into a working-class family in northern China, talked about the gap she felt when she dated a local Beijing man, who had previously been her client:

*There is a huge gap between us. The discrepancy in family background causes differences in ways of receiving education and viewing things. His relatives and cousins were all educated overseas. He was born and grew up in Beijing, and some things just can't be changed in relation to the ways of treating waidiren [outsiders], for instance.*

The above stories reflect the far broader context within which regional matching and cultural hierarchies shape young people's dating practices and attitudes toward love and marriage. Lijuan's account is consistent with Wang and Nehring's (2016) argument that it is hard for *wai di ren* (outsider) to date a local Beijinger due to various reasons. Especially, but interestingly, it is much more common for Beijing men to marry women (32.8 percent) from outside Beijing than for Beijing women to marry non-Beijinger men (12.7 percent). These figures substantiate my earlier argument that the gendered hierarchy of 'women marrying up' still persists in China's present-day dating and marriage market.

Practically, not everyone marries someone with the same *hukou* status. Nie and Xing (2011) found a rise in inter-marriage over time, which may suggest that the boundaries between urban and rural people may have narrowed, partly due to the processes of modernisation and urbanisation (Blossfeld, 2009). An example of breaking geographical conventions by marrying a man from outside Beijing is found in my data. Xiaobo (26, married) met her husband at a UK university, where Xiaobo was doing her master's degree and her husband was pursuing a doctoral degree. Xiaobo's father, a businessman, was at first opposed to her dating relationship and hoped she would not eventually get married. However, her mother, who worked in a hospital but is now retired, put in a good word regarding her daughter's relationship, and eventually they married:

*Xiaobo: They [her parents] of course hoped that I could find someone who could exactly match my family's [socioeconomic] conditions. That would certainly be perfect. But if I don't like him [the person who may match me materially], perhaps they would also make concessions. They were not the kind of parents who arranged a marriage for me. But sometimes they would unconsciously say that there was a woman who married a Beijing guy with good family circumstances etc. They occasionally said similar things to me. So, I think they still wished that I could find a Beijing man [...] I mean, it really depends on [the prospective partner's] personal qualities. Indeed, the son of a coalmine owner could be rich, and he may have houses in Beijing with fancy cars, but probably without being [well] educated. How could I marry him?*

*Interviewer: Do you mean that your husband's education made him stand out [compared to other rich people]?*

*Xiaobo: Yes, matching in terms of values and ideologies is more important than matching materially.*

Drawing on status exchange theory (Davis, 1941; Merton, 1941), it can be argued that when women with a local Beijing *hukou* marry an outsider, his higher socioeconomic status can compensate for his lower *hukou* status. More importantly, the transformation from an arranged marriage, when their parents' generation were young and barely had any autonomy in their own relationships, to free-choice marriage indicates that Chinese parental control over their children's love-based relationships and marriage-related decisions has experienced ongoing decline (Xu and Whyte, 1990; Yan, 2009; Yu and Xie, 2015a).

As shown in the earlier account by Xinyi (27) and Xiaobo (26), the increased agency of younger generations can be seen as a result of China's recent socio-economic transformation, including the economic reform of the late 1970s and the implementation of the one-child policy. One social implication of the child-centred family is that the traditional intergenerational power relations have been redefined, and parent-child relations, which traditionally often demand an obedient child, are changed. Even though young people nowadays are still faced with barriers regarding their choice of partner, primarily from their own parents, both Xinyi and Xiaobo's effort to pursue intimate relationships of their own choosing, with more emphasis being given to a person's traits, such as education, personality and moral quality, suggest the possibility of an incipient individualism in the form of partner choice based on personal, rather than purely familial or socioeconomic,

interests (Yan, 2009). In a broad sense, it could be argued that the subjective power of the individual has been observed in a way of accessing more autonomy in young people's partner selection (Yan, 2010a).

#### 4.3.2.3 Age

Age, as one of the important determinants for getting married, has been seen as a gendered way of achieving upward social status. Chinese women, in particular, are encouraged to find a stable husband and marry at an early age. In my data, some unmarried female participants in their late 20s were anxious about their marital status. For example, Beibei's (28, married) mother grasped every opportunity to find a potential partner for her '*before she gets too old*', considering that it normally takes time from getting to know each other to eventually getting married and having children. In this regard, Beibei completely agreed with her mother's views, and therefore she proactively engaged in going on blind dates and being introduced to others. Through her mother's introduction, Beibei met her husband, who was four years older than her, when she was 26, and got married at 28.

A double standard of ageing has put Chinese women into a disadvantage position if they approach their 30s and yet remain unmarried (Fincher, 2014; Wang and Nehring, 2016). In recent years, Chinese single women in their late 20s and beyond have been negatively labelled '*sheng nu*' (leftover women), which means that they are being left on the marriage market and nobody wants them (Ji, 2015b; To, 2013). In contrast, the term '*huang jin wang lao wu*' (golden bachelor) is used to describe the value of a single man over 30.

Although China's transformation in economic, social and cultural terms has provided more freedom for people to exercise their autonomy in marital relationships and there is a growing tendency towards an increase in the age at first marriage, and later marriage in urban China, as I demonstrated earlier in Chapter 2, it is still uncommon for a Chinese woman in their late 20s or early 30s not be married. According to the recently released 'Happy Marriage and Household Report'<sup>34</sup> from the All China Women's Federation (2015), over 90% of married women in China 'tie the knot' before the age of 30. Specifically, the average age of marriage in China is 26 (24.85 and 27.15 for women and men, respectively).

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<sup>34</sup> The Happy Marriage and Household Report states that the average ages of first marriage were 26.3 for the 1960s generation, 29.6 for the 1970s generation, 26.2 for the 1980s and 24.3 for the post 1990s.

Statistics from the United Nations (2017) also show that, in 2013, 95.5% of Chinese women aged 30–34 were married. Therefore, age is seen as a double-edged sword, with youth bringing advantages for women, while advancing years place them in a disadvantaged position on the marriage market (as well as the labour market).

Another age-related issue that arose from my data was the persistence of gender-distinct hypergamy with respect to age – the preference for a woman to marry a man who is older than her, which was often seen as an ideal type in traditional China. In traditional Chinese society, women are expected to marry at an early age, while they are still considered to be at the peak of their physical attractiveness and capacity to bear children, whereas men are expected to marry at a later age, after they have accumulated economic resources or achieved financial success (Piotrowski et al. 2016; Thornton and Lin, 1994; Xu et al., 2014).

Although lessening over time, Higgins and Sun's (2007) research, with a focus on 1100 university students' attitudes toward marriage and partner choice, also indicates that Chinese students still held relatively traditional values with female university students hoping to marry an older, taller, and educated husband. My data also show the practice of marital age hypergamy, as even nowadays, people still have concerns about unmarried women's age in relation to men. For example, Xiaobo (26, married) told me two non-negotiable conditions offered by her parents-in-law, professors in Chinese universities, before agreeing on their marriage: the daughter-in-law had to be younger than their son; and she must not be from a single-parent family. Luckily, Xiaobo is two years younger than her husband and eventually get married. Even though the age gap between genders is not huge, the desirable conjugal partnership of a man marrying a younger woman remains influential.

There is a social stigma attached to the love relationship between an older woman and man of younger age. In the Chinese culture, this is known as '*jie di lian*' (old sister-young brother-love), and women, in particular, are often faced with pressures (or even discriminations) from the society for not corresponding to the socially acceptable expectations on the age gaps. In my data, there were few women whose partner was aged younger than themselves. However, I did not mention the term '*jie di lian*' until they did. Yuqing (30, engaged), as an educational agent, met her partner, a firefighter graduated from a middle school, in

workplace. She is financially independent, well-educated, and able to take care of herself, but still felt vulnerable because she is 7 years older than her partner, albeit they have been together for five years. The following extract from Yuqing describes her attitudes toward socially criticised love relationships in relation to age gaps:

*I do care, but he [her partner] doesn't care [about the age gap between us]. Women tend to be overthinking, and I am passive [in this context]. I think this is a social issue that man dating a younger woman is more acceptable in the Chinese cultural values. It is quite common if a man dates a woman 5 or 7 years younger. However, people will consider you as alienated if you are older than your man. If leaving Chinese [dating] culture ideologies [regarding age] aside, I think my love relationship is also quite normal. There are now more and more jie di lian, especially in the world of the entertainment industry.*

One plausible reason for disapproving *jie di lian*, I believe, is linked to the practices of hegemonic masculine identities under the context of postsocialist Chinese society, characterised by being physically competent, highly accomplished, and having a white-collar profession (Liu, 2019; Song and Hird, 2014). Within the institution of heterosexuality, marrying a younger woman serves as a way of achieving the traditional notion of 'male superiority' and, by implication, continues the patriarchal family system. In the same vein, men, who are financially dependent on and marry an older woman for a living, are negatively labelled as '*xiao bai lian*' (literal meaning: little white face) to the determinant of attributed male masculinity. In this sense, the practice of *jie di lian* challenges traditional stereotypes of gender norms where women are supposed to subordinate their choice of their male counterpart to maintain the family's well-being.

In addition to the long-standing and ongoing legacy of traditional status hypergamy with respect to age, China's dramatic economic development also plays an important role in consolidating gendered preferences for age. Due to the considerable economic pressure on young people regarding the establishment of a household, especially in urban areas, alongside greatly rising consumption aspirations since the reform (Mu and Xie, 2014), older men, who are more likely than younger men to have accumulated significant economic assets, are preferred in the marriage market. Although the young participants in my data, in general, show less concern about the age gap between the genders, some parents, still

being influenced by deep-rooted traditional family values, would withdraw support if their children's partner choice did not conform to traditional expectations regarding age hypergamy. Zhonglan's (24) story serves as an exemplary for illustrating this age gap. Zhonglan's mother, who is eight years younger than her father, suggested that Zhonglan should also find someone who is older than her, with a stable economic status, as shown in the following excerpt:

*My mum doesn't want me to date someone who is my age or younger than me. She thinks that men generally mature slower than women. Ostensibly, women age faster than men and I will look older than him when I'm in my 40s.*

As the above account stated, a gendered double standard of ageing is identified. It seems to be an advantage in the marriage market if you are a young and considered a beautiful woman. In sharp contrast, age and appearance seem not to be a significant barrier for men; rather, it is their economic resources that matter, especially during the recent economic boom in China (Higgins et al., 2002). There is a popular Chinese discourse describing the double standard on age: 'men flower in their 40s, but women are like Tofu residue in their 30s' (In Chinese: *nan ren si shi yi zhi hua, nu ren san shi dou fu zha*). It refers to the symbolic meaning of men's body capital and value in relation to its economic standing growing over the years (Bourdieu, 1986); in contrast, women's advantages in physical appearance will reduce as they age. This ensures that marital age hypergamy between couples remains influential across generations. It has not completely disappeared along with rapid economic development, albeit such development is so far limited to urban China.

Linked to the principle of exchange, which suggests that people trade characteristics when choosing a spouse (Taylor and Glenn, 1976; Zelizer, 2005), age differences signify a gendered exchange of capital and suggest a 'commodification of intimate life', whereby men's success can be traded for women's physical beauty and youth (Hochschild, 2003; 2012).



## 4.4 Family Living Arrangements

In the previous section, I have examined the changing patterns of dating and associated values in spouse selection over the past few decades under China's profound social and economic transformations. These indicate that Chinese young people are tending to make their own individualised choices under the influence of Western culture and individualism; however, I also acknowledged that traditional family values regarding gender roles and childbearing expectations are still stubborn and continue to influence people's marital-related decisions. In this section, with an attempt to further unravel gendered consequences of individualisation, I will shift my focus to examining the changes that have been taking place in family living arrangements across generations.

### 4.4.1 From Patrilocal to Neolocal Marital Residence

In traditional Chinese culture, the ideal family form and dominant living arrangement is an extended or joint household with multiple generations co-residing, which limits the residential choice of younger generations (Chu et al., 2011; Cong and Silverstein, 2012). This was primarily due to traditional cultural expectations of filial piety coupled with an inadequate public system of social welfare, pensions, and elderly care (Fei, 2013). Under the patrilineal and patriarchal system, patrilocal multigenerational co-residence, in which married women are expected to live with the husband's family and care for their in-laws, placed women in a secondary and subordinate position in traditional Chinese families (Yang, 2008).

As might be expected, all the women in my sample who were born during Mao's era adopted patrilocal residence after marriage. For example, Guanya (37, married) was from a peasant family and Guanya's mother, who was poorly educated and relied on the crop yields for her living, told her the day before her wedding:

*You're going to live with your parents-in-law, giving delicious food to your husband first before you feed yourself, and being obedient to them. Don't show your temper like you did at [your natal] home, even if you don't want to obey.*

After marriage, Guanya devoted herself to her husband's family and was proud of taking good care of her husband and in-laws and, more importantly, giving birth to twin sons. However, the practice of patrilocal residence has the effect of detaching women from their own natal families, as a traditional Chinese saying - '*a married out daughter is like split water*'<sup>35</sup> (Zhang, 2009). Therefore, the parent-daughter tie was often 'cut off' and as a consequence, the married daughters may feel a sense of remorse, so that in the case of Guanya, she could not help her birth parents during the harvest, when more practical help is needed.

However, with China's educational expansion and economic reform, coupled with the implementation of the birth-control programme, there has been a corresponding change in the family patterns in recent decades (Chu et al., 2011; Shi, 2009; Xie and Zhu, 2009; Xu, 2013). Traditionally three-generation extended families have greatly declined in numbers while smaller, independent and more mobile family units are experiencing rapid growth leading to a nuclear family form. Being exposed to Western ideas of individualism and increasing peer connections outside family networks, young people, in particular, typically demand privacy and intimacy, and tend to form a conjugal family in urban areas after marriage, instead of living with the husband's parents (Yan, 2009). The 2010 census data reveals that more and more rural young people migrated to urban areas for a better life. Over 30% of rural families had seen one or more family members moving out, compared to only 10% of urban families (Wang, 2013).

In my sample, among people who were born after the economic reform and got married in the early 2000s and onwards, establishing separate households either in their hometown (but not with the husband's parents) or in a third place – different from their hometown – has become the dominant family living arrangement. For example, even though Hua (31, married) and her husband came from the small town of Baoding, Hebei province, they settled down in Beijing, where Hua works as a high-school teacher, while her husband works in Guangzhou, in south China. Similarly, Yufen (32, married) also moved with her husband

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<sup>35</sup> Once a daughter is married, she was not seen to have connections with her birth family; just like the water on the ground, which cannot be collected back into the basin. This saying symbolises that the relationship between a bride and her parents was completely severed after the wedding day.

away from their hometown, in Henan province, to Beijing, where they had bought a house and planned to stay for the long term.

#### **4.4.2 Revival of Extended Families: Living with In-laws**

Chinese household size has experienced a significant decline, while the increasing number of nuclear family arrangements (two parents with child(ren)) has emerged. This transformation has led some scholars to argue that the rise and popularity of the neolocal residence pattern has overtaken the traditional patrilocal post-marital residence pattern in both rural and urban China. However, other findings found that the extended family has not disappeared. Because the declining in family size is not equivalent to the Chinese family being more nuclear and modern, despite the assertion that 'the Chinese family is now more nuclear than ever before' (Xu et al., 2014: 49).

There are several possible explanations for the current 'revival' of the intergenerational co-residence living arrangement in spite of modernisation in contemporary China. Firstly, high living costs and housing problems in urban areas resulting from rapid economic development over the past few decades have led to the persistence of the extended family in contemporary China (Xu et al., 2014). This makes even harder for young college graduates to establish their own house after marriage without parental financial support. For example, as a response to the rocketing housing prices, Xiaobo (26, married) lived with her parents in Beijing after marriage. She planned to move to a small apartment owned by her parents when her husband, who was not born and has no residence in Beijing, has graduated and come back to China after overseas studying.

In addition, in the context of insufficient state welfare support, caring for the elderly, as informed by the culture of reciprocity (Yang, 1994), have greatly increased the likelihood of living in an extended family (Chen et al., 2017; Lei et al., 2015; Xu, 2013; Xu et al., 2014; Zeng and Wang, 2003). Not only in the case of Jiangling (47, married), whom I mentioned earlier in this chapter, other middle-aged women participants in my study also reflect this viewpoint. This implies that traditional family values, such as filial piety (*xiao*), still serve as a guiding principle governing people's residential choice, even though it is practised in diverse, and often new, ways (Cook and Dong, 2011; Qi, 2015; Shang and Wu, 2011; Whyte, 2003).

Although it is seen as a common understanding that parents should be their children's primary care providers, in the case of couples living apart together, it becomes difficult in practical terms for only one parent, who may still have a paid job to do, to raise young children. China has a cultural tradition of emphasis on paternal and maternal grandparents, rather than the state and institution, for providing childcare on a regular basis. Especially in the circumstance where there are young children at home and the wife or husband is absent due to work commitments, married people often seek practical help from their elderly parents. Under this circumstance, there is frequently a family consisting of elderly parent(s), grandchildren, and one parent (normally the mother, not the father who may usually be working away from home). The formation of intergenerational co-residence is seen to be facilitated by the absence of the father from a family for providing access for children's care (Chen et al., 2011; Lei et al., 2015; Settles, et al., 2013).

Some recent research shows that in China, couples living with the wives' parents may receive more help with child care and household chores than those living with husbands' parents (Yu and Xie, 2018: 1072; see also Zhang, 2009). My interviews with married women show that most expect their parents-in-law to be available for practical help. Yufen's (32, married) example is a good illustration of this point. She has been living with her mother-in-law since her son was born, whilst her father-in-law was in his hometown caring for his own aged mother. Because Yufen was not the only child in her natal family in rural Henan province, her own mother had stayed in her hometown to take care of her brother's children, as she said:

*In rural areas, [older] people perceive their son's children, rather than their daughter's children, as their own grandchildren. So, in my hometown, the husband's mother would certainly help to take care of their own grandson for the sake of their own son's wellbeing [...] I don't think I'm asking too much now, and it's very common [to have the mother-in-law care for her grandson]. We have no choice due to limited [economic] resources. Some of them [grandmothers] do prefer staying in the home [town], whereas some were forced to help. [If my mother-in-law doesn't come] we would have to pay for a nanny, which was far beyond what we could afford.*

Even though both Yufen and her husband were well-educated and worked as a dual-career couple, their views on the responsibility for childrearing were fundamentally guided by traditional family values. With a consideration of their weaker financial condition, they saw

no contradictions with this family practice. In a similar vein, Hua (31, married) also prefer children to be cared for by her parents-in-law. Being a beginner in her career as a high-school teacher, after graduating with a postgraduate degree in Beijing, she returned to work before her maternity leave ended. Living with her parents-in-law and 18-month-old son, her husband was working far away as a soldier and could only come home once a year. She justified the reason:

*In nowadays, some married women ask their own parents taking care of children. In fact, according to [Chinese] traditional families, the woman entered the man's family [after marriage]. The man's parents, of course, should take care of [their] grandchildren. Even though my husband is in Guangzhou, and very far away from me, I don't want to break this family pattern. It must have its own reasons [of having the husband's parents care for grandchildren] for being passed on from generation to generation [...] In fact, it is very tired taking care of children. I'd be sorry for asking my parents to do this just like they had raised me before. For example, if my children have accidents under the accompaniment of my parents, my husband, for the sake of caring for the children, may say hurtful words to my parents. I can't stand it. This can also ruin a married couple's relationship. So, I'll never ever let that happen. Since they [her parents-in-law] came Beijing to offer help, they're instead very understandable, and realised how hard it is for me as a young professional in Beijing. Our relationships become even better as they look forward to being asked to care for their own offspring.*

On the face of it, both Hua (31) and Yufen's (32) cases illustrate that living with in-laws and receiving intergenerational help, when their husbands began to work away, can easily be seen as a result of long-standing cultural traditions regarding the patrilineal family system. That is, who is being expected to provide childcare is significantly grounded in traditional Confucian family values regarding gender roles, childbearing and intergenerational relationships. However, as Hua's account above shows, she seems to intentionally expect paternal resources for providing childcare, which closely links with her intention of protecting her own parents from being physically tired. Although some women purposely avoid their children being cared for by paternal grandmothers, so as to free themselves from further pressures imposed by their in-laws, due to the norm of reciprocity (Zhang, 2009). For Hua, receiving practical help from her in-laws during her time in a LAT relationship, has a profound impact on her marital relationship and, more importantly, her career development, as she said:

*'I felt balance in my deep heart, as his [her husband's] parents, on his behalf, came over for childcare. So, we may have a good marital relationship. Because of them, I'm able to work. The reason I'm here [in the workplace] is because they're at home [taking care of my children]'.*

However, Shanrui (28, married), a mother of two daughters, was not as lucky as Hua (31, married) and Yufen (32, married), whose parents-in-law were able to provide childcare. Shanrui moved to her husband's family after marriage, and soon gave birth to a girl. She then moved a year later to a town with her husband, where she gave birth to another daughter. Our interview was conducted at her home at noon whilst her baby was asleep. Since they moved away and settled down in the town, Shanrui's husband had worked away as a truck driver, leaving her alone to take care of their two children – one is eight years old and the other is an infant. The following excerpt reveals her helplessness and desire for her mother-in-law's help:

*I do really hope his [her husband's] mother could help me. I need her help as my kids are very young. When my second daughter goes to primary school, then I can manage by myself. But she didn't come over due to heavy farm work in her hometown [...] My children didn't have any toy cars because my flat is on the sixth floor [without a lift], and I can't carry my children while holding a toy car.*

Shanrui was financially dependent on her husband and therefore had limited economic autonomy in her domestic life. During the interview, she explicitly stated that she hoped to *'find a paid job as soon as possible. Who wants to always stay at home looking after children? It'd be good to be financially independent, and don't bother to ask for money'*. As, from her perspective, this traditional division of labour concerning childcare has impeded the realisation of her willingness and full potential on the labour market. The tension between self-fulfilment and childcare provision is felt not just by women in rural villages but also by women in the cities (such as the example of Hua I discussed above). Indeed, women often face contradictions within China's process of individualisation. On the one hand, with increasing desire of self-actualisation through career development, Chinese women are eager to obtain financial independence and set up their own residence after marriage to pursue intimacy and privacy. In doing so, traditional forms of patrilocal living arrangements have been undermined and women attempt to free themselves from family obligations and

prescribed gender roles. On the other hand, their experience of individualisation has been hindered by a lack of social protection against the burdens of childcare. Being a mother with young children to be cared for, while having their partner living away, places women in a vulnerable position when tensions between work and family life occur. In this sense, it suggests that individualisation in China has gendered consequences, in that women remain embedded in traditional family networks and have to rely on the family and kin ties, rather than the society, for providing support.

Although living with in-laws can to a large extent free mothers from daily childcare in order to return to the workplace, it should be noted that this, in turn, would potentially bring a burden to the older generation, and in particular older women, who are still expected to provide childcare services (sometimes for free) after retirement for their adult children while experiencing living apart from their own husbands (see Goh, 2009 for more discussion about the lived experience of grandparents caring for grandchildren).

## **4.5 Summary**

This chapter was designed to look at how individualisation has taken place in the context of a rapidly changing Chinese society through the lens of examining people's marriage and family life experiences. This focus on individual's dating and marital practices can help unravel to what extent Chinese people's relationships have transformed, in ways which equate to the Western idea of individualisation, characterised as the deinstitutionalisation of marriage and destabilisation of prescribed gender roles and family obligations. With this in mind, I divided this chapter into three sections: dating practices, spouse selection, and family living arrangements. The framework of bricolage, as suggested by Carter and Duncan (2018), is useful here in examining how Chinese people draw on a variety of practices, social and culture norms, and traditions in making sense of their personal lives as a response to new circumstances. Based on my analysis, I argue that individualisation in China has presented in a gendered way and this has led to women facing contradictions when their aspiration of marriage and work are embraced, whilst simultaneously longstanding traditional patriarchal family values in relation to dating and marital experiences, such as women marrying up, remain prevalent. That is to say, the transformation of intimacy and love in China may be evident in some respects, but different patterns regarding these are

apparent, when compared to those in most Western countries and specifically in relation to the individualisation thesis described by Giddens (1992).

First, I considered the ways people look for their marital partner across generations and the extent to which their parents are still engaged in their marital-related decisions. My data show a clear shift in people's expectations about dating practices, from it being arranged to meet their partner with less concern being paid over the attainment of romantic love and intimacy, to making their individual choices regarding whom to date. This transformation, however, does not exclude parental involvement in their children's relationships, especially under the circumstances of the lack of a dating market and demanding work schedules in contemporary urban China. In this way, young people, who remain single, may experience the traditional way of meeting prospective partners by introductions from their parents. The rationale behind the revival of traditional dating practices has been associated with the social expectation of the formation of a stable marital relation. This may lead to unmarried women, in particular when they nearly approach 30, feeling pressured to have a love relationship and get married, as my participants may see no alternative to marriage. Therefore, it is not fully tenable to argue that the institution of marriage in China has been undermined.

I then delved into people's spouse selection and examined how the traditional matchmaking principle of 'men dang hu dui' has shaped -and been shaped by – their practices of mate selection. Love, which was seen as a driver in the Western societies for the formation of a conjugal partnership, has been experienced in a different way in China. Under Mao's era, young people at that time tended to attach more value to practical forms of love, rather than romantic ones. But the concept of lifelong marriage was given importance and is still seen as the ideal intimate relationship in contemporary Chinese society. This supports the idea that love is socially constructed and how people understand and experience love is subject to social and cultural variations.

