# “Dancing in Chains”: Single Women of the One-Child Generation Struggling for Empowerment in Contemporary Urban China

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# Abstract

Urban only daughters, seen as the biggest beneficiaries of China's One-Child Policy since the 1980s, are often perceived as empowered due to the absence of sibling competition for resources, granting them the ability to challenge gender norms and support their aging parents (Fong, 2002). Despite their unprecedented access to resources, these women face persistent social and gendered dilemmas. Expected to balance roles as virtuous wives, good mothers, filial daughters, self-sacrificing girlfrinends and economically independent individuals, they navigate societal expectations shaped by the One-Child Policy and neoliberal capitalism in China.

Drawing on 30 semi-structural interviews with single women of the One-Child generation in urban China, this project aims to explore the potential for empowerment in the single-woman position in mainland China, studying my participants' diverse strategies of exercising agency and autonomy as a way to deal with new gendered forms of pressure, norms and dilemmas in their daily lives. Specifically, with a focus on the themes/spheres of the natal family, romantic relationships and contemporary practices and attitudes to childbirth, this thesis discusses the power struggles between single Chinese women of the One-Child generation and hegemonic sociocultural norms, political ideology, national policies, and the pressures of social and familial relationships as they operate in China today, at this unique moment for Chinese politics, culture and economy.

This thesis challenges some scholars' understanding of "empowerment" and "power" in the Chinese context (Fong; 2002; Yan, 2003), and gives new implications to these terms by analysing the everyday stories of 30 single Chinese women of the One-Child generation. Each chapter elaborates on how these women are influenced and shaped by varied gender norms and social pressures, and how they wield power to gain autonomy in their interactions with intimacies, cultures, traditions and national policies.

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## Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. An article "Chinese Single Women: Negotiating a 'free' self within natal families" (*https://cultivatefeminism.com/issues/issue-three/chinese-single-women*) published in issue 3 of *Cultivate* draws on some of the material from this thesis. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Why this project?

> The devastating effect of gender norms on daughters of that world is evident in the life stories of women born prior to the 1950s, and to a lesser extent in those of women born in the 1950s and 1960s. Girls born after China's One-Child Policy began in 1979, however, have more power to challenge detrimental gender norms and use helpful ones than ever before, thanks to the decline of patriliny and the absence of brothers for their parents to favo[u]r.
>
> (Fong, 2002, p.1098)

This is an excerpt from Vanessa Fong's article "China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters", written in 2002 based on ethnographic research conducted since 1998. The first time I read it, I resonated with it. As a young woman born in the 1990s, I clearly knew what I had experienced as one of the One-Child generation: my parents have always encouraged and supported me to study hard, work hard, and pursue my career, interests and dreams; my grandparents took good care of my daily life, as they cooked food for me every day to provide a better life and support for me when I was in the third year of senior high school. I had always thought that I would have infinite possibilities in my future, and not be afraid of any challenges and difficulties, since I had access to so much resource, support and privilege. Even when some people questioned why I was pursuing a PhD degree at the age of 24, rather than working and marrying soon, I did not feel any anxiety because I knew my parents and family would always be my backup.

However, the experience of constantly being questioned for embracing the unique privileges of my generation did unsettle me. I clearly remember how angry I felt, when a male neighbour said: "What is the value of getting such a high degree? If a

woman doesn't lay eggs, it's no use receiving education!" In a similar vein, some friends of mine complained to me that their parents, relatives and colleagues often pressured them to marry or even forced them to attend some arranged matchmaking meetings. I did not really understand why young Chinese women, particularly the One-Child-generation daughters in their 20s, who could pursue any goal, experience such tremendous pressure to marry and have children. Those urban, well-educated and professional women who are not married by their late 20s and above are stigmatised as "leftover women" (*shengnü*). However, single young Chinese women's dilemmas go far beyond this.

My interviews with 30 single women, aged between 23 and 38, most of whom are only daughters in their families, reveal that the social, gendered dilemmas of young Chinese women today have not been categorically reduced or eliminated simply because they have unprecedented access to a variety of resources. Most of them have experienced pressure, particularly from their parents, to marry and have children as soon as possible; some shared that they felt torn between being obedient daughters and being themselves; a few women had been in abusive romantic relationships but found it difficult to escape from them; some single women wanted to have children outside of marriage, whereas others wanted to remain single forever, but both cohorts found it difficult to realise their reproductive choices and wants.

My personal experience as a single, urban only daughter was very much the reason why I started this PhD project. Since I realised that opportunities and challenges coexist in young Chinese women's lives, I hoped to explore how or whether other urban only daughters of my generation would be able to manipulate or even challenge gendered norms and the social pressures affecting them. I also wanted to explore how they navigate power struggles in their everyday single lives and exercise agency to empower themselves. Although my understanding of "empowerment" has changed dramatically since the start my PhD programme, significantly differing from how Fong (2002) understands it, how One-Child-generation daughters exercise agency and

leverage their privileges in their intimacies, social interactions and unmarried daily lives to achieve empowerment has steadily remained the focus of my research.

All of my participants are of the One-Child generation, born under the One-Child Policy. The state-led One-Child Policy, which started in 1979 and ended in late 2015, forced married married couples to give birth to only one child (Sudbeck, 2012; Jackson and Liu, 2017). This policy created a special generation, "One-Child generation" (*dusheng zinü yidai*), born since the 1980s, in mainland China's history, and particularly privileged a generation of urban only daughters, who could enjoy unprecedented access to resources that used to belong only to sons. The introduction of the Two-Child Policy in 2016 marked the official end of the One-Child-generation era; however, the legacies of the One-Child Policy still impact on gender and class issues in contemporary China, as the children born under this policy are now adults of an employable and marriageable age.

At the moment of the Three-Child Policy, which came into effect in 2021, this research, which focuses on the One-Child-generation daughters, seems more urgent and significant. Young women born under the One-Child Policy, many of whom are the only daughters in their families, enjoy unprecedented parental investment and do not have to compete for resources with brothers (Fong, 2004), and are seen as empowered to challenge gender norms in ways that previous generations of women never could (Fong, 2002). However, with the continuous modern transformations of demographic policies, cultures, traditions and political and gendered agendas within the past few decades, do only daughters, as some scholars argue, have more power to deal with varied predicaments of their everyday lives, intimacies and social interactions? How do One-Child-generation women navigate a variety of gendered, social, cultural, economic and political shifts in current new era? This PhD research will respond to these questions by exploring how single Chinese women of the One-Child generation manipulate norms, leverage privileges and exercise agency in their interactions with parents, partners, national policies and social changes.

With a focus on the stories of 30 single Chinese women, born between 1982 and 1998, who are in the cohort of the official "One-Child generation", this research aims to explore One-Child-generation daughters' potential for empowerment in the single-woman position in contemporary urban China by studying how they navigate power relations and exercise agency in their daily lives. In this thesis, I will explore the following questions: What kinds of gendered dilemmas are single, Chinese women, particularly of the One-Child-generation, faced with in post-1980s mainland China, where politics, economy, demographic policies, culture and traditions have experienced rapid changes since that time? How do they navigate power struggles in their negotiations with natal families, romantic partners and gendered norms, as well as personal aspirations, around motherhood? What strategies do single Chinese women employ to gain personal and/or political empowerment in their natal families, romantic relationships and navigation of childbirth/reproductive decisions? And what can we learn from this in order to more deeply understand the state and future of modern Chinese womanhood and its changing gendered landscape?

**Thesis Outline**

There are eight chapters in this thesis. Chapter One (the present chapter) introduces the story of how I started the research, outlining the research aims and urgency of this project, providing the sequence and overview of seven chapters, and explaining the logic of the structure of the thesis. Chapter Two is a literature review, which offers a broad review of the existing research that helped me build up the research context for my research on gender and mainland Chinese society, and elaborates on the social, political, economic and cultural context within which this thesis is situated. This chapter begins with an overview of China's economic and demographic reforms since the 1980s, with a focus on the gendered consequences of such social changes. Then it is followed by a discussion on the significance of marriage for Chinese people and the tremendous pressure on single women, as the One-Child-generation daughters, to

marry. This section lays out the literature foundations for the final section about single women's autonomy in different spaces. Finally, this chapter reviews some important concepts, literatures and contexts for the three key themes guiding and structuring this thesis - motherhood, natal family and romantic relationships – and discusses the literature about how single young women navigate a variety of cultural, gendered norms, and predicaments in these spaces.

Chapter Three elaborates on the design, conduct, and reflections of the research. I open up this chapter by presenting the design of this project, including how I proposed the research questions, decided the research scope, and design the interviews with unmarried Chinese women. Since my fieldwork was conducted between 2020 and 2021, when Covid-19 raged globally, this brought about much inconvenience and difficulty to my fieldwork. There were also many unexpected incidents and emergencies occurring when I was interviewing my participants, which I detail in this chapter. The chapter also reflects on a variety of ethical/practical dilemmas, issues and strategies pertinent to my fieldwork, both during and after it. I bring in a reflexive perspective on the issues, my methods, and my handling of the fieldwork and data, given my position as a single Chinese woman who also fits the profile of the women I have been working with.

Following Chapter Three, where I show how the data was collected, Chapter Four provides a specific framework based on which the collected data was analysed, interpreted and discussed. It unfolds the theoretical framework guiding my intervention, where I discuss some salient, key concepts, terms and theories guiding and framing this project. It begins by contextualising "power" in the contemporary Chinese context, with a focus on how population policies, cultural and gendered norms, political and economic transformations, as different forms of power, dominate, discipline and produce the bodies and subjectivities of young Chinese women. This section is followed by a theorisation of the privileges of One-Child-generation Chinese daughters, and the conceptualisation of (gendered) "agency" in this context.

The chapter ends with a discussion of "empowerment", where I problematise Fong's framing of empowerment in relation to only daughters in urban China today.

I use three analysis chapters to discuss and elaborate on the findings generated from the data. I focus on a specific theme in each chapter, and present how single women of the One-Child generation navigate power relations in different spaces and social interactions. I chose natal family, romantic relationships and motherhood/childbirth as the main three themes of the analysis chapters, since daughters, partners/wives and mothers are three socially sanctioned and prominent gender roles for women. Chapter Five is the first of my three main analysis chapters since I consider the natal family (home) to be the first space where one learns about gender, understands interpersonal relationships and constructs their sense of what intimacy is (or is not) and how one could practise it. The experiences in the family may influence the way that many Chinese women establish other forms of intimacy. Additionally, "daughter" seems to be a gender role that every woman is born with, which naturally requires women to take on filial obligations and responsibilities in Chinese natal families. This chapter focuses on the tensions between singleton daughters and their parents, and explores the role of gender in the transformation of the concept and practice of "filial piety", as well as the power dynamics between daughters and parents in post-reform China. It also explores some of the strategies that daughters may also use to manipulate gendered social norms, and potentially seek empowerment and agency beyond outright rejection of, or resistance/rebellion against, cultural norms and their relationships with parents, guardians and wider communities.

If the natal family is the first place where one learns about gender and intimacies, the romantic relationship is somewhere one builds up close bonds, and practises gender and intimacies with someone outside the natal family. Chapter Six aims to investigate "coercive control", a covert form of intimate partner violence, in the Chinese context, closely looking at male/female intimacies and uncovering coercive dynamics as they manifest in both obvious and unexpected, subtle ways. I begin by discussing coercive

controlling violence and “PUA” (pick-up artist) culture, a type of intimate partner violence that has not yet been defined, categorised or taken seriously in either Chinese legislation or dating culture, and I specify how IPV, such as coercive control/PUA culture, is legitimatised culturally, politically and institutionally in the Chinese context. Finally, I show how the Chinese only daughters I have interviewed used their privileges to handle IPV when they were experiencing gendered violence.

Similar to the role of wife, being a mother is a must for most Chinese women. However, what if they do not want to have children? What if they want to have children outside of marriage? What if some women’s life plans are different from what social norms dictate? Chapter Seven aims to reveal various predicaments and difficulties related to motherhood, childbirth and reproductive health that young women are faced with in economically neoliberal and politically authoritarian China, and further explores how Chinese women exercise agency to negotiate reproductive autonomy and carve out their own unique paths to empowerment.

In the concluding chapter, I retrospect the thesis and highlight the links between the three analysis chapters. Through a summary of the key findings, I outline some salient contributions of the project, such as the theorisation of some terms like “power”, “empowerment” and “PUA” in the Chinese context. Chapter Eight also discusses the future research directions through reflections on my research scope, samples and timing.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review: What Does It Mean to Be a Single Woman in Contemporary China?

## Introduction

Since Chinese women in pre-modern China did not have independent income, marrying men, serving their parents-in-law and procreating the next generation was the only way for adult women to access material resources. Marriage have historically been the most important arena where a woman could construct her identity, particularly by taking on the roles of wife, mother and daughter-in-law. However, there was a regional marriage resistance movement practised by Chinese women from the late 19th century to the early 20th century in the Pearl River Delta areas of China. In addition to the positive influence of some national women's liberation movements, the prosperity of the local silk industry provided many work opportunities for local women, which, in turn, gave women the choice to remain single and resist marriage. This marriage resistance movement was regional and small-scaled, but it has offered a positive historical reference for modern Chinese women who choose to delay or resist marriage in contemporary China. Looking at both the past and present moments when Chinese women attempted to resist and postpone marriage, there are close connections between gender norms, class struggles, labour movement and marriage institution.

Since the turn of the new millennium, there has been a trend of young women increasingly postponing marriage in China, though monogamous heterosexual marriage is still a near-universal practice there. Unmarried women over the age of 27, particularly those who are well-educated and professional, are stigmatised as "leftover women" (*shengnü*). This term was first put forward by the Chinese media in around 2006, and added to the official lexicon by the Ministry of Education of China in 2007. It is noteworthy that the first group of young women stigmatised as "leftover women"

happened to be the first generation of daughters born under the One-Child Policy. It is argued that the One-Child-generation daughters could enjoy financial and educational resources as never before, which implies their unprecedented privilege to challenge gender norms (Fong, 2002), and even the autonomy to choose their own lives, such as their marital status. However, contrary to Fong's optimistic value of gender progress in China, I argue that the appearance and prevalence of social stigmas such as "leftover women" implies that as women begin to become more independent from the family structure, particularly economically and educationally, and to postpone or reject marriage, they are more likely to face unparalleled social pressure and gendered dilemmas.

The current research about "leftover women" mainly focuses on media representations, social stigma and discrimination against this group, as well as individual narratives of women looking for partners and social reasons for "being single" (which will be further illustrated in this chapter). However, little research has focused on how single Chinese women, who are also One-Child-generation daughters, navigate power relations with their parents, partners and varied social and gender norms. In contrast to the existing research, this project aims to explore how One-Child-generation daughters, as single women in contemporary urban China, navigate power relations and exercise agency in their daily lives, sometimes in subtle and unexpected ways that may not fit neatly into Fong's or a western "empowerment" model. To be specific, I will investigate how single Chinese women of the One-Child-generation, exercise agency to handle gendered norms when they are negotiating their identities as daughters and partners, and their decisions to be mothers (or not) in their daily lives.

This chapter offers the social, political, economic and cultural context within which this thesis is situated, and pinpoints the existing research gaps that the thesis expands on. I will map out the social changes and gendered shifts that are relevant to Chinese women by critically reviewing the existing literature. This chapter begins with an

overview of China's economic and demographic reforms since the 1980s, with a focus on the gendered consequences of such social changes. I look at women's educational and economic opportunities since the market reform, and examine the predicaments and challenges in both public and domestic domains that have predominantly belonged to women since then. This section is significant for understanding the wider social, political and economic contexts in which One-Child-generation daughters were born and raised up, which will ground my analysis of the decisions, choices, and behaviours of single Chinese women who were born since the 1980s in their interactions with their parents, partners and varied gender and reproductive norms. Following this socio-cultural contextualisation, I move on to a discussion of "being single" in China. When Chinese women born under the One-Child Policy remain single, what kind of gendered dilemmas are they facing in their intimacies and daily lives? By reviewing the social stigma associated with "leftover women" and the parental practice of "grey date", this section reveals the significance of marriage for Chinese society, and lays out the literature foundations for the final section about single women's autonomy in different spaces. How do only daughters, who keep single or even resist marriage, negotiate autonomy in their natal families, romantic relationships and in relation to childbirth? In the final section, therefore, I focus on the literature about single women's navigation of power relations with parents, about intimate partner violence in single women's romantic relationships, and about single women's rights and predicaments when they choose to be or not to be mothers.

**China's Economic and Demographic Reforms and Gendered Consequences**

1978 marked a shift from China's collective past to a neoliberal era. Since then, China has witnessed unprecedented economic prosperity and a subsequent series of social changes. The economic reform and demographic reform, occurring during the same period, worked together to reshape the gender dynamics and landscape in mainland China. These new gender dynamics have had a profound influence on

intergenerational relations, and the diversity of intimacies and childcare patterns in contemporary China, which are particularly relevant to my study.

*China's Market Reform*

Mao Zedong's death in 1976 ended the decade-long Cultural Revolution. Soon in 1978, Deng Xiaoping initiated the "Reform and Opening-Up" (*gaige kaifang*), which accelerated China's modernisation through market-based privatisation and greatly improved the material living standards of Chinese people. Reforms started in the countryside in the late 1970s. Collective agriculture was abolished, and the land was contracted out to private households (Hershatter, 2018). It was not until Deng's inspection tour through Southern China in 1992 that China's urban economic reform began to change dramatically (Hershatter, 2018). In socialist China, urban citizens worked in "work units" (*danwei*), such as state-owned enterprises, governmental departments and public institutions. These served not only as workplaces but also provided a variety of welfare benefits and services, including childcare, healthcare, housing and pensions (Ho, et al., 2018). The stable jobs in the *danwei* system were known as the "iron rice bowl" (*tie fanwan*). However, state-owned enterprises, as a legacy of the collective past, experienced reform and reorganisation, which led to massive unemployment. During the 1990s and early 2000s, around 30 million workers were laid off (Ji, 2017). Additionally, the state gradually abandoned its job assignment system in the 1980s and encouraged individuals to be responsible for their own lives and make a living by themselves (Xie, 2021), which importantly marked the arrival of the neoliberal market.

By the 1970s, the government relaxed its control on *hukou,* a household registration system that underpins citizens' access to education, medical care, housing subsidies, and pensions (Nakano, 2014), and this facilitated mass geographical migration. People from the rural, underdeveloped and inland areas flooded into the urban, developed and coastal regions to pursue a better future. Population mobility

contributed to the creation of a free labour market, where self-employed and private enterprises boomed (Xie, 2021). “Iron rice bowl” was no longer as attractive as it had been before China’s reform, as the welfare and benefits which had originally been enjoyed by staff in *danwei* were largely reduced. The aspirations to become rich became a new trend. Many people abandoned their stable jobs in *danwei* and sought out business opportunities by running their own enterprises in the first two decades of the reform era, which was called “jumped into the ocean” (*xiahai*) (Xie, 2021). China’s entry into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001 indicated that China had become deeply embedded in the system of globalisation and capitalism through the previous two decades of market reform.

The market reform brought about specific gendered effects in China. In contrast to women in pre-reform China, whose domestic burden was shared, to some extent, by some service institutions affiliated to *danwei*, now women have to bear a double burden following the market reform: for one, a range of welfare benefits and services based on the *danwei* system were privatisation and marketisation, which has forced women to spend more time on domestic chores; for another, women face greater employment pressures due to gender discrimination in the labour market. In socialist China, the slogan “Women hold up half the sky” proposed by Mao emphasised the significant role of women in socialist economic development. The government compulsively required *danwei* to employ a certain quota of female workers, since women’s involvement in the labour force was promoted as the key to women’s liberation (Gong, 2002). The reform of state-owned enterprises, however, made a large number of women unemployed. According to Gong (2002), women took up 60% of the 16 million layoffs nationwide at the end of 1998. The female employment rate fell from 89.4 percent in 1990 to 62.3 percent in 2003 (Ji, 2017). Some gendered stereotypes that women are less capable and competitive labourers, as well as the idea that women’s “natural” responsibility is to look after the family and do housework, resulted in women always being the first to be sacked.

The boom of the manufacturing and service industry created numerous forms of gendered work and absorbed a large proportion of migrant women, which provided rural women with opportunities to make a living by themselves, though the work was generally low-paid, low-skilled, unpleasant and sometimes done in a dangerous work environment (Xie, 2021). It is noteworthy that the sex industry, which had disappeared in the socialist period, flourished again in the reform era. A typical example is Guangdong Province, which accommodates the most prosperous sex industry nationally. A mass of migrant women flew into Guangdong Province, particularly the Pearl River Delta, and became the mainstay of the local sex industry. Since the resurgence of the sex industry in the reform era, the state has attempted to regulate rather than eradicate the sex industry, as it is closely linked to political corruption and economic benefits (Zeng, 2016; Ho, et al., 2018). Low-end commercial sex work is usually suppressed but high-end sex work which serves CCP officials and top business elites is deliberately ignored by the administrative organisations (Ho, et al., 2018). It is estimated that the sex industry generated 10% of the GDP of Dong Guan − a city of the Pearl River Delta − in 2014, and contributed to 6% to 8% of China's annual GDP, reaching 164 billion U.S. dollars yearly in the same year (Ho, et al., 2018). The majority of sex workers are precarious migrant women coming from rural China, without education or professional qualifications/skills (Zeng, 2016). Once arrested by the police, they are sent to an Education Shelter Centre for 6 months to 2 years. During this period, they have to pay a fine and all their living expenses on their own, which causes a huge economic burden for them. Therefore, once released, returning to their former career in the sex industry becomes the best, sometimes the only, viable choice.

As urban women are normally better educated than their rural counterparts, their work seems more decent and better paid. However, many of them experience being sexualised and objectified in the workplace every day. Young female graduates working in the business sector are called “white-collar beauties” (*bailing liren*). According to ethnographic research in a state-owned enterprise in Jiangsu Province

(Liu, 2017), women constantly became the object of sexual banter between men, which was seen by men as a good way to "improve productivity" and create a "pleasant" working atmosphere. Women would risk damaging their sexual reputation and social status if they flirted back or responded in any way, positive or negative.

Besides, many companies selected women sales representatives on the basis of their appearance and perceived beauty, as physical attractiveness played a crucial role in luring in male clients. To outdo their peers in a competitive environment, some women in the enterprise were pressured to use their sexual charms and "feminine wiles", such as "playing cute" (*sajiao*), to woo clients. At the same time, they needed to protect their reputation as professionals, so they had to present themselves as "pretty but not sexy" (Liu, 2017, p.91) in their dress. In many cases, to maintain social connections and attract male clients, saleswomen were expected to participate in a variety of social activities, such as banqueting, karaoke and sauna, which exposed them to sexual harassment. Young women's daily life in the workplace indicates a paradox in post-socialist China: on the one hand, as Ho et al. (2018, p.509) state, "sexualised femininity contributes to the Chinese economy, from facilitating men's business transactions to promoting sales and being integral to service provision"; on the other hand, although "their bodies have exchange value" (Ho et al., 2018, p.509), women are discouraged to use sexuality to empower themselves in the workplace and will be stigmatised if they do so.

*The One-Child Policy*

From 1949 to 1979, China's population grew from 542 million to over 975 million. To curb the population explosion, the state introduced the birth planning policy known as "later, longer, fewer" (*wan, xi, shao*) (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Hershatter, 2018) in the early 1970s. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which China witnessed political upheaval and economic depression, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was faced with a crisis of legitimacy.

The death of Mao in 1976 disillusioned many Chinese people with the Maoist version of socialism (Xie, 2021). The party state adopted neoliberalism as an urgent rationale for addressing the legitimacy problems of the regime, caused by Mao's "class struggle" policy in the late 1970s, paired with market reforms, which successfully avoided severe political upheaval (Zhang, 2013). To promote the transition to and development of the neoliberal market, it was exigent to produce new generations who would be enterprising and competitive for the market reform. That is when birth planning came into being.

In 1979, the state implemented a much stricter birth control policy- the One-Child Policy - to replace the old one. The One-Child Policy was a mandated policy which forced married couples to give birth to only one child (Sudbeck, 2012; Jackson and Liu, 2017). It had two stated aims: "controlling the population quantity, improving the population quality" (*kongzhi renkou shuliang, tigao renkou suzhi*). In tandem with the market reform, this birth control programme was intended to contribute to raising a new generation of competitive, healthy, well-educated and enterprising young people (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005).

In practice, the mandated birth planning policy caused a huge rift between urban and rural areas. The majority of urban residents worked in a work unit (*danwei*), which was not merely a workplace but also took on the function of organising, intervening in and monitoring workers' private lives and affairs (Liu, 2007). So urban women working in *danwei* were subjected to close medical examinations, pressured to use IUDs, and even sterilisation or abortions if having a second child (Liu, 2007). Urban couples in violation of this policy would risk being fined and losing their jobs, but those who pledged to have only one child would get certain benefits, such as old-age pensions, a work allowance and longer maternity leaves (Sudbeck, 2012; Jackson and Liu, 2017). Due to the strictly implemented rewards and punishments, the birth control policy was carried out relatively smoothly in cities. In the year 1985, 86% and 91% of all newborn babies in Beijing and Shanghai respectively were only children

(Xie, 2021).

Since urban residents were gradually accustomed to having only one child, a new form of childrearing practice emerged in cities: family resources flowed from top to bottom, concentrating on only children; childcare became a task for the whole family. Many grandparents began to participate in childcare and take care of the daily lives of their grandchildren (Chen, Liu and Mair, 2011). As singleton children have become the "only hope" for their parents' old-age support and the family's upward mobility, parents massively invested resources in their children, regardless of sex (Fong, 2004). Many urban Chinese families tended to spend excessively and competitively on their only children, which often caused these children to become perceived as "spoiled" (*chonghuai*) and earn the titles of "little emperors" or "little empresses" (Croll, 2006). Urban only daughters received an unprecedented investment of educational and financial resources because they were expected to take on the filial responsibility that had exclusively belonged to sons in the past (Fong, 2004). This circumstance created a large portion of well-educated and economically independent urban daughters in China. For some more financially privileged families, daughters there began a trend of studying at popular overseas educational destinations for the pursuit of higher educational degrees, which enabled them to be more competitive in the Chinese or even global marketplace (Tu and Xie, 2020).

By comparison, the policy faced considerable resistance in rural areas, since rural people, for whom the government failed to provide sufficient old-age pensions and benefits, depended on their children, particularly sons, for farm work and old-age support (Jackson and Liu, 2017; Hershatter, 2018). As a result, in the mid-1980s, the government revised the family planning policy so that rural couples were allowed to have a second child if the first child had been a daughter (Sudbeck, 2012; Jackson and Liu, 2017). In some areas, even if the firstborn was a son, some farmers had a second child (Hershatter, 2018). The desperation to produce sons caused massive sex-selective abortions, though ultrasound screening for the sex of the fetus was

illegal in China; many women who gave birth to daughters were abused by their families; a large number of infant girls were abandoned, given away or even killed by their parents and grandparents (Hershatter, 2018). The son preference led to a severe imbalanced gender birth ratio across China. The national ratio of male to female children under 15 years old was 108.5:100 in 1990, 113.6:100 in 2000 and 118:100 in 2010 (Hershatter, 2018), which consequently led to a mass of "bare sticks" (*guang gun*) in rural China. "Bare sticks", according to Hershatter (2018), refers to "the surplus men who would never be able to marry, given their relative poverty and the shortage of women" (p.256). Economically disadvantaged rural men's difficulties in getting married was argued to have increased potential safety hazards, such as the intensification of the trafficking of girls and women. Young women in small towns and villages, the main target for human traffickers, are trafficked to remote areas in China and forced to marry the local bare sticks through kidnapping and abduction.

The number of newborns has been effectively regulated since the implementation of the birth control policy. In the 1970s, the number of children per woman fell from under 6 to under 3 and continued to drop to around 2.1 in the 1980s. By the early 21st century, fertility seemed to have further decreased to around 1.6 children per household (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005). However, the One-Child Policy was increasingly questioned as population ageing intensified since the turn of the millennium. In 2013, the government modified the policy: if one person in a couple was an only child, the couple were permitted to give birth to a second child. At the end of 2015, the state issued the Two-Child Policy; by 2021, the Three-Child Policy was introduced. The era of the One-Child Policy thus ended. Each family is currently allowed to have up to three children.

*Gendered New China*

Economic reform provides women with some specific opportunities to work, while at the same time making their bodies sexualised and objectified in the market; under the

One-Child Policy, urban only daughters became privileged as never before, whereas this policy deprived the lives of large numbers of girls in the countryside. For Chinese women, opportunities and challenges coexisted during the reform period. In addition to the aforementioned gendered consequences, China's economic and demographic reforms have given rise to dramatic sexual transformations in mainland China.

Pan (2006) argues that a "sexual revolution" (*xing geming*) occurred in post-reform China, which separated love, sex and marriage. Sexuality has always been interwoven with marriage, health, age, and procreation in China. It was not suppressed in traditional China but was hidden behind multiple paradigms, such as procreation, family and marriage. However, Pan summarises a few dramatic sexual transformations since the market reform. First, sex is no longer closely tied to reproduction in China (Pan, 2006). Historically, the only purpose of sex was to procreate offspring. "Sex for reproduction" continued to dominate in Mao's era, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, when "any expression of sexuality was repressed" (Higgins, et al., 2002, p.76). This is because romantic love and sexual behaviours were seen as "shamefully illicit or as a manifestation of bourgeois idealism and thus detrimental to collective welfare" (Evans, 1995, p.358). However, this situation has changed due to several economic and social transformations since the 1980s. Western sexual cultures started entering China and have increasingly influenced young Chinese people as the opening-up policy became more entrenched. Furthermore, the implementation of the One-Child Policy has dramatically changed the way Chinese people perceive and practise sex. After giving birth to a single child, the only reason for a married couple to maintain a sexual relationship is for pleasure, which "undermined the traditional equation of sex with procreation" (Pan, 2006, pp.28-29).

Besides, the more recent concept of "romantic love" has challenged the traditional notions of marriage (Pan, 2006). The 1950 Marriage Law, the first marriage law since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), prohibited the traditional

arranged marriage of pre-modern China and legitimated monogamous marriage. The PRC's Marriage Law of 1980 explicitly identified "the complete breakdown of affection" (*ganqing que yi polie*) as legitimate grounds for divorce for the first time (Pan, 2006; Davis, 2014), which indicates the institutionalisation of romantic love within marriage. The market reform since the late 1970s consolidated the importance of romantic love in mate selection and courtship. According to Rofel (2007), Chinese citizens' sexual, affective and material desires have been unprecedentedly celebrated and encouraged since the market reform. Based on this context, individual intimacies and affective expressions are increasingly critical for individuals. Simultaneously, the market reform was accompanied by China's opening up to the globe, which indicates that the Chinese public has more opportunities to embrace western values about romance, love and marriage.

Moreover, Pan (2006) also points out that sex has been detached from love and marriage since China's market reform. For one thing, young people regard romantic love as purer than sexual love; for another thing, in contrast to ancient China, where sex was only limited to marriage, diverse sexual intimacies have gradually emerged since the market reform, such as premarital sex, cohabitation and extramarital affairs. Within the reform and opening-up background, the only children born after 1980 have neither experienced the tough period of socialist construction, nor the national trauma of the Cultural Revolution. Living in relatively rich material conditions, young urban people possess few collectivist aspirations but strong attitudes towards pursuing personal pleasure and values. A generation of desiring, enterprising individuals is rising (Rofel, 2007; Yan, 2010).

Pan (2006) argues that young women have experienced a more dramatic transformation in attitudes to sexuality than young men, in spite of the unequal status of men and women in terms of sexual equality. He declares that young Chinese women have stronger individual rights awareness and self-esteem than men, and hold unique views and have greater awareness of their personal boundaries with regard to

consensual and non-consensual sex (Pan, 2006). However, although Pan illustrates many tremendous sexual transformations since the reform era, Wang (2017) points out that "the so-called sexual revolution in China is an unfinished project because the revolution in sexual behaviour is not equal to a real sexual revolution based on human rights, sexual autonomy, and gender equality" (p.165). She demonstrates that the so-called "sexual revolution" in China implies more sexual activities but not the emergence of a radically new value system. This revolution ignored some core discourses, including gender equality and the equal sexual rights of people from different genders, classes and backgrounds. The prevalence of keeping a second wife (*er nai*) and the sexual exploitation of women and girls reinforces patriarchy and male privilege; women, who are still expected to maintain chastity and fidelity, have suffered from stigma and discrimination in their sexual liberation. As Wang (2017) argues, "this phenomenon is due precisely to the unequal distribution of sexual capital and resource among different groups, and even emphasises the sexual double standard in the Reform Era" (p.169).

I agree with Wang's argument. Although China has witnessed increasingly popular non-marital intimacies and moves towards a de facto de-institutionalisation of marriage since the 1980s, both the economic and demographic reforms have collaborated to create new, gendered predicaments for women in both public and domestic domains. "[S]ince services and benefits provided by the *danwei*-based welfare system are gradually being privatised and marketised" (Ji, 2017, p.2), family, which replaced the function of state institutions, has become the safety net that provides material, affectional and instrumental support for individuals. The salience of family is growing. Young people, young women in particular, are pressured to marry and establish a family, where they are expected to seek financial security and stability. Although it had been attacked during Mao's era and seems to be contradicted to modernisation (i.e. progress), Confucianism, as an important mobilised ideology to resolve a series of "social crises" and "moral crises" in neoliberal China, was gradually rehabilitated since Deng's reform (Guo, 2020). The

resurgence of Confucian patriarchal traditions has rekindled women's role as wives and mothers and further reinforced women's "virtues" of being responsible for the family. Meanwhile, although economic and demographic reforms have provided educational and professional opportunities for young Chinese women in some cases, they are still disadvantaged in society in terms of gender discrimination in education and employment. Therefore, as Song and Ji (2020) argue:

> There has been a tension between growing opportunities for women outside the family and limited change in expectations and obligations within the family. Such a mismatch, as suggested by the gender equity theory, will make the "package" of marriage and family less attractive to women. The conflict between traditional expectations and economic opportunities, rather than individualism itself, leads to people's new marital and intimacy practices, such as delayed marriage and rising singlehood.
>
> (p.6)

However, although many scholars have paid attention to the increase in delayed marriage and singlehood, there is little research focusing on how Chinese women of the One-Child generation, deal with the increasing tensions between their individual desires and social gendered expectations. It is urgent to understand how these women negotiate their new life options and personal autonomy in a situation where their actions and decisions are often influenced by hegemonic sociocultural norms, political ideology, national policies, scientific knowledge, and the pressure of social relationships. Therefore, based on the existing research background about China's economic and demographic reforms and their gendered consequences, this thesis will push further to explore single women's navigation of a variety of power dynamics (both historical and new, specific to the One-Child generation) when they are negotiating an individual "self" and their social identities as girlfriends, daughters, and/or mothers.

**Picturing Single Women in China**

The centrality of marriage and family is one of the most striking characteristics of Chinese society (Ho, et al., 2018). Historically, marriage in China was not a personal matter but the fulfilment of one's obligation in maintaining the family line (Baber, 1934). Hence one's marriage was a familial decision and normally arranged by the parents, who were responsible for seeking out potential spouses for their sons and daughters. As women in pre-modern China had no income and were mostly less educated, it was impossible for them to stay single. At the marriageable age, they would be married out by their parents, serving their husbands and parents-in-law and reproducing the next generation for their husbands' families.

Since the establishment of the PRC, heterosexual marriage has been an undisputed and entirely naturalised part of modern Chinese life. Despite the rise of other forms of intimacy, the institution of monogamous heterosexual marriage remains unshakable (Kam, 2012), and the marriage rate in China still remains high (Nakano, 2014). In 2012, 34 % of women remained single in the 30 to 34-year-old range in Japan; this proportion was 39% in Hong Kong. In Shanghai, by contrast, the proportion of unmarried women between 30 and 34 years old was 4.5% in 2010 (Nakano, 2014). While marriage is still a near-universal practice in contemporary China (Ji, 2015 & 2017; Ho et al., 2018), the number of newly registered marriages fell for three consecutive years from 2014 to 2016 (Xie, 2021). Over the past few decades, there has been a rise in the number of unmarried professional women in China. Particularly in big cities, a growing number of young women remain single in their late 20s and early 30s. In Shanghai, the average age at first marriage for women has risen from 26.5 (2010) to 28.1 (2013) (Gaetano, 2014). According to China Demographic Census Yearbook 2020, the average age at first marriage for Chinese women has grown from 24 in 2010 to 27.95 in 2020 (Li, 2022).

In contrast to western women's singlehood, which is broadly accepted and even considered as "empowerment" (To, 2013, p.2), well-educated and professional Chinese women who are unmarried in their late 20s and over are called "leftover women" (*shengnü*). The term "leftover women", added to the official lexicon by the Ministry of Education of China in 2007, "attributes the unmarried status of these women to their own 'overly high expectations for marriage partners', implying that women are the ones to blame for their own competence and independence" (To, 2013, p.2). Along with the stigmatised label of "leftover", those "over-aged" women are seen as increasingly "unmarriageable" as they grow older because it is widely recognised that they must be unattractive and unfeminine, or even physically or mentally ill (Kam, 2010; Gaetano, 2014). For a woman, the family is seen as an important arena for the construction of gendered identity. Women's identities, roles, and statuses are shaped by their position in intimate relationships. Therefore, marriage and childbirth are the markers of adulthood and womanhood (Gaetano, 2014). A woman's life would be considered incomplete if she can not be a wife and mother.

Fincher (2014) argues that the term "leftover women" is constructed by the state and its media, which aims at pushing single women into marriage as soon as possible, thereby purportedly improving population quality, stabilising society, and sustaining political power. Some scholars find that many single women, who are of the One-Child generation, delay marriage due to their pursuit of higher education degrees and better careers (To, 2013; Gaetano, 2014). They argue that it was women's good income, coupled with outstanding educational and professional backgrounds, that resulted in men who harboured "male superior norms" to discriminate against them (To, 2013 & 2015; Ji, 2015). Some well-educated women accept younger and less affluent men as their spouses, while most men refuse to date women who are more successful, mature, and capable than them (To, 2015; Ji, 2015).

Furthermore, the traditional notion of hypergamy and "matching doors" (*mendang hudui*) is another crucial factor that contributes to the disadvantaged status of

well-educated, professional and "over-aged" single women on the marriage market. Hypergamy means women marrying men whose families, and social and economic statuses are better than theirs; "matching doors" refers to comparable family backgrounds, which was a "common practice for traditional arranged marriages in the Chinese society then" (Ji, 2017, p.9), and which are being adopted in present-day China. For contemporary urban single women, many of whom are the privileged (eg. economically and educationally) only daughters, "matching doors" is not just "the matching of the parents' families, but also the compatibility between the young people themselves, of their education, values, life style and other personal characteristics" (Ji, 2017, p.9). In premodern China, where husbands were the breadwinners and women undertook household duties, hypergamy and "matching doors" were important for parents to select potential spouses for their daughters, in order to ensure or even improve the future livelihood of their daughters after marriage. However, although many educated, professional women who are One-Child-generation daughters in today's China are economically capable enough to support themselves, their parents expect their only daughters to "marry up" to a man who has a higher economic status and can be the main breadwinner (To, 2013). This phenomenon is based on a normative assumption that "women and men are happiest in the heterosexual unions in which women are primary family caregivers and men are the superior income earners" (Nakano, 2014, p.175).

Besides the traditional, cultural, gendered norms that result in young women delaying marriage, there are individual reasons that impact on young women's marriage decisions. Based on a longitudinal mixed methods project, it was discovered that urban young Chinese people of the One-Child generation, particularly young women, expressed fears and skepticism about marriage (Fong et al., 2021). They worried about divorces and unhappy marriages if they marry someone whom they do not love; some worried that their parents would not be satisfied with their partners for not meeting parental expectations, even if they were in love. More women worried about marital infidelity, and many were concerned about the commitment to love and the

excitement of romance would not last long as they face more and more problems within marriage. Some people considered other forms of intimate relationships, such as premarital sex and cohabitation, as new alternatives to marriage. The high price of housing made it difficult for many participants to buy a neolocal housing, forcing them to postpone marriage. Normative heterosexual marriage seems to be increasingly less appealing to young people, especially young women, though singledom is stigmatised to varying degrees in contemporary China.

Although marriage normally refers to "heterosexual marriage" in China, heterosexual women are not the only ones experiencing huge pressure to marry. Lesbian women, who are stigmatised and discriminated against in China, also have to fit in with gendered social expectations and try to appear "as normal as possible" (Yau, 2010) through marriage. Only a small portion of them are able to stay single or "come out" through negotiations with their parents, while most of them are pressured to marry eventually. With the help of the lesbian or gay media and queer communities, some lesbian women find a gay male partner, building a "win-win" marriage to avoid social stigma and deal with the external pressure to marry. This is called "contract marriage" or "cooperative marriage" (*xinghun*) in Chinese societies (Kam, 2010; Ho, et al., 2018). In the Anglosphere, such a marriage of convenience is widely known as a "lavender marriage" (Mody, 2013).

Theoretically, lesbian wives and gay husbands do not interfere with each other's affectional and private lives, but in most cases, women still have to undertake domestic roles as virtuous wives and responsible mothers. According to Zarafonetis' (2017) research, the majority of gay men who wanted to have a "contract marriage" have specific requirements for their lesbian partners. They hoped to marry feminine and tender women who even agree to give birth to a child if necessary. Occasionally, lesbian wives may experience domestic violence, rape or being forced to give birth. Nonetheless, most lesbian women enter into heterosexual marriages to evade familial pressures and social stigma (Kam, 2012), while struggling to hide their identity,

sexuality and extramarital same-sex relationships under the guise of heterosexual marriage. According to the interviews conducted by Kam (2012), some married lesbians failed to hide their secret same-sex relationships outside of marriage. They were tolerated by their husbands because they had already had a child, who became the bond to sustain the marriage.

Students are not encouraged to date in high schools or even universities (Nakano, 2014). However, women are expected to find a potential husband at the age of 22 or 23, so that they can marry before the age of 27 (Nakano, 2014). As many women, intentionally or not, postpone their marriage while they focus on education and career development, their parents often worry that they would be "left behind" on the marriage market. Hence these parents arrange "matchmaking meetings" (*xiangqin*) for their daughters or even become their daughters' agents to find spouses for them in "blind date corners" (*xiangqin jiao*) (Sun, 2012). According to Sun's research, "blind date corners" are in free urban public places, such as parks and squares, where parents spontaneously organised to help children find spouses by setting up a stall or hanging out a sign for a so-called "grey date" (*yinfa xiangqin*). In the blind date corner, two main factors will influence a person's competitiveness: the "soft power" of parents and the "hard power" of children. "Soft power" includes parents' appearances, style of conversation, social status, economic backgrounds, occupations, pensions, physical health and ownership of property, which are prerequisites for drawing the attention of other parents. "Hard power" encompasses the children's appearance, age, occupation, income, "household registration" (*hukou*), property ownership, relationship history and even the Chinese zodiac. If the parents of both sides are satisfied with each other's hard and soft power, they then arrange for their son and daughter to meet and chat. In this way, parents attempt to select who they believe to be the most suitable spouses for their children.

Both the social stigma associated with "leftover women" and the parental practice of "grey date" reflect the salience of marriage for contemporary Chinese people, and the

difficulties for young women to remain single in China, though many of them are well-educated, professional only daughters who are seen as much more privileged than their female ancestors. In addition to social stigma and pressure, what other predicaments will single, One-Child-generation daughters face in their everyday lives, particularly when they are negotiating their identities as daughters and partners, and their decisions to be mothers or not? The next section responds to this question.

## Far More Than Being Merely "Single"

For the majority of Chinese women, heterosexual or non-heterosexual, heterosexual marriage is where they end up. Keeping single is difficult in China, particularly for women. A woman who struggles to remain single has to constantly manipulate gendered norms and simultaneously negotiate her autonomy in the context of various social interactions and responsibilities. This thesis particularly zooms in on individual women's experiences and stories to look at how single urban women born under the One-Child Policy struggle between a variety of social identities and individual desires. The literature about contemporary Chinese women's gendered responsibilities, roles and expectations as daughters, partners and mothers will be reviewed below.

### *Born to Be a "Filial" Daughter*

Family is seen as "an institution which exists in large part to provide an environment in which the individual can be conveniently raised and trained" in the west (Chu and Yu, 2010, p.1). However, for the Chinese, who have been influenced by Confucianism for thousands of years, family, which signifies collective harmony, loyalty, togetherness and stability, needs to be supported, served and sustained by individuals. In a traditional Chinese family, children were taught to respect, obey and serve their parents, since filial piety (*xiao*) has long dominated inter-generational relations in the Chinese family. A typical filial son/daughter should procreate to serve the (husband's) family line, and always provide material support for the elder

generations. Parents usually have absolute dominance over their children, particularly in the important events of the children's lives, such as mate selection and marriage.

Filial piety, as a traditional cultural norm in China, regulates the specific relationships and obligations between parents and children (Liu, 2008; Hu and Scott, 2016). Traditionally, filial piety, which served feudal authoritarianism, adopted the ethics of Three Bonds (*sangang*), including "the authority of the ruler over the minister, the absolute authority of the father over the son and of the husband over the wife" (Qi, 2015, p.144-145). Married women in ancient times were expected to take on more filial responsibility for their parents-in-law rather than their own natal families, because they were deemed as "the property of their husband's families" (Hu and Scott, 2016, p. 1269). They were required to provide instrumental support for their parents-in-law and procreate the next generation for their husbands' family line.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), in particular during the Cultural Revolution, although Confucianism, as well as the authoritarian filial piety of Three Bonds, were vigorously attacked, the mutual support and interdependence between family members were still sustained and promoted (Qi, 2015). During the Mao era, to achieve economic goals and accelerate the construction of socialist China, the government managed to push all citizens into the labour force to raise productivity, so women were encouraged to participate in productive labour. The slogan "Women hold up half the sky" emphasised the equally significant role of women in socialist economic development. Such governmental propaganda on gender equality facilitated an increasing number of women's entry into the labour force, which financially enabled them to take on the filial responsibility of providing old-age support for parents: something that had once only been expected of sons (Fong, 2002; Qi, 2015). It is even argued that Chinese women today tend to have more responsibility, especially financially, than in the past, to support their biological families more rather than their parents-in-law (Qi, 2015), which is in stark contrast to premodern China, when women were more expected to serve their parents-in-law than

their own parents.

The 1980s marked a significant economic reform in mainland China, featuring "opening up" to the world and market-oriented reform. China's opening-up has contributed to more flexible mobility, especially of the younger generation, which expands both the physical and cultural distances between the young and their natal families, as young people develop new lifestyles. Additionally, with increasing transnational population mobility, young people have access to different ideas on marriage and family (Jackson and Liu, 2017). Under the market economy, since the value of "self-sacrifice to secure collective goals" (Qi, 2015, p.147) is transforming to focusing more on individual interests, it is argued that family obligations and filial sentiments since the 1980s have been weakened (Yan, 2003). Nonetheless, many scholars observe that filial piety persists in contemporary China, although it has been reconstructed and given new definitions, featuring reciprocal and mutual support in care, resources and emotional interdependence between generations (Deutsch, 2006; Zheng and Ho, 2016; Jackson and Liu, 2017).

The traditional intergenerational relationship has been greatly transformed since the 1980s, along with the redefinition of filial piety in urban Chinese families. The One-Child Policy (1980-2016) contributed to the Chinese family becoming more child-centred, characterised by family resources flowing from parents to only one or two children. As the "only hope" (Fong, 2004) in their families, only children, including only daughters, who shoulder unprecedented love, care and expectations from their parents, received vast parental investment. As the state accomplished an economic transition, it retreated from public welfare at the same time. To concentrate more resources on economic development, the state decreased citizens' pensions, re-introduced the traditional "virtue" of filial piety, and even incorporated filial piety into the law, thereby shifting the pressure of old-age support from the state to individuals and families. Under this circumstance, only children have become the main or even only support for their parents to rely on in their old age.

One-Child-generation daughters, who have enjoyed unprecedented investment from their parents, are now expected to take on the same responsibilities as sons, to practise filial piety and provide old-age support for their parents.

The post-reform Chinese parent-child relationship is not only a link for intergenerational mutual support, but also an intimate emotional bond between generations. Simultaneously, intergenerational relations are also an important lens for observing the transformations of China's gender landscape. From 2000 to 2004, Harriet Evans conducted a series of interviews with 31 women born between the 1950s and the 1980s. Some were born in Mao's era, whereas some were singleton daughters born under the One-Child Policy. Based on the experiences of women of different ages, backgrounds and cultural experiences, Evans pays attention to mother-daughter relationships in her book *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (2008), and discusses how kinship, gender order and gendered expectations have evolved as China's political, economic and cultural climates changed over time. This is one of the few pieces of scholarship that particularly focuses on mother-daughter relationships in mainland China, and probes some salient topics about filial piety, intergenerational affective bond, the gendered body, discrimination and son preference, and so forth.

Most of the existing scholarships focuses on whether filial piety, as a core principle of the Chinese intergenerational relationship, is eroded or sustained in post-1980s China. In recent research, Liu (2022) argues that "while there has been a decline in everyday financial and instrumental support by adult children for their parents across all three generations, crisis-induced intergenerational solidarity has remained intact" (p.1). In another article about childhood in urban China, she discovers that although One-Child-generation children are cared for materially, they have been increasingly regulated by their parents, rather than gaining more autonomy (Liu, 2022b), which is in contrast to some scholars' argument that only daughters are empowered (Fong, 2002). Some of my research findings echo Liu's arguments, although my research

angle is different from hers. My research focuses on the power struggles within natal families specifically between the adult One-Child-generation daughters and their parents. Although Yan (2003) states that the Chinese intergenerational relationship has witnessed a rise of children's power and a decline of parental authority, I argue that his statement sees power as static rather than dynamic relations, and ignores the power interactions between parents, daughters, neoliberalism, the state power, and cultural and gendered norms.

In Chapter Five, I am going to investigate the power dynamics in the post-1980s Chinese intergenerational relationships, particularly the parent-daughter relationship, and explore how power flows between parents and their only daughters. Additionally, I will focus on how gender still matters in the practice of filial piety in contemporary China and how single women, born under the One-Child Policy, navigate power struggles and negotiate autonomy with their natal families through manipulating filial, and gendered norms and using their privileges as educated, professional and well-paid women. I discover that there is an emerging sense of insecurity/vulnerability among parents, who often express worries, disappointment, grief and irritation in the face of their increasingly wilful and "self-indulgent" adult daughters. However, I am wary of defining this situation as a static power shift from parents to daughters. Rather, I find that there is a persistent trend whereby adult daughters of the One-Child generation are coerced or even violently abused by their parents, self-sacrificing for their natal families under this pressure. Therefore, as Liu (2022) demonstrates that filial piety is non-linear, but a hybrid of complicated continuities and changes, I argue that the intergenerational power relation, which is based on the core principle of "filial piety", is fluid, dynamic and variational, and tremendously influenced by neoliberalism and the state power. Despite bearing great pressure to exercise filial piety, Chinese women of the One-Child Policy could bargain with their natal families for conditional autonomy by strengthening their social identities and obligations as daughters, wives and mothers. Their empowerment is inseparable from their manipulation of social and gendered norms in many cases, which has been a fascinating and somewhat

unexpected finding from my data, on which I elaborate in Chapter 5.

*Single, Ready to Mingle*

Since the 1980s, when the 1980 Marriage Law institutionalised mutual affection within heterosexual marriage and western styles of love and romance entered China, Chinese young people have enjoyed unprecedented freedom in choosing intimate partners. By the end of 20 century, as Zhang and Park (2023) state, China's dating landscape had undergone tremendous transformations. A variety of non-marital relationships, such as premarital sex, cohabitation, extramarital relationships, multiple relationships and one night stands, have become increasingly popular among Chinese people, particularly the young (Yang, 2018). A national survey reports that 30% young participants had engaged in premarital sex (Zhang and Park, 2023). Some from the younger generation regarded multiple dating practices and premarital cohabitation as more acceptable partner selection strategies and as a trial period for future marital life (Yang, 2008), despite a double standard existing between men and women regarding the practice of premarital sex. According to some scholars (Wang, 2017; Zhang and Park, 2023), women are expected to keep virginity before marriage, while men expect to have sex with their girlfriends. This double standard intensifies gender inequality for contemporary Chinese dating culture (further interpreted in Chapter 6).

In contrast to previous generations, young Chinese people now have more ways and means to find romantic partners. "Some go to traditional and online dating sites, some use social media apps, some just talk with friends, and some turn to matchmakers" (Zhang and Park, 2023, p. 2). Dating and social apps, such as Momo, Tantan, Soul, Blued and Rela (Blued and Rela are particularly developed for gay and lesbian markets), are increasingly popular among young people. These apps provide more discretion for young people in choosing intimate and sexual partners, although young Chinese people prefer to develop organic relationships (Chan, 2020).

As diverse intimate relationships and the concept of romantic and free love prevail, Chinese people tend to embrace diversified understandings of love, sex, relationships and happiness. It is found that contemporary Chinese college students may be adopting a view of dating and intimacy that focuses less on the path to marriage and more on immediate pleasure and gratification (Yang, 2011). Similarly, Yang (2018) discovers that romantic love was seen by her young participants as less associated with traditional lifelong commitment and increasingly as being shaped by changing emotional attachments and merging sexual desires. However, this does not mean that traditional mate selection values no longer impact on young people. Young generations continue to experience the pressure to conform to gendered, social norms and traditional sexual mores (Zhang and Park, 2023). Although young people in present-day China are free to choose partners for themselves, they are still expected to meet parental expectations and preferences for mate selection (Blair and Madigan, 2016). In other words, a new dating and love paradigm coexists with traditional expectations for spouse selection in contemporary Chinese dating culture.

Free marriage, romantic love and diversified intimacies are increasingly prevalent since the 1980s, as reviewed earlier in this chapter. With the diversification of intimacies, intimate partner violence (IPV) has also tended to become increasingly visible. “Intimate partner violence is defined as behaviours toward an intimate partner that result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering. Such behaviours include but are not limited to physical abuse, psychological torment, forced sexual intercourse, and other forms of controlling behaviours” (Zheng, 2022, p.5). In contemporary China, the term “intimate partner violence” (*qinmi guanxi baoli*), which is mainly used within academia, is not as widely known as the term “domestic violence” (*jiating baoli*). “Domestic violence” was formally introduced into China as an academic term through the Fourth World Conference on Women organised in 1995 in Beijing (Wang, 2019). Despite not being a gender-asymmetric term, the concept of domestic violence has generally been used to highlight perpetration by men and the victimisation of women in violent marital relationships. Previously, the popularity of

the concept of "wife-beating" (*da laopo*) prevailed in China to describe gender-asymmetric violence in domestic spheres. It is estimated that 35.7% of women since the 1980s have experienced domestic violence, and it is reported that more than 95% of domestic violence is perpetrated by men against women (Zheng, 2022). Before the Anti-Domestic Violence Law was enacted in 2016, when women were seriously abused by their husbands, what police would often do was to ask husbands to apologise and promise in writing not to commit violence again (Zheng, 2022). Finally, in 2016, China introduced its first anti-domestic violence law, symbolising a milestone for Chinese women in their fight against gender-based violence.

The advent of this law would not have been possible without Chinese feminists' persistent efforts. In the early 1990s, a number of Chinese female intellectuals participated in the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, which raised the issue of violence against women as a social problem. The Fourth World Conference on Women also listed domestic violence as one of the most pressing problems in the world, prompting more scholars and policy makers to recognise the problem. The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), an official Chinese women's rights organisation, has called on the government to focus on domestic violence for decades; other feminist organisations have done similar work as well. For example, the Gender Equality Working Group, together with some other NGOs, collected almost 10,000 signatures and submitted a letter jointly to the National People's Congress (NPC) to support the enactment of the anti-domestic violence law; the feminist activist Sun Xiaomei, working in the NPC, raised a series of proposals about it (Qi, Wu and Wang, 2020, p. 384). The Global Women Summit in September 2015 accelerated the formulation of the law, since President Xi gave a speech at the conference, announcing that "we must strive to eliminate all forms of violence against women, including domestic violence" (Qi, Wu and Wang, 2020, p. 384). In December 2015, the NPC voted to pass the Anti-domestic Violence Law of the People's Republic of China.

Even though the Anti-Domestic Violence Law stipulates a series of punitive measures against domestic violence perpetrators, domestic violence is still regarded as a private matter between married couples and is ignored and dismissed by wider society (Zheng, 2022). This is largely because police, judges and officials of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) normally make a judgement based on their cultural biases rather than laws. Most violence cases were mediated by police and ACWF through criticising and educating abusers. Although Written Warning Notes and Personal Safety Protection Orders are two important civil strategies used in the anti-domestic violence law to protect victims, there are few cases in which women have successfully applied for either in practice. It is reported that among the 8,989 victims of violence nationwide who sought police help in 2017, only 77 cases (0.85%) were issued written warnings by the police; from 2013 to 2018, it is estimated that each court issued less than 1 personal safety protection order among more than 3000 courts in China (Zheng, 2022). These data indicate the difficulty for Chinese women to get assistance through legal means, and also imply that the existing institutional and cultural environment is complicit in such crimes, and exacerbates the impact of IPV on women.

As the first law to prevent and regulate domestic violence in mainland China, the Anti-domestic Violence Law defines domestic violence as physical, psychological, and other violations committed by family members by means of beating, binding, maiming, restricting personal freedom, and frequent abuse and intimidation (Wang, 2019; Zhang and Wang, 2020). This law aims not only at the violence between married couples, but also at the violence enacted by parents on their children, vice versa. However, this law only focuses on violence occurring within heterosexual marriages, while ignoring violence in non-marital relationships, such as dating violence, violence in cohabitation and violence in non-heterosexual intimacies. Moreover, many other forms of violence happened within the family, such as economic control, sexual coercion, psychological aggression, and mental abuse, have not drawn much attention (Wang, 2019, p.313). In academia, studies and information

about non-marital IPV and non-physical violence are few. Wang Xiying published a book titled *Gender, Dating, and Violence in Urban China* in 2017, which is the only study that specifically focuses on the diverse forms of violence in the dating relationships of young Chinese people. The researcher argues that the boundaries between physical violence, psychological violence, verbal abuse, and sexual coercion are blurred so that different forms of violence may coexist in a violent incident; another important finding of her research is that the "minor", "subtle" and "trivial" violence that extensively exists in young people's intimacies is largely ignored but plays a role.

Most literature about IPV in China is primarily concentrated on women's oral stories, training materials provided to doctors, law enforcement officers, legal aids, and NGOs, and some surveys and questionnaires targeted at married couples, which aim to investigate the links between IPV and individual educational backgrounds, childhood experiences, and marital relations (Zheng, 2022). These studies ascribe IPV to individual factors, such as social status, marital relations, age, education, a history of childhood abuse, and alcohol and drug use, which reduces IPV from a serious social, structural violence problem to a personal, familial affair. *Violent Intimacy: Family Harmony, State Stability, and Intimate Partner Violence in Post-Socialist China* by Zheng Tiantian (2022) is the first book that shifts the focus from individual responsibility to much broader sociocultural and political factors, and argues that violence against women is facilitated, perpetuated and reinforced by invisible structural violence − violence inherent in legal, political, historical and socio-cultural structures. Through ethnographic research, Zheng (2022) has found that victims of IPV are often sent back to their abusers in order to maintain family harmony, social stability and state legitimacy, at the expense of women's safety and well-being. She provides a large number of cases and statistics about police and courts' inaction on domestic violence, and pinpoints how Chinese laws and public authorities ignore or even enable abusers. However, although Zheng uses the phrase of "intimate partner violence" in the book, the cases and data she focuses on are restricted to "domestic

violence" and only occurred within heterosexual marriages. Besides, she fails to explore other forms of IPV, such as psychological and emotional abuse, which are related to but distinct from physical violence and sexual coercion.

Chapter Six of this thesis aims to present and explore "coercive control" in the Chinese context, a type of IPV that has not been defined, categorised or taken sufficiently seriously in either Chinese legislation or dating culture. Rather than limiting Intimate Partner Violence to "domestic violence", I explore the violence against women in non-marital intimacies in an effort to make sense of how political tools and cultural capital in China make women vulnerable to Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). I also investigate some possible strategies used by young Chinese women to regain autonomy and deal with IPV today. I echo the argument of Zheng (2022) that intimate partner violence is a structural problem, which is historically generated and perpetuated politically, economically and culturally, but I attempt to demonstrate how individual women internalise diverse forms of discourse about IPV and how they react to IPV beyond marriage and strictly "domestic violence".