Though China's economic reform has brought about significant ideological and socio-economic changes, with the idea of individualism and romantic love being widely spread and welcomed mainly by young people, my data suggest that they often face contradictions in mate selection. It is recognised that young people, who were born after the 1978 reform and the implementation of one-child policy, have seen a growing autonomy in living their



own lives, compared to their parents' generations. This is particularly evident when they faced barriers in choosing their marital partner, mostly from their parents who were greatly influenced by Confucian familism, such as status matching and marital hypergamy. With the implementation of the one-child policy, the rising power of young people has challenged the traditional parent-child power relationship through their increased ability in negotiating social norms (Hansen and Svarverud, 2010).

Instead of pursuing a confluent ideal of love, as suggested by Giddens (1992) as a sign of a transformation of intimacy, my data indicate that Chinese young people often take a carefully consideration of a prospective partner's material condition, hukou origin, and age before entering into a marital bond. One social implication is that gender-distinct marital hypergamy has continued to serve as a guideline to shape their mate choice. The economic transition has caused a marked generational difference in viewing a prospect partner's financial conditions, with more attention being paid to this aspect by younger generations. The practise of marital hypergamy was also closely implicated with class and traditional family hierarchy system, so that in this research, a partner's urban *hukou* is seen as another indication for women marrying up. Marriage is still conceived of as an attractive lifestyle and women, in particular, are encouraged to marry early so as not to be 'left over' on the marriage market. In this way, age is practised as a gendered capital, in that men's success can be traded for women's physical beauty. Age gaps between couples were seen as a desirable marital practice, and is often suggested by young people's parents, with the intention of making sure their only-daughter can be free from having a 'hard life'. However, what has been termed 'older sister-younger brother' love has gained less social approval in Chinese society, which suggests that a gendered double standard of ageing has put women in a vulnerable position in the marriage market.

In the final section of this chapter, I moved focus to interrogate the shifting pattern of familial arrangements. Setting up their own household has clearly become a pre-condition of marriage for Chinese young people. This shift from patrilocal to neolocal living arrangements has greatly freed women from traditional family obligations and gender roles, while giving importance to their married life and career development. However, women, with young children needing to be cared for within the gendered pattern of family life, often find it hard to balance work and family life. As a consequence, living with in-laws, in the

circumstance of the pressing practical need for childcare, has regained some popularity as noted in my data. Though the women participants greatly appreciated this intergenerational help, the gendered consequence of individualisation calls for continuing attention to gender inequality, both within the family and work contexts. Therefore, based on the above findings, this chapter calls for a broader historical and cultural contextualisation to reach an understanding of individualisation in China. Combined long-standing Confucian ideas on family relationships with the increasing influence of Western culture on individualism, the Western notions of individualisation take a different path in the collective culture of China; that is, 'traditional' and 'modern' ideas on marriage and family life are sometimes mixed together. Chinese people have to find a way to balance and negotiate the complexities of family life and social obligations, as well as negotiating their individual desires of achieving self-actualisation and fulfilling a love relationship.

These complexities have led me, in the next chapter, to dig in deep and analyse the data regarding about how people's agency is (or is not) experienced and generated, through looking at why Chinese people engage in 'non-traditional' family and relationship forms – ie LAT relationships. Foregrounding gender in these accounts, I primarily ask if and how does women's agency play a role in the arrangement of intimate relationships?

# Chapter 5 Transformative Agency in LAT Relationships: Constraint, Relationality and Strategy

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter attempts to draw out the reasons underlying the phenomena of Chinese people living apart together, and provides possible explanation for how choice has come about in heterosexual intimate relationships. Therefore, the centrality of agency needs to be seen and conceptualised in terms of people's everyday life and experience (Hockey et al., 2007:36). In reviewing previous research on living apart together (LAT) relationships, there seems to be a close association between how people perceive LAT and how far people can be seen to exercise agency within such a partnership. As I demonstrated earlier, in the Literature Review, when LAT was seen as a 'new family form' (Levin, 2004) that allowed people not only to gain freedom but also to retain a sense of intimacy, the individualistic and agentic view of social action was emphasised. In contrast, as the continuist perspective tends to see LAT as a continuing stage, in which people's agency in this non-coresidential partnership is somewhat constrained by wider structures and power institutions, thus, it was often seen within a deterministic and structured view.

However, this strict dualist view on agency and structure had failed to capture the intricate and fluid rationale that can be seen when making sense of people's decisions in LAT relationships, in my data. Inspired particularly by Burkitt's (2016) framework of relational agency and Carter and Duncan's (2018) findings on differential agency, this chapter, therefore, aims to engage both critically and reflexively with the data in order to examine the potential of transformative agency of women at different life stages and to reveal how such agency is practised and achieved through their LAT experiences. It also explores how far Chinese women at different life stages can exercise their agency in this non-traditional family form.

Led by the data, I begin by briefly reviewing the current debates around agency in Western contexts and then bring in participants' own accounts of their relationship bonds, with the aim of classifying three different groups of women: constrained, relational and strategic. I

will discuss these groups in three different sections, but It is important to note that these groups are not discrete but interrelated in some way. The reasoning for dividing participants into these three groups is primarily because people, in my sample, tended to fall into one of these groups to a greater extent than another, depending on their life course stage. However, I also acknowledge that people can shift between these categories as their lives and relationships change. Indeed, their current lives may also encompass aspects of more than one category in relation to how agency is exercised, or not. Therefore, I have chosen to focus on examples which allow for these distinct groups to be brought into sharp focus, but I also problematise these groups at times discussing how, for example, the economic resources, together with the consideration of relational others may influence women's experiences and attempts at agency. To sum up, this chapter attempts to provide a more nuanced account of the intricacies of transformative agency across life stages. This is achieved by examining how agency is exercised (or sometimes not) in practical terms and how far Chinese women exercise purposive agency in LAT relationships, as life changes, and to what extent their agency was relationally and emotionally constrained.

## **5.2 Debates about Agency and Structure**

'Agency' has long been central to understand people's action-making process, though it remains inconsistent by definition. But one commonality is the emphasis on the agentic individual to reflect upon and make conscious actions (Rahman and Jackson, 2010). In particular, under individualisation theory, agency was often understood in a way that is related to purposive and conscious action in that individuals can monitor themselves and reflexively conduct a life of their own. For example, Giddens (1992) suggests that a modern individualised agent can make rational and reasoned decisions. In this way, agency becomes privilege and can overcome structural constraints, as he claimed that 'we can no longer learn from history' (Giddens, 2000, vii). This one-sided view of viewing agency as *either* enabled *or* constrained has also been supported by Bauman (2003), who holds though a more pessimistic view, arguing that traditions may have lost their control over people's lives.

However, this positive understanding of individual agency has been strikingly challenged by scholars, such as Gross (2005) and Duncan (2011), for ignoring the continuity of traditions and taken-for-granted social norms. For example, Duncan (2015) had conducted empirical research on heterosexual LAT relationships in the UK and examined how agency is practically achieved among women. He distinguished three groups of LAT women<sup>36</sup> - the constrained, vulnerable and strategic groups – to argue that people in given contexts often make decisions in relation to others, as well as drawing on pre-existing practices and ideas. They may also come from the unconscious motivations (habits or routines, for example) of conscious actions and the unconscious self-disciplining of agents (Carter and Duncan, 2018). Consequently, ‘differential agency’ is emerged (Carter and Duncan, 2018: 145) in that people’s decisions about living apart may range widely along the continuum of ‘preference’ and ‘constraint’ and vary in ways of how they practice LAT.

Duncan’s work has been extended by Burkitt (2016), who locates agency in the wider sense of action as being relational in that it ‘produces particular effects on the world and on others through their relational connections and joint actions’. In sharp contrast to Giddens (1984) and Archer (2003), who placed the isolated individual in the centre in making sense of personal life and defined agency in terms of an actor’s reflexivity as an individual phenomenon, Burkitt (2016) argues that agency only develops when people are embedded in their relational contexts. He demonstrated that people make decisions, not simply based on their own specific desires and needs, but also take others into account. A similar viewpoint was noted by Holmes (2010), who argued that reflexivity, which is often conceived of by individualisation theorists as an integral part of agency, is only one possible facet of agency. Agency can be unconscious, habitual, and is often relational and emotional relatedness to others.

In other words, we never confront social structures as a single individual, and the wider social relationships in which people are located form contexts in which agency should not

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<sup>36</sup> According to Duncan (2015), the first group includes women whose cohabitation preference was prevented by an external powerful authority or institution; the second group revealed that feelings of vulnerability also cause women who have had previous unhappy conjugal partnerships, or due to the perceived needs of dependent children, to choose LAT to avoid emotional distress while maintaining intimacy; whereas the strategic group demonstrated relatively unconstrained and more purposeful agency in escaping gendered norms, despite remaining emotionally and relationally bonded.

be understood as merely *constrained or enabled*, but as *constituted within relationships* (Burkitt, 2016: 336). From Burkitt's understanding, an individual's constraints in cohabitation are rooted not only in external powerful agencies or institutions but also in relational connections with intimate others. In this sense, Burkitt interprets the agency of people in LAT relationships from the relational agency perspective. He (2016: 334) argues:

*The women's agency was informed by the past in terms of previous experiences, habit, and hegemonic ideas about coupledness; it was also oriented to the future in terms of plans to cohabit or by piecing together different traditions and alternative ideas about intimacy in an imaginative process of 'bricolage'; yet the contingencies of the moment also played a role in agency.*

To some extent, my data support this view, as people usually make decisions regarding personal relationships pragmatically with reference to their material, social, cultural and institutional circumstances, while being reflexively critical of traditions and asserting their desires for living their own life. However, even though both Burkitt (2016) and Carter and Duncan's (2018) work on agency have placed the importance of traditions and relational networks as central, they did not pay much attention to the interplay between the idea of agencies they had developed. They seemed to presume that each aspect of agency remains static as things change. Due to the diverse motivations and experiences that people may have in LAT relationships, it was impossible to locate an individual's agency neatly in just one of the three categories that I have devised myself for this research, as these categories are not discrete but can be seen as elastic, fluid, and interrelated. Therefore, in the following sections of this chapter, I will critically engage with my data and investigate how agency can shift and develop as peoples' lives change over the life course.

### **5.3 Constrained Agency**

In this category, I aim to elaborate upon why people live apart and how their agency in cohabiting was constrained materially and externally. This will be discussed from the point of view of the individuals' economic condition and the power of external agencies and institutions. However, based on my data, I argue that even though women's agency was

variously constrained, people can develop and exercise a degree of agency across the life course in relation to their mundane, everyday experiences.

### **5.3.1 Economic Structures**

In my data, financial constraints were reported as one of the most common reasons preventing couples from living together in China. With the hope of making their lives better, people in LATs are characteristically often less well-educated with poor family backgrounds, with one partner working away from the family home. This finding is in contrast with Holmes' (2004a, 2010) research based on the data of the dual-career, dual household couple in the West. Because she targeted well-educated people who had the possibility of living their lives based on personal choice, she argued that the professionals who gained financial dependence from their work are more likely to be in LAT relationships. In what follows, I am examining those participants who are explicitly in LAT relationships, but who often do not have the financial means that those in Holmes' research did.

Jieyu (45, married) was a full-time housewife with a primary-school education level, and she has been taking care of her two children and her parents-in-law since she got married. Her husband, as the household's sole financial provider, has been working as a construction worker in Beijing for over 16 years and normally comes back home at Chinese New Year and during the autumn harvest season. However, Jieyu could not save any money because her husband's earnings had to feed six people to enable them to survive. In her village in Hebei province with limited job opportunities, people live by farming. Some married couples lived separately to make a better life, with men being absent and working in economically developed regions, while the women were taking care of the home. In her understanding, couples physically living separately to have a better life seems to be seen as a common and acceptable family living arrangement, as she said: *'What else should we do? How can we survive if he didn't go away to work?'* In this case, caring responsibilities and economic constraints are often interrelated, and together these affected how Jieyu constructed her married life. This implies that the willingness and ability to live a specific desired lifestyle (couples living together) is class based and gender related.

Carter and Duncan (2018: 151) argued that LAT can happen under the condition of people's 'understandings of their vulnerability as much as their ability 'to choose to do so''. From the account of Jieyu, she ended up living apart to enable them both to merely 'live their lives' as it were, rather than as a result of an active choice. Instead of being an active 'agent' leading to a LAT relationship, 'patient' – beings which the action affects – may generate a sense of vulnerability and 'patency' – having actions done to one's self, developed by Reader (2007) as a counterpart to agency.

As our interview continued, a shift from vulnerability to agency occurred in her account. This transition has seemed to relate to people's age and family roles. As a 45 years old mother, Jieyu had temporarily 'freed' herself from caring obligations on a daily basis (her older daughter was in college and her younger daughter had reached middle school age and could now go to school by herself). Then, she moved to Beijing and found a job in a hotel as a cleaner. In fact, this was the first time she had left the village to work, and I interviewed her in the hotel she had joined just a week before. The idea of finding a paid employment in Beijing was entirely dependent on herself, as she said:

*It's up to me. If I don't like it, I'll not go out [to work]. It's me, and he didn't ask me to find waged work. But I think he felt the same way as me; our life may become easier if I could earn some money. Otherwise, you don't have [more] money to spend. We still need it to afford two children. It's good if I can earn some money.*

Meadows' (1997) research on women's experience of agency in heterosexual relationships indicates that how women's age and time increased their ability to secure what they wanted while being clearer to define what they did not want. The shifting relationship between conformity (to the traditional gendered division of labour) and reinvention (of gender roles), across her heterosexual life, challenges the dualist understandings of structure/agency framework which I drew attention to earlier in this chapter. It is plausible to argue that women's agency can be developed in practice over the life course, despite the fact that Jieyu and her husband continue to live apart while they both are in Beijing (Jieyu shared a room with other six female workers in the hotel and her husband lived in a dormitory provided by the company which he worked for).



The practice of transformative agency is also apparent in the case of Hongli (40, married), who is one of the six study mothers in this research, who I examine in more depth in Chapter 6. The existing obligations to her children have caused her family to split geographically – as she and her school-aged son moved to town for the advancement of his studies, while her husband, an electrician, worked in a different city. Every time that her husband had to go back to work, she was left with no choice, as she claimed:

*I felt lonely emotionally, you know, a sense of powerlessness. But this is life, nothing can be done about it. The jobs in [our] hometown don't fit him. This [husband working away] is for our family and children.*

Although accompanying her children for his studies placed her in a 'disadvantaged' position when there were emotional costs identified, largely experienced as the loss of contact with her partner, she seemed to take LAT for granted, as she said: *'it was indeed quite a common phenomenon having a man working outside the home and a woman taking care of the inside'*. However, her desire of possessing a more autonomous, individual identity was increasing, which could be seen from her eagerness to *'find something to do'*. In fact, compared to the rest of the (full-time) study mothers in this research, Hongli, a cleaner, is the only one who had a paid job during the time when she accompanied her only son on his studies. She worked from 7:30–10:30 am in the morning and then went back home to prepare her son's lunch. This was followed by three consecutive working hours starting from 1:30 pm in the afternoon. Her reasons for working are not only related to her willingness to reduce her husband's financial burden but also indicate the need to protect her sense of autonomy in order not to be financially dependent on her husband. As she said:

*From my deep heart, I feel like [financially] depending on men will lose my autonomy. It feels bad when I have to ask him for money when I want to buy something. If I can earn money, I'm free to buy my favourite things [without his permission].*

Hockey et al. (2007) use a life-course approach to examine how people growing up as heterosexual exercise their agency and how heterosexuality as an institution shapes people's everyday life. They found complexity and subtleties in people's experiences of being heterosexual across life stages, as people negotiate their agency when constructing

their lives in a 'fluid, negotiable and changeable' way (Hockey et al., 2007: 63). Here, within the mundane experiences relating to heterosexual couple relationships in the Chinese context, their caring responsibilities constrained women's capacity for living together with their male partners, and to some degree further limited their opportunities to be financially independent. However, Jieyu and Hongli's decision to find a paid job in later life illustrates that agency is not fixed but rather, evolves in a complex way in terms of an overall life strategy, because here, both constraints and some degree of choice could be seen to be involved. Yet, it is important to note that these choices are not always a consequence of an individual's 'free will' as the work schedule of Hongli, a study mother at the time of the interviews revealed, which was 'tailored' in line with her family members' demands (see also Holmes, 2004b).

### **5.3.2 External Authoritative Forces**

Rather than personal economic circumstances, some people's desire for cohabiting was constrained by external institutions, which are dominant forces in people's lives. For example, Beibei (28, married) had secured a permanent position in an institutional organisation in Beijing, where she was born. She would continue living alone because her husband had been assigned to serve as a military officer in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, in the northwest of the country. Likewise, Bingyu (29, married) did not want to give up her career in Beijing, so, she had to wait for her husband's army service to end.

In addition, male partner's work demands can also prevent the formation of a co-residential partnership which may sometimes put women in a vulnerable position. For example, as a public official in her hometown in North China, Nan's (24, unmarried) willingness to cohabit with her boyfriend, who works as a pilot in South China, had been strongly opposed by her boyfriend on the grounds of *his* unstable career plans. Mei (34, married) also lived alone due to her husband's one-year overseas training in the USA. Because people under such circumstances often had little capacity to challenge or change the perceived vulnerability of their partnership, a strong sense of emotional loss arose. Mei recounted:

*Loneliness is a description of psychological states, but for me, it's like a material and tangible object which can send out a sound when it falls to the*

*ground [...] When I got up [in the morning], I would ask myself where I was, what I was supposed to do. Such rhetorical questions reflect my loneliness [...] it has become a physical and tangible thing.*

This sense of emotional loss was also echoed by Hua (31, married), a high-school teacher in Beijing, who was married to a man serving in the military in Guangzhou, during the time of interviews. According to Hua's account, her husband was required to stay five more years in Guangzhou due to his demanding work. The following excerpt describes her most inner feelings when her partner was far away:

*At the beginning, after his departure, what I was most afraid of was weekends. Because that was my most lonely time while exactly the happiest time for others. So, I loved working very much, at least I have colleagues and students around me [...] Sometimes I was in a deep trance and wondered whether I really was married. Until my little boy was born, then those kinds of feelings went away. He is my [emotional] sustenance and makes me feel homely [due to his existence].*

The above excerpt highlights the fact that it was important for her to keep busy with other things, so that she could distract herself from the sensation of sadness associated with being physically apart from her partner. However, this does not mean that being in a LAT relationship always placed women in a vulnerable position, as participants also noted some benefits. Some interviewees thought that LAT relationships provided them more freedom and extra time to themselves. Hua continued:

*Living together means that we have to make changes to fit in with each other, whereas [if] living apart there's no need to do this. I can do whatever I like. He won't bother me, and I won't be mad like if he was at home and messed it up.*

Likewise, Beibei (28, married) valued more freedom to 'go shopping, hang out with friends and watch movies' when she was alone. However, she then continued to talk about the contradictions between the autonomy that LAT offered, and the connections embedded in her intimate relationship with her absent husband:

*Sometimes you really want to enjoy being on your own when you're together; whereas having been alone for a long time you'll desire to live together. These are human beings – they always want something which they actually can't easily get.*

Although participants sometimes, and to different degrees, appreciated the benefits offered by LAT relationships as I have described, this appreciation was often seen as what Carter and Duncan (2018: 155) refer to as an 'incidental and temporary' benefit, because LATs were not conceptualised as the 'ideal' family form (if characterised by a co-residential heterosexual partnership). In fact, living apart was often seen as temporary separation for couples (Ermisch and Seidler, 2009; Haskey, 2005) and also as a practical response to having only limited financial resources and feeling vulnerable in the face of the power of institutions. Once circumstances allowed, it was both anticipated and preferred by participants that they would move into traditional coupledness, which entails a co-residential partnership. As Beibei envisaged regarding her partner: *'he would come back as soon as possible as I am here, and our future kid will be coming three years later'*. In this sense, it could be argued that LAT, for people in the constrained group in my sample, carries little implication for a desire to 'do' family in an alternative way.

## **5.4 Relational Agency**

In addition to the external constraints, how much agency people can exercise also depends on relations with others, as Carter and Duncan (2018: 147) argue that 'it is these relations that allow, or restrict, an agent's access to and use of resources.' In this research, the relational group is drawn from the largest sample of participants which covered individuals ranging from young graduate students to women in midlife. Like the constrained group, there is also evidence of benefits in relation to LAT in this relational group in terms of enjoying varying degrees of freedom and independence. This is also the case for men, as Lianbao (51, married) reveals, who claimed that living apart can evoke the absent one's good qualities and the past memories that they had, and thereby reduce any arguing over less trivial things.

However, a key distinct difference between them is that women's agency in the relational group, if seen in terms of wanting to achieve the 'normal' family, defined as a co-residential heterosexual partnership, was not necessarily limited by financial resources or external agencies, but often relationally constrained by their important family members. The emphasis here is on the importance of relational others (such as partners and parents) and, in particular, perceived obligations to their children in affecting family living arrangements and relations beyond the couple relationship. Therefore, in this section, I will look at how LAT was practised as a result of the fact that people's agency was relationally bounded with their connections to family members, and investigate how this further affects the construction and maintenance of relations beyond the heterosexual couple relationship.

#### **5.4.1 Relational Bonds with Family Members**

In this relational group, a high level of self-reflexivity was often showed by participants in discussing their perceptions of a co-residential partnership. Linjuan (32, unmarried) is a good illustration of how she reflected on her previous life experiences and (unsuccessful) dating relationships, through which her practice and expectation of an intimate couple relationship was shaped. As the oldest child born into a working-class family in north China, Linjuan has been working since she graduated with a degree. At the time of our interview, she lived alone in Tianjin, a coastal city near Beijing, where she was dispatched to work and later met her boyfriend. She related to me her experience of being a child:

*When I was young, my parents had a poor relationship. I often saw them fighting. My mum didn't divorce because of me and my sister. I felt very sorry for her. And, I think it really wasn't necessary to devote herself to children, revolving around them since they were born.*

In addition to her biographical history, her previous dating relationships also led her to view marriage in an unfavourable way. As she stated:

*Marriage is not an imperative thing for me. This is probably related to my previous [unsatisfactory] love relationships. As we often had quarrels in daily lives when I was with my ex-boyfriends. Personally, I also knew people who were married with children and had devoted themselves to their children and family. They just gave all their attention to their children and*

*two sets of families, leaving personal lives aside. I am particularly not willing to live a life like that. I would think the same way if I hadn't met my Mr Right. I like living in my way. Two people don't have to get married if they want to be together or have offspring. They don't have to be responsible for [the well-being of] the elderly.*

The above account suggests that people's relations with others may have an impact on their agency regarding making decisions in their own relationships. In this case, it seems that LAT provided Linjuan the opportunity for the reflexive and strategic undoing of gender in which taken-for-granted patterns regarding couplehood are undermined and destabilised (Evertsson and Nyman, 2013). However, she has no intention to permanently view LAT as an alternative to marriage, as she later told me that she thought her current boyfriend *is* her Mr. Right and thereby she would like to settle down and get married as soon as possible. In this way, it is plausible to argue that LAT was more likely seen as a pragmatic response to circumstances, with 'traditional' ideas about families, couplehood and marriage as a continuing framework.

In addition, my data with mothers show that the perceived obligations to their children can also make LAT occur, which further complicates the dualism framework of 'preference/constraint'. In this sense, their children's well-being was prioritised over themselves and other family members, for instance, when there were tensions between childcare provision and other aspects of their personal life which occurred. This was labelled by Carter and Duncan (2018) as an 'obligated preference', given that these women's agency in cohabiting was conditioned by their prior responsibilities to others, in particular, their children.

This was particularly manifested in the group of 'study mothers' in the study, who as I have previously defined, is the term used to describe women who accompany their children to study in order to advance their education while leaving their husbands behind. For example, Rosy (46, married) had quit her promising job in order to accompany her high-school-aged son in studying abroad, because her husband could not give up his business in Beijing and her son was too young to take care of himself in a foreign country. Another study mother, Xutong (40, married), accompanied her only son because she was worried about his daily life if he left home to go and study alone. As a consequence, she ended up living apart from

her husband, who had been working as the sole breadwinner in the family. A similar sentiment was also shared by another study mother, Guanya (37, married), who was born into a peasant family in rural China. In order to provide a better learning environment, she had rented a property near her twin sons' high school in the town. She viewed accompanying children to study and taking care of them as her responsibility as a mother in the family, rather than a father's, as she said: *'women must be family-centred. In my understanding, family is the most important thing for women.'*

While some mothers in this group considered LAT to be a form of self-sacrifice for the sake of children's education, others valued the freedom and extra time that LAT offered, as I have already identified in relation to discussing the constrained group above, albeit for different reasons here. It should be noted that, no one in this research complained about heavy household chores being left behind by their absent male partner. In fact, women saw shopping, cooking, doing laundry, and washing as their 'duty'. What they complained about a lot, during the times of living separately from their partner, were 'men's tasks' that women found hard to do, such as harvesting the corn, dealing with tricky contractors, fixing a broken radiator or pipes.

Nevertheless, again, the majority of participants in the study expected that they would be able to 'reunite' and live together with their partner one day in the future. The idea of married couples living together is so normative that Xutong (40, married) said: *'it would be abnormal if a woman does not expect her husband to go home.'* Compared to 'ordinary' couples who co-reside, being in a LAT relationship in my sample, is still very much grounded in the most socially acceptable familial living arrangement that I have previously defined.

This suggests that living apart is configured by their children's educational attainment, and this decision often seems to have been made 'by instinct' and is informed by habitual or unconscious calculation, especially when taking women's identity as a mother and their 'feminine' role as a caregiver into account (Roseneil, 2006). Although it has been noted earlier in the thesis, that the long-standing traditional Confucian family values regarding gendered norms have recently been considered less influential under the influences of individualism and modernisation, the literature on changing patterns of family practices in China shows that women are still considered as being very family-centred (Inoguchi and

Shin, 2009; Lim and Skinner, 2012; Qiu, 2019). As the research continued, I found that some key issues arose through study mothers' accounts regarding family practices, gender roles and identity construction. In order to better understand the gendered experiences of women who are involved in LAT relationships due to their children's education, I make an in-depth examination in a case study chapter on 'study mothers' in the next chapter of this thesis.

My data of married women with children, however, do not always share the same 'obligated preference' as the study mothers often have, albeit their agency in living together is also related to the obligation of caring for children. Some young mothers reported that taking care of their preschool children and baby on a daily basis was more about constraint than 'preference', especially when the tension between the desire of achieving independence and caring obligations for children was taking place. For example, at the time of interview, Shanrui (28, married), a mother of two, lived at a more substantial distance from her both sets of parents after Shanrui and her husband moved from the countryside to a local town a few years ago. She was often alone at home as her husband took on the sole breadwinner role as a long-haul truck driver, who came back home about once every two or three months, depending on workload. As the following extract shown:

*I think being independent is good for women. Not only living independently but being independent in all aspects of life. But I'm financially dependent [on my husband] and feel like I'm not being highly valued. If I had a monthly salary of 3,000 RMB [about 350 GBP], he [her husband] would at least consider my [emotional] feelings and pay more attention to me [...] Both my natal family and my husband's family said that the family doesn't need me to earn money, as long as I take good care of my children. But I don't agree, because [if I do nothing but taking care of children] I have to ask them for money. It would be better if they actively gave me some, but in fact I have to phone them every month for money.*

Obviously, Shanrui was not satisfied with her current life and status as a full-time housewife and felt vulnerable during those times, because the obligations of caring for children were seen as a barrier for her to access paid work and be independent, especially when both her husband and parents were largely absent from her daily life. As she said: '*I desperately hoped that my mum could come to take care of my children [...] I very much want to go out*



*to find a paid job.*' Shanrui's narrative illustrates the impossibility of finding a job if her mom does not come over to provide daily assistance for her children. Situated in the web of relationships, a sense of relational constraint emerges in that people can hardly make individual decisions about and formulate a project of the self (Mason, 2004). Instead, they may easily articulate a sense of powerless or lack of control due to the tension between paid work and childcare provision, as illustrated in the research by Wang and Dong (2010). They draw on data from 592 households in low-income rural villages in China and provide strong evidence that having children to care for places constraints on women's access to employment in China. Likewise, Yu and Xie (2012) also hold this view and further argue that the traditional gender-based division of domestic labour may impede women's participation in the labour market. Under this ideology, women are constantly expected to sacrifice their own interests in order to satisfy other family members' needs and to maintain familial and social harmony (Delphy and Leonard, 1992; Weeks, 1989; Wolf, 1985). In this regard, women's agency was very practically related to the perceived needs of their children in this study, with more negative consequences being noted by young women, in particular, but agency was also related to and impinged on by the economic constraints I have noted.

People often construct and constitute self-identify in relation to others (Mason, 2004; Roseneil and Ketokivi, 2016). Similarly, Jackson (1999) argued that women's identity is often constructed in light of their heterosexual relations, such as being mothers, wives, and daughters-in-law. As people organise their lives according to a gendered division of labour, the identity of mothers is commonly practiced through providing daily care for their children. Due to the bodily needs of the baby, Shanrui identified her primary family responsibility as childcare as her daily life has fundamentally revolved around her children. Consequently, her sense of vulnerability in a LAT relationship is informed by her dominant identity as a mother, as she maintained:

*I feel like I'm a housemaid, taking care of chi (food), he (drink), la (shit), sa (piss) and shui (sleep). I'm just like a single parent, or housemaid who gets paid every month. [The difference is that] the housemaids can spend it on themselves, mine all goes on the household expenses.*

This sense of vulnerability was more evident in situations when people's expectations of practical and mundane aspects of caring or help are failed to be delivered, which may undermine intimacy hitherto successfully sustained through other practices' (Jamieson, 2013: 19; see also Jamieson, 1999). Shanrui recalled her feeling of totally and utterly helplessness when her husband left her alone to take care of their six-year-old daughter and a toddler.

*There was a time when my baby always cried at midnight, it made no difference whether cuddling or singing to her. I was dead tired and sleepy. At that time, he was not at home. Sometimes when the baby cried, I didn't cuddle and sing to her, but cried with her. Actually, I have thought of divorce. [I'm] just so tired.*

However, Shanrui was not the only woman in this research who spoke of her identify in terms of being a single parent. Wangyang (38, married) also very much viewed herself in this manner, given that her husband was away from home and paid little (or even no) attention to their marital relationship or their family. Due to the nature of his job, Wangyang's husband worked away for half a month and then came back home to rest for the other half. Sometimes he returned home once every two months, depending on his work schedules. According to Wangyang, her husband's annual salary is three times higher than hers. In fact, she preferred living separately from her husband because he would break her daily routine and did not help in doing housework and caring for the children when he was home. By implication, Wangyang thought he had failed to do what he, as her husband, children's father, and son in his own family, should do. She claimed:

*You [Husband] trained your wife to become very independent, then you will be totally useless. What else I can expect from you as I'm so independent and strong? [...] Yes, my mum did help me a lot, but it was my mum helping me to take care of our children. As my husband, why don't you help me?*

Therefore, she said stoutly but relentlessly: *'I don't want him to come back [home].'* However, she still kept her marital relationship going, even though she asked her son to answer his phone calls so as to have 'no communication' with her husband. It might therefore be deduced from this example, that the meaning of agency also encompasses a

sense of protection for other family members in unfavourable circumstances, even at the expense of their own happiness and their emotional needs not being met by their partner. Therefore, I would argue that the decisions that individuals make are not simply individual choices but more often tightly related to their various relationships, which in turn, for my participants are informed by the traditional gender roles and the responsibilities that are attached to them (see also Stoilova et al., 2016). As Wangyang (38, married) said: *'I sacrifice my whole life for my children. But I have no choice.'* This sentiment was also shared by Guanya (37, married), one of the study mothers, who claimed that she would maintain her LAT relationship for the sake of her twin sons even if her husband had an affair. By doing so, a sense of 'motherhood' was prioritised over 'wifehood' and/or 'selfhood'.

As Twamley (2012) and Faircloth (2015) suggest, the concepts of gender and notions of intimacy and care stand in contrast to the notions of 'gender equality'. The unequal burden of domestic care, alongside women's economic dependence, which is often practised in traditional models of marriage and the family, remain prominent, even in non-conventional family forms. In this sense, the endurance of heterosexuality as an institution is still apparent in LATs (Hockey et al., 2007) when seen in the context of China and the traditional patriarchal family system in particular. This finding, however, is in sharp contrast to Upton-Davis' (2015) argument that women use LAT to undo or subvert and thus transform traditional gendered norms – both practical and emotional, and to resist powerful patriarchal structures. Within the context of institutionalised heterosexuality, the Chinese women from the study that I have identified here, are embedded in the wider contexts of relations that can be characterised as lingering patriarchal and familial gender norms. Wangyang's agency was largely compromised in the face of overwhelmingly dependent children within this relational network, leading her to identify herself as a single parent. In my other examples, the adoption of LAT for study mothers and care providers, like Shanrui and Wangyang, was inseparable from the perceived caring duties imposed by social norms relating to gender roles and parenting practices. From their perspective, LAT was not a new way of doing intimacy, nor some subversion of the gendered norms of coupledness. I would argue, with my data presented in this chapter so far, that there is little evidence of the existence of de-traditionalisation in relation to the practices of family life. On the contrary, at times, the non-conventional partnership of a LAT, in some ways has strengthened the

gendered division of labour and reaffirmed gendered norms in favour of traditional coupledness.

### 5.4.2 Friendship

In the Western context, sociological studies note that patterns of family practices and personal relationships may be shifting (Smart, 2007), and that there may be more flexibility now for individuals to organise, and perhaps prioritise, relationships such as friendships (Allan, 2008). Roseneil and Budgeon's (2004) study found that some individuals who are not in co-resident partnerships, in reality, actively decentred their sexual/love relationships but highly valued friendships. By implication, there is an alternative way of ordering and organising their intimate lives (Roseneil, 2006), resonating with Giddens' (1992) notion of the 'pure relationship'. Likewise, Ketokivi (2012: 482) found that heterosexuals who were not in a co-resident couple relationship had 'a more inclusive definition of closeness' and more diverse patterns of intimate life, including more friends.

Indeed, when people engage in a LAT relationship, they are more likely to consider intimacy and care beyond 'the family' (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). In my data, my participants often echoed the benefits that LAT offered in terms of having free time and space to develop their own friendship circles. This is evident in the story of Hua (31, married), a high-school teacher in Beijing, who lived with her parents-in-law, caring for her two-year-old son. She commented:

*[The relationship between] family and my personal life are not a quanji [universe]. It's just an intersection relation, and we need to give each other some personal space. I always told my husband that 'you'd better not intervene in my personal life when you come back. I'll not stay with you all the time.' But I certainly wouldn't do things against moral principles. Yes, the reunion time for us is indeed short, as he has only just over a month's holiday a year. But I also need to network with my friends occasionally. I need to have my own life. I can't stand you [her husband] asking me [to keep you company] once you're back.*

Clearly, Hua appreciated the reunion with her partner, but meanwhile was expecting to retain autonomy to maintain her own friendship circles outside of the heterosexual intimate relationship. However, by saying 'occasionally', this implies that her partnership remains of

importance within the coupled nature of social life (Cronin, 2015; Ketokivi, 2012), even if she lives in a non-conventional family arrangement. This appears to be the case at least for LAT people in my sample, as shown in the following extract from Yuqing (30, engaged):

*For example, I had two movie tickets that I received four months ago which would expire soon, but I didn't get an opportunity to find people to go together with. If we two [her husband] can go to the movies and have dinner together, that would be my first choice. Those people with families or partners around can't keep me company every day. In that case, I would have to play with myself.*

Furthermore, she frankly said:

*You know, I'm already 30. How many women [of my age] haven't formed a family or found a boyfriend? Who could accompany me every day? I can meet and talk with my friends, but, basically, they're busy with their own stuff.*

The physical distance, on the one hand, may help women escape from traditional stereotyped gender roles within a heterosexual context, but on the other hand, still limit people's agency in developing the wider social ties and connections. Most participants in my study were engaged in the ongoing processes of making and maintaining both individual couple relationships and what could be termed a hegemonic couple culture, which prioritises such partnerships and culture over other affiliations. Although Yuqing would like to spend more time with her (female) friends, the traditional coupledness was seen as being in first position, saying '*that would be my first choice*'. In addition, people in her age cohort are often either married or in a dating relationship with their intimate others based around them. Thus, few opportunities are available for women to maintain wider social ties and practice intimacy such as that seen between friends, beyond the context of a conventional heterosexual relationship (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004), even when their male partners are absent from their daily lives. This implies that, in the Chinese context, women's agentic power in developing friendship circles is also relationally constrained by the primary gender roles attached to them as a wife and mother in the family. While LAT may be seen a new family type for some people, in line with the dominance of 'the couple' as a norm under

heterosexuality, my data confirmed the centrality of the partnership in an individual's heterosexual life, based on how people organized their daily lives (Budgeon, 2008; Cronin, 2015; Gabb et al., 2013; Ketokivi, 2012).

## 5.5 Strategic Agency: Rationality and Relationality

In this group, my participants, in general, could have more easily moved in together with their partners but chose to (temporarily) live alone. As stated by people in both the above constrained and relational groups, some benefits offered by LAT are also evident in this group, such as freedom to *'do what I want'* (Qingshu, 30, married) and more time to devote themselves to their careers (as witnessed by the views of Hua, 31, married; Xuanye, 39, married). It was also reported by my participants that relating at a distance may increase mutual affection. For example, Zhonglan (24, unmarried), during the time of interview, was in Beijing preparing for the National Postgraduate Entrance Examination (NPEE), whereas her long-term boyfriend was looking for a job after graduating from a university in their hometown, Yantai, Shandong province. They have been dating since 2011, but met each other about twice a year—mostly in summer and winter vacations. According to Zhonglan, everything was fine in the first couple of days of reunion. However, she was one of the participants who recounted that more quarrels would happen when they frequently met up with each other during the three-month summer holidays. She appreciated the independence and personal space that distance offered, therefore, she enjoyed having a 'long-distance relationship' while expecting a short reunion (like two or three days) after a long separation, because physical absence she thought keep her intimate relationship fresh and alive.

In addition, some young participants, such as Yuqing (30, engaged), particularly appreciated the release from the gendered division of domestic labour, as the following excerpt stressed:

*I think it [LAT] has lots of benefits, getting more time to myself. Actually, I'm a kind of independent person and [in a LAT relationship] I can concentrate more on my work. I know some university students who go home directly after their graduation to look after their children. Their opportunities to work might have been constrained by children, whereas I don't have those*

*concerns [about taking care of the family]. Also, some married women complained to me about their husbands not doing housework, whereas I wasn't puzzled [by those issues]. I just need to clean myself up. So, it does offer many benefits and I've also been enjoying living on my own.*

Unlike the first two groups, in general, people in this group expressed fewer vulnerabilities or dissatisfaction but seemed to have more agentic power and individual choices in relation to their personal lives. For example, as shown in Yuqing's account, a strong subjective awareness of wanting to prioritise her own career plans while not risking her long-distance intimate relationship was illustrated. Expressions such as '*I just need to clean myself up*', in some ways, indicate how LAT can enable people to 'undo' gendered norms. In this way, choice is made after consideration and often related to rationality, with the capacity of choosing done in a rational way (Reader, 2007). Therefore, they ended up living apart from their partners, although cohabitation and marriage were still viewed as a goal and an ideal that they would like to achieve in the near future.

Although all human beings are embedded within networks of relations to varying degrees as Burkitt (2016) suggested, I would argue that it is generic, dangerous and even unfair to over emphasise the importance of the constraints of relational agency for all those in LATs, as I illustrated earlier. Others in the study clearly have more agentic and individualistic power in living their personal lives at different life stages. Therefore, strategic agency was used by me to investigate this category, with a particular emphasis being placed on an individual's purposeful approach which meant that they had relatively unconstrained choices in a LAT relationship, while acknowledging people's relational bonds with others in other contexts such as family relationships.

The example of Xiaobo (26, married) provides a nuanced perspective for examining how people's agency allows them to make decisions and then act on them regarding work and family life choices. Xiaobo and her husband entered a dating relationship just five days after they first met in a Chinese restaurant in 2013, in the UK. At that time, they were studying at the same university, where Xiaobo was about to start her master's course while her husband was a first-year PhD student. Due to visa restrictions, Xiaobo was required to return to China after finishing her postgraduate degree in early 2015. In order to legally stay

longer in the UK, she had to marry first, so as to apply for a dependant's visa to stay with her husband in the UK. However, Xiaobo's decision to get married did not go down well with her father who had never met her husband before. Since Xiaobo's mother had visited her for a month for her graduation ceremony, and therefore had the opportunity to meet her husband, she had put in a good word for their relationship with her father.

Having secured her parents' consent, they registered their marriage in China in March 2015. Just two days later, her husband returned to the UK for study purpose, while Xiaobo remained in China until June, preparing for the ACCA<sup>37</sup> test. While adhering to the idea that '*married couples should be living together, and why do people live apart?*' she took it for granted that, as a wife, she needed to keep her husband company. Therefore, she spent the second half of 2015 in the UK accompanying her husband on a dependant's visa. Although Xiaobo's married life seemed to mesh seamlessly with the requirements of hegemonic heterosexuality, a sense of crisis about her future, along with extreme dissatisfaction with her life and status in the UK gradually emerged, as she commented:

*He [Xiaobo's husband] had his own research to do, and I felt bored when I went shopping alone. Even though I'd made some new friends, they all had work to do during the day. The pace of life [between us] is different.*

Partly due to her changed identity, Xiaobo's daily life, as a trailing spouse who was a passive dependant in the UK, was very '*boring*' and '*a bit of wasted time*'. This was markedly different from previous times when she was a postgraduate student where '*everyone seems to have similar daily routines*' in terms of going to lectures, preparing for exams, shopping and going on trips, for instance. Six months later, she articulated that she made her own decision revealing her exercise of agency in deciding whether or not to continue to stay in the UK, as the following excerpt shows:

*Xiaobo: He said [to me] 'what about doing a PhD?', but I don't think I could finish it. I really have to be realistic. I shouldn't be unemployed but only passing exams like it used to be in the past. It would be a disadvantage to my future career development [if I stay in the UK until he graduates], as I*

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<sup>37</sup> ACCA stands for Association of Chartered Certified Accountants.



*don't have any work experience. Love is one side; my career development is the other side. I need to balance both.*

*Interviewer: How?*

*Xiaobo: I feel like it wasn't saying that women have to have a big career, at least [she should be] financially independent. In other words, you should be able to live alone when you're separated from your husband. If I stay in the UK for two or three more years simply for him, I will be 27, 28 years old without any work experience. By then, I won't be eligible to apply for on-campus recruitment [as I won't be a recent graduate], and also, I won't be qualified to apply via society recruitment due to lacking work experience, which all placed me in a dilemma. In this sense, I think I would have sacrificed too much if I couldn't get a job that I really wanted to do, couldn't go to the company that I dreamed of, and couldn't get paid what I'd hoped for. If we were both unemployed, it would also generate more pressure on our parents. After weighing both sides, it might be better to temporarily separate. [By doing so,] I will be able to gain some work experience and reduce my parent's burden. If he wants to buy something but doesn't want to put pressure on his parents, then I can help him. I think it's not a bad thing [if we live apart].*

At the time of our interview, Xiaobo had been working as an accountant for Deloitte in Beijing since she returned to China in 2016, whilst her husband remained in the UK to complete his higher education. It could be argued that Xiaobo herself took the initiative here to change her and her partner's life, as being in a LAT strategically allowed her to fulfil her plan to be employed. For her, LAT is a win-win situation and 'both/and' solution (Levin, 2004) by which her career path was strategically secured with a sense of fulfilment, whilst maintaining her intimate relationship and making a financial contribution to their family.

Furthermore, she continued to exercise her agency by living in her favourite city rather than following the traditional post-marital patrilocal living arrangement. As she stated: *'The only prerequisite for our marriage is that we have to be settled in Beijing, as I'm used to living here. I grew up here where all my family members and friends are based. I don't want to go somewhere else.'* Xiaobo further explained that her husband had originally planned to immigrate to the UK after completing his PhD. As a result of their marriage, he gave up this idea of immigration and went back to China as she wished. Obviously, Xiaobo acted to gain control of her own life in terms of when and whom she should marry, whether or not she should accompany her husband to a foreign country, when she should return to her home to work and where she would like to settle down in the longer term.

Similarly, Xinyi (27, married) was able to practice agentic power in living her life so as to both avoid patriarchal family life and retain her family ties. She encouraged her husband to enrich himself by attending a training course in Beijing, even though they had only just got married. I remember that our interview was conducted during summer in Beijing in 2016, when Xinyi, who was employed as a teacher in a primary school, was free to visit her husband. When I asked her if she experienced any difficulties during the time they were working in different cities and living separately, surprisingly, she is one of the few participants who had expected to live alone for a period of time:

*I was actually looking forward to it (laughter). Because I really wanted to live alone, and this was the opportunity. Actually, I've been yearning for Beijing since I was little. My academic record was not good, otherwise I really wanted to study in Beijing. He applied [for career training in Beijing] last year, and it was a voluntary application. It was me who encouraged him to go.*

Xinyi, as an only child, was born into a family which was orientated towards her father. Elsewhere in her interview, she told me that her relationship with her father was not close emotionally. Once, after a quarrel, she had not spoken to him for a year. Therefore, 'living alone and having my own time' was always part of her dream. Even though both Xinyi and her parents lived in the same city, Xiamen, she still preferred to live in her own flat whilst her husband was in Beijing. She would visit her parents at weekends to maintain a family relationship, while enjoying freedom and autonomy when she lived alone. It is possible, therefore, to argue that LAT, for Xinyi, is not merely outcome of her husband's working away to advance his career, but also allows for a purposeful strategy to conduct wider familial ties in the way she wants to.

It has been argued that the Chinese younger generation are more likely to embrace individualism and exercise relatively unconstrained and purposeful agency in many aspects of life, given that they have greater economic independence due to their educational achievements and employment. Some even argue that China appears to be experiencing the 'detraditionalisation' of family life characterised as higher acceptance of premarital sex, cohabitation, and same-gender sex (Yeung and Hu, 2016) and that women, in particular, have benefitted from this decline in traditional structures (Giddens, 1992).

However, although Xinyi's and Xiaobo's goals to create their desired lifestyles were achieved in some ways, it should be noted that, the extent to which the power that individuals can exercise also depends on their relations with others (Carter and Duncan, 2018). This signifies that the way how agency is practised can be transformative in a given context. Even in the strategic group, my data show a significant adherence to more traditional cultural expectations among young people. For instance, although Xiaobo displayed strategic agency with respect to living arrangements, when it came to future plans, she organised her marital life in a conventional way – living together as a couple with a baby envisaged at some point in life, as she maintained:

*I told him that I'd like to have a pig baby<sup>38</sup>, so I want to give birth in three years' time. We should have stable jobs by then, and will consider whether or not to move to a bigger house. Just having an ordinary people's life where he takes charge of the outside and I take care of inside the home.*

It is plausible to argue that different stages of the life course play a role in influencing the extent to which people can exercise their agency (Hockey et al., 2007). Xiaobo, as a married woman in her late 20s, had no intention of using LAT to consciously 'undo' gender or subvert traditional family values. Instead, she planned her marital life and family in line with the conventional family forms and a gendered division of labour, informed by pre-existing circumstances. In Chinese culture, it is still a normative family pattern that the birth of a baby comes after marriage and married couples are expected to live together with their dependent children to establish a nuclear family. This culturally and socially accepted family living arrangement undoubtedly affects how people live their family lives in a given social and cultural context. In this context, agency does not exist as some given absolute (Carter and Duncan, 2018: 148); LAT for Xiaobo incorporates traditional forms of family life because her agency was bound up with 'the availability of ideas about family and relationships' (Duncan, 2015: 600).

This mixture of traditional and more modern values in family relationships is even more evident when it comes to conflicts between work and family life, for couples. As Xiaobo

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<sup>38</sup> It is used to describe a baby who is born in the year of the pig (in this context, 2019). Because we still follow each other's social media accounts, I can see that she did indeed deliver a 'pig' baby as she planned.

illustrated above, she intended to follow the traditional family practice that ‘*nan zhu wai nu zhu nei*’ (men are in charge of the outside and women take care of inside the home). This means that some adjustments will have to be made regarding work and family relations when her husband returned to China after graduation. In this regard, having a decent but low-stress job has become her favoured occupational choice, as she claimed:

*I'll not stop working. But I won't find a busy job like my current one. [I hope I can find] a cushy nine-to-five job where I don't need to overwork and will be free at weekends, so I can have more time to focus on our children. [The reason for not quitting work is that] I don't want to be a full-time housewife, [because] I'll be disconnected from society as time goes by, and we two may have contradictions. I don't want to be like someone who struggles for success in the job market. In my workplace, there are many nu qiang ren<sup>39</sup> who give birth very late, like in their 40s. I don't want to become one of them.*

This ‘idealised’ version of heteronormative family is deeply rooted in Chinese people’s understanding of intimate relationships. In my data, Xiaobo was not the only female participant who claimed that changes (or sacrifices) would be made if necessary. A similar account was given by Yufen (31, married), who had a postgraduate degree and worked in Beijing as a teacher in a high school. She articulated the importance of family life, while simultaneously refusing to be a housewife in the long term, as shown below:

*My family is my priority as we work for better living. If my family life is harmonious and happy, I'll then put the rest of my heart into work with great effort. However, if conflicts between them happen, I'll certainly return home first. I may sacrifice my own career, at least he [her husband] is the jia ting zhi zhu [backbone of the family]. I earn far less compared to him, so, I will fully support him. When the children grow older, I will work again. I have traditional gender ideologies – Nan zi wei da [male-centred] [...] but I refuse to be a housewife all the time, for instance. I may get rid of it [being a full-time housewife]. I'm a person who combines traditional with modern thoughts, kind of a split [personality].*

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<sup>39</sup> The phrase ‘*nu qiang ren*’, literally means female supermen, and refers to career-oriented professional women who are considered capable of developing work-related skills, while less emphasis is placed on family and housework.

Both Xiaobo and Yufen were reluctant to pursue career prospects at the expense of their families' well-being, despite expressing varying degrees of attachment to work. Their attitudes to family and work yielded several rather intriguing and contradictory findings. Although women in the strategic group did exercise agency to purposefully fulfil their own desires and, in some way, they could be seen to be 'undoing' gendered norms, this agency was not simply 'a matter of choice' but remained compromised and conditioned by the prescribed social norms in relation to traditional family values (Cook and Dong, 2011). In this sense, a more conventional way of thinking and practices—redoing gender and reproducing institutionalised heterosexuality – was generated through the idea of the importance of being family-centred and pushing personal development into second place.

One possible explanation for this interplay between strategic agency and structure might be attributed to the gendered consequences of individualisation in China, leading to women facing contradictions, as I argued in Chapter 4. On the one hand, China's rapid socio-economic transition has brought about significant changes in people's lives, with Chinese women having a greater desire and capacity to enhance their sense of self-worth by securing a job and thereby achieving more financial independence than previous generations. Fong (2002) argued that China's one-child policy has empowered urban daughters in terms of negotiating gender norms in ways that benefit them, as they do not have to compete with siblings for parental investment. Opportunities for education and employment, especially in urban areas, have facilitated singleton daughters' efforts to enjoy autonomy as well as provide financial care for their parents. This leads many young people to experience greater freedom and autonomy than before in what might be termed building a 'do-it-yourself biography'.