Based on my interview data, I discovered that "PUA" (pick-up artist) culture is a form of coercive control in the Chinese context, the controlling tactics of which share many similarities with those of coercive control in western contexts but are often presented with certain Chinese characteristics. Based on this, I further argue that the cultural capital and political propaganda in mainland China, ranging from the daily language used within intimacies and the idealised concept of love to the widely disseminated political slogans of "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang*) and "harmony" (*hexie*), have collaborated to legitimise intimate partner violence in contemporary China. My interviews also indicated that young Chinese women could regain autonomy and free themselves from toxic relationships through migration, self-reflections on love and power, and even violent retaliations against their abusers, which also indicates some peculiar advantages of the unique (class and education) privileges of China's One-Child generation.

*Negotiating Motherhood and Singlehood*

In China, marriage and motherhood are almost universal practices for women (Evans, 2002; Xie, 2021). It is widely recognised that women are "born to be mothers"; their womanhood is said to be "incomplete and unfulfilled" if they choose to remain single and not have children. It is assumed that marriage means childbearing, and married couples would have children as soon as they get married. Those who postpone childbirth are often subjected to gossip and ridicule, and may be framed/stigmatised as sick, old or weak (Evans, 2002). This has been intensified by Chinese eugenic ideology, fuelled by the introduction of the One-Child Policy. Before applying for marriage certificates, couples are required to undergo physical examinations. As Xie (2021) states, this practice demonstrates that the naturalisation of childbirth after marriage is embedded in national policy. Women's fertility is important for the continuity of family lines; at the same time, it has great significance for social reproduction. The regulation of women's fertility is a powerful means of governing the population, so that the state can monitor society and ensure social stability (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005). The policy of "superior birth and superior education" (*yousheng youyu*) requires mothers to give birth and raise children of "high quality" (*gao zhiliang*). More specifically, this is to cultivate a young generation that is competitive, well-educated and self-enterprising for neoliberal China. Therefore, mothers are expected to follow a series of "scientific" childrearing norms and childcare guidelines; responsible parenthood is increasingly desirable (Xie, 2012).

Although being a responsible mother seems like a sound goal, mothers experience a "motherhood penalty" to varying degrees in post-reform China. Since the 1980s, when the market reform was launched, some influential scholars and policy makers have declared that women should "return home", as they are a biologically and socially inferior weaker labour force, unable to adapt to the fierce market competition (Ji et al., 2017). For example, Wang Xiancai, a member of the National Committee of

the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, gave a national address in 2001, encouraging married women workers to give up their jobs and return home to "take care of their husbands' daily lives, educate and raise the next generation" (*xiangfu jiaozi*) and "manage household chores" (*caochi jiawu*) (Zheng, 2022). Women's reproduction and household duties were naturalised and intensified during the reform era. In socialist China, women's domestic burden was shared by public welfare, particularly by some institutions affiliated with the *danwei* system, such as dining halls, healthcare and childcare centres and laundries. However, the state's retreat from the provision of public welfare and the privatisation and marketisation of these public services returned the domestic responsibilities to individual families, particularly by women (Ji et al., 2017). In the neoliberal market, married women and mothers are especially disadvantaged. The biggest drop in labour force participation is made up of women with young children. It is estimated that each additional child can reduce women's hourly wage by about 7% (Ji et al., 2017). In short, the state, the market and the family collude to create a motherhood penalty in post-reform China. This, meanwhile, is coupled with continuous pressure on women to marry and become mothers, effectively forcing women into a simultaneously propagandised and oppressive lifestyle.

Whether to be a mother, how many children to have, and what kind of mother to be are complicated issues for Chinese women today. The updates of birth planning policies, the neoliberal market and the patriarchal family culture have gone together to influence individual women's decisions and behaviours on reproductive issues. Despite so, women's reproductive autonomy, and in particular their ability, to stop having children when they do not want them, has a profound influence on gender inequality in urban China. Under the One-Child Policy, women's reproductive autonomy was greatly restricted by the state, and their reproductive decisions were relatively homogeneous (Qian and Jin, 2018).

The Two-Child Policy and the latest Three-Child Policy appear to leave more space

for women's reproductive autonomy. Qian and Jin (2018) state that the universal Two-Child Policy since 2016 opened up the possibility that gender relations and power dynamics in marriage may affect urban women's reproductive behaviour. They focused on power dynamics between married couples and researched how spousal pressure influences women's reproductive autonomy when their ideal family size (i.e., when they desire no more than one child and already have one child) has already been achieved. Some researchers claim that increasing gender inequality in the neoliberal labour market may reduce women's marital power, which negatively influences their bargaining power for reproductive autonomy with their husbands (Qian and Jin, 2018). Additionally, some other existing research has focused on how married women's personal characteristics affect their reproductive decision making and outcomes (Zheng, 2022). All of these studies are exclusively concentrated on married women's reproductive decision making and reproductive autonomy. Although a small portion of research has investigated single women's fertility dilemmas (Zhao and Basnyat, 2019; Zhu, 2021), it fails to focus on individual unmarried women's strategies of dealing with them. Fong et al. (2021) discover that childbearing and childrearing worry many One-Child-generation people, who fear that childbirth would lead to undesirable bodies for women, high financial costs, and the loss of work opportunities and leisure time. However, these scholars did not theorise why young Chinese people are not optimistic about childbirth and childcare. Chapter Seven of my thesis will respond to this gap.

Article 51 of the Protection of Women's Rights Act stipulates that women have the right to procreate and the freedom not to reproduce in accordance with the law (Zhu, 2021). However, childbirth is still restricted to heterosexual marriage, and women's fertility is regulated by the party state. In other words, procreation in China is a practice requiring official permission, rather than an individual woman's choice, because birth planning is promoted as a necessary responsibility for the modernisation and prosperity of the country (Zhao and Basnyat, 2019). Children born out of wedlock were called "illegal births" and were difficult to register with *hukou* (Nakano, 2014;

Zhao and Basnyat, 2019) before 2023. As *hukou* is closely linked to individual welfare, "illegal" kids could not enjoy benefits like free education, medical care, housing subsidies and so on (Nakano, 2014). Until early 2023, some provinces and cities relaxed their limits on new births outside of marriage and allowed single parents to register newborns with *hukou*.

Additionally, unmarried motherhood is highly stigmatised in China. Single mothers often lose family support and sometimes experience both verbal and non-verbal abuse from family and social networks. It is therefore difficult for unmarried Chinese women to procreate and raise children. However, some rich and well-off single women would seek assisted reproduction technology (ART) overseas, since ART is exclusively limited to heterosexual married couples in China (Zhu, 2021). It is reported that single Chinese women's demand for egg-freezing services in the US experienced a 10 to 15 percent annual increase from 2014 to 2016 (Zhu, 2021). ART expands the range of reproductive choices and opens up a whole new world of possibilities for other groups of individuals with child-rearing intentions, including single parents and gay people, though it is restrictive in current times in China.

Single Chinese women find it difficult to have children out of wedlock; at the same time, it is equally difficult for them to forgo marriage and motherhood. However, there is little research on single women's resistance to motherhood and normative/hegemonic childbearing and childrearing. Xie Kailing (2021) discovered that all of her participants claimed that they would have children after getting married, which indicates a universal desire for childbirth among Chinese women. She also finds that eugenic ideology, which has been prevalent since the introduction of the One-Child Policy, has been deeply entrenched in current childcare discourses (Xie, 2021). Nevertheless, although her participants were only daughters born under the One-Child Policy, all of them were born between 1980 and 1990. Her participant cohort did not include many younger women born since the 1990s. By comparison, the ages of my participants ranged from 23 to 38; the oldest was born in 1982 while

the youngest were born in 1998. Based on this, the reproductive choices/decisions of my participants seemed to be more diverse. Some wanted children outside of marriage, while some resisted motherhood firmly. This suggests a possible, subtle shift in attitudes towards marriage and childbirth as we move into the younger One-Child generation. I expand on this in Chapter 7.

In Chapter Seven, I investigate how single women negotiate reproductive autonomy, and resist hegemonic reproductive and childcare norms, which will speak to some research gaps in this area. Rather than focusing on how individual married women's characteristics and marital power in conjugal dynamics affect their reproductive decision-making power (Zheng et al., 2009; Qian and Jin, 2018), my research shifts the focus to single women, who are also One-Child-generation daughters, and situates their actions within multidimensional mainland China to look at how they find agency or empower themselves in a variety of reproductive predicaments in the current, unique political climate for gender inequality and reproductive autonomy. I argue that single Chinese women are able to negotiate individual reproductive autonomy through making use of the opportunities, space and gaps created by neoliberalism and the increasingly authoritarian and patriarchal state, though the transformative political, economic and cultural climates since the 1980s have caused new forms of gender inequality in urban China.

**Conclusion**

This Literature Review chapter has presented the political, economic and societal context within which this thesis is situated, and critically reviewed the key literature that is related to my project. Single Chinese women today are living in a transformative era, where they are facing both unique gendered opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, they appear to be a lucky generation, as many of them are privileged as never before to enjoy some auxiliary benefits offered by the economic and demographic reforms of the past four decades; on the other hand, as a

generation born between the 1980s and the 1990s, they are inevitably shouldering new, gendered responsibilities and burdens that result from the economically neoliberal, politically authoritarian, culturally Confucian state.

By teasing out the existing literature, I have also pinpointed the research gaps in the literature on single Chinese women, particularly with regard to their navigation of power in different fields and social interactions. Therefore, there is a need to pay attention to single women's reactions, decisions and strategies in the face of a variety of new social pressures and gender norms in their everyday lives, and to reflect on their positions, agency and privileges as they resist or surrender. Insights gained from the existing literature on transforming China and Chinese women are fed back into the analysis in investigating the power dynamics between single Chinese women and their social interactions. In the forthcoming chapters, the varieties of literatures reviewed in this chapter will be placed in critical dialogue with the voices of the 30 single, urban Chinese women of the One-Child generation that I interviewed between 2020 and 2021, just months before the introduction of the most recent Three-Child Policy.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter will reflect on the methodology of my project, detailing the research design and presenting how the research developed as I met a variety of situations and difficulties in the fieldwork. It begins by discussing my research design, with a focus on the revision of the project and the pilot study I conducted before the formal interviews. Then, it moves on to my fieldwork, conducted between September 2020 and May 2021, where I elaborate on the events, difficulties, and emergencies that unfolded, as my fieldwork coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic and the related travel and safety restrictions. I then reflect on research ethics and researcher-participant relationship. Finally, I detail how the data was transcribed, translated and analysed.

## Research Design

My determination to pursue a PhD degree was queried by many people, who considered that as a young woman at the "right" age to start a marriage and family, I should find a decent job and marry as soon as possible. This experience motivated me to focus on the discussion of the "leftover woman" (*shengnü*) in China. This term generally refers to an educated, professional unmarried woman in her late 20s and above – a category of womanhood that I was on the brink of entering, and decided that my PhD should explore their predicaments in present-day China and their agency/autonomy to navigate a variety of pressures and tensions in my PhD project. I intended to conduct qualitative research with educated, single women who are over 27 years old, learning about their pressures to marry and their strategies of dealing with this. While these ideas persisted at the beginning of my project, I ultimately had to modify my research plan as I gradually reviewed the existing literature and discovered the limits of my initial research plan.

### *Revising the Project Scope*

At the preliminary stage, I planned to interview urban single women who met the criteria of "leftover women". However, the stigma surrounding this label rendered it too offensive to use as a recruitment criterion, so I opted to replace the term "leftover women" with a more neutral term: "single Chinese women". Since one of my recruitment criteria was designed as "single/unmarried women", I noted that most of this cohort were the One-Child generation born since the 1980s. This generation is different from previous generations, since young people, particularly young women, have been privileged as never before under the One-Child Policy. Therefore, it further stimulated me to ask: Would young women born under the One-Child Policy be more capable of navigating gendered norms and social pressures if they were more advantaged economically and educationally? Would they face any gendered dilemmas in their daily lives as uniquely privileged daughters like Fong has argued? From this evolved the following research questions: What kinds of gendered dilemmas are single, young Chinese women, particularly of the One-Child generation, faced with in post-1980s mainland China, where politics, economy, demographic policies, culture and traditions have experienced rapid changes during their lifetime? How do they navigate power struggles in their negotiation with natal families, romantic partners and the institutions of marriage and motherhood? What strategies could single Chinese women employ to gain personal and/or political empowerment in their natal families, romantic relationships and navigation of childbirth decision-making and reproductive autonomy?

In contrast to a quantitative methodology, which "emphasises the collection of social facts or documents the operation of particular relationships between variables" (Jayaratne and Stewart, 2008, p.54), I established that qualitative methods would be more compatible with my research for a few reasons. First, my research values women's narratives and views, so I wanted to give voice to my participants and encourage them to present their personal experiences, stories, relationships and understandings of their daily lives in their own words. Second, I hoped to meet and

talk with my participants in person, during which I expected the data could be generated organically and expansively. In this situation, qualitative research provides more space for active interactions, where researchers could better listen to participants, empathise with them, and better understand their experiences and feelings. Third, as a feminist researcher, I did not want my research to exploit women for data but hoped to prioritise my participants' rights, voices and needs. The original aim of my project was to look at how single Chinese women are empowered and exercise autonomy, including the potential ways in which they could also benefit from the research, and what dilemmas they are faced with when navigating gendered cultural norms and pressures. If the research was conducted in an unethical or exploitative way, this would be totally contrary to the purposes of my project. Therefore, I needed to employ a participant-friendly research method, which could create as much of an equal researcher-participant relationship as possible. For these reasons, I established that qualitative methods, such as qualitative interviews, would be appropriate because I expected that interviews would provide a free and friendly space for participants to say anything they wanted to and refuse to answer any questions they did not want to engage with. Qualitative interviews afford much more nuance and a space for dialogue, compared to quantitative approaches, which are more "objective" and therefore potentially objectifying.

As to an explicit qualitative method for data collection, I planned to use qualitative interviewing. Compared to many methods of quantitative research, which "rely heavily on administering research instruments to subjects (such as structured interviews and self-completion questionnaires) or on controlling situations to determine their effects (such as in experiments)" (Reinharz 1992, p.19), qualitative interviewing "offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher" (Reinharz 1992, p.19). More precisely, I would use the face-to-face semi-structured interview because it is useful for collecting in-depth information that is not strictly predetermined by researcher bias or restricted or quantitative parameters (Kumar, 2011). I would begin

interviews with a general enquiry about my participants' daily routines and then naturally move on to ask about their single/relationship status, their relationships with parents and their views on childbirth, motherhood and the Chinese government's recent updates to the national birth control policies, etc. Although I designed an interview question list that covered all the research themes in advance, the interview questions in each interview were open-ended. I did not want the designated questions to confine either my participants or me but hoped to open space for data that I may not have necessarily anticipated.

Letherby (2003) proposes that researchers should "remain critically reflexive of our position" (p. 114) in feminist scholarship. To realise this goal, I formulated a few ways to make the researcher-participant dynamic as equal as possible. First, I designed an information sheet, which enabled my potential participants to understand my research purpose and the data collection process, and gave them opportunities to ask any questions about this project and the interview as well. If they wished to participate after reading the information sheet, I provided a consent form for them to sign, where I highlighted the participants' rights and some key points mentioned in the information sheet. I prepared a simplified Chinese version of both the information sheet and the consent form, which was particularly intended for my Chinese participants, all of whom came from mainland China and read simplified Chinese.

In terms of the sampling method, I designed to primarily depend on snowball sampling, "a sampling technique in which the researcher samples initially a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research" (Bryman, 2012, p.424). Based on the Chinese context, I planned to begin the sampling process by recruiting single women I knew well, including my friends, relatives and acquaintances, then ask them to introduce more potential participants to me. This procedure strongly depended on the cultural custom of personal networks/personal connections (*guanxi*), recruiting informants through

whom it could be easier to build a rapport with my Chinese participants (Jackson, Ho and Na, 2017). As Jackson, Ho and Na (2017) point out, “in East Asian societies, recruiting through personal networks works far better than any other method” (p.3) because “it fits somewhat more naturally with Confucian mores and expectations than attempting to recruit unknown individuals who lie outside networks” (Jackson, Ho and Na, 2017, p.3). Based on this, I fully took advantage of my personal networks to look for potential participants by posting recruitment notices on WeChat, the most influential and popular messaging and social media platform in China, which basically covers my entire social circle. Besides, I also asked my parents and relatives to re-post my recruitment notice on their WeChat Moments and introduce more potential participants through their social networks.

My research scope includes well-educated, unmarried, urban women in China but does not feature the experiences of less-educated, married, rural women, since my research motivation stemmed from the unique pressures experienced by well-educated, professional unmarried women, who are One-Child-generation daughters living in cities. Urban only daughters born since the 1980s are regarded as the biggest beneficiaries of the One-Child Policy, as they enjoy unprecedented educational and financial resources invested by their parents (Fong, 2002). For many educated, professional, urban young women, marriage seems not a “must” but a “choice”, though they are still experiencing enormous pressures to marry.

In contrast, many rural daughters may still have to compete for resources with their siblings, particularly their brothers, since the One-Child Policy allowed married rural couples to give birth to a second child if the first child is a girl. In this sense, rural women are likely to experience different gendered predicaments from their urban counterparts. For example, some rural women may be struggling with access to basic living resources, such as food and clothing; born in a poor family with a preference for sons, many rural daughters have to forgo pursuing education opportunities. Many rural women have no other option but to marry, since marriage or depending on

husbands is a crucial way for them to improve their economic conditions or material lives. I focus on well-educated, urban women rather than less-educated, rural women as my research scope, because I believe the contextual difference, in the conditions of rural and urban Chinese women is too great, and rather than drawing a direct comparison between these groups. I was interested in complicating the idea that urban single women of the One-Child generation are straightforwardly "privileged" and "empowered".

Since I depended heavily on snowball sampling in my personal networks to recruit participants, there were also practical limitations for my ability to reach women from rural areas. As an educated woman from a middle-class family, my position in society and my social networks have limited my access to women from other backgrounds, particularly those from either very privileged or lower classes. Based on the research limits and aims, I set up the following sampling conditions: an unmarried woman who is over 25 years old with at least a Bachelor's degree, who lives, studies or works in an urban city; no requirements on religion and/or ethnicity. As I strictly stuck to the sampling criteria, uneducated and younger women were not sought out at the very beginning of recruitment. However, I soon realised that such a rigid insistence on the originally conceived criteria would lead to my missing much interesting and heterogeneous data. Prior to pinpointing this issue, I had completed two-thirds of my interviews, but I resolved to relax the recruitment criteria as I realised these limitations in the course of fieldwork.

To diversify my research samples, I started with the selection of appropriate sampling locations, which assisted me in interviewing participants from different backgrounds. Rather than remaining in one or two cities, I intended to conduct interviews in multiple cities, in order to explore how the heterogeneity of sampling locations would influence the collected data. Bryman (2012) stresses the significance of sampling in terms of context, illustrating that "people's behaviour is influenced by contextual factors so that it is important to ensure that such behaviour is observed in a variety of

locations" (p.427). I preliminarily identified a number of cities as my interview locations, including Beijing, Nanjing, Hangzhou, Jinan, Yantai, Qingdao and Dongying, four of which are based in Shandong Province, an eastern coastal province of China. The sample cities cover both the most developed metropolises and some less developed cities, ranging from the first-tier city of Beijing and the new first-tier cities of Hangzhou, Nanjing and Qingdao, to the second-tier cities of Jinan and Yantai and the fourth-tier city of Dongying (Baike, 2020). These cities were evaluated and ranked based on five criteria: concentration of commercial resources, the extent to which a city serves as a commercial hub, urban residents' activity, diversity of lifestyles, and future plasticity (Baike, 2020).

Beijing, as one of the most developed urban cities in China, and appeals to a large number of young people working and living there every year. Similarly, Hangzhou, Nanjing and Qingdao have also been developing vigorously in recent years, where the local governments have implemented a series of public policies to attract educated and professional people. Thus these new first-tier cities are increasingly being favoured by young people due to the high level of urbanisation and numerous job opportunities. Jinan and Yantai, the capital city of the province and a coastal port city respectively, are comparatively well-developed and influential cities located in the Shandong province. Among these seven sites, Dongying is the least developed one, as it is a traditional petroleum production city.

The seven sample cities were selected due to my familiarity with them and my personal networks. Yantai is my hometown; I spent four years completing my Bachelor's degree in Jinan and worked in Hangzhou for half a year. I am particularly familiar with these cities and have the most social networks there. As to the other four cities, I have friends and relatives living there who would have become my potential participants or would introduce participants to me. During the eight-month fieldwork, I recruited eight women from Beijing, six from Penglai, three from Qingdao, two from Wuhan, two from York (UK), and one participant from Nanjing, Yantai,

Hangzhou, Jinan, Dalian, Dongying, Dorbod Mongol Autonomous County, Toronto (Canada) and Stuttgart (Germany) respectively. Four participants were based in developed western countries; eight were from a first-tier Chinese city; seven lived in new-first tier cities; eleven women were recruited from second-tier or less-developed cities/towns.

To specify how many interviews would be the most appropriate for my research, I referred to some studies on sample size. Onwuegbuzie and Collins (Bryman, 2012) state that if the sample size is too large, in-depth and case-oriented analysis would be difficult to undertake; if the sample size is too small, it is difficult to achieve data and theoretical saturation. Although scholars have drawn distinct conclusions on the minimum number of interviews required for qualitative research, Mason researched the sample size of interview-based qualitative research and found that "the 560 theses varied in sample size from 1 to 95, with a mean of 31 and a median of 28" (Bryman, 2012, p.426). Based on this data, I planned to recruit approximately 30 participants for the interviews.

However, Bryman (2012) points out that making sense of the employed sampling method, the reasons for using it and whether the theoretical saturation would be achieved through the sample size is more important. Based on this argument, I considered adjusting it during the fieldwork according to the criterion of saturation. In the course of my eight-month field research, I interviewed 30 women in total. The sample proved to be rich and heterogeneous and given the qualitative nature of my method, a higher number did not seem necessary for the project to effectively respond to the research questions and aims. The 30 participants were geographically based in fourteen cities in western countries as well as mainland China, ranging from the most developed metropolises to very rural towns; they were from different classes with varied academic and professional backgrounds; their sexual identities and romantic relationships were also diverse. However, since I did not relax the recruitment criteria until I had done more than 20 interviews, I reflected that my data might be richer and

more manifold if I had not stuck to such rigid sampling conditions since the very beginning of the recruitment process. Nonetheless, my data ultimately proved rich enough and spoke well to my research questions.

*Pilot Study: Testing and Polishing the Interview Questions*

Before I set out for the field, I did a pilot study with Lulu (pseudonym), a Chinese friend of mine based in York. The main purpose of my pilot interview was to test how the prepared interview questions worked and then to improve them. This pilot interview did provide me with useful information and clear direction on tailoring the interview questions. For example, one of the questions was "have you experienced any sexual harassment or gender inequality on campuses or in workplaces? Would you mind sharing it with me?" I had not considered it a sensitive and difficult question for participants to answer until I noticed the pilot participant's hesitation after I directly asked this question:

> Yue: You do not have to share that experience if you feel reluctant or uncomfortable.
>
> Lulu: I am hesitant because I think it was a shameful experience, please keep the secret for me.

Although the participant hesitated for a while and then decided to respond eventually, I realised that the question here was inappropriate. Directly asking such questions pushed Lulu to recall painful memories; she felt uncomfortable and embarrassed to be asked such "sensitive" or "shameful" questions, because blaming victims is still a potential and deep-rooted thinking mode in China. However, she wanted to be helpful towards her friend's research, so she looked like she was torn between reopening old wounds or keeping her secrets. After the interview, I seriously reflected on my questions, and decided to use vignettes prompt the more about sensitive discussions

relevant to the project.

Vignettes are “fictional scenarios that usually feature a problem or dilemma facing an imaginary protagonist” (Jackson, Ho and Na, 2017, p.4). This method is “useful in asking about sensitive issues, enabling participants to talk about an imaginary person and situation rather than their own lives” (Jackson, Ho and Na, 2017, p.4). Rather than posing the sensitive questions directly, as I had done in the pilot study, I presented participants with the fictional scenarios, and asked their views on them. For the aforementioned “sexual harassment” question, I made up a story in order to bring up this serious discussion in a less invasive or confrontational way: “Lili is a student doing a PhD programme in a university. Her supervisor is a man who often sexually harassed Lili and warned her not to let others know, otherwise he would make trouble for her research or even not let her finish the PhD programme. If you were Lili’s friend, what would you advise her to do?” Vignettes worked very well in the formal interviews that followed. My participants did not appear to feel uncomfortable when asked to respond to such stories, and freely expressed their thoughts on such issues. Sometimes, a few participants wanted to share their personal experiences after hearing the vignettes. Some participants even directly shared their own experiences of sexual harassment after listening to the fictional story of Lili.

During the pilot interview, I discovered many unexpected issues. For example, before the formal interview, we talked about trivial matters, then shifted to some current gender affairs somewhat unintentionally. Lulu was thrilled to speak out about her views on gender issues, but I found the content we were discussing could be covered in the interview, so I interrupted and advised her to express these opinions once we had started the interview. However, Lulu was far less passionate about discussing this in the formal interview than she had been before. I was suddenly aware that my interruption had been so rude that it seriously influenced the participant’s desire to express herself. I required the participant to express her views only in the formal interview, which was not in line with my original intention of prioritising the rights,

feelings and needs of participants.

The pilot interview with Lulu was not as smooth as I had imagined. There were a few awkward long pauses during the interview. The primary reason was that I was not familiar with the questions, so I had to look at the question list throughout the whole interview. Besides, I had not mastered the technique of freely formulating a targeted and clear question based on the context then. Fortunately, this improved as I was conducting more interviews, and becoming more familiar with the questions. The formal interview with Ling Yi is a typical example of my progress in asking questions flexibly and critically.

The Mayan prediction that December 21, 2012 would be the "doomsday" of the world had haunted many people in China in this year. Ling Yi had to drop out of university in 2012, giving up her dream of studying in Germany and embarking on a journey to learn about Confucian culture, because her mother, a Buddhist and Confucianism devotee, wanted her to stay together with family members, then spend the Mayan "doomsday" at home. After the "doomsday" passed, Ling Yi failed to go back to university but went to a temple to study Confucianism and Buddhism at her mother's request. When reflecting on this experience, we had the following exchange:

> Ling Yi: I didn't blame my mother for my dropout…That's my personal reason… Since I was a child, I have lived for my parents. I'm happy to be a parents-centred person.
>
> Yue: When your mother asked you to drop out, how did you feel?
>
> Ling Yi: I didn't want to (drop out). I thought why you wanted to control my life.
>
> Yue: Why didn't you feel happy to do that for your mother, like you said you

had always done from an early age?

Ling Yi: Maybe a person's thoughts change as she/he grows. It depends on age.

In this interview, Ling Yi had always tried to present herself as a very obedient daughter who was willing to do anything for her parents. However, I found contradictions in much of her narrative, and realised that how she presented herself verbally was different from what I had initially perceived in her. In this situation, if I had been limited to the prepared questions, I would have failed to discover the nuances in the participant's story and feelings about her choices and parental pressures. At this point, I asked a question that was not in the interview guide:

Yue: If you are given an opportunity to go back to the year 2012, will you listen to your mom or spend the life you want?

Ling Yi: Wow! That's a good question (Talk speed slowed down). It's difficult to answer because I know my life is like this. But if going back to that year, I want to say I will (spend the life I want). I have resisted a few years ago...I think it would be more accurate to say that I just want to get my parents' respect than to say that I want to do what I want.

This question made Ling Yi think for a while. Her hesitation proved that she was not as willing to sacrifice everything for her parents as she had initially said. Her desire for respect from her parents also proved that she was still haunted by the way her mother had changed the course of her life. Sometimes, participants' descriptions of themselves do not necessarily reflect an absolute objective truth about their reality but rather a way to perform normative or agreeable identities in some cases. According to Butler (2011), identity is performatively constituted; the repetitiveness of normative acts, such as the daily practice of filial piety in Ling Yi's case, is an important part of such performativity. Based on this idea, Ling Yi's repetitive acts to sacrifice herself

and meet parental expectations could be seen as a way to construct her identity as a filial daughter. In this sense, I could fully understand why her self-presentation as an obedient daughter contradicted to my perception of her as a young woman who desired for autonomy. Simultaneously, I realised that the answers as given by participants must not be taken entirely at face value: there are nuances and suggestive contradictions that invite the researcher to think critically and read between the lines. Researchers are expected to gain insight, think critically and question participants while participants are self-representing orally, particularly when there are contradictions in their narratives.

**Fieldwork: A Long and Tough Journey**

China issued a policy to dramatically reduce the number of flights between the UK and China when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in March 2020, which caused great difficulties in travelling between the two counties, particularly from the UK to China. As a researcher who desired to return to China safely for my fieldwork, I had two choices under these circumstances: buying a flight ticket for a "confirmed to fly" airline from a ticket scalper at a price that was several times higher than that of regular tickets (approx. 2,000 - 5,000 GBP per ticket); or pre-booking a flight at a reasonable price with an airline that might resume flights eventually, which I called "buying a lottery ticket". Due to budget limitations, I chose the second plan. Luckily, I won the "lottery" flight ticket and managed to return to China at the end of July 2020. Although I was still waiting for my ethics approval by the university ethics committee, I hoped that my fieldwork would not be unduly delayed and my priority was to reach China safely.

The moment I gained my ethics approval in early September 2020, I commenced the fieldwork. From September 2020 to May 2021, I interviewed 30 single Chinese women based in mainland China, UK, Canada and Germany. Half of the participants were people I knew well; the others were recruited through the personal networks of

my friends and relatives (see Figure.1). Two interviews, with the participants who were in Germany and Canada, were conducted via Google Meet after I returned to York; the others were done face-to-face in seven Chinese cities/towns, including Penglai, Qingdao, Hangzhou, Wuhan, Jinan, Beijing and Dorbod Mongol Autonomous County. Each interview lasted for one to two hours, with the longest being over three hours and the shortest being forty-five minutes. Most interviews were conducted in Mandarin, but a small number of interviews were done in the local dialect of my hometown, Penglai, which belongs to Jiaoliao Mandarin of Northern Chinese Mandarin.