On the other hand, this does not automatically equate to theories of individualisation, nor is this agency untrammelled, even when the agency can be considered consciously strategic. The traditions and continuity of social norms surrounding family and gender roles in the specific cultural and social context of China continue to organise Chinese people's understanding and practice of everyday family relationships. As Gregory and Susan (2009: 10) note, individual choice is also circumscribed by prevailing national gender cultures and expectations, as well as labour-market opportunities. In this group, people's strategically approach in making decisions about their living arrangement and intimate relationships

share a strong tendency to individualism. However, in the meantime, their choices are significantly conditioned by relational ties with their intimate partners and are also subject to external social norms. In this sense, my argument is consistent with Mason's (2004) finding on 'relational individualism' based on people's narratives about their residential histories. She explicitly demonstrates the relationality of people's practices and agency, but in the interest of others.

More importantly, as I stated earlier in this chapter, these three groups (constrained, relational, and strategic groups, respectively) that I have discussed so far, are themselves diverse, and sometimes overlapping. The participants in these groups share some structural constraints and relational ties in relationship to their lives, but different amounts and types of agency are exercised in each due to the balance of economic circumstances, age, perceived caring responsibilities, and personal career development, for example, as the data to illustrate strategic agency reveals.

## **5.6 Summary**

This chapter was concerned with the complexities of subjective interpretations of LAT arrangements by the participants, particularly with regard to the interrelation of agency and structure. The diverse motivations for the women to be involved in LATs and how far agency (and structure) are exercised in everyday life were examined through looking at three different groups: constrained, relational, and strategic. Based on my analysis, I would suggest that agency should be understood as fluid and transformative, and that people can shift between categories as their lives and relationships change over the life course.

People in these three groups, to varying degrees, demonstrated the benefits that LAT offered in relation to independence, personal space and extra free time, as well as autonomy from male authority and the traditional division of domestic labour. In this way, agency was apparent. However, as I have argued, there were differences between each group. For example, people tended to fall into the constrained group when their agency in living a desired co-residential partnership was conditioned by limited financial resources and external powerful institutions. In this way, people can hardly effect change in such circumstances. In addition, people often make choices and decisions in relation to intimate

others, such as children. This suggests that how to practice agency needs to take relational others, as well as the wider contexts in which people are embedded, into account. For people in the strategic group, they could easily have a co-residential partnership but chose not to do so. This unconstrained agency allowing them to realise their individualised life project, however, can sometimes go hand in hand with relational agency. In addition, the nature of their agency varies in different circumstances when participants have LAT relationships as a practical response to wider changes, rather than a conscious 'alternative' to coupledness (Levin, 2004), or a move 'beyond the family' (Budgeon and Roseneil, 2004), or a political act that subverts traditional gender norms (Upton-Davis, 2015). With 'traditional' ideas about families, coupledness and marriage as a continuing framework, expectations on 'normative' family life, when defined as living together as a couple, orientates and informs people's understanding of how they see their LAT arrangement and future family life. Therefore, my data found little evidence overall to support the wholesale de-traditionalisation of family in contemporary China, despite the occurrence of agency.

However, it is important to critically engage with the framework of Burkitt's (2016) relational agency and Carter and Duncan's (2018) analysis of the differential agencies of LAT women, in relation to my data. My data show that people, sometimes, shift amongst these three groups, indicating a fluid and transformative agency. People can not only act as active agents, but also respond to vulnerabilities as their lives change over the life course. In the same vein, when people make individualised decisions on their own, this does not exclude the consideration of intimate others, the influence of conventional and habitual manners and the wider social norms on heterosexuality and gender roles. As people may often draw on both 'traditions' and 'modern ideas and practices' to take on challenges and formulate responses. Therefore, the participants who ended up living apart were not completely passive in the face of both constraints and social norms. In fact, women's agency in living apart together relationships is subject to various interpretations and develops in a complex way as I have demonstrated.

In the next chapter, I will primarily focus on the experiences of six study mothers whose agency in living together relationships was relationally constrained by their children's education. As a case study chapter, my intention is to make a closer examination of how

they, in LAT relationships, 'do' family and how family practices are subject to cultural interpretations and social constraints.



## Chapter 6 Family Practices and ‘Doing’ Mothering: Case Studies on Chinese ‘Study Mothers’<sup>40</sup>

### 6.1 Introduction

During the fieldwork, I had interviewed 39 people in total from varied social backgrounds who lived apart from their partner. As I earlier discussed in Chapter 5, some of the reasons for Chinese couples living separately are similar to those in Western contexts, such as relating to jobs and/or educational location for any dependent children, others are quite different. In China, such differences can be seen clearly through the category of Chinese ‘study mothers’ (in Mandarin Chinese, *peidu mama*). The term ‘study mothers’, coined by the Chinese media in Singapore, refers to Chinese mothers who physically accompany and take care of their children so as to provide them with optimal living and study conditions. Generally, this can be achieved in multiple ways depending on personal and collective circumstances; for instance, sending their children abroad to receive a Western education accompanied by parent(s), or internal migration to (low-cost but relatively high quality) schools. Under such circumstances, the household is often split across a country or countries, as at the most case, the fathers usually stay in the home country or travel to economically developed regions to provide continuous financial support for their family.

Such living arrangements, organised primarily around children’s education, have been documented in literature and are regarded as part of a wider strategy of capital accumulation for children (and the family) to achieve a better and higher social class status (Fong, 2004; Waters, 2005). For example, in order to pass on their advantages and invest in their children’s future, Taiwanese parents had dropped their ‘parachute’ or ‘satellite’ children into the United States or Canada without the parents, who had returned to their country of origin to accumulate economic capital (Zhou, 1998). Waters (2005) focused on the importance of an overseas education as a strategy to both cultural capital and social reproduction in ‘astronaut’ families, where families immigrate to Canada and then the head

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<sup>40</sup> This chapter draws on a paper published in Sociological Research Online, available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1360780419871574>

of the household returns to Hong Kong to continue with his occupation. In South Korea, 'kirogi families' that divide themselves between two countries are practised mainly by middle-class families for the purpose of providing their children with Western credentials in response to external changes (Jeong et al., 2014). Due to children's education, the practice of split households reveals gendered patterns: usually the mothers rather than the fathers uproot their lives to accommodate their child, although a few fathers also did so (Lee and Koo, 2006; Waters, 2010).

With respect to Chinese context, Chinese parents have a long history of emphasizing childrens' studies and will do anything they can, even uproot themselves, to provide their children with better study conditions (Fong, 2004; Huang and Yeoh, 2005). The phrase *Meng mu san qian* (literally meaning Mencius' mother moved house three times), is a good illustration of this. It was said that the efforts that her mother had made in relation to her willingness to provide a better learning environment have helped advance the scholarly development of Chinese sage Mencius (in Chinese: Mengzi) (c.372- c.289 BC).

This is even more evident under China's one-child policy, which started in the late 1970s and ended in 2015, so that parents usually spare no efforts to devote themselves to their only children, even when self-sacrifice is involved, though this is done with different means (Fong, 2004; Huang and Yeoh, 2005; Shek, 2006). Recently, a popular Chinese television drama *Always with you*<sup>41</sup> (in Chinese: peidu mama) was broadcast in one of the most influential Chinese-language television channels – Zhejiang TV, in 2018. The 48 episodes of this modern drama revolves around stories of four mothers, who came from varied social backgrounds accompanying their high school-aged kids in Vancouver to study. The popularity of *Always with you* reflects that Chinese families are child-centred and the phenomenon of mothers relocating their residences to accompany their children, both in mental and physical terms, is apparently a feature in today's China (Huang and Yeoh, 2005).

Considering it has been taken for granted that married couples should cohabit and live in the same household to establish a culturally acceptable 'family' and raise their children

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<sup>41</sup> The TV drama tells a story about issues around being understood, love and being loved, sacrifice and growing up together between parents and children during a period of living in Canada. For more information about *Always with you*, see <http://www.chinesedrama.info/2018/06/drama-always-with-you.html>

together (especially in the Chinese context with its long tradition of establishing extended households as an ideal and dominant family arrangement) (Zeng and Xie, 2014). In this regard, families that were geographically separated for their children's education, in some ways, have challenged the traditional concept of 'the family' and thus further problematized the 'normalisation' of married couple's co-residence and family practices between parents and child. Since academically far too little attention has been paid to the complexities and diversity of family life regarding the way in which Chinese married couples live separately, specifically for their children's education, in this chapter, I will ask how people within scattered living arrangements do 'family' and how family practices are subject to cultural interpretations and social constraints.

Among my 39 participants, six were mothers of high school-aged children. Therefore, I designed this case study chapter within the context of the broader thesis, and within this framework, six Chinese study mothers whose experiences of accompanying their children while living apart from their partner, were examined. By applying David Morgan's (1996, 2011) 'family practices' approach, as I earlier mentioned in the Literature Review, to the non-Western context, this chapter considers the diverse strategies employed by women in diverse living arrangements to negotiate gender roles and everyday family practices, especially in relation to the group of study mothers I interviewed. I start by giving contextual information about these six mothers. This is then followed by a closer examination of how an individual's biographical history affects the way family is practised and serves as a lens through which the continuity and changes in family life are discussed. I will then look at the diverse reasons underlying why couples live apart and the coping strategies developed by family members, and study mothers, in particular. Through looking at their everyday doing of family, the final section in this chapter will investigate how study mothers construct and make sense of their identities during the course of accompanying their children to study.

## **6.2 Stories of Six Study Mothers**

These six study mothers were chosen purposely as case studies in this research, considering they shared the same reason for living apart from their partners, that is, for the advancement of their children's education, while varying in the ways they perform gender

role-related activities to 'do' family. In terms of living arrangements, they all relocated their residences so as to be next to the high school where their children studied, whilst their partner was expected to provide financial support, either by working in their hometown or moving to more economically developed areas.

Demographically, these women were in their mid-40s and none of them had experienced divorce. They grew up in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and had experienced profound social and economic changes in their adolescence and adulthood, as China started to experience economic transition to a market economy in 1978. It is worth noting here that they vary as a sample in terms of their educational level, family background, occupation and the regions in which they reside. Except for Rosy who got a university degree, the rest had graduated from either secondary school or high school. Apart from Qingyan (47) and Guanya (38) who have two children, the rest have only one child aged between 15 and 17 who are studying in high school. More detailed socio-demographic information in relation to six study mothers can be seen in Appendix 5. During the interviews, they talked about their embodied experiences of accompanying their children, in the absence of their husband.

Although it is a fairly small sample size, a case study approach was employed to exclusively interrogate contemporary real-life phenomena at the micro level, both within an individual setting and across settings, so as to represent the subtleties and complexities of an individual's unique experiences in their own right (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Hockey et al. (2007) used a case study approach to explore how heterosexuality was practised and reproduced within the sphere of the mundane, through the lens of a participant's biographical life history where agency was engaged in the context of institutional heterosexuality, and their study has partially inspired my choice of method here.

The use of a case study approach therefore enables me to examine these multiple cases in depth within each setting, but also allows me to illustrate the key themes that are relevant across the sample, with the aim of understanding how these study mothers 'do' family and make sense of themselves. I also examine how Chinese women negotiate gender roles and make sense of their own identities during the course of accompanying and being involved

with their childrens' education. In doing so, special attention to the context of Chinese social, historical and cultural perspectives have been taken into account.

## 6.3 Continuity and Changes in Family Practices

In this section, I elaborate on how individual's own biographical experiences were used to help construct their current family life and how family practices themselves are subject to wider social and cultural interpretations, leading to an understanding of their 'doing family' differently.

### 6.3.1 Continuity in Family Practices

During interviews, I noticed that some women often recalled the family they grew up in as a guide to construct how their current family life was practised. In these cases, working out how to construct a sense of family and maintain intimacy for them, had become strongly intertwined with an individual's own biographical experience in the past. In some cases, the continuation of doing family was clearly evident when women thought back to their own experiences growing up. This is well exemplified in the experiences of Guanya (37) who did not have a formal job but worked as a substitute teacher at a kindergarten in her hometown. She quit the job due to her (natal) family's heavy farming occupation and her father's poor physical condition. She considered: *'family is the most important things for a woman'* and this idea was deeply rooted in her heart from a very young age:

*[It's about my] family background [which made me think in this way]. Because my parents are in rural areas without being well educated. But my dad gave all his money that he gained to my mom [...] I thought this was the most trust [that my dad showed] to her [...] although I am a child of rural parents, my family is harmonious. For example, if my dad would like to do some projects which need more money while he felt embarrassed to ask for, my mom would go out to ask [people to borrow money]. I felt that my dad was happy for having a woman always supporting and encouraging him on his back.*

By stressing her 'rural' background throughout the interviews, she seemed to firmly indicate that a harmonious family has little (if any) relation to the geographic locations where people

were brought up, and by implication, for her, their class origins. From her perspective, it was not only because her father had undertaken the role of breadwinner in the family, but her mother had 'properly' performed what a woman, as a wife and mother, *should* do that her dad could be so happy and they could have a harmonious family (James and Curtis, 2010). This positive praise for her mom served as a reference point in relation to making sense of what a 'good' mother and wife should be like. As she continued, she recounted how her mom passed on her values in relation to how to be a wife before her marriage:

*My parents are low educated. But they told me that people must have to know how to behave as human beings, even if you don't have literacy skills. I didn't know how to do sewing before I married. My mom then told me that I could not bother farm work at home, but I had to learn it [how to do sewing] from her [her mom] before getting married.*

From her understanding, rural farming work requires significant physical labour, which is not a necessary skill that a woman has to have, whereas activities, such as sewing and knitting, are preferred to be learnt as skills by a woman. In this excerpt, the moral values that Guanya's parents attached to her perceived role and duties illustrate the importance of performing gender 'properly' and thereby doing suitably gendered work in a marital relationship. Therefore, Guanya's family practices in her current family are fundamentally associated with the ways in which family life was practiced by her own mother. One example can be seen from her attitude toward men's engagement with housework when they are reunited, after living apart. As she illustrated:

*I don't expect that men will do many domestic chores. Because I think he's already very tired because of working outside home, and cleaning dishes and the house ought to be women's work. [It also includes] taking good care of his parents and children. Because I think the most concerns for men are [their] children and the elderly [parents].*

She took it for granted that housework should be women's work and she endorsed the housewife role through her practices. As such, she viewed having mothers to accompany children to study and take care of their daily life as quite 'natural' and normal, even though

this comes with some degree of emotional loss, especially at the beginning of a couple's separation.

### **6.3.2 Doing Family Differently: Reciprocal Family Practices**

Although acknowledging that family is practiced in patterned ways, it is worth noting that families have increasingly been recognised as dynamic within sociology (Morgan, 1996) because how people understand and do family is culturally specific and contextually dependent. In fact, everyday practices are configured and reconfigured over time (Shove et al., 2012). Drawing on three study mothers' narratives of their own experiences of not being educated, their conscious accounts of trying to do family differently from how they had been brought up, were examined.

Both Xutong (40) and Minzhou (38) were born in rural north China after the Cultural Revolution, in 1976 and 1978 respectively. To some extent they shared similar life trajectories – both were not the only child in their own natal families; they all gave birth to a single son and accompanied them to study at the time of these interviews while their husband worked away from home for living; neither Xutong nor Minzhou had been to high school, but instead, stayed at home to do farming work as well as household chores. The reasons they offered regarding the question of 'why not continue studying' were quite similar too. For example, Minzhou talked in detail about the possible reasons for not being further educated when she was young:

*[People] at that time placed little value on education. My family condition was poor, and my academic performance was also not good. So, it does not matter whether I continued [to study] or not. At that time, most people in my age cohort failing to pass the exam for entering senior high school all worked. Even though you were able to pass the exam and then graduated from high school, the government no longer allocated jobs. There was no difference whether or not you got into a college. As in either cases, it was hard to find a job.*

Very similarly to Xutong and Minzhou in terms of background growing up, Qingyan (47), along with her five siblings were born in a poor peasant family in Liaoning province, the

north part of China. She was not given an opportunity to go to a college after graduation from high school due to financial issues. As she said:

*[There were] many children in my family. They [her parents] cannot afford us [to do any further education] at the same time. Both my younger sister and I were studying till high school, though we got the admission letters from college.*

However, being a study mother has more to do with her willingness to 'fix' things and provide her children with opportunities to achieve in ways that she could not in her earlier life, even though it may come with the price in terms of married couples having to live apart (Fong, 2004; Huang and Yeoh, 2005). She explained:

*I very much admire people who are excellent in studying. The reason that I couldn't go to a university is not because of my intelligence level, instead it's family [financial] conditions [...] I hope my children can do things that I might not have the chance to do.*

In particular, how study mothers arrange family life and make sense of their practices is profoundly shaped by the social prescriptions, economic constraints and cultural values in which they are embedded. With the idea of preventing her children from missing the opportunity of gaining a beneficial education, Qingyan decided to go to Beijing alone in 2006 when her son was seven and her daughter was five, in the hope of earning money. Despite her husband's opposition, Qingyan's agency in relation to resource accumulation was clearly manifested and even increased, as expressed by a 'flexible' family practice in the sense that she has taken a primary role as financial contributor in her family (Morgan, 2011). During the time of working in an estate agency in Beijing, according to Qingyan, her financial condition had greatly improved as her wages were raised from 400-600 yuan (around £ 44-67 GBP) per month in 2006, to seven or eight thousand yuan (around £781-893 GBP) in 2012. Nevertheless, she returned to her hometown in 2012 because her children were about to reach the key stage of their education. In this sense, working practices can also be understood as engaging in family practices; that is, family members reflexively negotiate their gender roles and reproduce relationships through working away (to financially support their children's studies) and coming back (to provide their children



with daily care). The rationale behind this appears to relate not only to Qingyan's cultural positioning as a mother and principal caregiver, but also to her biographical experiences of not being supported by her own parents – the agency to 'do' family and mothering in different ways. This further implies that people's parenting ideologies and family practices are not always set in stone but are flexible and intimately reproduced by the changing economy and particular societal context in which people are situated.

Compared to elite and middle-class parents, some working-class, under-educated parents have only limited resources to mobilise and therefore cannot transmit any 'privileges' to their children. However, they firmly believe that pursuing a degree is the 'only' effective path for people without a 'strong' family background and financial base to promote upward mobility and live a 'different' life. To verify the authenticity of this view, they often recounted their own (unsuccessful) life experiences as an example to instruct their children. For example, Qingyan said:

*If you [her children] study well, you will have a bright future, and your life will not be like mine, running around. I would rather owe you a childhood than an adulthood like mine, as it was much bitterness [...] I just felt that education, for me like having no [mighty] family background, is a way forward. Otherwise, what else can I choose?*

Similarly, Xutong draw on her own experiences of lacking education to enlighten her son:

*If I studied hard, I would not live in the countryside. If our rural children do not get educated, they will remain in rural areas. Education is the only way out if you want to. [If you are] learning well and getting into a good university, you can then find a decent job. If not, you may not even get paid in construction sites, as you cannot do anything without being educated.*

The very different attitudes toward education between study mothers' own parents and study mothers to their children have to be understood in the context of a specific social political environment, specifically the influence of the Cultural Revolution<sup>42</sup>, during which

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<sup>42</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, there was a widely spread discourse in relation to education, that is defined as, 'knowledge is useless'.

education was interrupted. Both Xutong and Qingyan's narratives of the importance of education indicate that qualifications are considered as particularly crucial to securing good opportunities in present-day Chinese society. As such, they determined to do things differently consciously, that is, placing such an emphasis on their children's studies. Because, from their perspective, that is the 'only' way to make their children stand out from other people and change their future lives. Therefore, a strong desire of 'doing family' in a very different way was shown to their children, so as to prevent them from experiencing the 'hard life' caused by not being well educated.

During the interviews, Qingyan repeatedly stressed that her children ranked at number one in her heart and she would like to do everything for them, even if this meant living apart from her husband. She claimed:

*I just want to raise and nurture my children. If they are useless and not promising, life is not worth living for our grown-ups.*

Clearly, Qingyan's narrative placed high value on her children's education and tied her own life, and even the well-being of the family, closely to her children's future in the long run, even if self-sacrifice was needed in the short term. As I have said, family practices are culturally specific and contextually dependent, where the way of 'doing family' is subject to social and cultural constructions of gender around the roles of mothers and fathers. In Confucian culture, individuals are expected to fulfil their duties as parents or children and, for instance, women were considered to be responsible for children's educational attainment and future development (Inoguchi and Shin, 2009; Lim and Skinner, 2012). Accordingly, as a child, being filial to his or her parents is perceived as *the* basic familial obligation to fulfil, and particularly in the Chinese context, a child seen to be studying hard has been considered as one of the most important ways of 'repaying' parents' sacrifices. Nevertheless, to some degree, parents' practices of intimacy, when characterised as devoting themselves to advancing their children's education can be seen as an extension specifically of a 'Chinese style of parental love' (Wei, 2011: 106), and have been heightened by conscious calculations concerning how to ensure their children are well educated and so have a bright future. As Jamieson (2011: 5.3) argues: 'practices of intimacy are implicated in

seeking its success'. In this sense, Chinese study mothers' practices of 'doing family' are partly grounded in traditional views on familial obligation. Therefore, I would also suggest that reciprocal family practices are being shaped and often linked to Confucian ideology of childrearing to ensure parents' security in old age.

## 6.4 Gendered Family Practices

Due to the variety of personal and familial circumstances, parents often try their best to do what they could for their children's well-being and future development, though with different means. As Morgan (1996: 81) claims: 'it is impossible to write or think about family without also thinking about gender.' Taking examples of Rosy (46) and Xutong (40), I explore how family practices are mediated with financial resources and shaped by traditional socially constructed gender norms.

Rosy, 46 years old, was the only study mother who had graduated with a university degree. Before accompanying her son to study abroad, Rosy worked in an insurance company with an annual salary of 600,000 yuan (about 6, 8155 in GBP) in Beijing, where she had been working for over 10 years. During our interview, I was told that she and her husband were born in China's third most populous province - Henan. However, they moved to Beijing in 2003 when their son was about 3-years-old. The decision in relation to residential relocation was initiated by Rosy: *'It was for children's education. As we all know that Henan is a province with a large number of people, but few universities. So (people) faced huge academic pressures'*, she said with a wry smile.

Owing to China's expansion of higher education during the late 1990s (Wan, 2006), being educated is no longer a taken-for-granted middle-class privilege (Waters, 2005) and the pressure on middle-class families to succeed in the local education system has gradually increased. This is manifested in the number of students taking the National College Entrance Examination (commonly known as '*Gaokao*') after three-years of high school across the years. In 1977, 5.7 million test-takers registered for the exam, the numbers reached a peak

of 10.50 million in 2008<sup>43</sup>, and have declined steadily since then. According to a recent report from the Ministry of Education<sup>44</sup>, 9.75 million students signed up for the exam in 2018. However, the acceptance rate<sup>45</sup> of the top 38 Chinese universities is only 2 per cent, which means that only 188,000 out of 9.4 million test-takers in total made it in 2016.

Even though Rosy's son was raised and educated in Beijing, his *hukou* (household registration) remains in Henan, which means her son was not allowed to attend *Gaokao* in Beijing. This is mainly because, in China, where people can take *Gaokao* institutionally depends on where their *hukou* is. If Rosy's son returned to the registered permanent residence, Henan, to attend *Gaokao*, he was faced with multiple challenges, such as different teaching materials. In addition, a recent report released by an education site<sup>46</sup> showed that, in Henan province where Rosy's family resides, there is the largest number of *Gaokao* takers, with a total of 820,000 people having registered in 2016.

In response to the competition with his 820,000 local peers, Rosy invested heavily by sending her son abroad, despite that he was reluctant to study overseas at the very beginning. Rosy noted:

*In the very early time, I instilled in him the idea that 'you [her son] are going to study overseas' [...] his teacher repeatedly stressed this kind of thing in all kinds of the parent's meetings, he then knew his own situation. We cannot go back to [our] hometown [...] so the only available option was sending him abroad.*

For the past two years, she has been accompanying her now 16-year-old son using her Green Card (as a US permanent resident), while he is studying in the USA for over two years. Her husband has remained in Beijing to run a jewellery business. Through this transnational educational migration, as a response to the working-class competition, Rosy has the

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<sup>43</sup> See the link: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2097512/gaokao-how-one-exam-can-set-course-students-life-china>

<sup>44</sup> The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. Available at: [http://en.moe.gov.cn/News/Top\\_News/201806/t20180606\\_338496.html](http://en.moe.gov.cn/News/Top_News/201806/t20180606_338496.html)

<sup>45</sup> <https://silvimedia.com/2019/03/26/not-only-cambridge-those-western-universities-see-merit-in-chinas-gaokao/>

<sup>46</sup> Education site. Available at: <http://www.eol.cn/>

privilege of passing on advantages to her son and withdrawing him from the local education system so as to access greater educational resources and, by implication, to success in a less stressful environment. In this sense, middle-class approaches to childrearing have become more strategic in the current socio-economic context, with parents being increasingly concerned with how to secure and pass on advantage to their children (Irwin and Elley, 2011:481). With the full support of Rosy's husband, sending their son abroad for education, in the company of Rosy as a full-time study mother, can be seen as an example not simply of an educational strategy pursued by middle-class parents (Gillies, 2005; Reay, 2000), but also of a classed strategy of 'doing' family: it seems that, arguably, family practices are entangled with the 'doing' of class.

Apart from external forces such as the Chinese educational system, Rosy's decision to accompany her son to study overseas whilst putting aside her own work, is also strongly related to her willingness to invest emotionally. It is important to note that Rosy and her husband had a difficult time balancing work and family life when they moved to Beijing in 2003. Under these circumstances, Rosy sent her son to a local boarding school from kindergarten onwards. After 9 years of boarding life (3 years of kindergarten and 6 years of primary school): *'He did form some bad habits'*, Rosy said, such as thumb-sucking. Rosy then took her son to visit psychologists who identified this as a way of self-comforting – in other words, it was seen as a mental illness partly caused by a lack of companionship and a sense of insecurity in his childhood. After apparent deep self-introspection, Rosy claimed that:

*Throughout these years, I did feel a sense of guilt for sending him to the boarding school. I owed him [...] in my heart, I'd like to more or less make it up to him. I'm willing to fix it by accompanying him [during the course of studying abroad].*

As Bedford (2004) states, one's guilty experiences are related to things that one does, rather than the way one is. In traditional Confucian culture, taking care of children has commonly been viewed as a woman's responsibility, both practically and educationally. Although recent research has shown a slight transformation in practices of fathering to extend beyond the role of financial provider to a more involved mode of fathering (Choi and Peng, 2016; Wilding, 2018), it is clear that women are still very much expected to put family

members' well-being first, while at the same time de-prioritising self-development and putting career development aside, as informed by a distinctively Chinese Confucian collectivism. So, Rosy's sense of maternal guilt was experienced especially when she realised that she could have fulfilled her caring responsibility to her son, but did not do so due to lack of time or effort. Therefore, as a mother, she bore the brunt of the blame for the harm caused by her limited emotional involvement with her son during his childhood when (particularly economic) capital accumulation was more highly prioritised.

Although the decision of being a study mother came with a high price in terms of her established career development (and even marital life) and Rosy was subsequently faced with incomprehension, it enabled her to ultimately fulfil the gendered expectations of a responsible, caring and emotionally engaged mother. As she illustrated:

*Because people view things differently. I enjoyed each other's company during his four years of high school in the USA more than stayed in Beijing making millions. If asking me to choose [between making money and accompanying children] again, I will still choose to be with my son.*

In contrast to her previous parenting beliefs, Rosy positions herself as '*being on duty*' to be involved in childcare and provide emotional support whilst helping her son escape the fierce competition prevalent throughout the local educational system. From her perspective, parent-child intimacy is developed (Gabb, 2008) and doing motherhood is characterised by child-centred, labour-intensive and emotionally absorbing activities, and may lead to strengthen the practices of mother-child intimacy (Devasahayam and Yeoh, 2007; Hays, 1996). Rosy's mothering practices entail more emotional engagement with 'doing' family life because experience, identity and subjectivity are strongly informed by socially prescribed gender roles in the Chinese context. This further evokes the deep-rooted gendered division of emotional labour in families, with the mothers being expected to invest more time and emotional energies in children's study than their partner (Irwin and Elley, 2011; Shek, 2006).

Across the data, the gendered family practice is also shown in a way of 'monitoring' children's behaviour through providing everyday accompaniment to ensure that they did

not go astray, or do things that the adults are supposed to do. The practices of monitoring, as shown in the following excerpt, refers to children's (future) sexual relationship. As Rosy said:

*I don't want to force children to do things that the grown-ups will do and say. If he behaves like an adult, he probably will make you a baby [laughter].*

Justifications were made by Rosy, as she insisted that children should behave like children, hoping to be cared for by mother. If her son is independent enough to be able to study abroad alone, she would worry about his personal life and relationships.

As I earlier illustrated, whether one can pass the exam at the final year of high school and have access to higher education at university level serves as a bridge to have a better life, therefore, the period of high school, in particular, is viewed as a key stage for children's future. This leads some mothers, in particular of the boys, to monitor their children's potential internet activities. As Xutong (40, a mother of 17-year-old son), said:

*Nowadays [people are all] accompanying their children, except [whose children stay in] school accommodation. Unlike the girls, we [parents] are worried about the boys in general. There are so many internet cafés<sup>47</sup> now. If you are not physically being with them [children], you may not even know where they are. [When you're] accompanying him [her son] to study, at least you can know that he would come home after school, otherwise, you have no idea where exactly he is if he actually goes to the internet café [...]. Parents are all accompanying children to study mainly because of so many temptations in the society, like the internet cafés. If they [children] learnt to act bad in the absence of parents, then our adult people had no chance to buy regret medicine.*

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<sup>47</sup> Internet café (in Chinese: wangba) was seen by many Chinese parents as harmful due to their stereotypical views on the environment of internet cafés, which are often? full of smoke with some 'disreputable' youths coming in and out (Sun, 2012). Parents of school-aged children feel a sense of being out of control when faced with online gaming and 'unhealthy' online information, and therefore, tend to control children's internet usage.

The 2015 China Teenager Net Behaviour Investigation Report<sup>48</sup> shows that network entertainment applications have been the most important Internet applications for young Internet users. Besides, the mass media has reported a series of accidents leading to death, because of fighting occurring in the cybercafés due to games being played overnight. Even though there is little evidence to support the existence of gender differences in internet addiction and online gaming (Ko et al., 2005), Xutong and other study mothers assumed that boys, rather than girls, were stereotypically more likely to indulge themselves on the internet, due to lacking self-discipline and self-control. As Xutong said, it is common to have mothers '*kan haizi*' (taking care of children) while the fathers are going away to '*dagong*' (do labour-force work), and '*only a few parents could accompany children together.*' By her repeatedly highlighting '*people are all accompanying their children*', it is clear that there are some cultural discourses about what people, women in particular, are expected to do, if they have children who are being exposed to academic pressures and an 'unhealthy' online environment.

Throughout the interviews with study mothers, accompanying children day by day facilitated the practices of 'monitoring' children's behaviour and everyday lives in the name of love. In Asian culture, the meanings of parental control may have different interpretations compared to the West, due to respective cultural differences. Generally, the notion of monitoring and governing, as interpreted as *guan*<sup>49</sup> in Chinese culture, may be seen as 'less of an intrusion upon children's sense of self than in European – American culture' characterised as representing individualism and freedom (Wang et al., 2007: 1593). In fact, the concept of monitoring has long been considered an important feature of child rearing in the Chinese context, interpreted as a symbol of parental love and support (Chao, 1994), and that is often associated with better academic performance (Wang et al., 2007). It is clear from my data that the study mothers' narratives of mothering practices, in terms of monitoring, suggest a gendered division of parenting practices which are already partially

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<sup>48</sup> 2015 China Teenager Net Behaviour Investigation Report. Available at: [http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/qsmbg/201608/t20160812\\_54425.htm](http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/qsmbg/201608/t20160812_54425.htm)

<sup>49</sup> The concept of *guan* is often used as verb and literally means 'to govern'. In the context of Chinese parenting practices, it is associated with more positive connotation in terms of caring, loving, and monitoring. See Tobin et al (1989) for more discussion about parenting styles.



shaped by traditional, socially constructed gender norms – ‘nan zhu wai, nu zhu nei’ – with men being in charge of outside the home and women the inside of the house (Shek, 2005). Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that gendered family practices may, in turn, influence how families headed by women are practised and displayed as an outcome of separation.

## 6.5 Everyday Family Practices and Identity Construction

### 6.5.1 Everyday Practices of ‘Doing Gender’

These six study mothers had given up their own careers and life networks in a radical way: they relocated their residences near to the senior high school, providing their children with a good living and studying environment. Except Rosy who accompanied her son overseas, the rest of five remained in China, moving from the countryside to town. Their husbands reunited with family members irregularly due to workloads. It can be very unsettling to move to a new house or leave home, given that one of the meaning of home is ‘familiarity’ (Scott, 2009: 50). In such cases, women had to face all kinds of challenges and hardships alone in terms of settling down to an unfamiliar environment, dealing with loneliness, caring for children, as well as taking the risk of potential infidelity from partners.

Generally, all the six study mothers indicated that they had experienced a hard time to adjust to the new living environment, and expressed a sense of disappointment, to varying degrees, about the fact that having to living separately arose for them. This is especially the case for both Rosy (46) and Minzhou (38), who had never lived apart from their partners until their children reached high school. When Rosy and her son fled to the US, she then suffered huge mental pressures and was afraid of the uncertainty that resulted from an unfamiliar living environment and language barriers. As she said:

*As I have had postpartum depression when I gave birth to my son. In the circumstances [of living in a foreign country], it was likely to cause the recurrence of depression. Time difference (between the USA and China) also made me lose sleep.*

Dissatisfaction about relocating and living apart from their partner was also illustrated in the way women expected couples to eventually be reunited. For example, Minzhou recounted

her feelings of helplessness after her husband worked far away from home and only could come back once a year:

*I stayed at home alone at night when my son went to school. I just constantly checked my mobile phone sending messages to my husband or calling him. But he was busy at work. I felt it was very difficult, leaving us alone here. There was nothing that I can rely on, as all responsibilities of taking care of children are fallen on me. Sometimes my mood became worse when he [her son] made me angry [...] I cried, and tears fell down.*

During the interviews, when I asked: 'Why is it the mothers, not the fathers who often accompany their children to study?' the answers that were frequently given were concerning the 'only child' and 'food'. To be sure, being a singleton, under China's one-child policy, has strengthened parents' resolve regarding giving all their attention to the precious 'only child in the family'. This child-centred ideology has profound implications for the ways in which family life is constructed and practised in everyday lives. For example, Minzhou (38), who was living with her only son (16 years old), while her husband had been working far away in Guangzhou, South China, for several months, claimed:

*We only have this one child. [If I wasn't accompanying him] I would be worried that he might not be able to eat well, and I'd be worried whether he was getting bad and going to the internet café [...] at least [by accompanying him] I can cook for him here and guarantee the quality of his food. He won't learn bad things and will come back home on time.*

During the time of accompanying their children to study, according to the narratives of these study mothers, they have been performing the caregiving role in a way that organises their daily lives around their children's needs, as well as frees them from additional family obligations. In doing so, their daily lives are fundamentally confined to the home setting to enable them to provide three homemade meals a day. Along with endless repetition of domestic chores, the experiences of time, for study mothers, are cyclical and fixed in many ways (Scott, 2009). Hongli (40), who found a part-time job, recounted her daily routine:

*I got up at 5.30 a.m. to prepare his breakfast. At 6.30 a.m., I woke him up and then he ate. I then started working at 7.30 in the morning and came back home to do his lunch at 10.30. He returned from school to eat and then*

*would take a nap. I watched the time and woke him up before he went to school at 1.10 p.m. I continued working from 1.30 to 4.30 p.m. and went home for cooking his dinner. He [was back to eat and] returned to school at 5.30 p.m. and then I cleaned up the house. Sometimes I would go outside for *guang chang wu*<sup>50</sup> till 7.30 p.m., otherwise I just stayed at home. I picked him up at 9.00 p.m. and then boiled milk for him. He would continue to study if he likes, and I would read novels or slept around 11 or 12 o'clock.*

Similarly, Minzhou's daily routine also largely depends on her son's timetable. She said:

*I prepared breakfast for my son and woke him up at 6.30 in the morning. He went to school at 7 o'clock. Then I cleaned the house before strolling down the streets. At 11 a.m. I got ready to cook his lunch before he came back around 12 noon. He then returned to school at 1 p.m. I would have a nap after he left; otherwise, I went out for groceries. You see, his three meals a day had me trapped (laughter). Time passed so fast; I had to prepare his dinner at 4 p.m. before he was back at 5 p.m. After he left, I sometimes went to the park for a walk till 7 o'clock and then went back home, watched TV or played with my phone. That's it. He'd be back at 9.20 p.m. from school, when I had already prepared him some fruit. He went to sleep around 11 p.m., and so did I.*

In the above excerpts, although Hongli and Minzhou's everyday food-related activities seem unremarkable and hardly worth talking about, in fact, some degree of collaboration in order to accommodate other people's timetables and preferences was noted (Morgan, 2019). DeVault, in her study *Feeding the Family*, illustrates that cooking as a way of showing care operates as a form of doing gender in which 'a woman conducts herself as recognizably womanly' (1991: 118). Based on the provision of nutritious sustenance and day-to-day accompaniment, this feminine ideal of care constructs an identity for both Hongli and Minzhou (see also West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Arguably, moving away from a focus on the role of a wife can be somewhat liberating, as living apart can free women from '*doing his laundry*' (Xutong, 40) and '*making his food*' (Hongli, 40). On the other hand, the role of mothering was still expected to continue, if not

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<sup>50</sup> *Guang chang wu* (In English: Plaza dancing) is a collective dancing activity which is popular with middle-aged and retired women in particular.

increase, their daily domestic workload. Although there has been a rise in men's participation in housework across the globe to different extents (Altintas and Sullivan, 2016), we can certainly observe the continuing dominant gendered discourses around the division of labour, which still influence how these domestic practices are understood. Women are still seen as: 'strongly tied to the traditional connection between food, care, and femininity, including a relationship of obligation and responsibility around food' (Aareth and Olsen, 2008: 282; see also Parish and Farrer, 2000; Shu et al., 2012). Rahman and Jackson (2010: 188) argued that anticipating others' wants and needs engenders 'a heightened rational self-reflexivity in which the self is constantly located in relation to the requirements of others', which is also pertinent to discussion here.

### **6.5.2 Negotiating Gender Roles and Identity Construction**

Through looking at women's everyday routinised practicalities in LAT relationships, it can be seen that the identity of Chinese study mothers is largely in accordance with the image of 'sacrificial mothers' described by Huang and Yeoh (2005). Their focus on motherhood, rather than wifehood, is often practiced by prioritizing the well-being of their children ahead of their own personal fulfilment or their spouse. This sacrifice, as I discussed earlier, is shown in relation to food preparation as they would prepare nutritious food in the light of their children's preference and eat themselves less (good quality) food than they provide for them due to limited economic resources.

Interestingly, my data also find that this 'maternal sacrifice' is manifested also with respect to how study mothers negotiate their personal time. I interviewed Hongli (40) in her rental property and I clearly remembered that it was a two-bedroom apartment with only a few pieces of furniture. When I asked her 'How did you pass time when your son went to school?', she said that sometimes she read novels at home, and sometimes went outside for *guang chang wu* (plaza dancing) partly due to having no television at home. She claimed:

*I purposely did not want to have a television. Actually, we have one at our home(town), but I did not bring it with us 'cos I'd be worried it [having TV] would interfere with his [her son's] studies. Accompanying children is the main purpose [of why I am here], and children's study is the most important one.*

Even though Hongli acknowledged that having no TV can be viewed as a type of ‘maternal sacrifice’ for her children’s study, she considered these child-centred everyday practices as a way of fulfilling mothering responsibilities. This perception was further reinforced by her personally knowing other study mothers who also compromised their personal recreational activities, when accompanying their children to study.

Through ‘maternal sacrifice’ manifested with respect to food preparation and personal time arrangements, the image of the ‘good’ mother is constructed and displayed (Attree, 2005: 235). Ironically, this gendered sacrifice was almost taken for granted, not only by the fathers involved, but by the study mothers themselves. As Rosy recounted: *‘My husband could not give up his business, and my son could not stay alone in a foreign country either [without my accompanying him]. So, I choose to go with my son in such a specific and no-way-to-choose situation.’* During this process, the involvement of Rosy’s husband with his business comes out as a ‘non-negotiable fact’ to which she has had to adjust her promising career plan and their personal lives.

However, some women felt different degrees of responsibility for such sacrifices, for example, this is well exemplified in Xutong’s account:

*I don’t think I sacrificed a lot. Actually, everyone in the family do different things for their children, including earning money. Nowadays, all parents live for their children [...] Life is forcing us to do so [couples living separately], there’s no way to change. I can’t ask my husband not to work away from home, [in that case], how could we survive and sustain our life? Likewise, I can’t leave my children alone and live with my husband, as I would regret it for the rest of my life if he [her son] became bad during these three years [of high school]. All parents share an idea that we can owe anyone except children. No matter you [children] get good or bad marks, parents bear no liability for your academic achievements, because we have already accompanied you and fulfilled our responsibility as a parent.*

Clearly, the agency of these study mothers in living apart from their partner is relationally constrained and inextricably linked to their children, as I have examined in the previous chapter. In this regard, as I have already noted, the traditional gendered division of labour, exemplified in the fact that the fathers are working away from home and the mothers are

taking care of children at home, remains powerful in many aspects of contemporary family life and continue to shape the ways how family life *should* be, ideally, constructed.

Nevertheless, not all study mothers that I interviewed agreed about the necessity of accompanying their children during the course of their study. At the end of her interview, again, Xutong (40) expressed her concerns over children's lack of independence in general, as a consequence of a parent's accompaniment. As she demonstrated:

*Children could be independent if [we are] not accompanying them. Because of our accompaniment, they would do nothing and had no idea about doing laundry, for instance. Now, high-school children are about in their seventeen or eighteen. They may have been married and raised a family, if they lived in rural areas. Our children are still being kept under the protection of parents, so, it is useless to accompany them to study.*

A recent statistic from the National Bureau of Statistics<sup>51</sup> (2018) shows that Chinese high-school students, aged 15 to 19, were found to have the highest rate in studying time, taking up 8 hours and 2 minutes in a day. Clearly, due to school-related stress, parents often free children from family obligations. Beijing Academy of Educational Sciences reports that on average Chinese primary school children only do housework for 12 minutes during the day, compared to 1.2 hours in the US, 0.7 hours in Korea, and 0.5 hours in the UK. Although she was aware of negative influences on children's independence, in reality, she still kept doing everything for her son, as she said: *'I come here for cooking and washing for you [her son]. If he does these things, then what else should I do?'* In this sense, it could be argued that her mothering identity was the dominant influence on her practices. Less explicitly, this comparison between children of study mothers and those who stayed in the rural areas implies different expectations of children in relation to family obligations. Xutong and other study mothers have, therefore, put children's education in first place, given this is seen as such an important and particular period of their life course. In doing so, Xutong reclaimed the image of study mothers as supportive, caring and qualified, and through which their

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<sup>51</sup> [http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201901/t20190125\\_1646796.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/201901/t20190125_1646796.html)

children may avoid the same pattern that they had experienced in their lives in earlier times.

However, when I asked, 'What roles do you think you are undertaking during the course of accompanying your children?' 'A mother', Xutong said, without hesitation. She then claimed:

*Actually, it is not that normal [to always priority the role of motherhood], but the reality forces us [the mothers] to do so, and we have to do exactly in this way. For all study mothers, it is a matter of fact that you can't put your children aside. Because they [children] are very important to you. It's same for all families. Today, there are only one child in each family. Not only their own parents, children's grandparents also pay a lot attention to them.*

An interpretation of their practices of family, through which mothering was emphasized, again needs to take into account the specific social, cultural and structural context in which people are embedded. Throughout study mothers' accounts, the gendered division of parenting practices seemed to be accepted as a matter of fact, so that the mothers are seen to be closely involved in and play a more active role in their children's schooling than fathers. As Rosy noted: '*It is much a popular phenomenon in China that the husbands involved little with children's education*'. At least in my study, the fathers, reported by the study mothers, basically have a dramatically different way of supporting their family members and thus 'doing' family. In other words, it reaffirms the instrumental role of the husband and father in this family living arrangement.

Faircloth (2015) links the concept of intimacy to parenting and examines how the care of children affects the parental couple's intimate relationship. She argues that competing ideologies between 'intensive' mothering and cultural discourses on equal parenting ideology are to be 'uncomfortable bedfellows'. Attention to the study mothers' everyday experiences in living apart from their partner due to children's education, call for a greater emphasis on 'gender equality' and intimacy. In these cases, family practices are often intimately bound up with gender practices in which men, as the primary breadwinner, are responsible for providing continuous financial support by finding jobs that are well paid, whilst being absent from their wives and children's daily lives. Especially during the time of

accompanying their children to study, women have very little time to do full-time paid work, and in such circumstances, husbands have become a crucial source of household income whilst being absent. These diametrically opposing parenting roles that men and women have played and continue to play in Chinese society, in turn, have reinforced the traditional deep-rooted gendered practices in the allocation of domestic work, whereby men play a key role in the wider society, and women are confined and bounded more tightly to the family chores, and therefore to subordinate status.

## 6.6 Summary

This chapter was informed by a family practices approach, which was applied to a non-Western context by looking in depth at the experiences of six Chinese study mothers, during the period of accompanying their children to study in China and, in one case, abroad. The trend of couples living apart, specifically those driven by educational mobility, has to be understood not only as a way of maximising their children's opportunity to accumulate cultural, social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), but also as part of wider family practices in a gendered and rational way.

The key conceptual issue that I have concentrated on in this chapter is how 'family' is culturally constructed and practiced by this specific group, which in effect, through such practices that I have identified reclaims conventional forms of family and gender norms in contemporary China, despite China undergoing profound social transformations of its own. My findings stands in sharp contrast to research on LAT relationships in the western context, which show that couples living apart could be seen as radical pioneers moving beyond traditional forms of 'the family' and provide a way for women to 'undo' gender and subvert the traditional patriarchal power base at the site of domesticity (Roseneil, 2006; Upton-Davis, 2015). This is in part a recognition that in Chinese families, and even in most Asian families, the ethics of care for children is paramount for mothers, and accordingly, women regard their caregiving role as integral to their identity as mothers. 'Doing' gender in a way that is congruent with cultural and social expectations of gender roles may directly or indirectly contribute to how family is constructed and practised. As Gross (2005) argues, family practices are embedded in both culture and history, in ways that mean the personal



and social are inextricably linked (Smart, 2007). Therefore, I would argue that Chinese study mothers' everyday family practices have to be understood alongside their individual biographical histories and wider cultural and social contexts.

Doing family in the form of providing children with better learning environment and homemade meals every day, not only serves a pragmatic purpose, but also 'performs a symbolic function, with mothers literally constructing a sense of family through their everyday family role' (Gabb, 2008: 91). In my narrative analysis of study mothers' everyday experiences, the role of 'sacrificial mothers' has always been recognised compared to the fathers, based on their day-to-day activities and the efforts they make in relation to their children's well-being in the process of capital accumulation. This set of routine practices has great implications for reinforcing a dominant ideal of motherhood, and the stereotypical feminine model of caring, 'of serving others'. In other words, the traditional forms of family are framed and routinely practised as they fulfil their gender role expectations as mothers. Therefore, I would suggest that family practices play a role in the construction of subjective identities and are inextricably linked to mothering practices; in particular, practices of 'intensive parenting' (Hays, 1996).

Although the 'traditional' gendered division of labour has been shaken due to women's increased education and participation in the labour market since China's economic reform, the dramatically opposite parenting roles inherent in the relationships of study mothers, reinforce and entrench the existing traditional gendered division of labour and traditional normalised family patterns in contemporary Chinese society, which has a long tradition of patriarchal families within Confucian culture. This suggests that being a full-time study mother and caregiver, even when it is at the expense of living separately from one's partner, has been seen as a way to privilege 'motherhood' over 'wifeness'. The underlying ideology, as informed by Confucian values, is to put children's well-being in first place and to prioritise the role of parent compared to any other roles in the family (Choi, 2006).

However, this could further result in the reproduction of new inequalities at the heart of family practices, in seeing childcare as something that is better performed by 'mothers', and as something that also reinstates care as a feminine activity, as well as reinforcing gender roles and hierarchies. Although justifications are often given for parents' devotion, some

women in the study, for example, are still uprooting themselves at any cost in order to accompany their children and, by implication, to both ensure a better future for their children and protect their own security in old age. Despite some dissatisfaction with the practices of being study mothers, which I have noted, for instance, in relation to a fear child may not learn to be independent, the sacrifices these women make was seen to be paramount in being a good mother.

In addition, I recognise that both men's and children's voices are missing in this chapter, due to the scope of this study. Men can be seen to 'perform' masculinity and 'do' family in different ways to women. Therefore, theirs and the views of the children who were accompanied by their study mothers in the context of these specific social, spatial, economic and cultural conditions, would have been interesting to investigate and compare to the women's experiences and understandings of family lives. I return to this issue more generally in the Conclusion.

In looking at the lives of study mothers, and the lives of other participants in this study in previous chapters, concerns over how to maintain a harmonious relationship and a sense of togetherness between couples while living separately were observed. Therefore, in the next chapter, I will primarily focus on how people maintain intimacy and closeness while living apart from their partners. In increasingly mobile societies, I will examine the extent to which intimacy has been shaped and rebuilt, in particular, by mobile technologies. In addition, I also ask how, in other ways, physical distance affects caring relationships and changes the way people maintain their intimate relationships.

# Chapter 7 Doing Intimacy across Distance in a Mediated Digital Age

## 7.1 Introduction

Traditionally, intimacy, which is closely related to physical proximity and with the opportunities for sex that 'closeness' provides has been called into question, particularly under the context of high social mobility where people are mobilised to seek out new opportunities in employment and relationships, leading to the physical distance between family members becoming greater. However, the rise of digital media and the availability of the internet, coupled with the development of information and communication technology (ICT), people can easily help to rebuild 'virtual co-presence' or 'connected presence' with family members who live geographically apart (Baldassar, 2008; Licoppe, 2004). Previous studies have found that the rise of networks is believed to greatly facilitate people in maintaining and enhancing their existing relational bonds (Hertlein and Blumber, 2014; Urry, 2007; Valentine, 2006; Wilding, 2006). Similarly, Jamieson (2013) illustrated that the use of mobile phones as a technology of propinquity (temporal and spatial proximity) in particular blurs the boundaries between presence and absence, due in part to its role in creating a sense of constant connection with others (Wajcman, 2008).