I started the recruitment while I was in my hometown of Penglai. Due to the large number of interview locations and their distances from my hometown, the recruitment process was comparatively complicated. I first contacted potential participants through my social networks, then sent out invitations, along with both the information sheets and the consent forms. After I got provisional verbal consent, I settled the rough dates for departures according to the number of potential participants in each city and their schedules. Normally, I would contact the participants again at least three days before leaving for their cities, in order to confirm the specific interview dates and locations. Since the sampling locations covered many cities, I designed two routes for interviews. Given that Beijing was still affected by the second outbreak of COVID-19, I started interviews in southern China from September to October 2020 and planned a route that connected all the sampling cities except Beijing and my hometown Penglai, including Qingdao, Hangzhou, Wuhan and Jinan. At this point, I added Wuhan to the sampling city list − where I recruited a few participants − and cancelled my flight ticket to Nanjing, in which the pandemic reappeared suddenly in September. I had also originally planned to go to Dongying to interview a participant, but I did not ultimately have to go there because I met her in Jinan. I returned to my hometown in early October and left for Beijing in mid-October. By early November, I had almost finished all the interviews conducted in big cities, and only needed to focus on the interviews in small towns, such as Penglai and Dorbod Mongol

Autonomous County. After I had completed all the interviews in mainland China, I returned to the UK in early May, 2021 and conducted three more interviews in York within this month.

To record a variety of challenges and interesting points in the fieldwork, I kept a reflexive field journal to note down my experiences, feelings, thoughts, ideas and queries during the recruitment process and interview arrangement, and after finishing each interview. For example, I recorded a lucky experience and my excitement on the first recruitment day:

> A Weibo influencer who had four hundred thousand followers saw my recruitment information through my friend's WeChat Moments. Although she was married, she was willing to help me. She created a WeChat chatting group, in which she invited me and some women to join. In the chatting group, she introduced my project and encouraged these women to participate if interested. Thanks to her help, I successfully recruited two participants in this group!
>
> (7 September 2020, Field Journal)

I also noted down some ethical problems and my worries related to them: "After accepting my solutions to mitigate the security risks, the participant video-recorded the interview. As I had expected, when the camera was involved, the participant performed unnatural in the interview." I wrote down many interesting experiences, difficulties and unanticipated situations like these in the field journal, which I will quote and reflect on further in the following discussions.

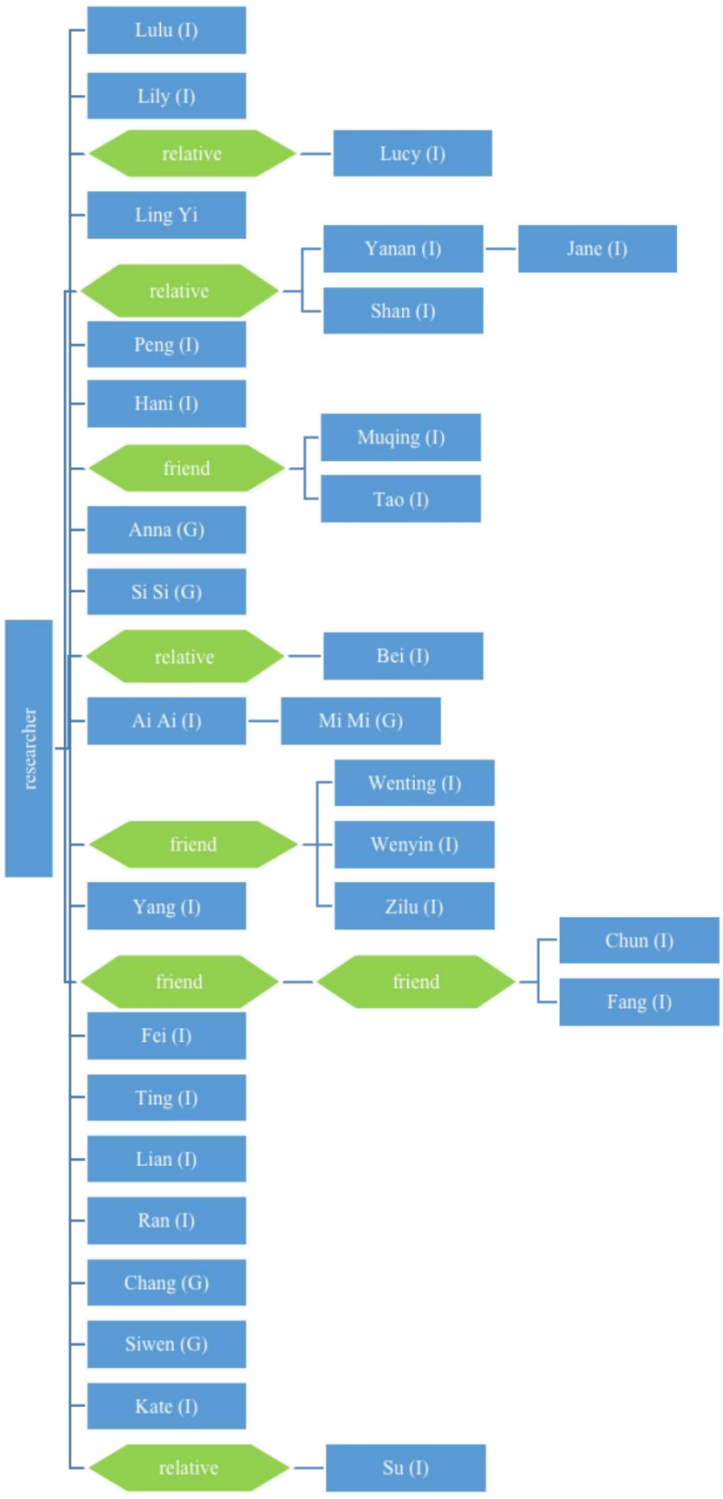


**Table 1: Sampling Process**

Notes: Friends and relatives are not participants but participant introducers.

G = Group Interview

I = Individual Interview

| Name | Age | Current Location | Siblings or not | Overseas Experience | Relationship Status |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Ai Ai** | 26 | Yantai | No | N/A | Single |
| **Anna** | 27 | Nanjing | No | N/A | Engaged |
| **Bei** | 32 | Penglai | Yes | N/A | Single |
| **Chang** | 23 | Penglai | No | UK | Single |
| **Chun** | 33 | Beijing | No | N/A | Single |
| **Fang** | 30 | Beijing | No | N/A | Heterosexual Relationship |
| **Fei** | 28 | Beijing | Yes | UK | Single |
| **Hani** | 25 | Hangzhou | Yes | N/A | Single |
| **Jane** | 30 | Jinan | Yes | N/A | Single |
| **Kate** | 28 | York | No | UK | Single |
| **Lian** | 25 | Penglai | Yes | N/A | Single |
| **Lily** | 27 | Beijing | No | UK | Heterosexual Relationship |
| **Ling Yi** | 29 | Penglai | No | UK | Single |
| **Lucy** | 32 | Penglai | No | N/A | Single |
| **Lulu** | 29 | York | No | UK & The Philippines | Heterosexual Relationship |
| **Mimi** | 26 | Dorbod Mongol Autonomous County | No | N/A | Engaged |
| **Muqing** | 35 | Wuhan | No | N/A | Single |
| **Peng** | 31 | Qingdao | No | Japan | Lesbian Relationship |
| **Ran** | 27 | Dalian | No | US | Single |
| **Shan** | 31 | Qingdao | Yes | N/A | Extramarital Relationship |
| **Si Si** | 26 | Dongying | Yes | N/A | Single |
| **Siwen** | 23 | Penglai | No | Netherlands | Heterosexual Relationship |
| **Su** | 25 | Stuttgart | No | Japan & Germany | Single |
| **Tao** | 33 | Wuhan | No | US | Single |
| **Ting** | 27 | Beijing | No | N/A | Heterosexual Relationship |
| **Wenting** | 28 | Beijing | No | N/A | Single |
| **Wenyin** | 38 | Beijing | No | N/A | Extramarital Relationship |
| **Yanan** | 30 | Qingdao | Yes | N/A | Single |
| **Yang** | 27 | Beijing | No | N/A | Single |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Zilu** | 27 | Toronto | No | UK & Canada | Polygamous Relationship |

**Table 2 Participant Profile**

**Notes**:

1. One participant dropped out of university in the final academic year; one got a college diploma; everyone else held at least a Bachelor's degree.

2. The "relationship status" refers to the relationship status of my participants between September 2020 and May 2021 when I interviewed them.

*Personal Network: An Indigenised Recruitment Method*

I started participant recruitment as soon as I received ethics approval in early September 2020. I had initially thought that the recruitment process would be difficult and time-consuming because I had assumed that Chinese people might be reluctant to share their private experiences and personal views with an unfamiliar person, in particular a researcher. However, the first-day recruitment experience proved me wrong. It was unexpected that there would be so many women interested in my research and gender issues more broadly. By the end of the first day of recruitment, I had recruited 7 participants who gave oral consent for participation, most of whom were friends of my relatives or friends of mine. It turned out that personal networks did play a crucial role in recruiting participants for my interviews.

On the first recruitment day, a woman, Zilu (pseudonym), who had seen my recruitment poster in her friend's WeChat Moments, gave me an overseas call from Canada at 3 a.m. in her local time. Zilu was passionate about my research and discussed gender issues with me for one and a half hours. She fit the profile for participants and wanted to participate, but she was not in China. The research was originally designed for women based in mainland China, with whom I would conduct offline face-to-face interviews. While the outbreak of COVID-19 had led to much inconvenience to my fieldwork, I still did not choose to do online interviews for a few reasons. First, social media platforms are under strict state surveillance in authoritarian China, so it would put both my participants and me at risk if we discussed sensitive or political topics online. If we wanted to mitigate such risks, we would have to use VPNs. However, VPNs are difficult to access, and sometimes the network is unstable when we use them, which would have influenced the interview quality. Second, although the online video interview is also a new form of face to face, it is virtual, which only allows researchers to collect verbal data and catch facial expressions but fails to provide more information about body language, interview contexts and environments. Third, I had always considered that physical proximity is

more beneficial to building a rapport, empathising with a person and picking up on their emotions. Due to these reasons, I had planned offline face-to-face interviews and had not considered what I should do if a woman like Zilu wanted to participate.

However, given Zilu's great interest in my research, I did not want to disappoint her, so I designed a plan B for the interview. Rather than using VPNs, I interviewed her through Google Meet after I returned to the UK. For one, both UK and Canada are comparatively safe locations, where we were not worried about being monitored by the Chinese government; for another, we did not have to use VPNs, which ensured that our interview was smooth without being disturbed by unstable networks. In the one-and-a-half-hour call, Zilu expressed an impressive view, which was also shared by many participants afterwards: that Chinese women need more opportunities to speak up for themselves, and my research, she said, offered a good platform for them to achieve this goal. I was touched by her encouragement because this was the first time that I really felt in my heart that my research may make a difference, even if only by providing space for women's voices. Hence, I became more confident about both my project and the recruitment.

Using personal networks to recruit participants is a reliable and efficient method in Chinese society, which I primarily depended on in my fieldwork. However, it raised some unanticipated ethical issues or unavoidable situations in my research. For example, a mutual friend between a participant and me had gossiped about the participant before I conducted the formal interview, which influenced how I perceived the participant and her stories, and even made me question the credibility of the participant's narrative. Similar situations happened several times in my fieldwork, which was an unavoidable condition that resulted from my recruitment method – using personal networks. Many enthusiastic friends kindly introduced potential participants to me, which often came along with their impressions of and narratives about the participants, before I had personally approached these women. Many "referees" revealed basic information about the participants, such as jobs, ages,

personalities and their friendship stories. Although I often knew something about a participant before the formal interview, as a feminist researcher who wanted to follow the ethical research guidelines strictly, I would only present the data provided by participants themselves in my analysis. I treated every interview as if it were an interview with a complete stranger. Once I was inmmersed in this process, the background information known previously did not matter, so I was able to communicate with the participants more freely without any major ethical concerns.

Ai Ai was a participant I had known very well for many years. In an informal face-to-face chat, I asked her whether she was interested in my research and sent her an invitation. Ai Ai hesitated to say "yes" and expressed her doubts in an indirect way. She asked me whether I thought some participants may accept my invitation for fear of damaging our relationship but would not want to share their true stories. Ai Ai expressed her concerns about other participants' feelings and responses rather than through a direct query to me. I could tell from her cautious facial expression that she was trying to ask the question in an indirect way in order not to upset me. I knew what she was worried about. On the one hand, she was afraid that rejecting the invitation would damage our relationship; on the other hand, she worried that I might expose her private stories and thoughts through the interview. As Letherby (2003) states, friends and family "may feel under pressure to help [researchers] and/or may feel that they have to reveal things that they would rather not", because "there will be a tension in a research relationship based on friendship or family affection" (p.126).

Although the interview had not yet started, this unexpected situation pushed me to ask myself a few questions: "How do I ensure that these familiar participants are motivated by interest rather than their relationship with me? What if participants, in particular those close to me, hide the truth or even make up stories because they are afraid of disappointment, or some kind of consequence to participating in the research?" To mitigate this, every time I recruited a close friend or relative, I gave an explanation below the invitation: "If you are interested in this interview, please

contact me. If you aren't, just say no. It really doesn't matter if you don't want to participate. That won't influence our friendship/family affection." Besides this, I was also aware that Chinese people heavily depend on interpersonal relationships, so it is understandable that some participants would have liked to join because they wanted to support me − their friend, sister or schoolmate. It was unwise to judge a participant's motivation, even though I just did not want my participants to get into the same dilemma that Ai Ai had experienced.

Further, I discovered that it was difficult to evaluate whether an unfamiliar participant was bending the truth, because her stories were almost totally new for me. Normally, I listened to the stranger participants' stories carefully, identified paradoxes, and then queried them further, in order to encourage them to be more forthcoming. By comparison, it appears more possible to assess the credibility of a familiar participant's narrative. Scott, who interviewed her stepdaughter, explains that "Given how much I know about her life, it would be hard for her to edit her story as she might for a stranger, and so decide what would enter the public sphere and what remain private" (Scott, 1998, p.4-5 cited in Letherby, 2003, p.126). The following exchange between Ai Ai and me shows how I dealt with a situation when the participant tried to bend the truth.

> Yue: What's your requirement or expectation of your future partner?
>
> Ai Ai: I almost (pause) have no requirement…I don't require him to be 1.8 meters tall or earn much money…I don't have specific requirements of him, as long as he doesn't have bad moral quality. (If he is a bad man,) I won't marry him.

Ai Ai had often mentioned her standards for mate selection, so I clearly realised that she did not give an honest representation of her requirements in the interview. To protect her face and our relationship, I did not directly question her, but asked her a

specific follow-up question:

> Yue: Is a man's financial condition a very important criterion for you? To what extent will this criterion influence your spouse selection?
>
> Ai Ai: emmm…It's a very important criterion…I will certainly consider the reality. He should have a flat/house. I could accept that he doesn't have a car. My requirement is not that high, like marrying into a wealthy family. But I couldn't live without a flat/house…But I'm very *qinggao*. I will say that my mother wants me to marry a man like this, but I won't admit (that it is also my own requirement).

*Qinggao* means that a person's morality is pure and noble. According to the context, this was not the best term for this situation. What actually happened here is that she wanted to present herself as "morally virtuous": someone who chiefly cares about intrinsic value rather than external conditions in terms of mate selection. Xiao (2018) argues that the notion of instrumental exchange is seen as a troublemaker of marriage in wider Chinese culture, which is also the reason for the illegitimation of commercial sex. Women who focus on financial ability and the family backgrounds of men in mate selection are often criticised and stigmatised as "mammonish". Such discourse may make some women, like Ai Ai, feel wary of speaking out about their economic expectations of a man, because they are worried about being stigmatised. My prior understanding of Ai Ai enabled me to evaluate to what extent her narration of herself in the interview conformed to how she presented herself in her daily life. For familiar participants, they may weigh their words and carefully decide what to say in the interviews because they consider that their views, experiences and secrets would influence how the researcher − their friend or family member − would perceive them, or even influence their friendship or family relationship afterwards. In some cases, participants' inclination to hide certain truths or fabricate stories might be a response to the questions they do not want to answer. Based on this, I informed each participant

of their rights to refuse to answer any questions, which I hoped would reassure them that their privacy was protected, while ensuring the authenticity of the collected data as much as possible.

Despite mine being an effective recruitment method for the Chinese context, researchers may also encounter some ethical dilemmas while recruiting participants by using personal networks. First, it is difficult to recruit a completely unknown participant through my chosen snowballing method. I was often informed of the background of participants by our mutual friends prior to the formal interviews; besides, as WeChat has become increasingly influential, Chinese people heavily rely on this social media platform, rather than emails or phone calls, for social contact. In most cases, I contacted participants through WeChat, which provided a platform for me to learn more about the daily lives of the participants through their WeChat Moments. In both situations, therefore, it was difficult to interview participants without knowing anything about them. I inevitably had some first impressions of or sometimes preconceptions about the participants before the interviews, which might have influenced how I perceived them. Despite this, I did not use any data beyond the formal interviews and ensured that I only processed the data that my participants had consentingly given me. Moreover, it is difficult to recruit a completely interest-motivated participant, in particular among friends and relatives. The moment I sent out an invitation to a friend or a relative, it became a form of "asking for help", no matter how much I highlighted that her participation should only be based on interest. When participants participate in interviews based on a desire to help or to maintain interpersonal relationships, the researcher-participant relationship becomes more complicated, interweaving friendship or the family relationship. I addressed this by making sure to thank my participants sincerely for their support and help, that each step of the interview was as ethically considered as possible, and that their rights and safety were protected in my research.

*Researcher-Participant Relationships*

As a researcher employing a feminist methodology, I clearly realised that developing a rapport and identifying a comfortable position in the relationships with my participants was critical for both me and the research. Half of my participants were strangers to me, but not complete strangers, because we usually had mutual friends. To build a rapport, I preferred to start our conversations with stories about my friendships with our mutual friends. Sometimes, a few participants took the lead to tell something about our mutual friends or acquaintances. For example, Fang actively told me that the first time she had met Susan − our mutual acquaintance − had been through a workshop organised by Susan. Following this, I asked Fang many questions about the theme of the workshop and her experiences. The initial tensions between two strangers were quickly diluted. Talking with participants about the friendships and stories with our mutual friends was a very effective way to open communication, which helped defuse any embarrassment or awkwardness, close the distance between researcher and participants, and create a good environment for the forthcoming interviews.

> Tao is such a big fan of K-pop! Luckily, I used to be a K-pop fan, otherwise I think it would be difficult to recruit her.
>
> (27 September 2020, Field Journal)

My friend Chen invited me to join in a team-building event of his company when I was in Wuhan in September 2020. For one, he had thought that I would enjoy the nice weather and attractive scenery of Wuhan after the pandemic; for another, he hoped that this could be a good opportunity for me to recruit some participants. With the approval of the manager of his company, I followed Chen to a scenic spot on a sunny weekend. When Chen introduced me to his colleagues, he mentioned that I was a big fan of K-pop (Korean pop music). At this time, some colleagues told me that: “Tao is a K-pop fan as well! She has no one to talk to about K-pop culture!” I looked at Tao and asked “Hi, sister! What K-pop group do you like best?” Tao then enthusiastically

discussed K-pop with me throughout the whole journey. I had stopped following K-pop a few years prior, but based on my limited knowledge of it, I tried to listen to Tao and engage appropriately, which helped build trust and rapport. At a suitable time, I sent out my invitation to Tao, who promised to participate in my research without any hesitation. At the end of the event, Chen and some of his colleagues were very surprised at how talkative Tao had been. I was told that Tao was normally a very private person who did not often communicate with colleagues in the company, so it was very unexpected that she spoke to me so much on that day.

> The two participants are very close friends of mine. Before the interview, they kept sharing interesting daily stories and gossips. Since I was always thinking about when to start the interview, I didn't take an active part in the discussion with them. Seeing them communicating so excitedly, I didn't really want to interrupt their conversation. At this time, a participant, who seemed to have felt my anxiety, stopped her talk with another participant and asked me "Come on! What questions do you want to ask us?"
>
> (2 October 2020, Field journal)

Such a situation often happened before the formal interviews with my close friends, relatives or acquaintances. We talked, gossiped, complained about life pressures and exchanged recent life stories. The atmosphere was so relaxing that I felt uncomfortable disturbing that and shifting from our free chats to the formal interviews. Such a research relationship is relaxing but ambiguous, as it can blur the line between a formal interview/discussion and an informal chat, and result in the researcher struggling to know "when to begin" (Letherby, 2003, p.126) or "when to turn the recorder on" (Zarafonetis, 2014, p.63). I discovered that both the participants and I performed differently after we started the formal interviews. For example, some familiar participants tended to become less talkative or silent after I turned on the audio recorder. Normally, I let them know the recorder was on but did not stress that the formal interview had begun: "Okay, I am turning on the recorder now. We just

leave it out. Please feel free to say anything you want/please continue your topic." On the one hand, I wanted my participants to notice the running recorder because I hoped for them to know that I would not record anything surreptitiously, which aimed to gain their trust and protect their right to informed consent; on the other hand, I did not want to over-warn them of the recording device, as focusing their attention on the device could make them feel nervous and unnatural. Therefore, after letting them know of the existence of the recorder, I would try to distract them from it and have them focus on our conversation instead.

As a researcher and a friend/relative to some of my participants, I was often confused about what tone, attitude and manner I should use to communicate with the person sitting in front of me, the one whose personality and background I knew well but whose views and experiences I hoped to more deeply explore through the interviews. Letherby (2003) suggests that "the researcher may be seen as a friend or family member who is doing research, a researcher who happens to be your friend or member of the family, or maybe it is not possible to differentiate between the two roles" (p.126). After several interviews with friends and relatives, I concluded that focusing more on the interview itself, rather than my role or my own performances in the interview, seemed to be an effective way to make the interview go smoothly and naturally.

> Yue: I remembered you had shared an experience with me in 2014. Would you mind saying more about it, if you feel fine?
>
> Lily: Well, I felt a little bit of violence in that relationship.
>
> (Interview with Lily, aged 27)

Lily is a close friend of mine whose stories I had been very familiar with before the interview. When interviewing her about her views and experiences of dating violence, I realised that one of her experiences was relevant to this question, but she had not yet

mentioned it. I was not sure whether she had forgotten about this experience or just did not want to mention something painful, so I decided to cautiously ask about her willingness to share. Interviewing friends/relatives was complicated and difficult, since I already knew much about them, including their backgrounds, personalities, identities or even personal experiences before the interviews. In interviews, these participants did not mention the backgrounds they thought I should have known; sometimes, I expected to hear about some experiences again that they had previously told me about, but they did not mention them at all. If I asked the questions about things I was aware of, it could make me "appear odd, insensitive or even stupid" (Cotterill and Letherby, 1994, p. 123), and could have also influenced the friendship or family relationship between us (Letherby, 2003). Faced with such predicaments, I followed two plans. First, if I thought some data might be relevant to my research – just like the example in the interview with Lily - I would ask her, "would you mind saying more about your experience of …?" I did not, however, try to persuade or force the participants to share if they were not comfortable responding.

Second, if some indispensable details from the backgrounds of the participants were not given in the interview, I would confirm those in follow-up questions. For example, in the interview with Anna, she mentioned that she had bought a car after she had found a decent job in Nanjing. As Anna's friend, I knew that she had graduated just a year prior, and could not afford a car herself. I also vaguely remembered her words that her parents had bought the car for her, but I could not be sure about it. Anna did not give the specific information in the interview, but it was very important for my research, so I decided to confirm this with Anna through WeChat after the interview. After getting her answer, I included this information in the data. This process seemed time-consuming and complicated, but I think it was essential. As their friend or family member, it never occurred to me to collect their data without their consent, even for background information; as a researcher, I always obeyed a key principle when interviewing familiar participants: the data I collected must be brought up by the participants themselves.

> Normally, I speak in a strong tone, a fast speed and a direct way, often ignoring others' feelings; sometimes, I even perform aggressively when discussing or arguing a question with others. I should attempt to avoid such issues in interviews… I should maintain a positive and patient attitude to listen to the participants' stories, attempt to have unbiased discussions rather than subjective comments and actively answer questions proposed to me. Speaking in a soft and euphemistic way may be easier to create a harmonious and comfortable atmosphere for interviews.
>
> (24 June 2020, Written Work 8)

I felt ashamed when I read this paragraph again, quoted from a written work about the research plan before my fieldwork. I did not think I had done very well in terms of the problem I predicted in the research design. In most cases, I remained composed, listening to participants, despite disagreeing with them sometimes. I often reminded myself not to judge participants or try to persuade them to agree with me. However, I had to admit that such a reminder did not work all the time. As Gray (2008) states, "emotional reactions are part of human life and are, therefore, never absent from the research situation" (p.936). I was irritated in some situations, particularly when I heard some misogynistic and victim-blaming opinions. The interview with Ling Yi was a typical example. Ling Yi was a Buddhist and devotee of Confucianism, who answered many of my questions from the perspectives of Karma and Confucian doctrine. When I asked her opinion on the relationship between women's dress and rape, we had the following exchange:

> Ling Yi: A woman dressing as she wants means she is self-centred, which is a problem. But contemporary people don't think it is a problem.
>
> Yue: But why does it mean self-centred? Does she hurt anybody due to dressing prettily?

…

Ling Yi: The reason why we women dress modestly and decent is that it will protect women and make us respected. First, you cannot control others' thoughts. As we have criticised, men are more likely to have bad thoughts…You think wearing like this (revealing clothes) is your freedom, but he is also free to think anything. So if you are raped, it's a result.

Yue: A woman wears as she likes, but she doesn't hurt anybody. A man rapes her, so it is the man who hurts the woman. It is unfair! (Volume increased, faster speed and obvious emotional fluctuation)

When I heard Ling Yi's views, I felt my anger rushed up to my head immediately and wanted to challenge her. I failed to control my emotions very well in that situation. Although I told myself, "Your purpose is to interview different opinions rather than winning arguments!", I still could not calm down. Since I totally disagreed but could not debate with her, I asked a series of sharp questions to express my doubts and disapproval. While reviewing the audio recording, I felt the obvious emotional fluctuations conveyed through my talking speed, and I sounded so aggressive and agitated when I asked these questions. I was unsatisfied with my performance in the interview, but I was surprised to discover that disclosing my stance stimulated the participant to give more interpretations and explain her thoughts more clearly. Nonetheless, there was a risk that such emotional expressions could damage the rapport between the researcher and participants in interviews, as Jenkins argues that "feeling and emotion are powerful motivational factors in the design and conduct of research projects and shape the relationship between the researcher and his/her object of study as well as understanding and interpretation" (Gray, 2008, p.937). I was worried that my aggressive performance in interviews would also damage the friendships or family relationships between my participants and me, so I did not want this to happen again.

*Further Ethical Considerations*

The COVID-19 pandemic that broke out in late 2019 has had a global impact, and it influenced my fieldwork. Although it had been effectively controlled in most cities in China after months of mandatory lockdowns, the epidemic had reappeared and intensified in a few cities by the time I commenced fieldwork. Considering the safety of both my participants and me, I did not stick to the sampling cities in the research design but adjusted interview locations according to the varying pandemic conditions in Chinese cities. For example, I cancelled my flight ticket to Nanjing one day before my departure, as the pandemic reappeared there. Generally, my fieldwork was not severely affected by COVID, during which I followed the local guidelines and safety measures recommended by the local authorities and the World Health Organisation to mitigate the potential risk of infection.

Before heading for the field, I had worried most about personal security in China's authoritarian political environment. Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the party-state has implemented intensifying coercive measures to restrict academic freedom, and to scrutinise or even detain activists (Fuchs, Tse and Feng, 2019). There are lurking surveillants and guards secretly monitoring the speech and behaviours of citizens and visitors in China (Shih, 2015). Although I did not intend to interview participants about their views on the party, the Chinese government, the national leaders or sensitive political events, my research touched on feminism, activism, gender and sexuality issues, public policies and the state-patriarchal society, which could all invite state scrutiny. So I followed a series of steps to ensure the security of both my participants and me.

First, finding appropriate interview locations was critical. Most interviews were conducted in neutral public spaces, such as tea houses or cafes. I normally chose a relatively private space or room in the café to ensure that our conversation would not be overheard; many interviews were done in private homes or a hotel room because

the participants I interviewed were my friends and relatives, so there were no safety concerns in this regard. Second, both my participants and me were cautious about our words and voice volumes when discussing something political or sensitive. I carefully worded the sensitive questions about activism and sociopolitical issues, avoiding any language that would normally get flagged up by China's censorship and surveillance systems, and avoided touching on the political "red line". I asked questions only related to public policies or feminist actions rather than those about the party, the government or governmental officials. Despite this, I found that many of my participants looked cautious and nervous when they mentioned political things. Mi Mi, who worked as a public servant in a community, directly refused to answer my question about the One-Child Policy: "I can't respond to this question because it might influence my job." Some other participants lowered their voices and were very subtle in expressing their views. For example, in the interview with Muqing, I noticed that she rarely used specific sensitive words like "the Chinese Communist Party", "the Chinese government" or "the party-led state". Instead, she tried to discuss Chinese social problems from a more macroscopic and theoretical perspective:

> So every time we look at something like this [crackdowns of LGBTQ community in China], we talk about the "institution". Then you'll find that you're stuck with the institution at every level, and you can't go further, because you can't change the institution. All the confusion we have is in this aspect…When you come to the institutional level, you have the feeling that people are just trying to survive in the cracks (of the institution).

Third, I kept the data secure as a matter of great importance. To ensure data confidentiality, I uploaded the audio recordings to the University Drive via VPN the moment I completed each interview. I kept each recording, transcript and manuscript secure in the university cloud, deleting them from any physical devices I had on me, and therefore was able to keep them safe until my return to York. I removed direct identifiers from the data, such as names, addresses and contact details, and did not

disclose any contextual data gathered through the interviews that could identify the participants, including workplaces, occupations, birthplaces and so forth.

Before going to the field, I had anticipated that I would be likely to recruit some LGBTQ participants. Queer people are particularly marginalised, stigmatised and discriminated against, so most of them are "in the closet" in the mainstream homophobic Chinese society. Although my research does not mainly focus on sexuality, some interview questions touch on the sensitive issues of gender and sexuality, which may make LGBTQ participants uncomfortable or feel at risk of being outed. To make my participants feel as safe and comfortable as possible, I was very cautious about the way I asked questions about sexuality and dating relationships in each interview. Rather than posing questions like "Do you have a boyfriend?", "Have you had boyfriends?", "What is your ideal husband?", I chose to ask questions in a more gender-neutral way: "Are you single or in a relationship now?", "Do you have a partner now?", "What is your ideal partner?" I used the term "partner" instead of "boyfriend" and "husband" for a few reasons.

First, the presupposition that women should only date or marry men implies the deeply entrenched heteronormativity and ignorance about the LGBTQ community. Queer participants could feel disrespected and offended if they were asked whether they had dated men. Second, I used the term "partner" (*banlü*) because it encompasses a diversity of meanings in Mandarin, such as boyfriend/girlfriend, spouse, or sexual partner. This is a non-binary term with broad meanings, which provided sufficient space for my participants to negotiate their preferred terms and to decide whether to disclose such private details or not. In most cases, participants used the words "boyfriend", "husband" and "man" in our conversations, or shared stories about their relationships with men, even though I had asked questions in a gender-neutral way. However, a few interviews were evidently distinct.

Yue: What do you think of your current single status?

> Zilu: Very happy! (laughs) I had a girlfriend before, and our breakup was quite terrible and painful. I am bisexual, so I think I can embrace infinite possibilities.
>
> (Interview with Zilu, aged 27)

Zilu was the only participant who came out to me explicitly in the interview. She came from an affluent family in Shanghai, having studied in an international school. In her own words: "The environment around me has created a bubble for me…I've been in Shanghai, London and Toronto, and I have many asexual friends". Zilu was proud of her sexuality and excited to say that out loud. In contrast to Zilu, the way that Peng presented her sexuality was much more discreet and subtle:

> At the very beginning of the interview, Peng said she was single when asked about her current relationship status. However, she was cohabitating with a woman, whom she called "the leader of our family". It was interesting that she was very curious about the LGBTQ landscape in the UK. After I introduced my Master research on East Asian queer cinemas, I noticed that she became relaxed and interested, sharing many stories of her queer friends when she studied in Japan. When I asked her views on intimate relationships and dating violence, she often used her relationship with her roommate as examples. Although she did not directly come out to me, she used [the term] "rare" to describe her sexuality.
>
> (14 September 2020, Field Journal)

In China, "the leader of our family" is generally used in a context whereby a husband/man introduces or mentions his wife/girlfriend in a humorous mood when talking with others. This phrase sometimes also suggests that the wives/girlfriends manage the family, while the husbands/boyfriends obey orders from their partners. Since "homosexual women remain the most socially unrecognised sexual 'deviants'"

in China (Kam, 2012, p.65), it is understandable that Peng claimed to be single at the very beginning and did not come out in the interview. However, she did not seem worried about presenting her sexuality and the current relationship with a woman to me – through her narratives, experiences and opinions − particularly after she knew that I had previously researched East Asian queer cinemas.

> Yue: Are you single or in a relationship?
>
> Muqing: I'm single. That means I don't have a boyfriend or a girlfriend! (laughs).
>
> …
>
> Muqing: I even think everybody contains two genders, but our society only has a binary category of men and women…In terms of sexual orientation, some people will explore it and label themselves. I think that is unnecessary because you'll never know what the next person you meet will be like. What if you label yourself first but meet a person who doesn't fit the label? Then you have to tear off the label and attach another one. I'd rather not attach any labels. Just have an open mind about it and embrace anybody you like.
>
> (Interview with Muqing, aged 35)

Muqing was the only participant who refused to label herself in terms of sexuality or gender. She was also the only participant who always kept using the term "partner" rather than "boyfriend" or "girlfriend". Unlike most of my participants, Muqing revealed nothing about her sexuality, always carefully worded her answers to such questions and cautiously framed her relationship stories. Participants' responses and reactions were widely divergent when presenting their sexualities and relationships. I was happy that my strategy of asking such sensitive questions was well-deployed and practicable, as it provided a secure space for all participants to negotiate their preferred ways of presenting their genders and sexualities.

*Dealing with Messes and Emergencies*

The fieldwork was a long and tough journey, where I encountered many challenges and unanticipated situations. I have felt vulnerable (e.g. when one participant video-recorded our interview; more on this later); I also had trouble starting some interviews (e.g. when a participant did not seem to trust me and required for our mutual contact, who had put us in touch, to be present for the interview). In this section, I will elaborate on some of these unexpected challenges.

> The interview this evening felt more like a psychological counselling service. My cousin and I comforted and talked sense into her (the participant) throughout the whole interview. I don't know to what extent this was a research ethical problem.
>
> (13 September 2020, Fieldwork Journal)

Shan was a friend of my cousin's, with whom I conducted the interview at my cousin's home. She looked stressed, exhausted and down, and had not smiled since she had come into the home. I cautiously greeted her, but she was indifferent to me. Honestly, I was flustered by her cold manner and started to worry about the formal interview that was meant to start shortly. After a few minutes' talk with her friend Shan, my cousin went back to her bedroom, leaving Shan and me in the living room for the interview. However, although Shan had read the information sheet and signed the consent form, she seemed to have no interest in my project at all. I attempted to actively start our conversation in a relaxing and comfortable way, but Shan did not look at me and just responded perfunctorily. I was very embarrassed, panicked and uncomfortable, because this was the first time that I was meeting such an uncooperative participant. I could feel that she had no trust in me and did not want to talk to me at all. At this time, my cousin stepped out from her bedroom, sitting down next to Shan and naturally asked about her recent daily life, her relationship stories and views on marriage and childbirth. With her friend in tow, Shan looked more

relaxed and willing to share, although she still did not want to talk with me too much.

In theory, it was not strictly "ethical" or planned to have a third party participate in an interview, who was neither a participant nor a researcher familiar with research ethics. In practice, however, having my cousin intervene was the only way to build a rapport between Shan and me. In the circumstances where Shan did not trust me at all, the interview could not have continued smoothly if I had insisted on doing it in a "theoretically ethical" way. Sticking to a rigid interviewing process in such an unpredictable emergency would lead to tensions and distrust between participant and researcher, which would have negatively influenced both the research relationship and data generation.

Additionally, "confidentiality" was another critical issue required to be considered when having a third party participate. Shan looked at and talked to my cousin for most of the interview, during which it was me who looked like a third party, only responsible for recording their conversation by typing. In this case, I did not think confidentiality should be the ethical focus. Shan had read the information sheet and signed the consent form, so she was aware of how the data would be protected and that the interview should be private only between us two theoretically. She felt more secure when my cousin was present, and preferred to tell her stories to her trusted friend rather than me. In this situation, I decided that it was better to let my cousin join us in the interview.

With my cousin − her close friend − sitting next to her, Shan looked much more at ease, complaining about the pressure to marry and a relationship she was in. The participant was greatly troubled by marriage and childbirth, even sobbing at different points of the interview. This interview lasted nearly three hours and Shan was in tears for most of the time. As Shan's friend, my cousin sympathised with her, comforted her and gave advice on her dilemmas throughout the whole interview. I felt sorry for her as a researcher as well but I always reminded myself not to provide advice

casually, though the participant had asked for my views on her private affairs several times. Letherby (2003) argues that "it is necessary to be aware that even if the researcher possesses counselling skills, research relationships are not counselling relationships"(p.127). I am not a professional psychiatrist, but I did want to be supportive, so I advised her to consult a psychiatrist or a support group. However, this suggestion was strongly rejected by Shan. Before going to the field, I had read some scholarship which provided advice on how to deal with situations where participants appear like they would benefit from counselling. For example, Brannen argues that the feelings that researchers want to help participants "may reflect our own needs – the need to feel better about the research and our involvement in it, or the need to feel useful – rather than those of respondents" (Letherby, 2003, p.127). Therefore, Letherby (2003) advises to take a break or provide information on some relevant support groups if participants need counselling help. Based on the advice, I had thought that it would be wise and helpful to provide some detailed information about a psychological support group in my information sheet. However, I had not anticipated that this attempt at assistance would not work with Shan, who was worried that being labelled as "depressive" would lead to difficulty in finding a partner.

In contrast to western societies, consulting a psychiatrist is stigmatised to varying degrees in China, so this is why Shan rejected my proposal. I did not handle Shan's situation in the best possible way, even though I was being guided by some relevant scholarship that I had read prior to the fieldwork. This was because all the advice, theories and methods I had gathered were generated from and for a western context, rather than the Chinese context. I started to reflect on myself, a Chinese researcher who had unconsciously fallen into the trap of "cultural imperialism", which "refers to a global situation in which powerful culture industries and actors located almost exclusively in the West and, in particular, in the United States, dominate other local, national, and regional cultures and actors" (Demont-Heinrich, 2011, p.668). Cultural hegemony influences not only cultural products but also knowledge production (Demont-Heinrich, 2011). As a Chinese student who had pursued/was pursuing both

Master and PhD degrees in the UK, I was aware that the preparation for, design of and approach to my research heavily depended on western scholarship, inadvertently overlooking localised research strategies in the Chinese context.

Since Shan refused to be audio recorded, I had to record the interview by typing, which required me to quickly assess whether the participant's narrative was relevant or not. Shan spent much time on venting her emotions, which made it more difficult for me to concentrate on recording the interview. On the one hand, I found that emotions were extremely contagious. In other words, it is difficult to remain impartial in the presence of a very emotional person. I always empathised with Shan, feeling pity and sadness for her experiences and predicaments. On the other hand, I had to constantly remind myself to maintain my composure, and critically think about the narrative and emotional performance of the participant, so as to identify the data most relevant to my research and record it. I needed to admit that the interview with Shan would be the messiest and most difficult one, where I failed to gain the trust of the participant, faced my most emotional participant, and had difficulty in collecting relevant data. However, these emergencies taught me not to always rigidly stick to theories, methods and ethics from my reading. Sometimes, insistence on these "theoretically right" things would bring about difficulties and inadvertent ethical breaches, so this interview served as an illuminating reminder for me – to stay flexible and present for the unique circumstances of each interview.

> I am currently in Beijing doing interviews. So far, everything is smooth. However, one of the potential participants hopes to video-record our interview for her personal use − the participant told me she had not considered how to use it, but she will let me check the edited video before uploading it online − but I am considering whether there will be any ethical issues generated from this process, so I look forward to your advice on this.
>
> (19 October 2020, email to PhD supervisors)

This is from an email written to my supervisors when I was doing fieldwork in Beijing. Before the commencement of the fieldwork, I had read some research on the subject, which mentioned the fluidity of the research relationship (Letherby, 2003). However, I had always regarded participants as "vulnerable" and did not consider any risks brought by participants to the researcher until I reached out to Chun. After presenting the potential risks that both Chun and I might have, Chun still hoped to video-record the interview, so I sent an email to my supervisors for help. Due to different schedules, we failed to talk about this emergency face-to-face within two days, but my supervisors gave me some advice over email. Combining their advice with my own thoughts, I tailored some solutions to it. First, I refused to be on camera, even if the camera only videoed my back. Second, I required Chun to erase my voice and make me anonymous, including my name, contact details, my university and the fact that I was a researcher based in the UK. Third, I had to check the edited video before she uploaded it to any platform, though Chun said that she would keep the video for her personal collection. As some scholars mentioned earlier, the researcher-participant relationship does not remain stable and unchanged and may shift based on different interview situations. The interview with Chun put me in a vulnerable position, although I had tried to mitigate such risks as well as possible. I was aware that researchers are not always privileged because their personal information, backgrounds and even experiences would also be disclosed to varying degrees in the fieldwork.

> A couple of days prior to the formal interview, she asked me for my interview question list, because she wanted to be well-prepared… After accepting my solutions to mitigate the security risks, the participant video-recorded the interview. As I had expected, when the camera was involved, the participant performed unnatural in the interview.
>
> (21 October 2020, Fieldwork Journal)

Chun was the only participant who wanted to see my interview questions before the

formal interview. Since she hoped to shoot a satisfactory video, preparing answers in advance would make her speak and perform better in front of the camera. On the one hand, having participants prepare answers in advance means that they could spend more time thinking deeply and broadly, which could help present integrated answers with more details; on the other hand, if participants are already familiar with the listed questions, they could respond swiftly when being asked again in the formal interview, which is not conducive to collecting non-verbal data. The process where participants hear a new question, think over, word sentences and answer the question is often accompanied by a few unconscious non-verbal signals, such as facial expressions, emotions, body movements, pauses and tone changes, which are also critical data for the research, as they often reveal further context around the participant's response. In the interview with Chun, I noticed that she answered most questions quite smoothly because she had been well-prepared. However, when I asked some questions not listed on the interview guide, Chun looked kind of panicked: "So you will also ask questions not on the question list?"

The presence of the camera influenced how Chun presented herself in the interview. I observed that Chun's behaviour, tone of voice and movements were markedly changed after the camera was on. For example, she limited her body language, paid great attention to her postures and facial expressions, and sometimes adjusted her hair, in order to maintain a good image in front of the camera. Although many other participants were more reserved after being informed of the presence of an audio recorder, they tended to forget about it as the interviews went on and performed naturally when they focused on our conversations. In the interview with Chun, the camera was placed in a conspicuous position, almost directly facing Chun, which often distracted the participant from our discussion.

I felt uneasy about the interview with Chun. For one reason, the participant's insistence on video recording the interview had pushed both her and me into a vulnerable position, though I had tried my best to reduce the risks of privacy

disclosure and being surveilled. For another reason, I did not think it was a good decision to present the detailed interview questions to Chun before the interview. If I had a chance to do the interview again, I would only let her know the broad themes I would focus on in the interview, which could leave a broad space for the participant to respond more flexibly and organically in the formal interview.

**Transcription and Translation**

From November 2020 to February 2021, the pace of fieldwork slowed down, so I had to continue to recruit participants and start transcribing simultaneously. Rather than hiring a transcriber or using transcription software, I transcribed the interviews into text manually for a few reasons. First, I had to ensure that the data was only accessible to me. Inputting data with the help of software or a transcriber may increase the risk of the participants' information being exposed. Thus, to protect the security and privacy of participants, I was responsible for transcribing the data myself. Besides, transcribing data in person brought me closer to my data. Listening to audio recordings and typing in the data was not a mechanical process for me, but rather enabled a more intimate engagement with my data and inspired any subsequent analysis. In other words, transcribing manually was a preliminary attempt for me to consider how the data could be analysed afterwards, so I often noted down my ideas and comments during this process.

Moreover, given that I am the researcher who conducted these interviews personally, I could catch the emotions and moods of both the participants and me, and the contexts of the interview, more explicitly. Listerning to the audio recordings reminded me of the environment, the lights, the coffee and the noises in the interview, and I felt like I was going back to that day, listening to the participant speaking in front of me again. So, I could supplement the transcripts with some additional data, such as notes on facial expressions, emotions, moods and behaviours, which would not have been achieved if I had employed a transcriber or software.

> Another interesting thing was that Lily and I had been close friends, growing up together since we were very young, so we talked in our local dialect instead of Mandarin because we had been used to it. Some words in our dialect seemed to be difficult to write down in Chinese characters, so transcribing and translating such words might be a problem I should focus on this afterwards.
>
> (6 September 2020, Fieldwork Journal)

The data was basically transcribed in simplified Chinese characters because I interviewed most of my participants in Mandarin, the universal spoken language in mainland China. However, a couple of interviews were conducted in the local dialect of my hometown. The reason we did not speak Mandarin in the interviews was that the local dialect was the language we had always used for communication, so it felt unnatural to use Mandarin Chinese between us. As mentioned in the fieldwork journal, some dialect words were only limited to oral use, so there were no specific Chinese characters for these words. For example, Lily mentioned the word “me long”, which I could only transliterate phonologically. Because I could not find any suitable Chinese characters for it, I used Hanyu Pinyin, which is “the only legal and official romanisation system recognised by China and has been widely accepted as the phonetic scheme for teaching and learning Mandarin internationally” (Chin, 2018, p.67). By retaining the pronunciation of the dialect word, the meaning of the sentence and the context could be preserved to the greatest extent. Besides the pronunciation, I added interpretative words behind “me long”, including “raise”, “bring up” and “cultivate”, which was to explain this dialect word more explicitly.

According to the criteria of informed consent, many feminist researchers hope to empower participants through negotiating the interpretations of data with them (Ramazanoglue and Holland, 2002), which “depends on a high degree of trust in the research relationship” (Ramazanoglue and Holland, 2002). So they send transcriptions back to participants and invite them to give feedback and make revisions. For my

project, however, it would not be a safe strategy to discuss transcripts with my participants. As I discussed earlier, my fieldwork was conducted in China, an authoritarian country where the government monitors the public sphere, including the internet. To protect the safety of both my participants and me, I did not send completed transcripts back to participants via email or any social media platform. To better deal with the issue of misinterpreting data, I planned to use rich, vivid quotes of by the participants as much as possible, so as to allow the readers to "personally critique the credibility of the study and substantiate the interpretations" (Cope, 2014, p.90).

Prior to the fieldwork, I had identified that translation would play a part in data processing, but I had not been aware of the difficulty in translating Chinese into English until I was preparing a paper for a conference at CWS, my home department at the University of York. "Chinese is grammatically very different from European languages and is written in characters, each one of which represents a concept (which can also of course be spoken)" (Jackson, Ho and Na, 2017, p.9). The very different cultural and historical contexts of China and the UK make translation more than just a language issue. Sometimes, I failed to find an appropriate English word for the translations. When this happened, I chose to copy the original Chinese pronunciation and interpret it later in the analysis. Another situation was that I could find a suitable English word, but it still did not make sense when fitting it in the whole sentence. For example, a participant called her cohabiting female friend "the leader of our family", translated from the Chinese characters "我们家领导". Despite there being no difficulty in translation, it could still confuse Anglophone readers if these words were presented without any specific explanations. Based on this, I gave the context and interpreted the metaphor behind the five characters. Due to the distinct languages and cultures between China and the UK, I had to be aware of the "loss of nuance" and "distortion of meaning" (Jackson, Ho and Na, 2017, p.8) when translating from Chinese to English.

## Conclusion

This chapter gave a detailed presentation on the design and modification of this research project, and reflected on a variety of issues about participant recruitment, research ethics, researcher-participant relationship, transcription and translation during the fieldwork and research. I particularly expanded on the indigenous recruitment method in the Chinese context, and also responded to some western hegemonic research ethics that frame feminist research methodology. In the next chapter, I will focus on some important terms and concepts that theoretically frame the whole thesis, based on which the collected data were analysed, interpreted and discussed.

# Chapter 4: Theorising Power, Agency, Empowerment and Gender for Women of the One-Child Generation

## Introduction

My determination to explore "empowerment" was influenced by Vanessa Fong, a China scholar who argues that only daughters born in post-1980s China have been unprecedentedly empowered, as the absence of siblings, particularly brothers, enables them to become the "only hope" in their families and exclusively enjoy all the love, care and financial and educational resources provided by their parents (Fong, 2002; Fong, 2004). She argues that "girls born after China's One-Child Policy began in 1979, [...], have more *power* to challenge detrimental gender norms and use helpful ones than ever before, thanks to the decline of patriliny and the absence of brothers for their parents to favo[u]r" (Fong, 2002, p.1098). Recalling myself, an urban only daughter who had been fully supported by the family and enjoyed financial and educational resources that my female ancestors did not have, I agreed with Fong's conclusion and considered that other young Chinese women would share similar experiences with mine. However, since I stepped into my fieldwork and listened to other young women's stories, I noticed that these were far more complicated and different than how I had imagined, and had to reflect on my own stance and preconceived assumptions.

Most of my participants shared some similar backgrounds: they were urban, well-educated and professional; and they were the only daughters in their families. However, their decisions, actions and strategies to defy gender norms varied tremendously. Some young women, like Fong (2002) indicates, were able to challenge the social pressures and gender norms exerted on them; some, on the contrary, appeared to succumb to mainstream social norms by sacrificing their own needs and interests. With these observations, I had to query Fong's findings: can we

easily conclude that urban singleton daughters have been "empowered" or young women have more "power" in post-1980s China, compared to other generations of Chinese women, just because they can enjoy some resources and privileges that women before them could not? How should we understand the terms "empowerment", "power" and "privilege" in the Chinese context, through the varied and nuanced experiences of these women?

This chapter will theorise some important concepts and terms, related to power, agency, privilege and empowerment, which frame the theoretical approach of the whole thesis. I begin by contextualising power, elaborating on how multiple powers, including coercive national policies, gendered norms, cultures and traditions, political ideology and neoliberalism, dominate, discipline and produce Chinese women's bodies, sexualities and subjectivities. This is followed by a discussion of "agency" and its relation to "resistance". Then I focus on the term "privilege", and interpret how young women born under the One-Child Policy are uniquely privileged as well as assess the nuanced implications and limits of these privileges. Based on the analysis and definitions of agency, privilege and power, I problematise Vanessa Fong's argument about "empowerment" in the final section.

**The Contextualisation of Power in Contemporary China**

Power is omnipresent, meaning that it is not a resource or substance that, as Fong has considered, "can be possessed, distributed, and redistributed" (Allen, 2018, p.3). Rather, power is fluid and can be found in any social interaction. Power creates discourses, constructs knowledge and produces subjects (Foucault, 1995). In other words, the body of each subject is a site for a variety of powers to engage and operate in. Locating power in the Chinese context, it is necessary to look at how various modern forms of power function in relation to young Chinese women's bodies and how women, as modern Chinese subjects, respond to power, particularly biopower and disciplinary power, in their daily lives. In this section, I will look at how

hegemonic sociocultural norms, political ideology, national policies, scientific knowledge, and social interaction dominate, discipline, and produce Chinese women's bodies and subjectivities. I will begin with a discussion on how biopower targets the whole population, regulates women's bodies and operates in post-1980s China, followed by a discussion of how neoliberalism, consumerism, and traditional gendered and cultural norms shape Chinese subjects, particularly women. I argue that young Chinese women's bodies have been an arena for varied powers to operate. Since the 1980s, national family planning policies, neoliberalism, filial piety, and gendered norms, as different forms of modern power, constantly impact on Chinese women: women's reproductive choices, decisions and behaviours have always been regulated by the state; consumerism, as a by-product of China's neoliberal reform, has collaborated with the traditional notion of "filial piety" to reinforce women's social identities and responsibilities as virtuous wives, good mothers, dutiful daughters, as well as enterprising and attractive professionals.

China's birth planning has served as one of the basic state policies since the late 1970s, when the PRC government shocked the world with its implementation of the One-Child Policy. Birth planning does not simply mean controlling population growth, but regulating the quality of the population in relation to economic development. Hence, from the early stages of the policy − when the state strictly regulated the number of newborns through coercive measures, such as forced abortions and sterilisation − to the later stage, when the government started to guide the reproduction of a competitive and high-quality labour force by means of the market, science, and knowledge, the focus of the regulation of population changed significantly in the 1990s.

China's population project is a typical and remarkable case of "governmentality". Foucault (2007) understands "governmentality" primarily as "the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population

as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument" (p.108). In other words, governmentality is to regulate populations and bodies through a variety of governing practices in order to maximise economic profits and achieve political goals. As neoliberalism replaced liberalism as the new globally dominant paradigm, China's market reform since the late 1980s, which is characterised by the launch of reform and opening-up policy, indicates that neoliberalism has also taken an increasingly important position in the state's governmentality, particularly in Hu's era, when neoliberalism was further developed and promoted by the state (Greenhalgh, and Winckler, 2005, p.9). To accelerate the development of the neoliberal market, neoliberal governmentality has systematically been used to restrain individual bodies and regulate the population designedly. This becomes one manifestation of modern Chinese "biopolitics".

Historically, the emergence of biopolitics was closely associated with the rise of capitalism in the west, when newly trained bodies and newly educated minds were needed to form a new workforce for the expanding capitalist economy (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005). Foucault (1995) points out that modern power is not only negative and repressive, as it dominates bodies, but also positive and productive, as it produces subjects and subjectivity. In a similar rationale, post-socialist China has urgently required a particular labour force, who are competitive, educated and capable, to promote market reform, so "improving population quality" has increasingly been the focus of birth planning since the 1990s. Under birth planning, a generation of self-enterprising, self-reliant, desiring and rational citizens are produced for China's neoliberal market. Essentially, as Fong (2004) states, the purpose of the birth planning policy was to create a group of young talents with ability, ambition and high quality, in order to enhance China's competitiveness in the world capitalist system. In the case of neoliberal China, how does governmentality function specifically in regulating the population and creating proper (gendered) subjects for the neoliberal market? How does neoliberal governmentality impact on Chinese women's bodies, sexualities and subjectivities?

As governmentality arises in modern societies, the exercise of power becomes different from that in premodern societies. In *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault differentiates premodern sovereign power, which is characterised as "repressive" and "punitive", from modern power, which is both prohibitive and productive. "Governmentality is a form of rule that goes beyond old-fashioned sovereign state power to draw on three forms of power that, analytically, constitute a triangle" (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005, p.22-23):

> The first is governance over and through government in the conventional sense. State bureaucracy can intervene in macrosocial processes such as population dynamics, preferably through indirect regulation, and can also intervene in individual behavior such as reproduction, preferably by helping shape individuals' own sense of their identities and desires. The second form of modern power is governance through "intermediate" disciplinary institutions, usually run by professionals on the basis of particular expertise. Main examples of these disciplinary institutions are schools, hospitals, armies, and prisons. Some of these generally are state institutions, others generally are not. The third form of modern power is self-governance by individuals of themselves. That self-governance is often promoted and guided by states and professional experts.
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> (p.23)

In China's case of neoliberal governmentality, the three forms of power work together to regulate the population and discipline individual bodies. By making specific measures for sanction and establishing official institutions, such as the Birth Planning Committee, for supervision, the government can monitor and discipline individual reproductive behaviours; experts, scientists and the particular professional institutions sponsored/owned by the government create specific scientific knowledges and interpretations to culturally legitimatise the (bio-)governance of population and

individuals. Exposed to such discourses for a long time, Chinese citizens have gradually and widely internalised the scientific notions of eugenics and Social Darwinism. In my research, many young women considered that mothers must be responsible, and should give their all to their children, including educational, financial and emotional support, so that their children could become competitive in schools and labour markets. With this in mind, most of them claimed that they could support only one child; some even resisted motherhood for fear of failing to be responsible mothers (See: Chapter 7). Neoliberal governmentality has brought Chinese people out from the traditional notion of "the more children, the more blessings" (*duozi duofu*), and allowed many women to choose not to spend most of their lifetime on childbearing and childrearing, as the One-Child Policy has lessened the pressure on women to reproduce multiple children. On the other hand, however, it ensnares citizens in another form of power. As Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) argue:

> [T]he modernization of reproduction in recent decades has freed China's people from an oppressive tradition. At the same time, however, it suggests that these changes have enmeshed them in a new type of power—the power of the modern, science-based norm—that is especially insidious because it is masked by the apparently neutral language of science. Spread by a wide range of disciplining forces (the professions, the market, and so on) and society itself, those modern norms are particularly constraining because they are internalized by people themselves.
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> (p.32)

As we make sense of how neoliberal governmentality functions in China, it becomes clear that the state's regulation of the population could be analysed through two levels of power. One is disciplinary power, that is, disciplining individual bodies that deviate from norms at the micro/individual level. Much scientific and medical knowledge serves to legitimise the discourses of this form of power or hegemony. For example, some women in my interviews referenced some medical evidence that 35 years old is

the deadline for a woman to have a child; giving birth beyond this age would bring serious damage to women's physical health, they worried. The other form of power is biopolitics, which governs the population as a whole on a macro level by tracking and regulating birth rate, death rate, fertility rate, longevity, public health, etc. Every ten years, China will have a national, large-scale population census; annual statistics on birth and death rates and population size of the previous year are published at the beginning of each year. The data are so important that they influence the formulation and updating of population policies. It is on these two levels that biopower operates in modern Chinese society. Different from sovereign power, which could "take life" or "let live" (Foucault, 1978, p.136), biopower could "foster life" or "disallow it to the point of death" (Foucault, 1978, p.138). Specifically, "biopower is the calculated power over human life, especially at the level of the population. Biopower is aimed at the administration of the vital characteristics of human populations and exercised in the name of optimi[s]ing individual or collective life, health and welfare" (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005, p.27).

It is noteworthy that, compared to its western counterparts, power in China is much more concentrated in the central party and government. While neoliberal economically, it remains authoritarian politically to a large degree. Such authoritarian power, exercised by the party state, is characterised as repressive and prohibitive. For example, during the early stage of the One-Child Policy, through forced abortions, sterilisation and contraception, reproductive urban women were coerced to give birth to only one child. The government particularly founded the Birth Planning Committee to supervise women's reproduction and implement these coercive measures. Since the 1990s, when China shifted its focus from population quantity to its quality, it is modern power, rather than authoritarian power, that has begun to take on a dominant effect on individuals. As Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) point out, "although China's modern political trajectory takes a distinctively Chinese form, far from being outside modern power relations, since around 1980 and especially since the early 1990s, China has become ever more enmeshed in them" (p.32). However, it is worth

noting that Greenhalgh and Winckler drew this conclusion in 2005, when Hu was striving to develop neoliberalism in China. Since 2012, when Xi Jinping came into power, China's authoritarianism has been on the rise. Under Xi's leadership, the birth planning policy has changed twice since then.

The state modified its birth planning policy, aiming to address the increasingly serious population ageing problem and the shortage of a young labour force: the One-Child Policy ended in 2016, when the Two-Child Policy was implemented; then the Third-Child Policy was introduced very soon after in 2021. The government bodies at different levels have issued a series of measures to encourage childbirth since the enactment of the new policy, which, however, has received plenty of criticism from citizens. The One-Child generation (born since the 1980s) seems to be seen as one of the major targets for fertility mobilisation because they are of childbearing age. However, as a generation who was born and raised under the One-Child Policy, enjoying unprecedented parental investment and heavily influenced by ideas from eugenics and social Darwinism, young people appear not to be active in procreation. They seem to "have accepted having an only child, no longer needing compulsion to ensure compliance" (Ho, et al., 2018, p.490). In other words, young generations have bought into the One-Child Policy and no longer have to be coerced to practise it by the government like their parents did. On Sina Weibo (China's Twitter), Xinhua News Agency issued a questionnaire in 2021 about the "three-child policy" with the title "Are you ready for the coming three-child policy?" There were four options in the questionnaire: "ready, can't wait", "already put on the agenda", "hesitating, many issues to be considered" and "not considered at all". A total of 26,000 people voted, and as many as 24,000 voted for "not considered at all". This questionnaire was quickly deleted by Weibo (Lin, 2021). To some extent, the results of the poll reflected the attitude of many Chinese people towards the new birth planning policy. It seems that citizens' views on childbirth have not changed much, notwithstanding the quick update of the birth planning policy and the introduction of incentives for childbearing.

However, the state is still on its way to explore some new methods to increase birth rates. According to some (mostly married) women's posts and comments on Weibo in 2023, they had received phone calls and texts from their communities or local maternal and child-care service centres, being asked about their plans to have children. Pregnant women were asked about their health conditions, expected dates for confinement, and even their plans to have a second child. The frequency of these phone calls and texts varied: some women received them every half a year; some got them every month; a woman received three calls on the day of her parturition. Looking back at the early days of coercive birth planning measures and the suffocating experiences that some women had gone through since the introduction of the Three-Child Policy, a question should be posed: Under Xi's leadership when authoritarianism continues to rise, what kind of role will authoritarian power play again in the new regulation of women's bodies and reproduction? It is difficult to draw a conclusion on this question at this early stage, but this issue should be further interrogated by scholars.