Consequently, self-disclosing, which is seen as a crucial in maintaining good-quality and democratic forms of intimate relationship under the transformation of intimacy (Giddens, 1992), has shifted from 'territorially fixed designations to more individualised and mobile patterns of relating' (Elliott and Urry, 2010: 87). These changes have led some to propose new forms of contractual love (Giddens, 1992), or bemoan the demise of traditional notions of intimacy (Bauman, 2003). In this way, large numbers of people are experiencing 'mobile intimacy', 'intimacy at-a-distance' (Elliot and Urry, 2010: 85), or 'distant intimacy' where connectivity functions without regard to place (Farman, 2012).

Therefore, the social implications of family mobilities on the construction of intimate lives are seen as central to understanding the transformation of intimacy in a networked society. LAT relationships in this study become a focal point for studying how intimate relationships

are shaped in the absence of a partner's physical co-presence, due to educational demands, the pursuit of dual careers, military deployment, and other such factors. In this chapter, I, firstly, look in detail at the use of mobile communication technologies, WeChat in particular, with the intent of exploring how social and technological changes have shaped people's experience in their intimate and family lives. This helps to understand whether Chinese people in LAT relationships de-centre love and long-term monogamous partnerships in the mediated digital age, where people are seen to seek out and construct a mobile form of self-identity that is liberated from traditional social expectations (Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1991).

When distance prevents people from delivering and receiving embodied and other tactile forms of caring, people have to enact certain behaviours in order to construct and manage their relationship across space and time (Carter et al., 2016; Holmes, 2010, 2014; Jamieson, 2013). This led me to move the focus to alternative ways of doing intimacy, that is the mobile form of giving, such as practices of gift and monetary giving. Although people value and often send gifts to the loved ones, differences in what to give to show love and affection is observed and this seems to be related to gender, age and the nature of relationship. With consideration of the specific Chinese social and cultural context of Confucian values on gender role and family obligations, women's practice of filial piety is found to be the key factor to maintain the collective sense of intimate family lives. This is then followed by an examination of the emotional aspect of intimacy when people live apart. By including male participants' accounts of emotional expression, I investigate how emotion work is done in gendered ways by men. In the final section of this chapter, I draw out the potential risks of relating at distance to parent-child intimacy and demonstrate how people do parenting and react to it in order to form a 'normal' family.

## **7.2 Practices of Mobile Intimacy**

In the mobile-mediated society including China, the development of ICT has significant importance in maintaining and strengthening connections among geographically dispersed families (Kang, 2012; Zhou and Xiao, 2015). Mobile phones, along with their accompanying features, such as in-built cameras, have become an integral part of everyday life to provide a platform for individuals to keep in touch, particularly with others who live in distant

regions (Dillon, 2009). Phone calls and Short Message Service (SMS), together with instant messaging applications, have become the primary mediated communication toolkit for people across the globe, albeit used with different frequencies. WeChat, in particular, as I mentioned in the Methodology chapter, is the most popular mobile-based social networking application among Chinese people, including my participants, due to the variety of functionalities offered to the users. People can easily rebuild a sense of having linked lives with intimate others through textual discourses, aural practices, and virtual connectivities. In this sense, the application of ICTs has significantly changed the balance between 'togetherness' and spatial distance, providing people 'new ways of doing old things' for achieving intimacy (Tyler, 2002). In order to explore and understand new ways of experiencing intimacy, Elliott and Urry (2010) conceptualise 'mobile intimacy' as the discursive and affective context by which electronic media mediate social relations. This concept includes couples in 'living apart together' relationships, and ranges from 'long-distance relationships' and 'weekend couples' to 'commuter marriages'. Drawing on Jamieson's (2011) notion of 'practices of intimacy', as discussed in the Literature Review, I use the concept that I have devised of 'practices of mobile intimacy' in this chapter to look at how social and technological change has shaped intimacy, when people are separated by distance through their daily or regular use of mobile technologies (WeChat in particular).

### **7.2.1 Textual Exchanges**

Textual exchanges have long been embedded into people's everyday lives to enable them to send and receive messages. As I demonstrated previously in the chapters, the verbal expression of love and affection (such as saying: 'I love you') was not a common practice among young people during Mao's era. My participants born before the 1980s recalled that writing letters was the most popular way to reveal inner thoughts and get to know each other, once they had been introduced to their future married spouse. For example, Qingyan (47, married) recalled her experience of writing letters when she was a primary school teacher to keep in touch with her husband, who worked in the army, when they were in the early stages of their relationship. She maintained:

*I was in Hebei [province] while he was in Shanxi [province]. We didn't have telephones at that time. If he used a landline phone to speak with me, he had to ring the principal [of my school, because I didn't have a phone]. We*

*communicated mostly through posting letters, like once or twice a week [...] we didn't talk much about the future, but our own everyday lives and what had happened around each other. For example, I was teaching at that time, so I talked a lot about things around teaching, children, and my colleagues. Every time, I might write two or three pages.*

Another example comes from Guanya (37, married), who lived quite close to her husband and was introduced to him when she was about 20. She smiled sheepishly when she said in interview: *'I wrote a letter [to him] only once 'cos I think face-to-face expression can make people feel closer. But writing [about feelings] sometimes has more profound implications than the verbal one.'* According to Guanya's account, her husband was very happy to have received this love letter and he had even taken this opportunity to 'show off' his masculine charm to their twin sons, saying: *'You know, your mother wrote a love letter to me when we were young.'* Although acknowledging that face-to-face communication can *'make people feel closer'* to each other, it is through the interactions in letters that individuals kept in touch and this hand-writing of letters has become their shared memory, as her husband attributed special value to it because of the emotions and self-disclosure that are bound up in it.

Cheap and time-saving communication devices advanced by ICTs have significantly changed the way people communicate. Writing and posting letters in affective context is an effective way to keep connected between couples, nevertheless, was not much mentioned by the younger generations involved in this research. As they told me that they would often use WeChat to send and receive text messages with their partner every day, but with different frequencies involved. When it comes to what they would often talk during the course of being apart, the most common topics they reported all centred on *'boring things'*, just *'like everything that's happened during the day'* and children's study habits, if relevant. For example, Xueyi (25, unmarried), a hotel receptionist in Beijing, would text her partner every day about silly trivial things, such as eating, shopping, and details about work because, for them, this 'small-talk' and talk about 'what's going on' in each other's daily lives are the most important aspects of showing care and building mutual connectedness, especially when they could rarely see each other on a regular basis. These short, unplanned texts or 'thinking of you' messages that are supported by information and communication

technologies can compensate for distance and help to re-establish the relational proximity threatened by geographical separation (Licoppe, 2004; Rettie, 2008; Zhao, 2016). Another example is from Beibei (28, married), who recounted her experiences of texting her husband, who worked away as a military officer:

*We often sent messages in WeChat, not phone calls. Because you have to find a private and consistent time [if making a phone call], whereas WeChat doesn't need that. For example, I would send him what I thought was good to drink or something that was funny. He would reply once he saw it.*

In contrast to the kind of disclosure of major aspects of the self, which was seen as central to 'pure relationships' by Giddens (1992), sharing day-to-day types of feelings, talking about the 'nothingness' of daily life, and 'light-hearted' communication about future plans were also important to my participants in maintaining the sense of exclusivity that is thought to be fundamental in marking out intimate sexual relationships (Bawin-Legros, 2004).

In addition, textual exchange also works when it comes to working through contradictions or quarrels between couples. Although face-to-face and voice communication is often seen as an effective way to solve and manage arguments, my sample illustrates that how to deal with and overcome misunderstandings varies depending on personal situations. Some participants require 'some personal time' to calm down and, in this case, having textual exchange becomes essential. For example, Jiajia (23, unmarried) and her partner were classmates in high school, and they have been together for three years since they went to university. At the time of our interview, her partner was employed in a state-owned company in Beijing, whereas Jiajia was waiting for her student visa for postgraduate study in the USA. She told me that she did not like to argue on the phone with her partner, because '*I just didn't want to hear his voice, as his voice would remind me of things that I was angry about*', and thereby ending up having a 'cold war'. In contrast, her partner acted differently and would continue calling Jiajia to '*break the ice*'. Because he got to know her tempers over time, he stopped calling her but sending messages occasionally. Under such circumstance, '*I would get back to him if I saw something interesting to me*', Jiajia said. For her, the use of written communication seems to have effectively eased their conflicts and facilitated the maintenance of their relationship, because it can be seen as providing people with some

space and time to read messages, and helps individuals to gather more articulate thoughts in a calm and clear manner before responding (Zhao, 2016).

We should also bear in mind that misunderstanding or contradictions do occur occasionally, even though people remain constantly in contact while they live apart. For example, Yuqing (30, engaged) talked about her experiences of using WeChat:

*Sometimes when I played jokes via texts or audio messages, misunderstandings would occur if he didn't understand my tone of voice. [The use of] punctuation I think can even generate contradictory meanings. For example, he might be wondering whether I was unhappy, and I might be thinking why you did this etc. and then conflicts occurred. That's not going to happen when couples are physically together.*

Thus, how people experience and use textual exchange on WeChat is different, and frequent text messages, although facilitating everyday 'nothingness' and sharing emotions, are potentially inadequate tools for the development of long-term intimate couple relationships, because 'they are often stripped of these essential communication elements' (Juhasz and Bradford, 2016: 707–708), such as facial expressions, bodily gestures, voice inflection, or tone of voice. This led me to look at the effect of virtual and aural practices on the maintenance of intimacy.

### **7.2.2 Virtual and Aural Practices**

Despite geographical separation and time differences, many virtual activities can be simultaneously performed through a range of mobile communication practices by WeChat, such as inviting others to a video chat if internet access is available. The real-time information exchanges have increased people's engagement in the lives of absent others and greatly blurred the distinction between 'absence and presence' (Wilding, 2006). That is to say, arguably, a sense of virtual intimacy, which is negotiated by mobile technologies and goes beyond the conventional forms of physical intimacy is –can be experienced. Rosy's (46, married) overseas living experience in accompanying her 16-year-old son to study in the USA is a good illustration of practices of mobile intimacy. She recalled the ways in which they kept in touch when her husband, who had stayed in Beijing, with consideration given to the long distance and time difference:



*I actually didn't expect that God would help us by offering WeChat. I seldom send messages to my husband, but he made video calls almost every day while we [Rosy and her son] were in the US. [...] honestly, we spent much more time together in WeChat video calls which were even longer than our face-to-face conversations at home [in Beijing]. He called me while he was driving to work in the morning, which coincided with the time when I was off work [in the US]. This is really much better than when we were physically together. [When we were both in Beijing,] I had no idea when he came back home as I was already asleep. We didn't talk very often [when we lived together in Beijing] if there was nothing in particular happening.*

The practise of mobile communicative devices can enable those geographically distance to nevertheless take part in family-based activities and maintain a sense of 'presence-in-absence' and 'togetherness' (Vetere et al., 2005). In this case, Rosy use WeChat video chats to have regular 'meetings' with her husband discussing 'what furniture should I buy' and thus feels a sense of his presence and 'closeness', which, ironically, she might not have been able otherwise to experience when they were physically together. Partly because the experience of separation, driven by the importance of her son's education had increased her self-reflexivity about her marital relationship, at the end of our interview, Rosy told me that she had started to change and planned to ask her husband out on a date. Under such circumstances, being 'apart' improves or enables being 'together', with the aid of ICTs. As Licoppe (2004: 153) argues, mediated communication facilitates the 'connected management of relations', through which quick, spontaneous contacts and the ability to initiate the connection at any time reinforce closeness and bonding.

Given that a move away from a fixed residence gives rise to a fluid and changing family relationship (Holdsworth, 2013), there has been some concern regarding the impact of social and technological changes on people's lives. According to Bauman (2003), traditional life-long monogamous partnerships which once provided solidity have been 'liquified' by the force of social change, consumerism, and individualisation. Especially with the widespread usage of mediated communication, people are confronted with endless choices to form a romantic couple relationship, where 'real' relationships are being eroded and increasingly replaced by virtual relationships. Consequently, this may lead people to think more of transient rather than life-long commitment, monogamous intimate relations (Hobbs et al., 2017).

With this growing concern, this mobile technology is considered as a double-edged sword, because it enables people to connect more easily with others, yet it also facilitates infidelity by allowing deception and covering up extra-marital affairs. Text messages, for instance, have been questioned for having the potential to transform ostensibly harmless flirtations into more serious relationships (Rettie, 2008). As one of my participants, Yuqing (30), whose husband is a firefighter in the army, said: *'Although he wasn't able to go away [from the army] freely, I would sometimes worry about whether he talked to others [via mobile phones], due to the popularity of social networking platforms'*. Another example of this can be seen from Shanrui (28, married with a 6-year-old daughter and a new-born baby). She was conservative about her absent husband's commitment to their marital relationship, especially under the circumstances of knowing very little about her husband's pattern of work, as a long-haul trucker who came back home about once every two months:

*During such a long time of separation, to be honest, I really don't know whether he has extramarital affairs or not. Even if it had happened, I would have no way to know as his colleagues are all men and on his side. Although I say that I wouldn't accept it [if he has affairs], it seems like in my deep heart I've acquiesced in [his infidelity]. He said he doesn't have one-night stands, but I still don't believe him.*

In a modern couple relationship, sexual exclusivity is seen as one of the fundamental elements of a successful and long-lasting monogamous relationship. Sex outside the relationship was viewed as always or mostly wrong and destructive to the family. Almost all the participants in this study expected sexual fidelity and exclusively throughout their committed intimate relationship. However, due to the rapid urban development of China, many opportunities were created for migrants from rural areas to find a paid job by moving to the urban areas. As a consequence of job-related physical distance between couples, together with the advancement of mobile communication devices, it seems that the possibility for experiencing the breakdown of relationships is increasingly high.

Indeed, people now have become increasingly networked as individuals in a much-networked society. The use of mobile technologies, nevertheless, are not necessarily giving rise to 'liquid love', which is characterised as uncertain and flimsy in relation to modern relationships (Castells, 2000). With the rampant individualisation, the notion of 'networked individualism', proposed by Rainie and Wellman (2012), describes the ways in which people

no longer passively, but actively, network with others by connecting, communicating and exchanging information. This is also evident in my data as people continue to value and make efforts to sustain and reinforce their 'shared lives' by using a range of media practices when they are separated by distance and time. Xiaobo (26, married) and her husband often make video calls by WeChat when they live separately in two countries. During the time of my interviews, Xiaobo was working in Beijing and her husband remained in the UK for his education. She claimed:

*We would have a video chat every week, talking about things that had happened to us during the week, no matter whether they were good or bad. We also did online shopping together, as sometimes I would pick something for him. Or, we would talk about newly released British or American TV dramas. Normally we would talk for at least one hour, even though there was nothing particularly important to say.*

It is clear that ICTs are deeply embedded into people's everyday lives and shaping their experience of intimacy. Instead of deprioritising commitment and partnership as a result of 'liquid love' (Bauman, 2003), the proliferation of extensive networks of romantic possibility provided by dating apps and mobile phones dramatically enhance people's capacity to search and build a fulfilling monogamous relationship (Hobbs et al., 2017). Spending time together digitally, due to the synchronicity offered by virtual activities, facilitates people to experience mobile forms of intimacy and (re)construct a sense of physical and/or psychological proximity (Jamieson, 2013). These practices of textual and virtual activities can be considered as the re-centring of the committed intimate couple relationship and through which the subjective feeling of another person being present has undergone changes.

### **7.3 Practices of Gift-Giving and Filial Piety**

Even though there are numerous advantages to using mobile technologies to stay connected in a geographical dispersal of family, it remains problematic if physical touch and tactile forms of support are for some people a primary way of expressing and sustaining a sense of embodied intimacy. For example, Xiaobo (26) commented that absence fails to give her bodily sensations, as she cannot have a hug when she needs it. Likewise, Minzhou (38) claimed that '*talking on the phone is not as close as seeing and feeling him physically*'. In

addition, although accompanied by visual support or real-time interaction, mobile phones sometimes cannot be able to help people know exactly where people are. Questions have also been raised about the frequency and importance of using mobile technologies for those lacking digital literacy. Considering that they have usually been together –longer than younger couples, the ways in which they build connections and manage their relationship are not confined to verbal communication and textual discourses, as the younger generations are more likely to be.

Therefore, this section looks at alternative ways of ‘doing’ intimacy among geographically dispersed people. As Jamieson (1998, 2013) argues, it is important to express love and care through practical acts of doing and giving to someone. I firstly examine the role of gift-giving in a romantic relationship and how people practise monetary gifts, with consideration of gender, age, and the nature of the relationship, albeit very few male participants are included in this research in this respect. Equal attention has then been placed on the specific cultural and social practice of filial piety, which helps me to understand that the variety of ways of doing intimacy in a collective sense is conditioned by prescribed gender roles.

In the previous section, I illustrated the importance of sustaining an intimacy developed from mutual discourses with the use of ICTs in a romantic relationship. Besides which, the practical doing has long been seen as symptomatic of showing love and exclusiveness (Jamieson, 2002; Zelizer, 2005). This is also evident in my study, in that the practice of mobile forms of giving and delivering gifts are appreciated and highly valued by those in distance relationships. Throughout interviews, many (particularly young) participants told me that they used to receive gifts from their partners or send them. For example, Tiantian’s (26, unmarried) relationship with her boyfriend encountered her parents’ opposition due to their unmatched family backgrounds. Although her boyfriend came from the rural community, and did not have a well-paid job in Beijing, Tiantian thought that he valued her, which was apparent in the gifts that she received from her boyfriend. As shown in the following excerpt:

*In fact, he doesn’t have much money right now, but he bought me an Apple Watch by credit card [...] I think it’s worth cherishing someone who’s willing to buy [expensive] stuff for you.*

Another example of gift-giving to express exclusiveness is from Mei (34, married) who gave her husband, whose work needs a lot of travelling, a very expensive world-time watch after they became engaged. She attached special value and commitment to this gift, as she described:

*This watch is important to me. It's the most expensive gift [I've bought him] so far. I think it means that you [Mei's husband] have gained my recognition.*

This evidence based on empirical data is seemingly not in line with Giddens' (1992) finding on the importance of mutually enjoying and deeply knowing as the central aspect of a modern democratic type of relationship or what he calls 'pure relationship'. The material gifts that integrate various meanings are calculated, not only on the amount of money spent on them, but also on the symbolic meanings that people attach to it, depending on the nature of the relationship with the gift-receiving partner. Informed by Chinese culture of reciprocity, where people are expected to give gifts and return the favour (Chan et., 2003; Zhou and Guang, 2007), the practice of giving in affective contexts remains important for the construction of intimacy.

More specifically, my data find gender difference in relation to what to gift. Throughout interviews, women in general are more likely to shop practically and purchase daily-use items, such as clothes (Jiajia, 23, unmarried), healthcare (Xuanye, 39, married) or skin care products (Xueyi, 25, unmarried) to their male partners. They seemed to be used to taking a role of 'caregiver' and thinking what consumer goods their male partner might need and use in their daily lives. This can be seen from the example of Linjuan (32, engaged):

*I don't know why. I just bought it when I saw something suitable for him. Mostly it's about clothes [...] he never buys me clothes, but normally he would give me handbag or perfume.*

In contrast, the absent one (normally the husband) tends to make purchases for their partner to reclaim their masculinity. For example, Lianbao (51, married), working far away as a manager, said that he would buy clothes for his wife, so '*she can better support my work*'. Xuanye (39, married) recalled that he would buy his wife on special days '*things women want, such as accessories or gold and silver ornaments. No matter what type of*

women you are, they all like gold and silver ornaments [laughing].’ In this sense, how people use gifts, and for what purposes, are different depending on the stage of their relationship and subject to variations due to cultural and context specific reasons. The data seemed to suggest that men uphold gender stereotypes of women needing to be beautiful, given women were supposed to support and advance their husband’s career after being bought material things to ‘look good and beautiful’. Due to the gendered family pattern, this practice underlines men’s financial choices and implicitly their power and status in the family.

The gendered difference in choosing what to gift can be attributed to prescribed gender norms, where women are seen to be caring in the family on a daily basis, while men sometimes consider gift-giving in an instrumental way. As shown in my interviews, some participants use gifts to ‘break the ice’ after quarrels to recover their relationship. Zhonglan (24, unmarried) said that her boyfriend was used to buy her a gift to mitigate their conflicts: ‘Because I really like sneakers, he will buy me [a pair of shoes]. But it seems to me this makes our quarrels become different in some way, like he’s buying me off.’ Another example comes from a male participant, Qingshu (30, married), who further explains how he used gift-giving as an attempt to stabilise the early stage of his love relationship:

*In the early stage of our relationship, [the reason for gift-giving was because] I was afraid that we might split up due to small contradictions. It [gift-giving] was often used [as a way of mitigating conflicts]. I’ll also buy her gifts on Valentine’s Day and her birthday. If I forgot, she’d be angry, but I’ll make it up to her later.*

In this example, due to his fear of being abandoned, Qingshu may have felt obligated to take the lead of buying gifts to secure and solidify his romantic love relationship. According to Nguyen and Munch’s (2010) research on people’s perceptions on gift-giving in romantic relationships, they found that anxious individuals are more likely to experience a strong urge to use gifts as a means to form affective bonds and secure attachment. This seems to suggest that gift-giving, arguably, plays an instrumental role where people use it purposely to maintain an unstable relationship, especially during their initial stages (Joy, 2001).

However, as the nature of Qingshu's relationship develops from unstable dating to a long-term marital relationship, his perception of gift-giving between couples has also changed. As he continued illustrating:

*But we are old couples now and wouldn't separate easily because of such trivial matters [not often doing gifts-giving]. Compared to dating couples at younger age, I concern more about our future life, including career development, thinking about how to make our family and children's lives better [...] because we are now a family with a child. It's no longer just two individuals, but two families linking together along with responsibility. It's not going to separate just because of us [their relationship being] watered down.*

With growing intimacy in a relationship, he downplayed the role of gift-giving in pleasing his partner to secure an exclusive intimate relationship and stable family life. It is plausible to argue that the actions of giving in a financial form are, instead, of importance in supporting the family as their relationship developed. This was substantiated by other participants in their mid-life, who said that their husband would remit almost all of their salary to them to control the finances, save and spend, as necessary.

On the contrary, almost all the women (especially those who were in mid-life) attached great importance to taking good care of in-laws for the maintenance of the conjugal family. For example, Qingyan (46, married), a study mother at the time of our interview, commented on the decline of romantic love and passion between couples over lifecourse:

*There was love at the beginning of our marriage. With the children growing up, our [marital] relationship has upgraded from love to qinqing [familial love and affection], with more mutual understanding being involved. [The common goal is] living a better life together.*

Similarly, Xutong (40, married) placed greater emphasis on family obligations in maintaining a conjugal partnership:

*We've been married so many years and the feelings that I had when we were just married have already gone. Now, taking care of our parents is more important.*

The above accounts signify that an individual's happiness and intimate relationship is often closely interrelated with the whole family's well-being. In a collectivist culture, such as China, the construction of family is not simply about two individuals, apparent in the traditional Chinese saying that *'When you marry, you don't just marry your spouse, but their whole family'*. Under traditional Confucian beliefs regarding family obligations, *xiao* (filial piety) was defined by gender, whereby women undertook the main caregiver roles of cooking and performing domestic work, especially when her in-laws could not take care of themselves. Although family obligation has substantially weakened as a consequence of the individualisation process and China's dramatic changes through economic transitions (Yan, 2009, 2010), empirical studies argue that the practice of *xiao* is still an indispensable part of 'doing' family in contemporary Chinese society. Family obligation continues to shape the overwhelming majority of people's personal lives in China (Qi, 2015; Whyte, 2005; Zhang, 2016). Female participants in my study claimed that providing practical care and economic support for their in-laws, especially when their husbands worked away, was considered crucial in maintaining their conjugal intimacy and family relationship. Xinyi (26, married) echoed:

*For example, I would come over when my father-in-law had problems with technologies, such as downloading apps onto his mobile phone or fixing TV cable wires. Sometimes I had to drive my mother-in-law to her mum's house. I have undertaken his [her husband's] role as I have to do more things now for his family [while he is away].*

Again, Guanya (37, married) talked about what she would do to 'please' her husband, while she appreciated her husband's thoughtfulness and 'gifts', shown by making her breakfast and taking her out on her birthday. As she said:

*Every year on my birthday, he would get up early and make breakfast for me if he was not too tired. If time was available, we would finish [the farm work] earlier, and he would invite people, like my besties, for dinner together. In return, I would take good care of our parents, children and housework [...] Before I left [from home to accompany my son for his study], I prepared all daily living aids for her [Guanya's mother-in-law] as she is aged.*



As a consequence of gendered family patterns, where men are normally working outside of the home with women in charge of inside the home, intimacy is practised in a gendered way. In the specific Chinese context, how people 'do' intimacy is closely related to their practices of familial obligations and gender roles, with men being the financial providers and women taking care of family members. In this respect, 'doing' the role of daughter-in-law as part of their gender role is fundamental to a woman's construction and maintenance of a stable and harmonious marriage relationship.

## **7.4 Emotional Intimacy**

In the previous sections in this chapter, I have discussed the mobile forms of caring with the aid of communication technologies, together with gift-giving in making people feel connected and constructing a sense of presence-in-absence. However, little is known about how emotion informs people's experience of intimacy when distance made embodied forms of caring impossible. Therefore, in this section, I go further to examine emotional aspect of intimacy with an attempt to understand how emotion work has been done in this context. When gender is taken into account, it tends to assume women as emotionally competent and men as inarticulate in relation to emotional forms of caring (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993; Lupton, 1998; Rutherford, 1992). Therefore, my focus has also been on examining how people negotiate gender difference in emotional intimate behaviour.

In Western culture, sexual and emotional closeness have long been seen as important for constructing and maintaining a committed intimate relationship (Jamieson, 2013). With regard to intimacy when people live apart, risking sexual intimacy has become a potential problem that people may have to take precautions to avoid. When talking about how they felt about couple's physical separation and to what extent they trusted their male partner, several factors were reported by the women in this study as having great impact upon the construction of commitment and a connected intimate relationship. The importance of being acquainted with the absent partner's work colleague(s) in constructing a sense of trust was confirmed by participants in my data. For example, Jiajia (23) and Xiaobo (26) stated that they felt a strong sense of commitment because they knew their partner's colleagues and friends and could easily contact them if something happened with their partner. Alongside this, the nature of their absent partner's work(place) can also influence

the extent to which women trust them. For those whose partner was doing a 'masculine' kind of job, they assumed that the possibilities for him to have affairs were rather low, even though their physical contact was limited by distance. For instance, Hua's (31) husband served in the military in southern China, which was dominated by men. Beibei's (28) husband also worked in the military branch as an officer, and could not easily leave without permission. Tiantian's (26) boyfriend was employed in an engineering team that was mainly composed of men.

More importantly, some people asserted that physical distance does not necessarily cause affairs. Hua (31, married) claimed that *'infidelity may have nothing to do with distance. It can also occur even when couples are physically together.'* Mei (34, married) expressed a similar attitude and regarded separation as having little consequence for the possibility of having affair, as she said:

*This is and will always be an excuse to say that [couples who are] not physically together will then cause [emotional and physical] infidelity [...] that's only a surface phenomenon, they must have other deeply hidden reasons [if people have affairs when they live apart].*

By highlighting some 'hidden reasons', Mei implicitly placed emphasis on more abstractly imagined forms of emotional intimacy within couple relationships. Although few researchers have examined emotion work within the institution of marriage or couple relationships, it is seen as crucial to maintain connected intimate ties and family life (Erickson, 2005; Hochschild, 1983, 2003; Holmes, 2010b; 2015). As a part of the transformation of intimacy, the intensive dialogue of emotional disclosure in maintaining good-quality and democratic forms of intimate relationships have replaced a set of social conventions and obligations (Giddens, 1992). In the context of a LAT relationship, in which couples are not able to co-present, regardless of the degree to which they have 'chosen' or feel 'compelled', Holmes (2010a) suggests that emotional support is an indispensable part of sustaining intimate relationships.

Likewise, my study has also noted that people in LATs have to make concerted efforts to maintain intimacy, as distance living, for some people at least, has made things more complicated, especially when it comes to illness. Almost all people had experienced illnesses

during the time of couples living apart. Perhaps not surprisingly, very few of them could enlist embodied forms of care from their partner due to distance and other commitments, and under such circumstance, people would often provide other forms of support such as reminding the loved ones to take their medicine. This is evident in the case of Zhonglan (24), who recalled her experiences of texting her boyfriend that she had diarrhoea after an evening dinner with her friends. She explicitly expressed how she was pleased to receive her boyfriend's messages and phone calls, with the intent of coming to take care of her, *'Even though I knew he wouldn't come [due to job-related distance], but it felt much better to hear him say things like that'*.

Although in most cases, people told me that they had learnt self-care as they had become *'accustomed'* to looking after themselves over the years. Emotional support through verbal communication, including talking and listening, takes on importance in maintaining couple relationships (Gabb, 2008; Holmes, 2015). Younger generations, in particular, seem to attach higher emphasis on emotional forms of caring and showing affection within heterosexual relationships. Mei (34, married) was reflexive about emotional support after knowing how this has been done by his husband's family, as she illustrated:

*His parents often watch TV together, without communicating or interacting with each other a lot. With regard to a family, their role-playing is children-centred, like he is the father and she is the mother. But they forget the fact that they are husband and wife. I wouldn't do that [to my family]. No matter how many children I have, I know that we are partners other than parents. I may have a higher standard for this and will keep communicating and negotiating with my partner about the importance of keeping emotional communication and family interactions.*

Research literature has shown that, in situations where traditional bonds are stretched by distance, people are more likely to seek more abstract forms of support and connection in order to remain 'close', and for that they need to reflexively work out how to provide 'emotional support' for the other person (Finch, 1989; Holmes, 2004a, 2006, 2010b; Jamieson, 2013). A series of actions of constantly communicating, exchanging messages and phone calls, giving advice and keeping no secrets from each other are frequently mentioned and appreciated by people in 'doing' emotional forms of caring, when hugging and other tactile ways of supporting were impossible. Xiaobo, 26, works as an accountant in Beijing. At

the time of our interview, her husband was in the UK for postgraduate study. When she was in trouble or faced difficult situations at her workplace, she would always ‘tucao<sup>52</sup>’ with her partner on the phone, no matter what the weirdest things she had ever faced were.

Although I did not interview couples together, mainly due to the focus of my research being on women and the fact that they were geographically apart during the time of interviews, thus making access difficult, there was a male participant who happened to be ‘suffering’ a similar experience from his wife. Qingshu (30, married), a self-employed entrepreneur in Beijing, recalled his experience of answering a phone call from his wife, who worked for Deloitte in northern China:

*She would tell me everything that happened at work, for example the unfair workload distribution, or the interns who didn’t obey her orders. Sometimes I felt annoyed. So, I turned the speakerphone on, and did what I needed to do while she talked continuously, as she would often talk for a very long time.*

The findings from my in-depth interviews, as evidence here, demonstrate that young women tended to open their mind emotionally and placed a higher value on communication and emotional connectedness. In the same vein, they often encouraged their male counterpart to share things that happened during being separated. Nevertheless, the feedback they got was often significantly asymmetrical. Yuqin (30, engaged), whose partner is a firefighter in the army, recalled that her partner seldom talks about his work pressures as ‘*He thought men shouldn’t say these kinds of things*’. Similarly, Linjua (32, unmarried) relayed that her partner said little about his work issues, partly because he did not want his intimate others to be worried about him. Another example, taken from my data, can be seen from a male perspective. Xuanye (39, married), was a manager working far away from home, and said:

*Basically, I’m not likely to tell her [his wife] about my work. There’s a difference between men and women regarding facing pressures. Women can mitigate their pressures by talking and crying, but men basically won’t*

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<sup>52</sup> The word tucao (in Chinese 吐槽) refers to ‘spitting into other people’s bowls’. It is widely used in people’s everyday lives in a context of commenting on and complaining about something.

*do that. Men sometimes hide it or hold it by themselves when something [bad] happens.*

The above accounts together show that men were less likely to participate in the disclosing of self and talking about their daily work and work stresses as much as most women do in the study. As Xuanye acknowledged, there are gender differences in the ways people 'do' emotions, where women are expected to be emotionally absorbed and take primary responsibility for managing and supporting relationships (Delphy and Leonard, 1992). This contradiction comes from the dominant and entrenched cultural expectations and norms about gender, heterosexuality and marriage, shaping the ways in which men and women *should* behave emotionally in their intimate relationships. That is to say, the ways in which people experience intimate emotional states and behaviour are constrained by sets of cultural and social relations of gender, heterosexuality, and marriage (Hochschild, 1983). In this ideology, people need to manage their feelings in line with particular cultural expectations and beliefs about how they think they *should* be feeling (Elliott and Umberson, 2008; Hochschild, 1983; Lewis, 1978). Given that the traditional male role expectations encourage men to be competitive, for example, rather than disclose vulnerability and personal feelings at an emotional level, fear of making others worried or 'compromising their own masculinity' (van Hoof, 2013: 129) may have driven them to control and withhold their emotions. Consequently, a gender asymmetry in emotional labour where men are seen to express less and devalue their emotions has emerged.

A substantial body of research on emotion work has revealed that it is heavily gendered, which consequently further affects women's roles in families (Erickson, 2005; Whitehead, 2002). This might be the result of a taken-for-granted assumption that women are more skilled than men, not only in consoling and comforting others, but also in expressing their own emotions, both facially and bodily (Duncombe and Marsdem, 1993), or because of the characteristic that love is seen as something feminine (Cancian, 1986). James (1989: 23) holds a similar view, arguing that emotional becomes part of a major cluster of other adjectives by which masculine and feminine are differentiated and through which the emotional/rational divide of female/male is perpetuated (see also Reddy, 2009).

In addition, gender divisions in the labour market and social expectations on gender roles also give rise to the essentialist view of gendering of emotion. This was, again, explicitly expressed by one male participant, Xuanye (39, married). He acted as the breadwinner for his family and had been promoted to a position of leadership working for his company across other cities. Therefore, he had only spent five years physically together with his wife although they had been in love for 16 years. His wife is a full-time housewife and responsible for looking after their daughter and their elderly parents. When they lived together before, he recalled how tired he was after a long day and, as a consequence, he either brought work home or only wanted to relax in front of the TV. As he justified:

*Men have to pay a lot of attention to work and other things, but women are only responsible for [taking good care of] children. They [women] wait the whole day until their husband comes back and he's the whole world in their eyes. However, they [women] are not everything in our [men's] minds...sometimes I really didn't want to talk after a busy day at work, I only wanted to go to sleep.*

Rubin (1990) noticed that men and women may be deeply conflicted about the gendered dynamics of emotion, marriage, and heterosexuality. In this way, women's emotional 'demands' (as men think of them) can too easily be seen as 'unreasonable, undermining or even threatening' (Duncombe and Marsden, 1993: 228). However, men's emotional detachment in couple relationships may generate a sense of emotional distance, even if their absent partner hoped to live together in the future. As shown in Shanrui's (28, married), account, she was dissatisfied with and unhappy about her husband's emotional detachment, which is shown in fewer incoming phone calls and fewer words about his daily lives whilst they apart:

*I'm the one who always takes the initiative to contact him, he never proactively calls me... I feel like he just doesn't want to talk me anymore.*

Later she told me that she was tired of asking her husband 'How's it going there?' because she always received nothing back from him in return. As a consequence, every time her husband called her, she would ask her daughter to pick up the phone, as she knew 'he must have been missing the girls [rather than me]'. In addition, Minzhou (38, study mother), whose husband was away at work and could only come back home once a year, worried if

her husband had seemed to physically 'desert' her due to his emotional indifference, and therefore, she felt wronged and cried sometimes:

*Sometimes his response was lukewarm when we chatted on WeChat. Then I would wonder if he's having an affair over there. I'm here alone caring for our children. If you [Minzhou's husband] divorce me while the children are going to college, I can't image what my future life would be like.*

These women do not necessarily deprioritise their marital partnership, while undertaking the responsibility of taking care of their children. In fact, they long for the absent one's emotional forms of caring and the feeling of emotional security, especially when distance made other forms of caring impossible. The emphasis here is on the type of emotion of what one 'does' and 'feels' rather than what one 'has'. In this regard, the individual's ability to 'do' emotion can shape people's experience of intimacy where emotional action, not merely 'being', has become at the forefront in the construction of intimacy and family ties.

Failing to take part emotionally may contribute to a greater source of friction and create varying degrees difficulties among heterosexual couples, given that the 'institution' of marriage is being transformed by ideas related to ideologies about the personal 'relationship', that call for greater emotional communication. The case of Wangyang (38) is a good example to illustrate how her husband's emotional detachment in the family caused the 'death' of their relationship. Wangyang is eight years younger than her husband, and they have a nine-year-old son living with her. Although her husband's job had prevented him from providing embodied forms of caring, she said, *'I don't blame you when you work away, but why can't you do something when you're at home?'* By leaving childcare and housework completely to Wangyang, her husband did '*nothing*' emotionally apart from sending money back to support the family, which made Wangyang think that she was paid for caring for the children, as her husband's income level is three times higher than Wangyang's. With the demise of emotional connectedness, their marital life, according to Wangyang, is on the brink of divorce, but she still sustains a way of maintaining '*zero communication*' with her husband to provide her little son with a 'complete', rather than separated family.

In addition, it is argued that people adopt a variety of ways of doing emotions and that the practice of familial intimacy is also associated with how women control or suppress their own feelings. As Finch (1983: 85) stated: a wife's responsibility is to place 'minimal demands' upon her husband, which includes not only physical, but also emotional, demands. Hongli (40, married) chose not to talk about unhappy moments in her daily life to her husband. She took her personal emotions as being an extra burden on her husband and viewed it as selfish to make him divert his attention from work. This is what Hochschild (1983: 35) called 'surface acting', referring to when an individual's emotional display does not conform to what they are truly feeling. When it comes to parent-child relations, almost all the study mothers in this research stated that they would pacify themselves if they were sad or felt angry. Minzhou (38, married) took a tolerant attitude and tried to manage her own bad tempers and emotions in front of her son so as not to influence his studies.

While my data acknowledges and confirms gender differences in doing emotion work, the dualist viewing of men as always being emotionally restricted and incompetent is not neatly applicable to all male participants in my sample. For example, I interviewed Qingshu (30, married) in Beijing and before that he worked and lived alone in Shanghai, while his wife worked as an accountant in the north part of China. He shared the feeling of emotional loss he has suffered:

*Every time when I watched TV or saw my friends who can stay with their partner, I just felt that their lives are happiness. To be honest, I am more emotional than her [his wife]. For me, I like that kind of life - staying together as a couple with children [...] I had a strong sense of loneliness when I worked in Shanghai. I went back from work alone and spent all my weekend alone [...] we often phoned each other. But still nothing can be changed.*

Qingshu does feel a degree of vulnerability in an emotional sense, as a consequence of him living apart from his partner, due to dual-career locations. In fact, he was not reluctant to say, but explicitly articulated his emotional reliance on his wife, even though this non-co-residential partnership would continue if his wife still pursues her own career development. Under such circumstances, he told me that he had to learn to be used to this living arrangement. In contrast to seeing the expression of emotion as exclusively a female preserve, the common sense thinking on men's non-disclosure tendencies needs to be



carefully examined. As Robinson and Hockey (2011: 149) have suggested that men are capable of reflecting on and showing emotions in certain contexts, but in ways that 'have not been directly comparable with women' in their everyday heterosexual relationships. Likewise, Holmes's (2015) research on heterosexual men in the context of long-distance relationships has supported the idea that men do exercise emotions in different ways and can relate to the feelings to their partners, challenging the stereotyped views of gendered emotionality.

## 7.5 Parent-Child Intimacy

Since the implementation of China's one-child policy in late 1970s, an intact family, which includes two parents with a child has long been seen as good for familial stability, until the recent universal two-child policy proposed in 2015. The lack of one parent in family life, no matter whether temporary or permanent, is inadvisable and regarded as harmful by the society, especially for the well-being of children (Settles, et al., 2013). Although the parent-child intimacy is not the focus, either in this chapter or in the thesis overall, due to a lack in the sample of children, many married participants often have concerned with the departure of a parent on everyday family life. As it is normally the men working away from home as a consequence of couples living apart together, therefore, in this section, I attempt to explain the ways in which absent fathers care for children and do parenting at a distance. In the context of the limited male participants included in this study, I examine the potential influences of the absence of the father on their developing children's lives, as well as the strategies that people used in their reactions to such family life.

Although people (including men) in LATs value autonomy and freedom to different and gendered extents, in general, they did not see any potential advantages for their children as a result of couples living apart. For example, some girls' parents, in my sample, were more anxious about their daughters not being brave but too 'feminine'. Xuanye (39, married), father of an 11-year-old daughter, thought that his daughter had a timid personality and was not enough brave. He ascribed his daughter's 'personality weaknesses' to the '*lack of a father figure in her everyday life*':

*Now the positive influence of fathering, such as determination and courage, was too little [for her]. Her [his daughter's] life was surrounded by women only, such as her aunts, nanna, and grandma. Even though she's in school, her PE teacher is a woman as well.*

In contrast, some mothers of teenage boys, in particular, expressed concerns over the lack of a 'father-son talk' about 'men's stuff'. Therefore, Guanya (37, married) had to teach her son sex education by herself, considering that teachers, especially in rural schools, are often ashamed of and give little emphasis in teaching the subject. Wangyang (38, married) worried about whether her son was behaving in a 'masculine enough' way, due to his father being missing from their everyday family life. It seemingly suggests that the presence of a father-figure is seen as central to children's development. Truly, a series of incidental intimacies, such as a few words of praise or sitting together at a table, are often seen as a way of 'doing' fatherhood and showing an appropriate masculinity (Wilding, 2018). In a LAT family, where the father is often absent and can hardly 'do' fathering on a daily basis, concerns regarding parent-child intimacy may arise. Again, as shown in the case of Xuanye (39, married), who told me a poignant story that had happened about 10 years before, and had, in his words, made a 'deep impression' on him. Due to work commitment, he had been working away in Ningbo, a port city in eastern China, since 2000. He left childcare completely to his wife and visited family members every two or three months. Once, he went back to his hometown in Liaoning Province and asked his two-year-old daughter to say 'baba' (in English: dad), and she did so. However, when his niece called him uncle, his little girl followed her and thoughtlessly said 'uncle' as well. Xuanye was shocked to hear this and related the following to me:

*She [Xuanye's daughter] had no memories of me, and treated me like other, ordinary people. I knew this wasn't right. It was an irresponsible attitude towards her life. Then I discussed it with my wife, and finally I decided to give up my career and terminated cooperation with my partnerships in Ningbo. Then, I went back to Dalian [his hometown].*

There has been an increasing demand for greater parental (and paternal in particular) involvement in the contemporary Chinese parenting culture. The idea of how to do parenting has become particularly important especially when one parent is absent from

children's everyday lives. In order to build an image of a responsible and caring father, Xuanye reunited with his family members, although he went back to Ningbo again about four years later for reasons of providing greater financial security for his family. It could be argued that men do express feelings and men's emotional attachment and breadwinner role can coexist (Dermott, 2003). Recent literature suggests that intimate fathering cannot be viewed through the same lens as intimate mothering, because men and women have access to different cultural resources and often perform a different work-family role (Dermott, 2003). With the existence of the domestic division of labour between mothers and fathers being clear-cut, and men's capacity to financially support the family taken as a display of their masculinity and, more broadly, to 'do' family, men's capacity to perform hands on care is often limited (Zang, 2011). Due to the child-centred family as a production of China's one-child policy, family members, albeit it through different means, sought to invest heavily in their relationships with their only child. This is exemplified in the case of Lianbao (51, married) who works for a company as a manager, living far away from home due to work demands. He said that he would continue financially support his daughter – 25 years old – who had a paid job in their hometown, Dalian, as the below extract shown:

*Every time she calls me, she must have run out of money. I will support her financially if she wants to buy expensive items, have a beauty spa, or take beauty injections. Normally, she will negotiate or ask me if it costs over 5000 yuan [around 570 in GBP]. In most cases, I approved it because I wasn't around, with few opportunities to take care of her. If I'm [financially] capable of supporting her, I will allow her to beautify herself, as girls all love being beautiful. This can also be seen as a way to make up for [the time I've been away from] her.*

It is possible to indicate that parents in LAT relationships do value their relationship with children and try to make efforts in different ways to make up for their absence. Similarly, Hua (31, married) and her husband were also living apart as dual careers couples, and their story provide an illustrative example of how they creatively construct a 'normal' family at distance. Living with in-laws to provide childcare on a daily basis, Hua worked in Beijing as a high school teacher, while her husband served in the army in South China. Being aware of the social phenomenon of the detachment of the fathers from parenting, leaving the educating of children entirely to mothers, the reasoning for intergenerational co-residence

can be explained by Hua's strategy of ensuring a male character and thus, a father-like image in her son's everyday life. In this way, the role of father was temporarily replaced by another male family member, that is, the children's grandfather:

*I often assign tasks to my father-in-law. He needs to nurture my son as much as he nurtured his son, doing everything that a boy should do. Because I literally don't know how it was like growing up as a man, isn't it? So, I was very happy when I saw my father-in-law take my son to climb trees and perform somersaults.*

As interview continued, she demonstrated that compared to the notion of absent father, she was even more concerned about the 'background figure' of father who was physical present but did not 'really' engage in children's lives. As Hua justified:

*A father is not just simply an appellation, instead it means a constant companion. In doing so, he can then become a qualified father. Today, there are still many fathers who emotionally walk away, even though they are physically at home.*

Hua's understanding of family and the notion of father is in line with Morgan's (1996) idea of the importance of 'doing' in the construction of family and fatherhood. Instead of 'being' there as a father, she recognised the importance of 'doing' fathering in a way beyond physical proximity in developing father-child intimacy. Due to her husband's work schedule, he can only reunite with family members during the period of his annual leave. Under such circumstance of a father being absent, Hua often sends 'xiao shipin' (short videos) by WeChat, which normally last less than a minute, to her husband. As she claimed:

*Occasionally, video chats are not enough to 'quench his thirst'. I'll take some xiao shipin and send them to him. He asked me to take more as well, as he really misses our son. Then he can save and watch them over and over again. This [way of sending short videos] is perhaps more meaningful than having video chats.*

Although distance prevents her husband 'doing' fathering in a physical term, the evidence from Hua's narrative suggests that the practices of mobile communication devices can enrich the way of doing fatherhood by preventing the absent husband from being a 'helicopter parent' in the mediated digital age. Kang's (2012) research examines how

Chinese young migrants in London use internet tools to maintain long-distance intimacy with their ageing parents in China. Similarly, Zhou and Gui's (2017) study on Chinese family intergenerational interactions suggest that new media, such as WeChat, play an in-between role in facilitating a 'distant but close' family relationship between parent and children. At the time of our interview, Hua's husband had been away for over five months. It seems that temporarily 'seeing' their young son through video chats could not effectively lessen the father's deep and emotional thoughts when missing him. This is because of the feature of video chats that all the aural and visual information will end once one of the parties hangs up the phone. By repeatedly watching short videos about his son's mundane everyday practices sent by Hua, he could know in detail that his son was recently '*learning to talk*', although he was far away from his family. And, accordingly, he would read parenting books delivered by Hua in order to have a better understanding of children's growth. It is through the mediated communication practices that the absent father could 'do' fathering, such as virtually taking part in children's development, and building up knowledge about what had happened to his son every single day.

## **7.6 Summary**

In this chapter, I have examined the notion of intimacy in the context of geographical distance couples. Considering that nowadays young people can easily rebuild connections and 'stay connected' through communication technologies, if the geographical dispersal of intimate ties causes uncertainties (Bauman, 2003). I began by considering how social change, along with the development of information and communication technology (ICT), have shaped people's experience of intimacy, through the concept of practices of mobile intimacy. Drawing on the accounts of my participants, this study shows that the practices involved in aural, textual, and visual practices provide people with different ways to create an intimate space and maintain close relationships in this mediated digital age. In particular, talking about embodied routines and trivial things is one of the important ways of showing a certain level of connectedness and creating an illusion of intimacy, especially when couples are physically living apart. They value the connectivity that is enabled by technology-mediated communication, which fills the gaps between face-to-face interactions and maintains the sense of closeness and co-presence with family members who are far away. In

this sense, intimacy under conditions of intensive mobility becomes flexible, transformable and negotiable (Elliott and Urry, 2010: 90). In this regard, intimacy is not fixed to a single geographical location, but can be seen as mobile and on the move. Therefore, I suggest that changes in doing intimacy at a distance do not always, or inevitably, individualise and alienate people from others or sets of conventions and relational ties. Instead, and importantly, this transformation can enable people to adopt a variety of creative approaches to maintaining and enhancing committed heterosexual relationships of love, care, and support, challenging claims that the breakdown of relationships has become a late-modern norm.

In addition, my data show that people often send gifts or receive gifts from their loved ones to show love and affection. However, the practices of gift-giving are conditioned by age, gender and the stage of their relationship. Although men seem to take initiative in gift-giving to achieve a certain purpose, such as mitigating arguments between couples, the interpretation of viewing gifts in an instrumental way should be taken with caution, especially when intimacy is steadily developed over time. In addition, practice of filial piety has also been seen as crucial for the construction of intimacy and the maintenance of family relationships, especially in the Chinese context. As I illustrated in the previous chapter, distance does not mean that women can avoid the obligations of care, especially for older parents. Women are still expected to fulfil their gender roles, informed by traditional Chinese family values in order to maintain a harmonious family relationship. This further indicates that practices of intimacy are often implicated with the practices of gender.

Although distance prevents people from delivering embodied forms of caring, the importance of emotional support was frequently mentioned and emphasised by participants. The emphasis on communication and emotional disclosure within heterosexual relationships was clearly seen in my data, but in a gendered way, with women giving more while receiving less from their male counterparts. This implies that practices of intimacy in an emotional way can be gendered and when lacking practical forms of support driven by couple's long-term separation, along with unequal emotional involvement, this has its own knock-on effects in relation to couples' construction of intimacy. However, it is also important to bear in mind that men in this study also express their desires of having a loving, close emotional bond with their children in addition to fulfilling a breadwinner role.

This suggests that men do exercise emotion and can be capable of providing emotional forms of caring, which challenges the dualist viewing of gendered emotionality.

As a result of LAT relationships where the absent ones failed to develop an intimate relationship on a daily basis with their children during long periods of physical distance, in the final section in this chapter, therefore, I have discussed the potential risks couples living apart have on children. Though this was from a small sample, due to the number of male participants in my study, it was nevertheless shown that due to the missing 'father figure' in the family, mothers sometimes have to work at helping their male children construct a sense of masculinity, as they perceived it. In addition, the gendered family pattern of men being expected to financially support the family, has also influenced the way they do fathering.