However, the updating birth planning policies are not the only power that regulates, influences and disciplines women. Other forces, such as neoliberalism, Confucianism and so forth, have also functioned and produced new subjectivities for young Chinese women. In tandem with the One-Child Policy, China started a neoliberal experiment through market reform and opening up to the globe. Market economy replaced socialist planned economy at the end of the 1970s. Neoliberalism was originally used to describe a capitalist model of governance that advocates the privatisation of industry and the shift of responsibility for social governance from the state to the market and the individual. In addition to the economic sphere, neoliberalism also promotes individualism in everyday life: by providing the market with an abundance of consumer goods, neoliberal societies encourage people to adopt individualistic lifestyles (Peng, 2021, p.117). The economic reform since the 1980s symbolises the advent of China's neoliberal era, which has encouraged and unprecedentedly celebrated consumerism and individual desires. In this neoliberal context, the

government retreats from the private sector, wages were increased and anchored to the booming market economy, and a large quantity of commodities were manufactured for consumption (Yang, 2020).

Individually, "rising living standards and the growth of consumerism helped engender a new sensibility among more affluent Chinese citizens, in which the frugality and collective norms of the past gave way to the individual pursuit of consumption and pleasure, including sexual pleasure, which also began to inspire the aspirations of those less privileged" (Ho, et al., 2018, pp.488-489). Lisa Rofel (2007) analyses how China's neoliberal market produces "desiring subjects". Particularly for the younger generation, who were born since the 1980s and have little or no memory of the socialist era, they are "more concerned with expressing their feelings and pursuing their own desires and ambitions through consumption, sexual practices and relationships, making money and travelling" (Ho, et al., 2018, p.489). Zooming in on young Chinese women, neoliberalism and consumerism have left a deep imprint on their bodies. A new female subjectivity was created in the reformist era, which indicates a departure from the degendered subjectivity in the Mao era, whilst re-emphasising traditional/normative femininity, highlighting women's purchase power as consumers, and framing women as enterprising, self-responsible and desiring agents (Liu, 2014). The popular degendered image of "iron girl" (*tie niangzi*) in Mao's era is no longer prevailing in post-socialist China. Rather, there was "a surge of interest in reclaiming the female self by emphasising sex differences" (Liu, 2014, p.20); the market and media are full of commercials, products and information about fashion, cosmetics, beauty and lifestyles; many new female images, such as "strong woman" (*nü qiang ren*), "virtuous wives and good mothers" (*xianqi liangmu*), and "urban beauties" (*dushi liren*), have come to characterise the new ideal of Chinese womanhood (Liu, 2014).

In addition to the prevalence of consumer culture, neoliberal China has witnessed a resurgence of Confucianism. Particularly since the new millennium, Confucianism,

which was “disavowed under the Mao regime and attacked as a feudal remnant during the Cultural Revolution” (Ho, et al., 2018, p.491), was revived in the Hu era. As prominent features of traditional Confucian culture, the concepts of “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*) and “harmony” (*hexie*), seen as beneficial to both intimate relationships and social interaction, have been promoted vigorously by the party state, particularly since some social problems brought about by rapid economic development, such as corruption, unbalanced development between rural and urban areas and so forth, have become increasingly prominent in post-socialist China (Han, 2008). The rehabilitation of gendered Confucianism has resulted in the resurgence of traditional gendered norms, such as the revived emphasis on traditional femininity and the notion of “virtuous wives and good mothers” (*xianqi liangmu*). The importance of family values and women’s responsibility as wives and mothers to maintain family harmony was particularly highlighted in reform era. It is believed that a woman, who is able to take on her wifely and motherly duties or even sacrifice herself for her family, will contribute to a happy and harmonious family. Millions of “harmonious” families will further benefit the construction of a “socialist harmonious society”. Therefore, women, who are given a primary role in regenerating morality and harmonising families and society further, are indoctrinated to become responsible mothers and self-sacrificing wives, to serve their husbands, children, families and the whole nation.

Additionally, as a core value of Confucian culture, the notion of “filial piety” (*xiao*) was rehabilitated simultaneously, and was strengthened by neoliberalism. The reform and opening up contributed to China’s entering into a modernisation period, where the social economy rapidly developed over several decades. Before the reform period, most urban residents were closely connected to the work unit (*danwei*), the workplace where they were employed, including factories, stores, schools, and government offices (Liu, 2007). “It was founded to carry out production tasks as well as to provide comprehensive material support to urban residents” (Liu, 2007, p.41). In the process of economic reform, to improve their market competitiveness, many state-owned

enterprises laid off a large number of urban staff to optimise the labour force structure, save costs and improve productivity. Those laid-off workers, who would have been the beneficiaries of lifetime employment and the socialist welfare system before the reform (Yang, 2020, p.3), now have to depend more on intimate relationships or family members, particularly younger generations, for care, service and financial security. Under neoliberalism, the responsibility for social welfare has shifted from the government to individuals and the domestic domain. In other words, Chinese individuals face the predicament that the national institutions fail to provide social security, attempting to transfer the burden to domestic spaces.

The following propaganda slogans from different periods suggest a shift in the Chinese government's attitude towards old-age support:

> One child is good. We depend on the government for old-age support. (1985)
> One child is good. The government will provide a part of support. (1995)
> We cannot depend on the government for old-age support. (2005)
> Postponing retirement is good. We depend on ourselves for old-age support. (2012)
> It is a duty to provide old-age support for our parents; it is shameful to leave the duty to the government (2018)
>
> (Zheng, 2021)

Faced with the increasing burden of elderly support relegated to the children of the post-1980s generation, the Chinese government has constantly advocated the cultural model of filial piety within families, so that the state can focus its resources on "economic growth" rather than improving social welfare. Based on this, the government has pressured citizens to increasingly rely on their children for old-age care, financial support and medical care (Fong, 2004). The reform period was the key stage for the governmental reintroduction of Confucian culture and its core concept of filial piety, as an indirect economic and state-empowerment strategy.

Filial piety *(xiao)* "serves as the guideline for parent-child interaction and the traditional basis for harmonious inter-generational relationships within Chinese families" (Yeh, et al., 2013, p.278). Despite being attacked under Mao, mutual support and interdependence between family members was still practised by the Chinese public (Qi, 2015). Given the importance of filial piety, the individual practice of filial obligation has been covered by Chinese law (Evans, 2008; Liu, 2008). The legislation stipulates that "adult children must meet the financial, medical, housing and social needs of their elderly relations as long as they have the ability. Disregarding this obligation can be punishable by law" (Liu, 2008, p.415). The government's reaffirmation of the importance of filial piety in the reform period solidified the moral responsibility of adult children to support their parents. As the government gradually withdraws from its responsibility to provide social welfare, Chinese adult children increasingly bear the pressure to provide old-age support for their parents or even grandparents.

Since the 1980s, when the One-Child Policy was brought into effect, singleton daughters have been seen as the "substitute sons" (Liu, 2008), who are undertaking the same filial obligation as sons, such as the provision of aged care and support. Fong (2004) indicates that only daughters have received unprecedented parental support not only because no brothers are competing with them for this parental investment, but because they live in a socioeconomic system that gives them a cultural model of filial piety that was previously available only to sons. Some researchers even argue that daughters in contemporary China perform better in terms of practising filial responsibility because they are not only economically able to provide financial help but also are more willing to offer more emotional support and practical physical care to their parents (Qi, 2015). An important reason for this is that modern women do not rely on their husbands for resources, but it has become a salient role to share the financial burden with their husbands. The increase of their economic independence in the family have increased their capacity to "act as daughter

caregivers for their own parents" (Xu, 2001, p.312). Hence, Chinese women, who have to live up to gendered social identities as good wives and sacrificing mothers, are also expected to be filial daughters and perform filial duties to their parents or even parents-in-law, although some researchers argue that the economic independence of contemporary Chinese women has empowered them to decline or refuse to provide old-age support for their parents-in-law (Xu, 2001).

Coercive national policies, gendered cultural norms, political ideology and neoliberalism have enabled young Chinese women's bodies to become the objects of and arena for intertwined power struggles: they are negotiating their childrearing desires and behaviours, their desiring subjectivities, and their gendered responsibilities as filial daughters, sacrificing wives and good mothers, all of which are produced, dominated and disciplined by the authoritarian state, neoliberalism and gendered sociocultural norms. In romantic relationships and the domestic sphere, they are deeply influenced by language, culture, and political gender agendas, which compel them to self-sacrifice for romance, love, family, husbands, children and parents; as women of a so-called "childbearing age" (*shengyu nianling*), they are struggling with constantly changing biopowers. Multiple powers work together to produce the new modern female subjectivity full of contradictions, entanglements and struggles.

**What Does Agency Mean for Women in Contemporary China?**

Although contemporary Chinese women, as neoliberal subjects, are dominated, disciplined and produced by a variety of modern powers, Chinese women are not passive and docile subjects to these powers. Instead, they are capable of interacting with others, critically reflecting on existing social norms, beliefs, practices, cultures and institutions, and transforming subjection into liberation: namely, they can gain and exercise agency. In this section, I will theorise women's agency in the Chinese context, to look at how young Chinese women navigate a variety of powers in both

obvious and surreptitious, expected and unexpected ways.

My early analysis of "agency" directly tied it to "resistance". Since I understood resistance as challenge, rebellion and fight, I considered that women's exercise of agency should look like explicit confrontations with any forces, people and interactions that oppress or disadvantage them. In the early stages of data analysis, I focused on a variety of rebellious and resistant behaviours in my participants' interactions with gendered discourses, social norms and people in their daily lives. However, as I continued the research, I noted that the concept and meaning of "agency" is far more than "resistance". "Agency is the capacity for intentional action and presupposes the human ability to reflect upon situations that confront us and to decide on appropriate courses of action" (Rahman and Jackson, 2010, p.155). Although individuals are produced or constructed into particular subject positions and identities by particular social and cultural norms, these discourses are modified in everyday lives. "As people go about their daily lives, they interpret what is going on around them, negotiate relationships with others and reflect on their own actions and experiences" (Rahman and Jackson, 2010, p.155). In the article "What is Agency?", Emirbayer and Mische (1998) provide more explanations of "agency" and the process of exercising agency. Agency is conceptualised as "a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its 'iterational' or habitual aspect) but also oriented toward the future (as a 'projective' capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a 'practical-evaluative' capacity) to contextuali[s]e past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment" (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p.962). Specifically:

> The iterational element...refers to the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time...The projective element...encompasses the imaginative generation by actors of possible future

> trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future...The practical-evaluative element...entails the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories of action, in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations.
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> (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p.971)

In brief, agency is about how actors reflect on the past, react to the present and then project into the future. This conceptualisation of agency has given me a richer understanding of agency, and also of my participants' behaviours, which I used not to regard as "an exercise of agency", unless they could also be described as "resistance". For example, a participant had experienced much pressure from her and her fiancé's parents to have children, particularly since she was engaged. Despite no interest in children, she told me that she would have a child someday to relieve the pressure. She would require, however, that her parents, husband, and parents-in-law would take on the main responsibility for future childrearing.When I interviewed her, she was negotiating this with her husband. On the surface, since this participant had in fact agreed to have a child against her wishes, it could seem like she was simply passively succumbing to pressure (i.e. not resisting). However, her decision to have a child represented a strategy of bargaining for autonomy, rather than merely complying with gendered duty, which would free her from intergenerational conflicts, parental intervention, and the non-stopping nagging from her parents. By comparison, some other participants did not plan to have children because they noticed a rising pressure to be responsible mothers and an increasing risk to their careers as mothers in contemporary China. For some participants, who had experienced coercive control/PUA, a form of intimate partner violence that is normally subtle, covert and difficult to identify (See Chapter 6), in their relationships, they seriously reflected on their past experiences, and claimed that they would focus more on their own feelings and emotions and try to avoid past relationship patterns if they would date men again.

Many participants' experiences were not simply about "resistance". Rather, their active reflections on their experiences, deployment of strategies, projections into the future and dealings with the present dilemmas were all about the "exercise of agency".

**A Lucky Generation? Privileged Daughters in Urban China**

It is worth noting that the young women in my research, who were capable of exercising agency and who successfully improved their situations, were privileged to varying degrees. They possessed different forms of cultural capital (eg. economic resources and mobility opportunities, being well-educated and professional; or the courage and confidence imparted to them by the doting parents of beloved only daughters), which enabled them to become privileged agents with tools to reflect on their predicaments and even challenge gender inequality and social norms in varying ways. In this sense, privilege could be understood as a resource that could be wielded to exercise agency, which echoes some scholars' understanding of "power as a resource" (Allen, 2018). Therefore, it is worth querying: in what specific ways are One-Child-generation women privileged in urban China? How do they use their privileges?

Privilege is defined by Bailey (1998) as "systematically conferred advantages individuals enjoy by virtue of their membership in dominant groups with access to resources and institutional power that are beyond the common advantages of marginalised citizens" (p.109). One could be privileged/unprivileged in certain respects, such as based on race, gender, sexuality, age, class, religion, health, education and so forth. It is noteworthy that privilege is perceived relationally and relatively. One is not always privileged in all aspects but one could have specific privileges (e.g. access to financial support or education) while lacking others (e.g. experiencing gender or ethnic inequality and oppression). For example, urban Chinese only daughters seem more privileged than their rural counterparts or women of the

older generations in their communities because the One-Child Policy enabled them not to have to compete for resources with their siblings, but they are not always or uniformly privileged. They could be unprivileged in marital settings, campuses and workplaces when compared with their husbands, male classmates and male colleagues, since women are more vulnerable to gender discrimination, oppressions and inequality in these spheres. Based on this, the following analysis, which mainly focuses on how Chinese young women are privileged in certain respects under tremendous social change, will not deny the dilemmas and situations in which they are underprivileged or disadvantaged. Identifying the advantages of urban only daughters could be helpful to analyse how women could use various forms of social capital to exercise agency and improve individual situations.

Urban young women are privileged through their urban birthrights (Xie, 2021) or urban *hukou*. *Hukou* is "a residence registration system that provides registered residents with essential social services such as access to education in local schools, subsidised medical care, pensions, and eligibility to apply for subsidised public housing (Nakano, 2014, p.160). The *hukou* system in socialist China controls population mobility, which has gradually been relaxed since the 1980s, when migration started to rise (Chan, 2009). Despite so, the *hukou* system is still influential on Chinese society. Holding an urban *hukou* means access to "better education, good healthcare, and minimum level of income protection" (Xie, 2021, pp.6-7), which are not accessible to people with rural *hukou*. Sun (2012) points out that *hukou* is not only an institutional classification but also a cultural classification, symbolising a type of power through which urban citizens create an identity and exclude the rural/outsiders.

First, *hukou* status plays a significant role in finding a good job. Tong and Su conducted a survey of job hunters among 2,964 college students in April and May 2009 in Beijing, finding that "the rate of signed or about-to-sign job agreements was 32.9 percent for college students originating from within Beijing, 32.2 percent for college students from other cities, but only 16.5 percent for college students with rural

backgrounds" (Tong and Su, 2010, p. 93). Besides, *hukou* status influences dating choices and marriage prospects. Many Beijingers considered dating "outsiders" (*waidiren*) − people from outside Beijing in this context − as losing face (Wang, 2017). In a similar vein, many Shanghai parents have stated their firm refusal to find a *waidiren* as a son-in-law because it would be considered a lowering or shaming of their family reputaion (Sun, 2012).

Since rural people reacted more intensely to the One-Child Policy, the state allowed rural couples to give birth to a second child if the first child was a daughter (Sudbeck, 2012; Jackson and Liu, 2017). Their urban counterparts were more subjected to the state's surveillance mechanism because their work, welfare and other benefits heavily depended on their *danwei,* which were owned by the state. Therefore, urban people had to abide by the birth control policy more strictly. That each urban family had only one child enabled the child, regardless of sex, to become the "only hope" (Fong, 2004) of the family, because the child would then become the only one that their parents could rely on for old-age support. With a great deal of expectation placed on their only child, urban parents invested all of their resources, love and care in their only children. In this circumstance, urban only daughters have access to the resources and investments that were previously reserved for sons. In many cases, urban parents would invest a large amount of money and resources to equip their only daughters for independence and upward mobility, such as by buying house properties for their daughters and sponsoring them to pursue higher education degrees overseas.

Sending children to study in mainstream developed countries has been a family capital accumulation strategy that Chinese families use to exchange economic capital for cultural capital, so as to further achieve class solidification through their returnee children's contribution to the family (Tu and Xie, 2020). In recent years, the number of female students studying in popular western educational destinations is consistently higher than that of male students (Tu and Xie, 2020), suggesting a great desire of only daughters' families to realise upward mobility through equipping daughters with

educational capital. Compared with a son's natal family, which bears a huge pressure of providing marital housing for the son, a daughter's parents could invest money in the daughter's education. A higher/overseas degree will greatly enhance the professional/economic competitiveness of daughters who are looking for decent, professional jobs in China, especially in the contemporary Chinese work environment, where academic qualifications and educational backgrounds are highly valued. Additionally, an increasing number of parents aspire to provide financial support for their single daughters, such as buying a flat or a vehicle. According to the 2019 Women's Settlement Report, published by a real estate network platform which analysed 607,724 real estate deals nationwide, in 2018, 47.1% of single Chinese women over 30 years old had bought a house. Among the women who had purchased at least a house property, 45% received parental economic help and 29% claimed that they had bought the house independently.

My participants (N=30) were privileged to varying degrees and many of them shared similar backgrounds: 21 were only daughters; 27 were brotherless; 28 of them had at least a Bachelor's degree; 11 women had studied/were going to study at overseas universities for degrees; 24 were working/had worked as professionals in urban areas; 7 were pursuing higher degrees (Master & PhD); 7 of them, all brotherless, made it clear that their parents had or would provide financial support for their purchase of a vehicle or a house. Their educational and professional backgrounds, career prospects and earning power provided a sufficient material foundation for them to stick to their own decisions, choices and actions in social interactions and avoid financial sanctions imposed by others. Moreover, pursuing higher education and careers has provided young women with opportunities for intercity or even transnational mobility, which may free them from some specific oppressive socio-political environments in certain cases. For example, two of my participants, Fei and Wenting, moved to another continent/city for a degree/business, which enabled them to be away from their toxic partners and end the relationships finally, although neither of them had intentionally decided to break up (and would likely have found this impossible if they had stayed in

the same location as their abusers).

**What does Empowerment Mean for Urban Chinese Women?**

Since young urban women are privileged in many ways and some intentionally take action to change oppressive and undesirable situations, can we readily conclude that they are categorically empowered with no room for analysis of the gendered dynamics in their engagements with power, privilege and agency? To address this, it is necessary to go back to the discussion of Fong's (2002) argument that privileged urban daughters have been newly *empowered* in challenging gender norms. I argue that Fong is too quick to conclude that women are "*empowered*" without carefully analysing the process, ways and methods of women's empowerment, and what role women themselves play in this empowerment process, which she has analysed as largely economic in terms of the resources and capital that One-Child-generation women have possessed.

Kabeer defines empowerment as "expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them", and indicates three interrelated components that are key for making "strategic life choices": "resources, which form the conditions under which choices are made; agency, which is at the heart of the process through which choices are made, and achievements, which are the outcomes of choices" (Mishra and Tripathi, 2011, p.59). Based on this definition and three elements, I argue that to estimate whether and how young Chinese women are empowered should assess whether they have sufficient resources and abilities to exercise agency, and whether or to what extent their actions produce positive outcomes.

However, it is interesting that some women in my interviews did not seem to intentionally take action to change their gendered dilemmas, yet hey had found themselves and their situations were nonetheless improved by their specific privileged

status. For example, two of my participants, who had experienced coercive control in their relationships, successfully escaped their toxic relationships by moving to another country/city for the pursuit of a higher degree and a career, though neither of them had intentionally tried to break up with their controlling boyfriends through mobility. Their situations were improved to a large degree due to their privileged status as well-educated, mobile and professional middle-class women. In spite of some positive outcomes, their experiences inspired me to reflect on some questions: What if they had not been able to move to another city/country? Would the situations have been different? Would they have found it more difficult to escape from such a toxic relationship if they had not been privileged enough to travel? Can we regard such situations as empowerment if they hinge so heavily on socio-economic privilege?

I am wary of defining their success as categorical and unambiguous empowerment. In the Chinese context, if these privileged young women's accidental achievement in bettering personal situations is defined as a form of empowerment, we would have come to the same conclusion as Fong, which simplifies the process of women's empowerment. The possession of resources is an important but not sufficient condition for empowerment. Drydyk (2013) gives a detailed example:

> For instance, literacy is an important means of empowerment; illiteracy can be disempowering to women (among others), but literacy does not empower women in all cases, since other factors such as tradition, family structure, or development itself (Boserup, 1970) may keep them disempowered.
>
> (p.251)

As Drydyk indicates, resources/capital/privileges are a significant but not sufficient requirement for women's empowerment. Women would not achieve empowerment simply by having a variety of resources, as many other patriarchal factors continue to subject and disadvantage women. I noted that not every young woman in my research was able to successfully challenge the social pressures and gender norms exerted on

them, though many of them were privileged in similar ways. Whether and how young Chinese women can manage to challenge social pressures and defy gender norms depends not only on the resources and capital they possess but also on their ability to reflect on their dilemmas, perceive individual privileges and take practical action. In other words, the empowerment of women requires objective conditions, such as cultural capital/resources, but it is also inseparable from their exercise of agency.

Additionally, Fong's consideration of young urban women's access to educational, financial and career resources as empowerment, this opinion, to some extent, manifests the neoliberal feminist and postfeminist understanding and definition of empowerment. Both neoliberal feminism and postfeminism are pseudo-feminisms, which are the by-products of neoliberalism. The economic reform since the 1980s symbolises the advent of China's neoliberal era, when consumerism and individual desires are being celebrated unprecedentedly. Neoliberal pseudo-feminism defines Chinese women as "autonomous", "empowered", and "modern" individuals who have access to education, career and economic independence, and are able to freely express their femininity and individuality through consuming fashion, cosmetics and other goods. However, it ignores the pressures and dilemmas that women are facing in neoliberal China, where women are disciplined to be capable professionals/workers in workplaces, whilst being virtuous wives, responsible mothers and dutiful daughters at home.

Neoliberal feminism and postfeminism are different, though both of them are produced under neoliberalism. Postfeminism, understood as a contemporary cultural sentiment, declares that women are "now empowered" and celebrates their consequent "freedom" to return to normative feminine pursuits, thereby disavowing feminism as no longer needed or desirable (Dosekun, 2015, p.960). The rise of China's post-feminist sensibility is based on the prevalence of consumer culture since the 1980s and the criticism of socialist feminism − which obliterated gender differences and purportedly deprived women of their femininity and identity as

women − during the Mao era. In post-socialist China, postfeminist sensibility encourages Chinese women to re-affirm normative or traditional femininity, and consider themselves as free, autonomous and empowered subjects through consumerism. By comparison, neoliberal feminist sensibility highlights some key liberal terms like "equality", "opportunity" and "free choice", and produces a particular female subject as "not only individualised but entrepreneurial in the sense that she is oriented towards optimising her resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation" (Rottenberg, 2014, pp.421-422). The gender agenda of neoliberal feminism particularly encourages women to pursue a "felicitous work-family balance" (Rottenberg, 2014, p.422). In the Chinese context, this pseudo-feminism advocates that women must be self-reliant financially instead of depending on their male partners, and describes Chinese women's self-expression of femininity as a key means of enhancing their sexual attraction to men, which enables them to "tame" their male partners at home − by using some specific tactics, such as "playing cute" (*sajiao*) and showing vulnerability − and to ensure the longevity of romantic relationships or marriages (Liu, 2014).

Back to Fong: she summarises the opportunities/resources that One-Child generation daughters have due to the market reform and birth planning policy. First, the market reform creates a large number of service, textile and handcraft industries, which particularly favour young women. Second, more educational opportunities are accessible to girls due to their good academic performance. Moreover, China's hypergamous tradition provides young women with opportunities to realise upward mobility beyond education and career (Fong, 2002). However, she does not consider that most service and handcraft work is generally low-paid, low-skilled, unpleasant and sometimes done in a dangerous work environment (Xie, 2021); she does not discuss that many universities and programmes prefer male students and relax admission criteria to favour men; she fails to note that those women who do not fit in with the marriage institution would be stigmatised, and those who are married have to take on most domestic chores, pregnancy and childrearing, and may even risk

domestic violence.

Fong (2002) points out that urban only daughters strategically pursue personal success, happiness and life goals by resisting the gender norms that damage their interests and using the norms that conform to their interests. She defines their pursuit of desires, resources, interests, success and pleasure as empowerment, which represents the neoliberal understanding of women's empowerment, but ignores the dilemmas and pressures that neoliberalism has brought to these women. Along with women's access to a variety of resources, women are increasingly expected to take on more responsibilities to fulfil normative identities in both domestic and public domains. Many young Chinese women are even disempowered by neoliberal gender norms, which discipline them to be enterprising professionals, virtuous wives, dutiful mothers, filial daughters and feminine/sexualised bodies. Therefore, the neoliberal definition of women's empowerment covers up structural gendered problems that Chinese women are facing and neglects working-class women's predicaments, which produces a neoliberal illusion of being empowered for young Chinese women, though they are experiencing structural gendered oppression every single day.

## Conclusion

This chapter has theorised several important terms and concepts in the Chinese context, which has provided a new framework for understanding and theorising power, agency, privilege and empowerment for Chinese women of the One-Child generation. The contextualisation of power in contemporary China reveals a nuanced and evolving landscape where young Chinese women's bodies serve as contested sites for the negotiation of diverse and intersecting forms of power. The interplay between national policies, cultural norms, political ideologies, and global economic forces shapes a complex tapestry of subjectivities, highlighting the need for a holistic understanding of power dynamics in the lives of Chinese women.

Besides, I provided a nuanced exploration of women's agency and privilege in contemporary China, challenging simplistic definitions of empowerment and emphasising the multifaceted nature of women's experiences. The chapter encourages a more comprehensive understanding that considers the intersections of resources, agency, and structural constraints in the analysis of one-child-generation women's empowerment in a neoliberal context.

This chapter elaborated on how young Chinese women's bodies, sexualities and subjectivities are produced, regulated and disciplined by varied forms of power by neoliberalism, the state and gendered cultures and traditions, which helps frame the following analysis chapters. For example, Chapter 5 will present more details about how filial piety, neoliberalism and the One-Child Policy recreate the power dynamics between parents and only daughters. Chapter 6 will demonstrate how gendered love culture, political propagandas and languages used in everyday life legitimatise intimate partner violence, such as coercive control/PUA, in the romantic relationships of young Chinese women. Chapter 7 will interpret how gendered childrearing and childbearing norms, national policies, eugenic ideology, and neoliberalism reshape One-Child-generation women's reproductive choices and decisions.

# Chapter 5: "*Caring and Supportive but Disobedient?*" Intergenerational Tensions Between Parents and Daughters in Contemporary Urban Chinese Families

## Introduction

I grew up hearing many stories about my parents' and grandparents' childhoods. As the oldest child in her family, my grandmother (born in the 1930s) had to look after siblings, do farm work and work in factories to support the family in her teens. Although she longed for an education, this opportunity was only reserved for her brothers. She learned to read in a literacy class (*saomang ban*) after the establishment of the PRC in 1949. When she was eighteen years old, her parents arranged a marriage for her, so she married my grandfather, whom she had never met before the wedding. Despite experiencing violence from her husband and mother-in-law, my grandmother still took good care of all her family members. Those days, in my grandma's words, were "too bittered" (*tai ku le*). My mother, born in the 1960s, also had to share the workload with her parents when she was a child. Her hands often blistered from doing farm work. She was the only one among her siblings who went to university. I sometimes wonder if my grandmother's experience of not being educated as a daughter influenced her determination to support my mother to go to school.

My story is in stark contrast to theirs. I was born in the 1990s, when China was undergoing tremendous transformations in social and economic reforms since the 1980s. I have known that my life seems much "better" and "happier" than the lives of my grandparents and parents, since I have never had to worry about food and clothing in the ways my parents and grandparents did. Like many other urban daughters of the 1980s and 1990s generations, I have enjoyed many opportunities and resources that were unthinkable for the women from the elder generations: nutritious food, nice

clothes, education, love, care and service from my elders. My parents paid for my tutorial and extracurricular classes to study ping-pong and the electronic keyboard, and sponsored me to pursue Master's and PhD degrees in the UK.

I know my life is totally different from my mother's and grandmother's. For their generations, serving their parents and doing what their parents asked were always taken for granted; being dutiful, obedient daughters was something that they never thought to question. Our One-Child generation, by contrast, as the "only hope" (Fong, 2004) in our families, was the one who was always served and pampered by elders as children, and for many of us, there seem to be no limits. Inter-generational relations seem to have transformed a lot in my generation, but something still remains unchanged. My grandfather and father expected me to study hard and work well so that I could "make our family and ancestors glorious". So when I did not get satisfactory marks in school, I was often spanked by my father. I had always been taught to "do what adults say" (*tinghua*) and respect seniors. If I got some fruit or snacks, I needed to share them out based on a gendered and age-based hierarchy: grandfather at the top, followed by grandmother, father, mother and myself.

The stories of three generations of women in my family indicate a transformation of intergenerational relations and its core principle of "filial piety" in China. Most of the existing scholarships focus on whether filial piety, as a core principle of Chinese intergenerational relationships, is eroded or sustained in post-1980s China. It is mostly agreed by scholars that filial piety has been redefined and reconstructed, characterised by reciprocal and mutual support in care, resources and emotional interdependence between generations (Deutsch, 2006; Zheng and Ho, 2016; Jackson and Liu, 2017). Compared to the existing research, I will lay more emphasis on the role of gender in the transformation of the notion and practice of filial piety and power relations between daughters and parents in post-reform China. The 1980s marked not only a shift in the family structure, but also a salient era when China witnessed new waves of capitalism, globalisation, neoliberalism and a series of social

reforms in public systems, such as the updates of birth planning policies and old-age support. Situated in this context, this chapter will explore the following questions: What do power relations between parents and daughters look like in post-1980s Chinese families? How has the intergenerational relationship, particularly filial piety, transformed since the 1980s and what role does it play in contemporary China? How does gender still matter in the practice of filial piety since the 1980s? How do daughters strive for autonomy through navigating these power relations within the family? What role do gender, age, marital/economic status and social norms play in the daughters' power struggles with family members?