## Chapter 8 Conclusion

This research has examined women's motivations and experiences in living apart together (LAT) relationships in the context of China. My central aim in this study is to uncover how this group of people living outside the conventional family in this way, make sense of, negotiate, reproduce family life and maintain intimacy across distance in a transforming Chinese society. Literature on transformation of intimacy, individualisation, family practices and the framework on bricolage and agency have fundamentally framed this research focus. Considering LAT relationships have not been systematically researched in China, this first qualitative in-depth examination of the experiences of Chinese people in such relationships makes an original contribution to the literature on family life and intimate relationships by providing new empirical evidence of the cultural specificity of family practices in the context of an ever-shifting Chinese society.

In doing so, I have employed a feminist methodological stance to conduct in-depth interviews with 39 Chinese people (including four males) aged 23-57 by allowing them to speak in their own words (Letherby, 2015). They were recruited by multiple ways, such as snowballing, social media (WeChat), and personal networks, in Beijing and my hometown Liaoning province, based on personal familiarity. I benefited from using personal networks in conducting interviews with older people in my hometown, even though I was a young unmarried woman studying abroad for years during the time of fieldwork. This research identity has also provided me many opportunities for building rapport with the research participants and enlisting detailed information, but on some occasions, this has given rise to distance between me and the researched, even though we share the same gender and/or education attainment. Other factors can also have an impact on how others perceived or positioned me. Therefore, it is necessary to be self-reflexive, so as to be aware of similarities and differences to the research process. I also reflected on the process of data processing and translation in particular. As I interviewed my participants in Mandarin Chinese, the process of how and what to translate from Chinese to English for data analysis and thesis writing has become a methodological issue, especially when it comes to my triple roles of researcher, transcriber, and translator. In this sense, I combined conceptual equivalence



with text equivalence to preserve both the reliability and the validity of the data so as to avoid linguistic difficulties in understanding.

My data on 39 LAT people provide rich and detailed accounts of how Chinese people negotiate gender roles and make sense of their LAT relationships under the context of contemporary Chinese society, where the Confucian patriarchal tradition (even if in some ways weakened) is seen to go hand in hand with the rise of the notion of the individual in China, given the influence of Western ideas of individualisation and modernisation. This was achieved through looking at people's dating and marital practices as well as their perceptions of family life; motivations and underlying reasons for living in a non-residential partnership; practices of 'doing' family and identity construction; and the strategies that people have employed to maintain intimacy when relating at distance.

By applying Morgan's (1996, 2011) 'practices' approach to the non-Western context, I have argued how family is culturally constructed and practised in order to reclaim conventional forms of family and gender norms in Chinese social, historical and cultural contexts. Through looking at this non-conventional living arrangement, this research develops a new way of conceptualising the notion of family and understanding how social and cultural constructions of gender norms and the ideal of motherhood, as informed by traditional Confucian values, still play a key role in contemporary Chinese society.

it has been widely recognised that under China's socio-economic and cultural transformations over the past several decades, people's relationships and family life have undergone substantial changes. Throughout the interviews, the generational changes have been clearly marked in relation to dating practices, spouse selections and marital practices. Compared to people who were born under Mao's era (1949- 1976), the post-reform (1978 onwards) generation of young people under China's one-child policy, in particular, tend to be exposed to the Western culture of individualization and embrace more individualized life styles according to their own choice, while a long-term monogamous marital partnership remains of paramount concern for all including young participants in my study. In this sense, little evidence is shown to support de-traditionalization of marriage in China. This is partly because when Chinese young people make decisions regarding their own intimate relationships, the collective family is still being taken into account when they do so, given

the specific Chinese context where the remnants of Confucian values on family life are still pervasive. For example, their individualistic choices regarding partner selection are still influenced by their parents' suggestions in line with the traditional value of matchmaking and status hypergamy. This coexistence of modern trends and powerful traditional patterns has been called as a 'mosaic pattern' by Ji (2017). The emphasis on a prospect partner's family background also relates to the considerable pressures brought about by China's economic reform, combined with rapid urbanization which has caused a great increase in living costs, especially in urban China. Although none of the (unmarried) women in my study wanted to be solely a housewife after marriage and had their own job to enable them to look after themselves, their higher expectations regarding their male partner's career development have placed men into the position of being the primary breadwinner. All these examples served as evidence to argue that, in reality, people often draw on various resources to inform their reactions and make sense of their personal lives as a response to new circumstances. This process of bricolage, as suggested by Carter and Duncan (2018), where people combine both 'tradition' and 'modern' in piecing things together, has largely influenced their perceptions of marriage, love, and family relationships. In this context of this study, tradition, as opposed to a sole emphasis on modernity, can co-exist together with modernity, when it comes to understanding the transformation of intimate life in the context of post-reform Chinese society.

Through a closer examination of the motivations and reasons underlying people's LAT relationships, agency was taken into account. I have examined how women both exercise their agency and experience constraints in their LAT relationships. Through my participants' accounts, I recognized the complexities of the subjective interpretations of LAT as people have different experiences over their life course. Inspired by Carter and Duncan's (2018) analysis of the differential agencies of LAT women, I divided people into three groups to challenge the dualist understanding of agency and structure. As my data show that agency can be seen as neither an absolute individual choice nor as being totally imposed by powerful outsiders. People in the constrained group, due to their desire for co-residence have been conditioned by external powerful institutions and limited financial resources, and often saw LAT as a practical response to the changes brought about by either external powerful institutions or limited financial resources. However, I noticed that women's

vulnerability is not static but can be developed over the life course as their circumstances change. With regard to the relational group, Burkitt's (2016) framework on relational agency is influential here in understanding how women make decisions with consideration of intimate others, given that we are embedded in wider social connections where people can both act on others and are being acted upon themselves. Therefore, I would argue that how far women in LAT relationships can exercise their agency is also relationally bounded with other people, such as their partner and children, and in a broader sense, the prevalent social and cultural norms. In the strategic group, women do exercise a certain amount of purposive agency in living apart so as to sustain personal autonomy while keeping couple intimacy. However, this desire of fulfilling an individualised life project is also bound with relational agency, where 'conventional' ideas of living a 'normative' family life with intimate others is still guided by people's perception of family life. These three interrelated groups show that people, sometimes, shift amongst these three groups, indicating a fluid and transformative agency across the life course, depending on the particular situation. Although women in my study indicated varying degrees of freedom and autonomy offered by LAT, it should be acknowledged that none of them intended to use LAT as a strategy for 'undoing' gender (Upton-Davis, 2015), or an alternative way to coupledness (Levin, 2004).

By shining a spotlight on those whose agency in living a coresidential partnership was relationally constrained by existing caring obligations to their children, such as the study mothers who accompany their children to study while living apart from their partner, I have discussed specifically how the gendered experiences of the 'study mothers' has impacted upon their everyday practices of 'doing' family in China, despite the country undergoing profound social transformations over time. For a woman, being a full-time study mother, even when it is at the cost of living separately from her partner and established career development, has been considered as a way to privilege 'motherhood' over 'wifehood', as part of 'womanhood'. This kind of taken-for-granted gendered family practice has merged with gender practices, whereby women are still expected to fulfil their feminine roles as mothers in an old-fashioned way (such as providing children with emotional support and preparing their daily meals), despite the fact that they may also suffer emotional loss themselves during the time of accompanying their children to study. The fathers, in this study, are often expected to provide continuous financial support as a way of 'doing' family

while being absent from their wife and children in their daily lives. These dramatically opposite parenting roles reinforce and entrench the existing traditional gendered division of labour and gender hierarchy in contemporary Chinese society. Based on my participants' narratives of the everyday 'doing' of family, I have argued that family practices in the multi-locale household setting are often closely implicated with practices of gender, class, and social norms. Through the lens of the study mothers, I would argue that family practices can take place in many different forms of living arrangements and people's practices of intimacy are often implicated with practices of gender and related to 'doing' family.

Another central issue that this thesis has been concerned with is the way people experience family mobilities and how people make sense of, negotiate and experience intimacy in this mediated digital age. Based on Jamieson's concept of practices of intimacy (1999, 2011), I take a step forward to examine the practices of information and communication technologies (ICT) through which mobile intimacy has been shaped and rebuilt. It is undoubted that technology changes the way people communicate and the practices of mobile intimacy through texting, audio and video activities have blurred the distinction between presence and absence. However, my data show little evidence of the de-centring of monogamous partnerships driven by social and technological change, tearing apart family and intimate relationships. Instead, my discussion of practices of intimacy across distance, when in the form of textual exchange and virtual activities, has seen physical intimacy transformed into other forms of intimacy in which people make efforts and act as networked agents to enhance existing relations in the affective context.

It was evident from participants' narratives that practical doing and giving by exchanging gifts were also appreciated and seen as a way of expressing love and exclusiveness. This finding resonates with those of Jamieson (1998, 1999, 2011) and Gabb (2008) but is in contradiction with Giddens (1992) who placed greater emphasis on 'knowing' and regarded mutual self-disclosure as at the heart of forming a democratic form of intimate relationship. More importantly, as I have earlier argued that family practices are conditioned by and might fit with social and cultural norms, so too might practices of intimacy. Given the specific Chinese social and cultural context where filial piety (in Chinese: *xiao*) has been seen as central to Confucian family values, women, as wife and daughter-in-law, are expected not only to take care of their own conjugal family but also the extended family, especially when

men are working away from home. Zhang's (2016) research on young Chinese mothers' negotiations of familial obligations found out the importance of not only being filial to the elderly parents, but also displaying *xiao*, in the maintenance of (intergenerational) familial relationships. By interviewing women (married, in particular) in LAT relationships, my research confirmed the importance of being filial to the elderly. However, I would argue that women's practice of familial obligations and taking care of the elderly were also highly valued and appreciated by their husbands, and were seen as important in the maintenance of heterosexual marital intimacy. A sense of obligation to elderly parents and these practices of intergenerational care are closely implicated with practices of intimacy and gender roles in the Chinese context. Arguably, it can be related to the 'doing' of gender, and 'doing' family according to gender roles, as well as practices of filial piety in China.

In addition, emotional aspect of support and caring was also given important emphasis by LAT people in the construction of intimacy when people are living apart. When distance prevents embodied forms of caring, both men and women in my sample valued verbal forms of emotional support provided by the absent partner, with women giving more but receiving less from their male counterpart. This gendered emotionality, despite being evidenced by the small sample size of the male participants in this research, can be seen to generate contradictions between couples and become a greater source of unhappiness among heterosexual couples. However, my data challenges the traditional conception of gendered emotionality, as men in the study do exercise emotion and can be reflexive about their feelings to their partner.

Through looking at the subtleties and nuances of Chinese women's experiences of LAT relationships, the data, on the whole, has shown that the participants were quite conservative in their attitudes with regards to marriage and family relations and thereby, there was little evidence throughout my interviews to support the view that people in LAT relationships tend to deprioritise love and commitment, leading to de-traditionalization of marriage as an institution. As a response to the research questions that I have outlined at the outset of this thesis, my data provide little evidence to support the idea that China has undergone the same (if much debated) transformation as in Western societies, inherent in the theory of individualization and the assumed, attendant transformation of intimacy, in particular. Under the lingering patriarchal family system and what could be seen, in some

ways at least, the revival of Confucianism, people's lifestyles are still expected to conform to traditional prescribed gender roles and adhere to social norms, whilst simultaneously finding a way to assert their own desires and individualised choices.

Noticeably, it should be borne in mind that my argument has derived from interviews with Chinese women across different age, social background, occupation, marital status and educational levels. This diversity may not be universally applicable to all Chinese women, owing to the small sample size. In fact, the results should be taken with caution while taking into account an individual's personal biography and the wider social and cultural contexts within which people are located. Due to time constraints, personal networks and convenience sampling were seen as the most fruitful methods in approaching the research participants, yet making it problematic to generalise to a wider range of people in LAT relationships. Although my sample, on the whole, can be seen as diverse in terms of age, educational level and class background, far less variation within generations and geographic locations was noted. The majority of the participants I recruited in Beijing were well-educated (young) people with relatively well-paid jobs. In contrast, in my hometown, a small town in Liaoning province, the majority of participants were born into working-class families and said that they had no choice but to leave one person at home to take care of other family members, whereas the partner (normally the male) worked away to earn money. However, though differences could still be seen between those women who were brought up in wealthy families in my local area and lived separately from their partners and other groups, the lack of a more extensive intra-regional difference in my sample, meant that the findings of this research do not therefore represent a wider population, albeit they cover an age range of 23–57, and participants had multiple occupations. With the large geographical variations in China, as a vast country, one possibility for future study could pay special attention to the variations between urban and rural locations so as to gain a wider picture of people's experiences of and perceptions to LAT relationships.

In addition, the current research has mainly concentrated on women's experiences. Unfortunately, the viewpoints of children while their parents were living separately were not included because they were under 18 and remained at school studying. Therefore, future research with a greater focus on children is suggested to explore the implications that parents' LAT relationships have placed on their perceptions of love, marriage and

family relationship. In addition, Holmes (2004) used joint interviews to study dual-career couples in distance relationships which she found useful to build rapport with participants. Due to time constraints, and the focus of my study being on women in LAT relationships, I did not utilise this method, but joint interviews in future work could also provide a new perspective in understanding how individuals present themselves as a couple during the knowledge co-construction process. I also recognise that my research could be further developed by including a wider group of men's views and experiences in LAT relationships, to explore more specifically how they 'do' family, emotions and maintain an intimate heterosexual relationship at a distance. Therefore, future research could be conducted including men's voices more and, in doing so, explore specifically how masculinity informs their identity and everyday family practices. Lastly, older women's attitudes toward LAT relationships could also be a productive focus, given the fact that there is a growing number of elderly Chinese expecting to maintain their own personal space in such relationships, whilst keeping connected to others, including family members.

## Appendix 1 Interview Guide

Key themes	Sub-topics
Partnership and dating practices	Tell me about your love story and how did you meet your partner? How long have you been together? Where does he/she live currently?
Motivations and agency	Why do you live separately? Who makes this decision? What do you often do while living apart from your partner? How do you currently arrange your spare/leisure time? Have you found any positive/negative sides of living separately from your partner? How do you think this relationship is going to proceed in three years? What is your ideal relationship and family life?
'Doing' family and gender roles	Who do you provide care for? What are your attitudes towards domestic labour and childcare? What is the meaning of a 'family' for you and how would you do to construct and maintain the 'family'?
Communication and everyday practices of intimacy	How long have you been apart? Think about the last time you needed help, who helped you when you needed practical/emotional support? Will you go and see your partner when she/he needs help? How do you keep in contact with your partner when apart and why? Frequency of keeping in touch? How often do you physically see your partner? Is sexual exclusivity important for maintaining an intimate relationship?



## **Appendix 2 Information Sheet**

### **Research project: Women in Living Apart Together (LAT)**

#### **Relationships**

##### **Who is the researcher?**

My name is Shuang Qiu, a doctoral researcher at the Centre for Women's Studies, University of York. I am collecting data for my PhD thesis.

##### **About the research**

China has experienced major socio-economic changes in the last few decades. People's lives are also changing accordingly. For example, younger women in contemporary China are more likely to be well educated and be employed compared with the situation of women in the 1960s. Moreover, the number of women in late marriage or in singlehood continues to increase. Couples who live separately with their partner challenge the taken-for-granted assumption that intimacy is associated with physical proximity. While debates about the impact of social changes on personal life have been widely discussed among sociologists, how Chinese women understand the changes in their own personal life and deal with the conflicts between independence and intimacy still need to be further analyzed. In particular, little is known about how different age groups of Chinese women experience their lives when they choose to different types of living arrangements? How do Chinese women in 'living apart together' (LAT) relationship identify their role in different life stages? Therefore, this research aims to understand the meanings of living apart from partner but still as couples to different age groups of Chinese women. The findings generated from this research will be published in academic journals, working papers, and a book.

##### **How will I carry out and what will participation in this research involve?**

In order to explore the views and thoughts of Chinese women in LAT relationships, a face-to-face individual interview will be employed. You will be invited to share experiences and attitudes to love, intimacy and friendship during the interviews.

Before conducting the individual interview, you and I will have an informal conversation to ensure that you know your rights throughout the interview and the information you provide will be audio-taped if you agree. The interview will last around one to one and a half hours. You can choose to be interviewed in your own flat, a café/tea room you like, or any other public areas such as the university. During interviews, I will ask your experiences in relation to family life, love, marriage, friends, career, and your future plan etc.

### **What will happen to your data?**

The data you provide will be transcribed into Chinese and used for analysis in my PhD thesis. During the whole process, I can assure you that no-one outside the research will hear the recording or read the transcript of your interview. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the information you provide such as your name and the name of anyone you mentioned during interview will be changed or removed so that nobody could identify you.

Besides, all the information I collect from you will be safely kept and stored at the University of York, with records of your real name and contact details kept separately from the interview material. You can ask to read the transcript or field notes at any time or withdraw from this project up to six months after the interview or focus group meeting. If you agree, your interview transcript will be placed in the UK data archive after I have completed my PhD studies. My research has been reviewed and approved by the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology (ELMPS) Ethics Committee, University of York. If you are concerned any ethical issues with my study, please email the ELMPS Ethics Committee or my supervisor.

### **Your rights:**

You are granted the following rights in this research:

- Taking part is completely voluntary
- You are free to decline to participate for any reason.
- If you have any concerns or questions about this project, you are entitled to ask at any time before, during and after the interview or focus group.

- You can ask for the findings or results of this research.

I sincerely invite you to take part in my research on Chinese women in LAT relationships. I would appreciate hearing your thoughts, opinions, and experiences. Thank you very much for your attention and cooperation.

**Contact details:**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact Shuang Qiu on +44 07542823093, or email [sq596@york.ac.uk](mailto:sq596@york.ac.uk)

You may also contact my supervisor, Professor Victoria Robinson by email [vicki.robinson@york.ac.uk](mailto:vicki.robinson@york.ac.uk)

Or contact The ELMPS Ethics Committee, University of York, by email ([elmps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk](mailto:elmps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk))

## Appendix 3 Consent Form

### ‘WOMEN IN LAT RELATIONSHIPS’ RESEARCH PROJECT

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the study. Please read and answer every question. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

1. Have you read and understood the project information sheet about the study? Yes  No
2. Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study? Yes  No
3. Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in confidence by the researcher? Yes  No
4. Do you understand that the information you provide is used for PhD study and may be used in future research? Yes  No
5. Do you understand that you are free to withdraw before, during or up to six months after the interview without giving a reason? Yes  No
6. Do you understand that the researcher will anonymize your name and disguise your personal information in her thesis and future publications? Yes  No
7. Do you agree to allow the researcher to archive your data in the UK Data Archive? Yes  No
8. Do you agree to take part in the study? Yes  No
9. If yes, do you agree your interviews will be audio recorded? Yes  No
10. Do you understand that if you choose to withdraw from this project after the interview the recording and transcript will be destroyed?  
  
Yes  No

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_

Your signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Your contact details: \_\_\_\_\_

The researcher's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 4 Participants' Brief Demographic Information

	NAME	AGE	EDUCATION LEVEL	MARITAL STATUS	NO. OF CHILD(S)	EMPLOYMENT STATUS	METHOD OF RECRUITMENT
1	An	23	MA	Unmarried		Graduate student	WeChat
2	Nan	24	MA	Unmarried		Village cadre	WeChat
3	Mei	34	BA	Married		Engineer	WeChat
4	Huangzhe	25	College	Unmarried		Education agent	WeChat
5	Xiajie	27	MA	Unmarried		HR	WeChat
6	Yunyue	24	MA	Unmarried		Graduate student	Intermediary-Friend A
7	Xiaobo	26	MA	Married		Accounting	WeChat
8	Maixi	30	BA	Married		Fast food manager	Snowballing (from Yunyue)
9	Qingshu	30	MA	Married	F-2 yrs	Self-employed	WeChat
10	Xueyi	25	College	Unmarried		Hotel receptionist	Meet by chance
11	Bingyu	29	BA	Married		Teacher	WeChat
12	Rosy	46	BA	Married	M-16 yrs	Study mother	Meet by chance
13	Hua	31	MA	Married	M-2 yrs	High school teacher	Intermediary-High school teacher
14	Yufen	32	MA	Married	F- 6 yrs F- 3 yrs	High school teacher	Intermediary-High school teacher
15	Jieyu	45	Primary school	Married	F-21 yrs F-15 yrs	Hotel cleaner	Meet by chance
16	Tiantian	26	BA	Unmarried		Travel agent	Intermediary-Friend B
17	Lianbao	51	College	Married	F-25 yrs	Vice manager	Intermediary-old sister
18	Linjuan	32	BA	Unmarried		Accounting	Intermediary-old sister
19	Xuanye	39	BA	Married	F-11 yrs	Vice manager	Intermediary-old sister
20	Jiangling	47	Primary school	Married	M- 24 yrs F- 20 yrs	Maternity matron	Snowballed (from Rosy's colleague)
21	Xinyi	27	BA	Married		Primary school Teacher	WeChat
22	Jiajia	23	MA	Unmarried		Graduate student	WeChat

23	Zhuli	25	BA	Unmarried		Self-employed	Intermediary-Friend C
24	Beibei	28	BA	Married		Public servant	Snowballed (from Zhuli)
25	Zhonglan	24	BA	Unmarried		Graduate student	WeChat
26	Yuqing	30	BA	Married		Education agent	WeChat
27	Liangjing	45	BA	Married	M-17 yrs	Self-employed	Intermediary-my father
28	Pingping	45	Middle school	Married	F-17 yrs	In-house tailor	Intermediary-my relatives
29	Anli	41	Middle school	Married		Housewife	Intermediary-my relatives
30	Yafang	51	Middle school	Married	F-28 yrs	Housewife	Intermediary-my relatives
31	Hongli	40	Middle school	Married	M-18 yrs	Study mother (with a part-time job)	Intermediary-community director
32	Wangyang	38	High school	Married	M-9 yrs	Electricity fee collector	Intermediary-my father
33	Wanglei	56	College	Married	M-32 yrs	Retired	Intermediary-my relatives
34	Guanya	37	Middle school	Married	M-16 yrs M-16 yrs	Study mother	Intermediary-community director
35	Qiangyan	46	High school	Married	M-17 yrs F- 15 yrs	Study mother	Intermediary-community director
36	Shanrui	28	Middle school	Married	F-6 yrs F- 12 mos	Housewife	Intermediary-my relatives
37	Minzhou	38	Middle school	Married	M-16 yrs	Study mother	Intermediary-community director
38	Xutong	40	Middle school	Married	M-17 yrs	Study mother	Intermediary-community director
39	Zhaowen	52	Primary school	Married		Nursing worker	Intermediary-community director

## Appendix 5 Mini-Biographies of Six ‘Study Mothers’

<p><b>Rosy (46)</b></p>	<p>Rosy met her husband after gaining her bachelor’s degree, and then got married when she was 27. At first, she was doing business with her husband and then had a son in her thirty. In order to give her son a better study environment, they moved from their hometown, Henan province, to Beijing when her son was about 3-year-old. One year later, she obtained a job in a foreign company, where she has worked for over 10 years. She was recruited as my participant, as I overheard her conversation with her friend in a café and knew that she came back to Beijing for summer vacation. (More information about how she was contacted and agreed to be interviewed were described in the Methodology chapter). At the time of our interview, Rosy and her son have been stayed in the U.S. over two years, while financial support was provided by her husband who remained in Beijing, the capital of China, as the breadwinner.</p>
<p><b>Guanya (37)</b></p>	<p>Being the only child, Guanya was born in a rural family in Liaoning province. She had worked as a part-time teacher in a primary school after she graduated from secondary school at the age of 17 or 18. Then she had an arranged marriage followed by patrilocal living arrangement and gave birth to twin sons when she was 21. Guanya was contacted by one of my intermediaries and accompanied her 16-year-old twin sons studying in the town in where the key point high school was located. Her husband stayed at their hometown to run a poultry farm.</p>
<p><b>Qingyan (47)</b></p>	<p>Living in a context of quite significant disadvantage, Qingyan was one of five children in her natal family in Liaoning province. She could not go to a college, due to poor financial issues. At that time, she was asked to look after her relative’s children and help them with homework. Qingyan was introduced to her husband who was born in a family of seven brothers in Hebei province, and married within six months after they first met in 1995. Due to her husband’s military service in Shanxi province, she lived alone after marriage and worked as a teacher in a local primary school. She gave birth to a son when she was 28, and then a daughter at the age of 30. For a better life, Qingyan went to Beijing for earning more money, leaving her</p>

	<p>husband behind to take care of their children. When she was around 41, she came back from Beijing to her hometown and dedicated herself to the education of her children. At the time of our interview, she was a full-time study mother who has not got a formal job.</p>
<b>Hongli (40)</b>	<p>Hongli and her siblings were born in a peasant family. She took an odd job in a textile mills in her local area after her secondary school graduation. She met her husband who was an electrician and worked in different cities on a blind date, and three months later, she was married at the age of 22. During the time of accompanying her 18 years old son to study, she found a part-time job as cleaner and her husband worked away and came back home normally once a week.</p>
<b>Xutong (40)</b>	<p>She was the youngest in her natal family and had nothing to do but stayed at home after she graduated from secondary school. Xutong was introduced to her husband and got married within less than six months. Her husband has been working away from home since their son was about 7 or 8 years old. At the time of interview, Xutong has accompanied her son for 2 years during the course of his high school study, while her husband worked in a timber mill and returned to home probably once a month.</p>
<b>Minzhou (38)</b>	<p>Since Minzhou did not pass the entrance examination of high school, she worked part-time in a weaving sack factory. She was introduced at the age of around 20 to her husband and married at 22, and one year after she gave birth to a son. Minzhou and her husband have been living together until her husband went to Guangzhou, South China, in 2016. She was a full-time study mother, living with her son and looking after household affairs. She planned to follow her husband to go to Guangzhou, after her son's high school study.</p>



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