I interviewed 30 young Chinese women born between the 1980s and 1990s, most of whom were younger, post-1990s only daughters, which made the data heterogeneous and somewhat different from those of earlier research on the One-Child generation, which has tended to focus on participants born in the 1980s (i.e. the older One-Child generation). I discovered that there is an emerging sense of insecurity/vulnerability among parents, who often express worries, disappointment, grief and irritation in the face of their increasingly wilful and "self-indulgent" adult daughters. This is considered by many sociologists and anthropologists studying China as a rise of children's power and a decline of parental authority since the 1980s (Yan, 2003 & 2016; Fong, 2004; Liu, 2015). However, I am wary of simply defining this situation as a power shift from parents to children in post-reform China, as some scholars have done. Rather, I find that there is a persistent trend that adult daughters of the One-Child generation are coerced or even violently abused by their parents, self-sacrificing for their natal families. Therefore, as Liu (2022) demonstrates that filial piety is non-linear, but a hybrid of complicated continuities and changes, I argue that the intergenerational power relation, which is based on the core principle of "filial piety", is fluid, dynamic and variational, and tremendously influenced by gendered, filial norms, neoliberalism and the state power.

In the first section of this chapter, I will detail the struggles and conflicts between the

neoliberal subjectivity of young Chinese women and the continuous gendered, filial norms, which, I argue, indicates a new intergenerational tension in contemporary Chinese families. Nonetheless, the One-Child Policy and economic reforms provide young Chinese women with more space and possibilities to resist parental authority and strive for individual autonomy. Bearing the pressure created by the state, neoliberalism and cultural norms, I note that the empowerment of young women of the One-Child generation since the 1980s often comes along with their increasing self-sacrifices and intensifying social responsibilities. So in Section Two, I will mainly focus on some specific strategies that One-Child-generation daughters employ to negotiate self-determined power in the post-1980s family structure and sociopolitical and economic environment. I have found that young women of the One-Child generation could bargain with their natal families for conditional autonomy by strengthening their social identities and obligations as daughters, wives and mothers. Women's empowerment is inseparable from their manipulation of social and gendered norms in many cases; and what may sometimes appear as compliance and passivity on the surface is actually a subtle form of exercising agency. I elaborate further below.

**A New Intergenerational Tension in Post-1980s Chinese Families**

Through ethnographic research in xiajia village in northeast China between 1980s and 1990s, Yan (2003) discovers that "a new logic of intergenerational exchange" functions under a dynamic that "if the parents do not treat their children well or are otherwise not good parents, then the children have reason to reduce the scope and amount of generosity to their parents" (p.178). He also finds that young people in the village gained rising autonomy while their parents' authority was declining. He further argues that post-1980s Chinese families are witnessing a crisis within the traditional notion of filial piety (*xiaodao shuailuo*) (Yan, 2003). My research echoes some of his findings that young women of the One-Child generation were not as obedient as their parents had imagined, which made their parents feel insecure and

powerless sometimes. However, I disagree with his argument that "filial piety" is eroded in contemporary Chinese families. Adult daughters' responsibility to take on filial piety continues to be strong; parents of only daughters mobilise varied gendered, filial norms and employ coercive and sometimes violent methods to ensure their daughters do not deviate from the path of filial piety.

*Only Daughters: Wilful or Dutiful?*

> I joined a society at university. Once our society was going to take a competition in Zhengzhou (a city away from Chang's University). The head teacher asked students to get parental approval so that she would let us go [to another city]. So I called my parents, but they rejected me...I hung up, booked a ticket and went to the city by myself. Since then, I have never done what they said. I have been to many places during my undergraduate years, but I never let them know since this incident.
>
> (Chang, 23)

Chang had just gained her Bachelor's degree and was going to study in a postgraduate programme in the UK when I interviewed her. We have known each other since we were very young, so I have witnessed a drastic change in her attitude and behaviours towards her parents since she has become an adult and gone to university. She was always praised by adults for her characteristics of "*tinghua*" and "*guai*" at a young age. "*Tinghua*" means "do what somebody says", which often appears in a parent-child or adult-child relationship. "*Guai*", a word used to describe children mostly, refers to someone who is "well-behaved", "quiet", and "docile". The two words are often used as compliments in the description and evaluation of children by Chinese adults/parents, which indicates an important parental expectation on children, that is, "obedience" (*shun*).

"Obedience" (*shun)*, which is often used synonymously/or together with "filial"

(*xiao*), includes two aspects in traditional Confucianism: first, children should meet parental demands and preferences (*shuncheng xihao*); second, children should continue the family line (*xu ti*) and follow their parents' aspirations (*xu zhi*) (He, 2013, p.75-6). In both cases, parents had absolute power to dominate children's daily behaviours, marriage, childbirth, career and choices. *Disciple Rules* (*di zi gui*), an influential book used to teach Confucian ethics since the Qing Dynasty, specifies children's obligation to treat their parents filially: w*hen your parents call your name, you should answer without delay (fumu hu, ying wu huan); when your parents ask you to do something, you should act immediately as your parents say (fumu ming, xing wu lan).* Clearly, that Chang refused to do what her parents said and acted self-assertively was a violation of the traditional principle of filial obedience. However, she was not an exception in my interviews. Many other participants shared their stories of being "disobedient" and "wilful".

Su's parents wanted their only daughter to come back to their hometown, get a stable job and marry as soon as possible after she completed her Bachelor's degree. They even bought a small flat for her in their small town. However, Su was much more ambitious than her parents had imagined. She studied hard and won an opportunity to become an exchange student at a Japanese university. After graduation, she went to Germany for a Master's degree. Since her parents could not fully sponsor her study, she worked part-time while studying. When talking about the pressure from her parents, she responded firmly:

> They wanted me to find a spouse as soon as possible. I've been self-supporting all the time, so they don't have a say in my life. I would interrupt them firmly [if I was pressured]...They make decisions for me, but it is me who has to bear all the consequences. So I think "no"! It would be too stupid [to let parents decide for me]. I don't want to be weighed down by my parents' ill-informed decisions, so I don't really listen to them. But as to "filial piety", I can treat them well. When I get paid, I can give it all to my mom, but just don't ask me to

do as they say.

Su resisted the pressure to be a traditionally obedient daughter who did what her parents said, on the one hand; she clearly expressed her willingness to support her parents financially, on the other. Such "contradictions" appeared many times in my interviews with Chinese women of her generation. When disagreeing with her mother, Ting did not argue with her and pretended to be *tinghua*, but she would continue doing what she wanted to privately. Muqing, who often communicated with her parents intimately and provided much emotional support for them, frankly told me that "they can't *guan* (control/dominate) me!" *Guan,* a verb with multiple meanings in different Chinese contexts, could mean "control/dominate", "care for", "discipline/educate", "be responsible for" and "manage/administrate", highlighting the complex and telling cultural intersections between care, love, and control (or struggles for power) in the Chinese family.

In contrast to the assertion of a crisis of traditional filial piety (*xiaodao shuailuo*) since the 1980s by Yan Yunxiang (2003), my participants' stories echoed some other scholars' arguments that the notion and practice of "filial piety" remains strong and continues to wield an influence in contemporary China (Deutsch, 2006; Liu, 2008; Zheng and Ho, 2016; Jackson and Liu, 2017). Simultaneously, many young women tend to be wilful and feel entitled to their own, autonomous choices and desires, which looks seemingly contradictory to the traditional notion of "filial obedience". Wang (2019) proposes that "inter-generational intimacy has transformed from unconditional obedience and submission to 'caring and supportive but not obedient' (*xiaoer bushun*)" (p.29). Hence, following Wang's viewpoint, I would further argue that young Chinese women's apparent self-entitlement and wilfulness in relation to their parents embodies an imprint of neoliberalism on China's One-Child-generation daughters, and is inseparable from China's economic reform and demographic transformation − the One-Child Policy specifically. China's economic and demographic reforms since the 1980s produced the One-Child generation as desiring,

enterprising and self-responsible subjects who pursue emotional and material self-fulfilment and self-interest (Rofel, 2007). This may sometimes appear to contradict the traditional Confucian notion of children's "unconditional obedience and submission" (Wang, 2019, p.29) to parents, which makes this generation's natal family dynamics such an insightful ground for the study of how globalisation, modernisation, neoliberalism and national reforms have simultanously contradicted/challenged and newly reinforced traditional norms of social hierarchy, including gender norms.

To promote neoliberal reform in the 1980s, the state urgently required a particular labour force, who are self-responsible, competitive and aspirational, along with which the One-Child Policy came into being (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Rofel, 2007). This birth control policy has been widely condemned by the Western media and academia for its coercive measures and brutal methods in its implementation. Unexpectedly, China's singleton daughters, as the biggest beneficiaries of the One-Child Policy, have received an unprecedented investment of educational and financial resources, love and care by their parents. Fong (2004) indicates that only daughters have received unprecedented parental support not only because no brothers are competing with them for such an investment, but because they live in a socioeconomic system that gives them a cultural model of filial piety that was previously available only to sons. These daughters are seen as "substitute sons" (Liu, 2008), who are undertaking the same filial obligations (but then also reaping similar privileges to some extent) as sons. Like sons, daughters, who are the "only hope" (Fong, 2004) in their families, have been encouraged to make full use of their academic talents and perform as well as or even better than boys (Fong, 2002). The social expectations of being "competitive", "ambitious" and "aspirational" do not exclusively belong to men any longer. Many young women's desires for happiness, success, and material and emotional interests are also encouraged.

In my interviews, I noticed that almost all of my participants have been fully

supported by their parents, particularly in terms of academic pursuits. 28 participants (N=30) in my interviews had acquired at least one Bachelor's degree; 20 women had received at least a Master's degree; 11 women had studied or were going to study in popular educational destinations abroad, including the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, the US, Japan and Macau. Many of them described to me how their parents had taken their education seriously since they were very young. The parents had sent them to extracurricular tutoring classes for academic development, encouraged them to pursue higher education degrees, and sponsored them to study abroad, although their families' resources and financial situations varied widely. Some participants had been spanked or punished by their parents when they failed to get good marks; many of them claimed that their parents had great expectations of their academic performance. As Chun said, "Ever since I was young, my mother has always expected me to be the best!"

Additionally, neoliberalism has given rise to consumerism in post-reform China. A newly produced generation, who were born since the 1980s and have no memory of the socialist era, are "more concerned with expressing their feelings and pursuing their own desires and ambitions through consumption, sexual practices and relationships, making money and travelling" (Ho, et al., 2018, p.489) than their predecessors ever were, as scholarship argues.

Back to the stories of young women in my interviews, it is noteworthy that these One-Child-generation daughters pursued career success, entertainment, and emotional and material self-fulfilment; at the same time, they expressed a strong desire for independent and self-autonomous decision-making power and self-responsibility. Their pursuit of self-interest and self-autonomy, in some cases, appear contradictory to the traditional notion of "obedience". However, it is difficult to conclude that these young women's desire and pursuit for self-entitlement is a practice of individualism, or means a demise of filial piety in contemporary China, as some scholars have argued (Yan, 2003). The idea of filial piety remains strong in my interviews: Shan and

her sister shared their grandma's daily expenses; Tao regularly gave cash to her parents at festivals; Ai Ai felt responsible for her mother's emotional well-being; Ling Yi gave up her education because of her mother's objection. Whyte argues that "far from an erosion or weakening of filial obligations due to the growing generation gap, filial support has remained strong and that in some instances the young are even more likely to express support for filial obligations than the old" (Croll, 2006, p.482). These young women's strong responsibility for exercising filial piety is further reinforced by the state-led modernisation trajectories.

Within just a few decades, China has undergone dramatic demographic and economic changes that took Western developed countries 200 years to complete. To concentrate most resources on economic development, the state has increasingly been failing to provide social welfare, attempting to transfer the burden to domestic spaces and into families. The Chinese government's current re-emphasis on the importance of 'filial piety' is being used to justify a failure of the state to provide basic material conditions and welfare benefits for Chinese citizens. Given the importance of filial piety and the governmental difficulty in supporting our seniors, the individual practice of filial obligation has once again become imprinted in Chinese law, albeit in new, contemporary ways (Evans, 2008; Liu, 2008). The legislation stipulates that "adult children must meet the financial, medical, housing and social needs of their elderly relations as long as they have the ability. Disregarding this obligation can be punishable by law" (Liu, 2008, p.415). Therefore, the younger Chinese generation, particularly adult singleton children, are experiencing unprecedented financial and emotional pressure to practice filial obligation as well as take responsibility for the family finances.

On the one hand, neoliberalism creates a generation of young Chinese women as desiring, aspiring and autonomous subjects, who tend to be wilful, assertive and "self-indulgent" in their interactions with their parents; on the other, the state-led modernisation process has also strengthened the pressure and responsibility imposed

on them to fulfil their filial piety. In this situation, young Chinese women's subjectivity is being profoundly shaped by multiple and contradictory forces of state power and neoliberalism, which invites a deeper investigation and analysis that may challenge some scholarly arguments on the One-Child generation thus far. I would even argue that some scholars, such as Fong (2002), may have inadvertently over-emphasised the privileges of only daughters, in the effort to highlight the new gender order of this generation.

*Parents of Singleton Daughters: Vulnerable or Coercive?*

In my interviews, I noticed that many parents had a strong emotional dependency on their only daughters. For example, Siwen's father texted every night, wanting to keep track of her daily schedule when Siwen was away from home for university. It is intriguing that the father experienced peer pressure when he found his brother's daughter called his brother every single day. So he tried to maintain a closer relationship with Siwen by increasing his contact with her, although Siwen felt pressured by it.

Sometimes, parents' emotional dependence on their daughters may escalate through competing with each other for their daughters' attention, care and preference. Jane, who has a younger sister, is not the only daughter in her family, but she often faces the problems that many only children do. She shared with me a situation that often occurs in her family. Once, when Jane's family were watching TV, her parents had a disagreement on a historical question, so they asked Jane for her opinions. Jane had always been confused about such situations because she clearly knew that this was not a serious discussion but was all about "choosing one side to stand by" (*zhandui*). She complained:

> I used to avoid discussing these questions or expressing my opinions, but both of them were quite disappointed obviously. However, no matter how neutral

> you are to discuss the question itself, as long as your opinion is close to one side, one will be happy and the other will be very disappointed.

Jane's parents both wanted their daughter to pick a side because this was seen to represent the daughter's affectionate preference for one of them. Many only children, including me, have been asked the same question many times from a very young age: "Which one do you prefer, your father or mother?" This question always haunted me as a little child who found it difficult to answer. Only children continue to face similar questions when they grow up, though the question can take on various new forms, as in Jane's example of a debate around the TV. That each family has only one or two children makes these children more precious than ever to their parents, where the children come to represent both financial and emotional security to their parents (Liu, 2015). Hence, parents sometimes even compete for the affection of their children. This contrasts the family dynamics before the 1980s, when children competed with their siblings for their parents' favour, since parents possessed the most resources and absolute power in earlier generations (Fong, 2004).With the increasing emotional and economic value of One-Child-generation daughters, there appears to be a growing sense of emotional insecurity among parents. In fact, parents seem not only insecure emotionally but also vulnerable economically as they grow older.

> Once, my father was having dinner and asked me to get a bowl for him. But I was busy doing my own thing at that time, so I responded "I'm busy now. Do it yourself!" He complained with sighs: "How will a child like you provide old-age support for me?"
>
> (Chang, aged 23)

The exchange between Chang and her father indicates that filial obedience seemed to have been eroded in her family. Chang's refusal to act obediently concerned her father about whether his only daughter would become his only source of support when he is old, which reflects the concerns of many Chinese parents who have only one child.

However, these parents have reasons to worry. The One-Child Policy, issued in 1979, accelerated China's transformation into an ageing society. The number of people who were 60 years old or above made up 16% of the national population in 2015 (Jackson and Liu, 2017, p.1). The majority of rural elderly citizens in China depend on their adult children for financial support, although they receive a basic pension; urban elderly people risk pension reductions and inflation, though they have pensions nonetheless (Qi, 2015). Since the Chinese government has been reluctant to provide sufficient welfare and old-age pensions for citizens (Jackson and Liu, 2017), public anxiety about people's future senior life has intensified. Consequently, "families remain the main source of welfare and support in contemporary China" (Jackson and Liu, 2017, p. 1), and the One-Child generation, has become the primary economic resource for their ageing parents and is/has been required to take on more responsibilities for the emotional care, financial support and service for parents (Fong, 2004).

The parents of only children tend to be economically vulnerable when they are old, which accordingly increases only children's economic value to their parents. Such economic value privileges some daughters with the capacity to improve their family status and transform their power relations with their parents; parents tend to show more vulnerability when they realise the potential class disparity between their capable daughters and themselves.

Wenting, who had carried the hope of the whole family, had always been strictly disciplined or even beaten by her parents, in order to enter a top university. She had been forced by her parents to choose the pathway of the sciences in high school, in which she was not interested, just because it is widely considered that those studying sciences are more employable. However, things had changed tremendously by the time she was admitted into a good university. "*When I went to university, my [family] status was different. They thought I was already a university student with visions, knowledge and independent thinking ability, which they could not make*". As an

intellectual who would find a well-paid job and support the whole family in the near future, Wenting was respected by her parents, because she gradually showed great potential to provide old-age support for her parents and contribute to the social class jump of her family; her parents' authority seemed to be declining, since they realised that a class disparity existed between their only daughter and themselves. When Wenting's mother tried to pressure her to marry, Wenting talked back. In the face of such a financially and educationally capable daughter, the mother had to keep silent, which was in stark contrast to a few years ago, when Wenting would be punished by her parents for her unsatisfying academic performance. As Liu (2022) states, children could gain bargaining power and negotiate with their parents for their preferred lifestyles through meeting their parents' "ultimate goal [...] to enter university" (p.609).

> I think my parents could also feel that they are ageing. My father sometimes would say something like "Nobody is able to argue with you, are they?" ...He would think that I am right about a lot of things. He's really not like he used to be. He used to be like "You, a wimpy kid, know nothing!" He is now trying to think over what I have said. I think my father must be getting older and less confrontational.
>
> (Siwen, aged 23)

Siwen shared a similar experience to Wenting's, whose ideas, thoughts and feelings were neglected in her teens but valued and respected in adulthood by their parents. Likewise, Muqing found that it seemed much easier to communicate with her "*aged*" parents, who are "*milder and more tender than before*". Ai Ai claimed that "*parents are getting older...they have age difference with us, and they don't know much about this society any more...They are not what they used to be when they knew a lot more than we did*"; Chang also mentioned that "*I have argued with her (my mother). She failed to persuade me so she said 'Did I pay for your education all these years just so you could talk back to me (jiangzui)? '*". In some of my participants' narratives, their

parents were presented as “old people” who were not as knowledgeable as they used to be, and could not keep up with the current fast-paced era of science, technology and economic changes. Seniority/age, which mirrors historical and social upheavals, creates generational gaps and hierarchies in contemporary Chinese families, which futher impacts on intergenerational power relations.

All my participants’ parents were born and brought up between the 1950s and early 1970s under Mao’s regime. Many of them had a profound memory of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), “a period of political chaos where class privilege was reversed” (Liu, 2022b, p.606). They experienced a collective economy, and some of them had struggled to make a living. However, they were also the first generation who grasped the opportunity of market reform. Although they failed to enjoy many material resources when they were young, many parents accumulated wealth and capital in the 1980s and 1990s, which made their singleton children's childhoods in many ways less difficult than theirs. My participants were born throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and grew up in the new millennium, an era typified by “materialism and consumption, information and Internet, urban civilization and globalization” (Lian, 2014, p.968). Social reforms privileged these One-Child-generation daughters to give them unprecedented access to education, technology and knowledge, and at the same time, disadvantaged aged parents who are struggling to keep pace with scientific and technological and cultural development. There is a growing ideological divide between the two generations. Although parents of only children were the mainstay of China's social and economic development in the 1980s, 1990s and early 21st century, as they grow older, many parents are beginning to feel powerless, and insecure in the face of the rapid social, technological and ideological transformations, particularly when arguing with their well-educated, knowledgeable and eloquent daughters.

On one hand, it can be argued that the vulnerability of parents implies a decline of parental authority in contemporary Chinese families, as Yan (2003) asserts. However, I have also observed that showing vulnerability appears a useful, sometimes coercive,

strategy for parents to manipulate their singleton daughters into doing their bidding. Some participants shared such interactions with their parents. Rather than intense quarrels and tough sanctions, some parents managed to gain their daughters' sympathy and make them do what they said by showing their weakness and fragility. When Ai Ai shared her stories and feelings about her interactions with her mother, she sobbed and shed tears in the interview:

> When I started to work and became more independent, I tended not to *tinghua* (do what she said). She couldn't accept it. She thought I didn't listen to her and she was sad. I'm actually very afraid that she is sad. When I saw her crying and feeling grieved, I would want to compromise. But sometimes I really didn't want to do what she said. I was not a very obedient child since I was young, but when I grow up, I become soft-hearted. I was afraid of making her disappointed, though I often made her so. But when I saw her crying, I would feel like "Well, no matter how I spend it, it is just a lifetime. Okay, just let it be." I'm not the kind of person who has to do something. I think I can compromise.

Ai Ai's mother had heart disease and was vulnerable to having attacks of it in emotional situations. Despite having been disobedient in her childhood, Ai Ai gradually realised how much her mother had sacrificed for her and the family as she grew older. Considering her mother's health, Ai Ai felt she had to sacrifice her own needs and desires sometimes, and only did things that her mother agreed with. Parents' cultivation of and support for their children are often accompanied by evidence of parental sacrifices, such as illness or material constraints, hence "induced guilt produced a heightened sense of filial obligation" in children (Evans, 2008, p.175). Ai Ai was not the only one who had complicated feelings in the face of a vulnerable parent. Although Jane's mother seemed more respectful of her daughter's single life, Jane still felt guilty for not marrying and having children as soon as possible. Her guilt was particularly intensified when her mother showed understanding and respect for her current single life, but sometimes fantasised about Jane's happy life after

marriage and childbirth:

> My biggest source of guilt may come from the fact that my parents like children very much...They did not pressure me too much. But just because they didn't pressure me too much, I feel a bit guilty instead. They just wanted me to marry...I was trying to instil ideas into my mother, such as something about "marriage institution will eventually die out". My mother is very rational. Although she was not well-educated, she could understand [what I was saying]...I think it's quite cruel to make her understand "singlehood" because all the people around her had thought that singlehood is "abnormal". She has lived in such an environment where a deep-rooted custom has existed for such a long time. She could understand [the new ideas/thoughts/lifestyles] but she was unable to change [the old traditions]. She was in pain.

An apparent perceived sense of the sacrifice of Ai Ai's mother, and her display of physical and emotional fragility, reinforced the daughter's feeling of responsibility to be an obedient daughter; comparatively, Jane's mother, who was born and grew up in a conservative era, struggled to position herself in an era of ideological upheaval, not least in terms of changing gender norms and new possibilities available to urban single women of the One-Child generation, which resulted in her daughter's strong sympathy. The mothers of the two participants both achieved varying degrees of coercive control over their daughters' actions and emotions by showing their vulnerability, although their tactics were slightly different.

The unprecedentedly important economic and emotional value of singleton daughters and social changes coalesce to reshape the transforming power dynamics in contemporary Chinese families, in which senior parents seem to be increasingly insecure and vulnerable; nevertheless, showing vulnerability and insecurity appears to sometimes be used as a coercive strategy by parents who may manipulate their relationship with their daughters to access parental power and control in this new era

of familial relations. In my interviews, some stories between daughters and parents sounded more coercive and even violent, which made me ponder a question: what role do violence and coercion play in disciplining daughters to fulfil filial and gendered norms in such an era of dramatic transitions in Chinese families?

*Coercion, Violence and New Roles of Gender in the Family*

Wenting, 28 years old, who held a Master's degree and worked as a film producer in Beijing when I interviewed her, was born and brought up in a working-class family in a small rural town. Although neither of her parents were well-educated, they had always taken their only daughter's education very seriously. As Wenting complained: "*My parents had put all their own aspirations for academic pursuits on me*". She had even been spanked by her parents for her bad academic performance at a young age. Domestic violence caused her to have PTSD. So she was extremely afraid of intense quarrels and arguments between people as an adult. I found it not uncommon for singleton children to have been abused by their parents for unsatisfying grades. Chang was often physically punished and verbally humiliated by her father when she performed badly in her studies; Kate reported that she had experienced peer pressure from an early age, since her father had constantly compared her studies to that of other children, shaming her for being "so stupid". Her father continued to humiliate her until she was an adult pursuing a PhD degree. I empathised with these participants very much, since I shared similar experiences at a young age. Except for verbal humiliation and physical punishment, I still clearly remember a banquet where my father publicly compared me to his friends' children who always studied very well. As a little child, I was too ashamed to look up during the banquet. Why is academic achievement so important for Chinese children and their parents? How could we understand such violence through a gendered, societal and structural lens?

Historically, since 1371 AD, when the civil-service test system was adopted by the imperial court to select talented officials, this important examination became a key for

many poor children to promote mobility across social classes in ancient China (Fong, 2004; Chu and Yu, 2010). In contemporary China, the College Entrance Examination (*gaokao*), generally considered the fairest exam, has also been regarded as the only way for many disadvantaged students to change their "fates" and transcend social and economic barriers. Many Chinese subscribe to a cultural model in which poor students are expected to be more motivated to learn than rich ones; this cultural model thus gives hope to poor and disadvantaged families who dream of upward mobility through their children's academic achievements (Fong, 2004).

For the One-Child generation, as Liu (2022) points out, children's academic performance is valued and emphasised as never before, regardless of classes and family backgrounds. People have had to compete for jobs since the market reform, which is in stark contrast to the pre-reform era, when "graduates of different levels were allocated jobs in work units by the state or inherited jobs from their parents when they retired" (Liu, 2022b, p.608); an understanding that "good educational qualifications bring good job prospects with good economic returns and a good life" (Liu, 2022b, p.608) is widely shared in contemporary China. For the parents of One-Child-generation daughters, their singleton daughters are expected to take on the same filial responsibility and support the whole family as sons. Therefore, singleton daughters have been put under parental pressure to study and work well so as to help the whole family become upwardly mobile. Being an excellent student at a young age is considered a salient way to honour one's parents, bring face to one's parents (Liu, 2022b) and exercise filial duty. Those who fail to perform well in the study would be framed as "losers" in their future careers and lives, and seen as incapable of achieving a social class jump. Based on this cultural notion, many parents impose "an authoritarian upbringing with an emphasis on academic study" (Liu, 2022, p.608), and even physically, psychologically and verbally punish their children who do not meet parental expectations of academic potential.

Siwen had experienced domestic violence as well in her childhood, but different from

those participants who were abused for academic reasons, Siwen was spanked by her parents because she did not behave as obediently as they expected and always talked back (*jiangzui*):

> They didn't allow me to talk back, but I was obstinate to talk back...My parents always struggled with trivial matters. For example, when I was talking to my father and my mother was absent, I couldn't use "she" to refer to her. I had to use "mom". As for my mother, she required me to make the chair neither too far from nor too close to the table when I was eating. They always focused on such things. Sometimes, they had very "extreme" or "abnormal" ideas. For example, I couldn't keep my head down when they were lecturing, because it would show that I didn't respect them. Very weird thoughts. Recalling it now I think it was ridiculous.

It sounds incredibly pressuring, even coercively controlling, that a child's every move was under surveillance, judgement and control by her parents. Siwen had been disciplined to be "well-behaved", "obedient" and "respectful to elders" since her childhood, and experienced long-term physical abuse by her parents for not fulfilling a variety of gendered, filial norms. The domestic violence was gradually decreased as she became an adult, but it did not disappear. A few months before the interview, Siwen had fought with her father at home. Her father had grabbed her neck and pushed her up against the wall, while Siwen had punched her father's face to fight back. The reason for this violence was similar to those in her childhood: perceived disrespect to her father; a violation of the expectation of filial piety. As a child, she was expected to obey parental instructions and respect parental authority; as a woman, she was still expected to behave in accordance with gendered expectations. Showing disobedience was considered a transgression of the filial, gendered social order, and she would be punished for not fulfilling such norms, even as a grown, financially and otherwise independent woman.

As some other scholars discover that "communicative intimacy" (Evans, 2008; Liu, 2015) tends to be popular in contemporary parent-child relationships, many participants in my interviews shared that their parents were happy to communicate and negotiate disagreements with them in peaceful and equal ways. However, it is difficult to conclude that a more democratic or equitable intergenerational relationship has appeared in post-reform China. The experiences of my participants who had been violently treated by parents indicate a close connection between the violation of gendered, filial norms and domestic violence in contemporary Chinese families. The traditional hierarchical order based on gender and seniority remains strong. In addition to visible violence, many parents would exert coercive intervention and control on their daughters, which is normally more difficult to observe, to ensure their adult daughters remain faithful to filial and gendered expectations.

> My mother is always saying that she most wants to be a grandmother. She hopes that our marriages could be long-lasting, stable and happy; that we can give birth to the next generation; and that our marriages are as normal and same as others'. My mother hopes that we can be looked after well, so my father and she would be relieved.
>
> (Fei, aged 28)

Fei is not the only child in her family: she has a sister three years older than her. Out of concern and love, Fei's parents were "*crazily arranging matchmaking meetings*" (Fei) for Fei and her sister when I interviewed Fei. She had attended dozens of matchmaking meetings in Beijing over two years. The parents often advised their daughters to look for a man who "*treats you well*" (Fei), rather than a man whom "*you like*"(Fei). This echoed some other parents' requirements in choosing a partner for their only daughters. "Treats you well!" and "Takes good care of you!" appeared frequently when I asked young women about their parents' expectations of their mate selections. For many Chinese parents, particularly those with daughters, child-rearing is a lifelong responsibility, and it is taken for granted that parents should find an

alternative caregiver, a spouse, for their only daughters (Zheng and Ho, 2017). Many parents believe that if their daughters are not married, they are not mature enough to take good care of themselves (Zheng and Ho, 2017).

In addition to finding a caring partner, procreating the next generation was another parental expectation imposed on Fei and her sister. It is still a consensus and universal practice that married couples are expected to birth the next generation. Parents of the only-child generation want their precious children to be as well supported in old age as possible, so many parents would strongly hope for their children to give birth.

> Once my father and my sister quarrelled, which hurt me deeply. My father said: "I don't have any other expectations. I just hope you could spend a normal life like a normal person!" In my parents' opinion, it seems that if you don't marry or keep single, you are spending an abnormal life. His words hurt me very much... I hope I could marry, no matter if the marriage could last for a long time...The main reason is that [I hope] my parents can tell their friends that they have at least one daughter married, married "normally" (forced smile)...In my parents' social networks, many children of their friends have already married. Only my sister and I [are still single]. When we were very young, my father's friends often said that my father's two daughters were the most good-looking children. However, neither of us has married. I think my parents looked very aggrieved when they were recalling these stories. So I hope I could marry someday.
>
> (Fei, aged 28)

Throughout the whole interview, Fei presented herself as a self-sacrificing and filial daughter who always prioritised her parents' feelings and emotions, although she was stressed out. At the stage when she was interviewed by me, she had a satisfying and well-paid job, yet her primary goal was to marry a man as soon as possible to meet parental expectations. Zheng and Ho (2017) state that, "other than providing material

and emotional support...getting married is another crucial constituent of the expectations of Chinese parents with respect to their children's filial obligations" (p.452). Particularly for daughters, playing the normative social roles of wives and mothers is critical to the role of filial daughters. Since heterosexual monogamous marriage is the only legitimate and normative form of intimacy in China, those who do not fit into the marriage institution are deemed to be "deviant" or "abnormal" (Kam, 2012). Well-educated, professional women in their late 20s and over who have not married are labelled as "leftover women", which continues to carry a social stigma. "Parents will also be affected by the social stigma if they have an unmarried but 'overage' daughter" (Kam, 2010, p.92), so many parents are anxious to push their single daughters into marriage, for one thing in order to avoid such stigmas, letting them live a "normal" life as a "normal" person; and for another, to protect the reputation of the family or avoid losing "face" (*mianzi*).

Liu (2008) writes that "'losing face', an expression widely used in Chinese society, is synonymous with 'to be laughed at or condemned by others'" (p.418). Despite not an evidently coercive method, *mianzi* exerts influence on individual behaviours through social evaluation and self-assessment and other factors, thereby prompting individuals to act in accordance with normative social values and goals (Zhang, 2009). Frequently, one's situation, status, reputation and behaviours are not only related to one's own "face", but also affect how others evaluate the community and relationship that one belongs to. Once one's face is lost, it is difficult to win it back. In Fei's case, for example, her and her sister's singlehood "shamed" their parents, particularly when the parents were socialising with their friends whose adult children had already married. Hence their parents chose to pressure their daughters to meet normative social expectations in order to save their own *mianzi*. For Fei, this pressure became an invisible but powerful mechanism, coercing her back into traditional gender norms, even though she had the economic means to make autonomous, non-normative choices.

Lucy told me the story of her friend Molly, which was the most extreme case of "*mianzi*" that I heard about in my fieldwork. It was not until the day before they were to apply for a marriage certificate that Molly's fiance confessed to Molly that he was previously married and divorced. Molly's trust in the man collapsed. She told her parents the truth and planned to break off the engagement. However, she did not get any support from her parents. Her mother persuaded her to marry as she had planned: "*The wedding date is decided, and the invitations have been sent out. If you two don't marry, relatives and friends will laugh at us!*" (Lucy). Marriage has historically been considered "a great event of one's life" (*zhongshen dashi*) in China, so wedding ceremonies, which include complicated procedures, are one of the most important rituals in Chinese people's lives. Zhang (2009) points out that a contemporary wedding is not only a ceremony for a couple, but also a platform for social interaction. Although Chinese marriages are mainly concerned with spouses and their families, the groups attending weddings gather a variety of social relationships, such as relatives, friends, colleagues and classmates of both family members. A wedding ceremony, where the most social network of the two families is gathered, is related to "*mianzi*". Each detail of a wedding, from wedding site decoration and red packets (*hongbao*) to invited guests and wedding banquets, could convey the financial strength, social identity and status of the couples and their families. As the ceremony holds such a significant social function, many Chinese would spend plenty of resources, money and time on it to make it impressive, grand, and luxurious. In this sense, if Molly had broken up with her finance and cancelled her wedding, she and her parents would have had to inform their relatives and friends one by one. The "ridiculous" experience that Molly was cheated on by her fiance would be known to all, which would tremendously hurt the *mianzi* of both her and her family members.

Protecting the *mianzi*/reputation of the whole family seems a very coercive and effective way to pressure young women to exercise gendered, filial norms. As a filial daughter who cared about her parents' *mianzi*, Fei was trying to marry early and well by persistently meeting men introduced by her parents and relatives; Molly finally

married the man whom she did not trust just in order to save her family's reputation. Clearly, their sacrifices avoided making their parents the object of others' ridicule. That young Chinese women protect their parents' face indicates that they care about their parents' emotional well-being, which is culturally predicated on upholding traditional social (including gender) norms. It is often considered an important way for the only-child generation to reciprocate their parents' investment and love, which, however, frequently comes along with the sacrifices of adult children's own interests, needs and happiness. Hence I often felt an emerging sense of burden evident in my participants' narratives when talking about their efforts to practise filial piety. Many of them sighed, looked stressed or even sobbed during the interviews because they were coerced to fulfil the expectations of their families and confined by the tensions between parental expectations and individual desires. By contrast, Ling Yi, whose experience, discussed below, was unusual among so many parent-daughter stories, did not seem to have such trouble, which invites further inqury into what distinguished her conditions from those of my other participants of a similar age and status.

The Mayan prediction that the world would end on 21 Dec. 2012 haunted many people that year, including Ling Yi's mother, a Buddhist and devotee of Confucian culture, who changed her daughter's fate in the same year. To achieve her ambition of studying abroad, Ling Yi had studied German and successfully secured an offer from a German university. However, to be with her precious only daughter in the apocalypse, Ling Yi's mother forced her daughter to drop out of university in her final academic year, and sent her to study Confucianism and Buddhism in a temple after the "doomsday" passed, which led to the daughter not getting her Bachelor's degree. The mother had also mobilised her friends, relatives and acquaintances to persuade Ling Yi not to study abroad. Mobilising the whole community seems to be another effective method to exert coercion, which is to overwhelm someone through constant persuasion and nagging from community members, who may be of different ages, identities and backgrounds.

Since Ling Yi dropped out, she had not worked and always studied in temples or Confucianism training classes across the country, in order to satisfy her mother's expectations. After a few years of study, Ling Yi became a devotee of Confucianism as her mother had expected, and was practising "filial piety" in her daily life. She emphasised many times in the interview that she wanted to be an obedient child so that she could make her parents happy: "*I'm very happy [to be parent-centred]*." When reflecting on her experience, Ling Yi claimed:

> She (my mother) wanted me to stay with her because she loved me too much! My mother is not that kind of parent who has a strong desire for control. She just cares about me too much! She just wants to make all the [life] roads paved for me.
>
> (Ling Yi, aged 29)

Honestly, the story of Ling Yi and her mother sounds suffocatingly pressured to me, although she stressed many times that her mother was not a "control freak". In Ling Yi's mind, a real "controlling" parent should be authoritarian, demanding the absolute compliance of children, while her mother, who sacrificed herself and always showed care and love for the daughter, was not a "control freak", though she had pushed a tremendous change into Ling Yi's life. In this situation, "love" and "care" seem to become a way for the mother to exert coercive power and control. So when Ling Yi found that I was trying to question her mother's controlling behaviours, she responded quickly and emphasised a few times that it was just because her mother loved her too much and that she fully understood and accepted such love. However, Ling Yi's reaction precisely indicates that she had internalised some coercive filial norms. Such proverbs as "There are no wrong/bad parents" (*tianxia meiyou bushi de fumu*) and "Whatever parents do, they do it for the good of their children!" (*bama doushi weile haizi*) have taken root in many Chinese people's hearts and lives, which constantly discipline Chinese people and influence parent-child relationships.

Additionally, Ling Yi's story also mirrors a situation that it is possible and effective for Chinese parents to intervene in or even control their children's lives in the name of "love" and "care". It appears that coercive control, a term created to describe a long-term power relation where men establish dominance over women through a series of frequent but covert controlling tactics (Stark, 2007), is similarly common in Chinese parent-daughter relationship. Given that the cultivation of only children is the main project of a family, Chinese parents conduct more invasive surveillance over their children's personal lives and choices (Liu, 2015). As emotional connections between parents and children tend to be increasingly close in present-day China (Croll, 2006; Deutsch, 2006), such surveillant and controlling actions are more likely to be wrapped up in narratives/discourses of care, love and attention.

The family is not just a place for love and intimacy, but also a space where coercion and violence over power relations exist. To make daughters conform to filial, gendered expectations, some Chinese parents make use of deeply entrenched cultural norms, such as *mianzi* and filial piety, to exert coercive control on them. For those daughters unable to fulfil parental and social expectations or trying to resist, strategies from explicit domestic violence to coercive and controlling tactics, mobilising not only family members but also the wider community, seem to be an effective way to make daughters "pay the price". In this situation, is there any space for young Chinese women of the One-Child generation to handle their relationships with their parents? What could young women do to negotiate autonomy and navigate the tension between individual desires and kinship? To what extent can we still argue that women of the One-Child generation have privileges and unprecedented opportunities to challenge cultural and gender norms in ways their mothers and grandmothers could not?

**Daughters in Struggle**

As previously presented, both children and parents are experiencing transforming family dynamics in contemporary China. Many young women of the One-Child

generation are torn between being obedient daughters and being themselves. However, this is not to say that there are no strategies for these young women to navigate such tensions. Many of them have made full use of individual resources and abilities to deal with it. I discovered that Chinese singleton daughters could acquire varying degrees of autonomy by consolidating their social identities and responsibilities as daughters, wives and mothers. In other words, financial ability, compliance and filiality could be instrumentalised as bargaining chips for young women to trade for empowerment. Women's struggle for empowerment and autonomy has been a long process of bargaining with patriarchy, which includes diverse forms of compromise, exchange of interests, resistance and so on (Kandiyoti, 1988). Based on my findings, I argue that it is possible for young Chinese women to manipulate norms within their families so that they could find agency and be empowered in unexpected ways. In other words, even though my participants' generation continues to struggle against gendered oppression and coercive social tactics that simply take new forms in contemporary China, they are not passive victims: they are active and knowing participants in this system. And many of them find ways to navigate it deftly to their advantage.

*Exercising Agency in Filial Piety*

> When you have a certain amount of income, money is the best weapon, which is to shut them up. At every festival, you buy something for your parents, and then your parents will brag that "my daughter gave me a red packet containing 2000 CNY during the festival!" Other people will also be envious.
>
> (Tao, aged 33)

A red packet (*hongbao*) containing cash, an important form of gift in the Chinese context, is generally exchanged on birthdays, at weddings and on important Chinese festivals such as New Year, symbolising good luck and well-wishing (Jackson and Ho, 2020). Tao had been pampered since childhood, always lived with her parents and

lacked basic living skills, which worried her parents, who sometimes hoped their singleton daughter would marry in order to have someone to take good care of her. When I interviewed her, Tao worked as a teacher in an educational company. As she had worked well and had a good income, her parents were proud of her. Through giving them cash and gifts regularly, Tao, who firmly resisted marriage and childbearing, managed to make her parents support her decision to remain single. Sometimes, her open-minded parents even helped her share some social pressure to marry, such as by changing the topic of conversation when her marriage situation was questioned by relatives.

> Her (my mother's) first trip abroad was to the Philippines where I worked. I thought I should take my family abroad for a visit and make her (my mother) experience a different culture. And she was like "Wow, (people) could live like this!" When I was doing a Master's degree, she also went to the UK. She thought the UK was much more different and the ways of living there varied from person to person.
>
> (Lulu, aged 29)

Lulu was pursuing her PhD degree and cohabiting with her British boyfriend in the UK when I interviewed her. As a filial daughter, she often took her mother on overseas holidays while she worked and studied abroad. A daughter taking her mother on trips is one way of showing closeness and companionship (Jackson and Ho, 2020), which is a further expression of care towards the mother's emotional well-being. Lulu's mother used to hope that Lulu would marry a successful man early, but partly due to these inspiring trips, the mother's opinions on life and marriage unexpectedly changed, and she began to support Lulu's life choices.

Jackson and Ho (2020) present a few ways that Hong Kong daughters handle intimate practices to maintain good relationships with mothers, including companionship, reciprocal practical support and gift-giving. Based on a similar cultural context,

Chinese women also employed such methods of being "filial" daughters. Both Tao's practice of cash giving and Lulu's practice of companionship are displays of filial piety and closeness, which means showing affection and care, and "giving face" (*gei mianzi*) to elders, a way to make the elders proud, thus contributing to their emotional well-being (Jackson and Liu, 2017; Jackson and Ho, 2020). For singleton daughters, the practice of filial piety is not only a form of repaying, reciprocating and appreciating parents but also a type of "currency" that they can use to "purchase" power, comfort, and parental support for their individual goals. In the above example, we can see Lulu's understanding of these processes as she pre-emptively manoeuvred her mother's normative expectations in order to surreptitiously bring her mother around to Lulu's non-normative choices.

*Compliance with Gendered Duties*

When I interviewed Anna, she was engaged to her boyfriend and planned to marry within the year 2020. Despite being unmarried, she had already been struggling with the question of when to have a child. Anna claimed that she did not like children at all, but she predicted that her parents, parents-in-law and relatives would undoubtedly pressure her to give birth after her marriage.

> Anna: If I tell them that I don't want to give birth, it is predictable that they would take turns to persuade me. So I have to have a child to resolve this problem and hand over this "historical mission" (*lishi renwu*)...His parents even want us to have a second child!
>
> Yue: Will you compromise if they ask you to have a second child?
>
> Anna: I will compromise to have only one child because I predict that if I insist on not having children, not only the four parents, but also my other relatives will definitely take turns to "bomb" (*hongzha*) me. To avoid such trouble, it's

> better to have one. Just have one and get over with the matter. So I am thinking if I should give birth earlier or later because it's all about getting the job done anyway.

*Hongzha* literally means “bomb attack”. Although Anna did not pinpoint the specific tactics that her parents and relatives may use to pressure her to have children, the metaphorical word “bomb” she used indicates that these tactics could be coercive and distressing. To free herself from such a situation, Anna takes “reproduction” seriously as a “historical mission”. In the Chinese context, “historical mission”, which refers to certain major tasks and significant responsibilities, is often used in political propaganda. For a traditional Chinese family, procreation is compulsory in order to continue the family line; for a nation, procreation is mobilised for the reproduction of the labour force. In each dimension, this metaphor is ingenious and subtle, underlining the significance of women’s fertility for both the family and the nation. For most of my participants, expectations and experiences of childbirth are inseparable from the fulfilment of family responsibility. Many of them cared much about the emotional well-being of their parents and claimed that they did not want to disappoint their parents, although some were not interested in childbirth. By comparison, Anna prioritised her individual emotions, feelings and motivations. Her final reproductive decision did not aim to satisfy reciprocal obligations or practise filial piety, but was a bargaining chip for Anna to trade for more individual autonomy and freedom. This was even more obviously represented through the following exchange:

> Yue: Have you thought about what you’re going to face after you give birth?

> Anna: I think this (childbearing and child-rearing) will bring lots of unhappiness in my life, so before the marriage, I need to discuss this with the [four] parents on who is going to take care of the child. My partner must take the main responsibility! Don’t bother me!

Anna hoped for a situation in which, once she had completed the "historical mission" (giving birth to a child), she would not have to take on any other childrearing responsibility and could spend her life away from non-stop nagging, intergenerational conflicts, parental interventions or any other coercive control by the elders. Another participant, Ya'nan, who was pessimistic about marriage, experienced tremendous pressure to marry from her mother. To relieve such pressure and stop her mother's nagging, she conceded that she would eventually marry. Different to some other participants, who sacrificed their interests to protect their parents' emotional well-being, regarding her compromise, Ya'nan claimed: "*This is not filial piety. It's a cop-out. It's like 'Stop making trouble! Stop making trouble! I'll marry to show you, Okay?*"

The stories of both Anna and Ya'nan reflect how some young women refuse to sacrifice themselves too much for their families; and if a woman does appear to be playing along with social norms and performing filial duties, this can sometimes represent a strategy of bargaining for autonomy, rather than merely complying with gendered duty. In her research on women in Taiwan five decades ago, Margery Wolf discovered that by reproducing children, especially sons, a woman "was able not only to claim a place of public legitimacy in her husband's ancestral line, but could also acquire an authority in decisions concerning, for example, the allocation of family property" (cited in Evans, 2008, p.188). In other words, a woman could empower herself through the creation of her own "uterine family" (Wolf, 1972). In these participants' cases, their wishes to be masters of their own fates could be achieved through fulfilling their social identities as wives and mothers. Through pre-empting and manipulating gendered and social norms, they were able to take control and exercise agency in their own lives.

*Geographical Mobility*

> Honestly, the most pressure on me is not from my parents but from other kin relationships, such as my aunts (*gugu*), uncles (*shushu*) and grandmother (*nainai*), who have pressured me very much... One of the significant reasons I want to stay in Beijing is that I want to get away from the complicated relationships at home, where my family interfere in anything I am doing.
>
> (Fang, aged 30)

Fang, who graduated from a prestigious university and lived in Beijing, came from a disadvantaged family in Northeast China. Due to the imbalanced economic development between urban and rural areas, many parents from rural China make every effort to "support their children in leaving the village and migrating to the cities, hoping that this will secure better life chances for their children and even the whole family" (Zheng and Ho, 2017, p.457). When Fang's parents expected their only daughter to secure a better livelihood through "marrying up" to a rich urban man, Fang was in a relationship with a man from a rural, divorced family, which caused strong dissatisfaction and criticism from her family. Her elder female cousin had married a well-off man a few years ago, which was in stark contrast to her current relationship: "*ever since my cousin married a rich man, my family thinks I should follow her example and marry a rich man so that I don't have to worry about anything*" (Fang). Although population migration leads to contemporary Chinese people visiting kin less frequently, "kinship sentiments and obligations remain strong" (Jankowiak, 2009, p.82). Jankowiak had researched 75 urban families in Hohhot, the capital city of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region, and summarised two features of kinship and family relatedness among contemporary Hohhotians:

> a network of mutual help established bilaterally between households in relationships of mutual help; and the remnant of a patrilineal descent ideology that has force in symbolic arrangements, social orderings and material gifts at ritual events (funerals, marriages, family photographs).
>
> (p.80)

In Fang's case, her relatives lived close, often visited each other, and gathered to celebrate important festivals and events. Such close extended family ties often resulted in Fang's private life being pried into and her personal choices being intervened in, as her relatives usually felt a strong sense of responsibility for providing guidance for the younger generation of their big family. Simultaneously, Fang was under peer pressure, since her academic performance, salary, career prospects, mate selection and other personal situations were always compared with those of her cousins by her relatives. However, Fang found it difficult to deal with such situations. As a junior in the family, despite often being coerced by relatives, it was considered impolite or even unfilial for Fang to contradict or resist the elders, particularly when they pressured her "for the good of the younger generation". To keep far away from her natal family, she settled down in Beijing. The distance of more than a thousand kilometres between Beijing and her hometown had freed Fang from practical sanctions and the nagging of her family, so her parents and relatives had stopped expressing their disapproval about her relationship when I interviewed Fang.

Likewise, Chang was freer to make decisions by herself without asking for her parents' approval when she was at university in a city away from her hometown. Her biggest wish was to complete her Master's degree and move to a city that is very far away from her natal family, so that she would no longer be surveilled and controlled by her parents. Although the freedom for unmarried women "to move out of their parents" home before marriage or to relocate to another city is relatively restricted" in China (Kam, 2012, p.61), education and career provide many more opportunities for young women, rural women in particular, to travel far from their natal families. However, the premise of such geographic mobility is that the daughters who migrate to urban areas could bring economic benefits to their natal family or even contribute to class mobility. I am not sure their situations would have been different if they had not secured a decent job in big cities or did not have promising career prospects. In this

sense, the argument that One-Child generation urban daughters do wield more privileges than their foremothers, by virtue of their greater access to education and financial independence, seems to hold more weight than in previous examples.

*Concealment and Disclosure*

Some participants attempted to conceal facts from their parents, which becomes a more successful strategy of gaining autonomy when they are away from natal families. Zilu, aged 27, who was born in Shanghai, settled in Toronto, Canada. She identified herself as a bisexual woman and had a girlfriend when she was pursuing a Master's degree in London. She broke up with her girlfriend after graduation and went to Canada. Zilu had a couple of sexual partners there and was in a long-term and stable sexual relationship with a man when I interviewed her. However, her parents, who were based in Shanghai, knew little about her romantic relationships. For one reason, it was difficult for her parents to keep an eye on every move of hers due to the over 10 thousand kilometres' geographical distance between them; for another reason, Zilu tried to conceal individual affairs and relationships from her parents.

> They don't really know about my dating experiences. They don't know that I had been in a relationship with a girl. I haven't told them about it...Although I didn't tell them [about my sexuality], I have a lot of gay friends. So my mother kept telling me "I know you have many [gay] friends. I can't regulate (*guan*) others but I don't want you to be [gay]." But I had a girlfriend (laughs). Although we broke up, I guess that my mother sort of knew it. After I broke up [with her], I went to Canada. They don't really know what I have done in Canada. They only know that I met some people but don't know that I had sex with them...It is unnecessary to let them know. Actually, I want to tell my parents about everything but are they okay with that? If you (they) are, I could tell you (them). But if not, it's unnecessary.
>
> (Zilu, aged 27)

Although Zilu hid her sexuality and romantic relationships from her mother, she was not someone who rarely talked to her parents. Instead, she had video calls with her mother every two weeks, and had a close communicative bond with her. In a similar vein, Chun managed to negotiate a comfortable private space for herself through communication with her parents:

> I drew a very clear line with them (my parents), which is don't ask too much and don't try to pry into my romantic relationships. I would let them know my thoughts in advance and show a determined attitude every time. But of course, the premise is that I would tell them I am actually dating someone, and I hope to have more options. So I won't refuse these options. However, I won't make a decision randomly. So I don't want them to be too involved (in the mate selection).

Like Zilu, Chun was also a daughter who liked to share her thoughts with her parents; but at the same time, she would not let her parents know every detail of her life. Evans (2008) researched the experience of mother-daughter relationships among urban women born between the 1950s and 1980s and discovered that "communication" (*goutong*) has become an increasingly popular practice for post-1980s young women and their mothers to boost intergenerational intimacy. "*Goutong* provided an avenue for exploring feelings and articulations of sameness and difference, identification and recognition, as well as connectedness, separateness, and autonomy" (Evans, 2008, p.98). However, *goutong* does not mean the disclosure of all of one's secrets; how to communicate effectively is a skill. The cases of Zilu and Chun indicate that communication and concealment are not contradictory. Rather, that daughters withhold some secrets is conducive to good intergenerational communication and intimacy, since they selectively communicated with parents, and avoided and concealed the topics that would cause any inter-generational disputes. In Zilu's case, whether her "non-normative/queer" sexuality or her sexual relationships with multiple

men, it did not seem like a topic that she could discuss with her parents, who grew up in a relatively conservative environment. Therefore, keeping quiet about her own dating relationships seemed to her a much better approach to the parent-daughter relationship, compared to having to navigate the "difficultly" of being open with her parents.

In this vein, disclosing individual thoughts to and sharing one's personal life with parents regularly is an effective way to "purchase autonomy". In Chun's case, she often shared her dating stories with her parents, which greatly gained her parents' trust, although she did not fully disclose all the details of her relationships. Communication with parents does help to increase mutual understanding and strengthen the intimacy between the generations. This can satisfy the emotional demands of parents, who emotionally depend on their one-and-only daughters. Hence such communication and self-disclosure is to exercise filial piety to a large degree, but strategically so. In the face of the daughters who communicate a lot but may keep some secrets, parents may "assume that their daughters are behaving 'respectably', occasionally turning a blind eye to what daughters actually do" (Zavoretti, 2017, p.134), which leaves space for young women to exercise agency and autonomy while maintaining filial bonds.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the transforming power dynamics within contemporary Chinese families. Rather than concluding briefly that power shifts from parents to children in post-reform Chinese families, I argue that the intergenerational power relations in contemporary China is fluid, dynamic and variational, and tremendously influenced by neoliberalism and state power. Despite bearing tremendous pressure to be filial daughters, many adult daughters were able to navigate the power tension between individual desires and parental expectations. Through a series of strategies, such as the fulfilment of filial and gendered responsibilities, young women manage to

bargain with their parents for more autonomy. As Kandiyoti (1988, p.274) states, "Different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct 'rules of the game' and call for different strategies to maximise security and optimise life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression".

It is noteworthy that all the participants who actively negotiate autonomy with parents are only daughters who have received abundant parental investment into their education and careers, so they have considerable financial resources or have promising career prospects: all of them have at least a Bachelor's degree; the majority are currently or used to be PhD students in top universities, white-collar staff in influential companies and work units (*danwei*), or teachers in international schools or universities. Their economic situations and career prospects give them sufficient confidence and solid material foundations through which to bargain with natal families. As Muqing said, "*No matter what, my parents can't sanction me financially. It's very important to be financially independent, otherwise, you can't deal with anyone!*"

However, economic power alone is not sufficient for only daughters to get autonomy. Young women have to employ different strategies in exchange for agency in a world that is far from free from cultural and gender norms. Anna had to agree to have children against her own wishes; Lulu and Tao had to perform filial piety to make their parents happy and proud; Chang and Fang had to move far away from their hometowns so that they could escape from their family members' coercive control, while Chun and Zilu had to maintain a good relationship with their parents through strategic and effective communication-and-concealment tactics. As the emotional ties between parents and only daughters are unprecedentedly close (Croll, 2006; Deutsch, 2006), only daughters take new forms of filial responsibility and care for their parents' emotional well-being. In most cases, they need to serve their roles as filial daughters, responsible wives and sacrificing mothers to exchange for some autonomous powers, such as decision-making power in areas of their lives that have traditionally been

dominated by men and elders. To this extent, good income, promising career status, the exercise of filial piety, and compliance to gendered duties sometimes could become these young Chinese women's capital to exchange for more autonomy. My participants' experiences of striving for autonomy indicate how norms can paradoxically empower women in some cases. Thus young Chinese women are able to construct and assert a free and empowered "self" to the greatest extent within the narrow intergenerational space through playing with patriarchal norms.

# Chapter 6: *"Hitting Is a Sign of Affection, Scolding Is a Sign of Love"*: Coercive Control with Chinese Characteristics

## Introduction

On 12 December 2019, *Southern Weekly* published an article titled "'Chilling Love': Chat Records of a Suicide Peking University Girl", which reported that Bao Li, a third-year undergraduate female student at Peking University, committed suicide in October 2019 after having been abused by her boyfriend Mu Lihan for a long time. The article presented in detail the dating history of Bao and Mu and disclosed their chat records on WeChat, provided by Bao's mother. Mu abused Bao through tactics like humiliation, gaslighting and psychological manipulation on the pretext that Bao was not a virgin, which eventually led to Bao's suicide. This incident became a hot topic in mainland China from late 2019 to early 2020, which unprecedentedly drew public attention to intimate partner violence (IPV) and "PUA" (pick-up artist) culture.

The existing public discussion of the case mainly focuses on the specific PUA tactics that Mu used to manipulate the victim; some touch on the topic of IPV but fail to theorise the specific forms of violence that Bao had experienced. Only one recent academic article first points out that the abuse that Bao Li had experienced could be defined as "coercive control" (Wu, 2020), a term more widely used in western academia and anti-domestic violence movements. However, the author does not elucidate "coercive control" in the Chinese dating context, and this term remains under-researched in Chinese academia. Through my interviews with 30 young Chinese women, I noticed that although my participants did not use this exact phrase, coercive controlling violence does not exist exclusively in western intimate relationships, but it is prevalent in Chinese intimacies as well. Coercive controlling violence is localised and referred to as "PUA" in China. Only a small number of women in my interviews clearly declared that they had experienced IPV (eg.

PUA/coercive control), but many of my participants had discussed PUA. As some cases related to PUA gradually come into public view through mass media, many young women have begun to reflect on and pay attention to the power interplay and covert gender-based violence in their dating relationships and those around them. Discussions and discourses related to the PUA phenomenon are gradually becoming popular among the young public. However, the lack of shared vocabulary and cultural definitions of coercive controlling violence in China affected my ability to both interview my participants about this and to close-read the interview data. Although some participants had mentioned the term "PUA" to interpret their abusive relationships, I was aware that "PUA" had neither been explicitly defined nor evaluated in Chinese academia and legislation.

This chapter is written based on media discourse about PUA culture, particularly around the Bao Li case, and seven of my participants' narratives and stories of experiencing IPV, including PUA/coercive control in their romantic relationships. It aims to present and explore the varied manifestations of "coercive control" in the Chinese context, a type of IPV that has not yet been defined, categorised or taken seriously in either Chinese legislation or dating culture. I will look at the power dynamics in coercive intimate relationships, exploring the ways in which invisible violence can manifest in young Chinese women's relationships and the varied vocabularies and cultural concepts they use in order to make sense of and communicate their experiences. I discuss the following questions in the chapter: How is coercive control presented in the Chinese dating context? How do political tools and cultural capital in China make women vulnerable to IPV, including coercive controlling violence? Based on the coercive cultural and political environment, how could/do young Chinese women regain autonomy and handle IPV in their romantic relationships, particularly when experiencing coercive control? Based on my interview data, I discovered that "PUA" (pick-up artist) culture is a form of coercive control in the Chinese context, the controlling tactics associated with which share many similarities with those of coercive control in western contexts but are often

presented with certain Chinese characteristics. Based on this, I further argue that "PUA" culture, as a form of coercive controlling violence in the Chinese context, is normalised and legitimised culturally, politically, and institutionally in post-socialist China. My interviews indicated that young Chinese women could regain autonomy and free themselves from toxic relationships through migration, self-reflections on love and power, and even violent retaliations against their abusers, which also indicates some peculiar advantages of privilege for China's One-Child generation.

**Localising Coercive Control in China: Manifestations and "PUA" Culture**

In my interviews, several of my participants recalled their experiences of being abused and violently treated in romantic relationships. Recalling such stories made them angry, emotional and distressed. Before I went to the field, I had anticipated that reopening their wounds could be a painful experience for them. In order to afford them sufficient respect and agency, I used a vignette, expecting that this apporach would enable them to choose whether to voluntarily discuss their past painful experiences. I created a fictional scenario: "Lili has a very controlling boyfriend who always tries to control her every move. She wants to break up, but he always rejects doing so. If she comes to you for help, what suggestions would you provide for her?" This vignette works very well. Many participants discussed IPV and some hot news, such as Bao Li case, based on this story; some women, however, voluntarily told me that they had experienced a similar abusive relationship as Lili. For example, when I told Fei about Lili's story, she shared her experience with me.

> His home is in the city where our university is located. I was only allowed to study and eat with my roommates when he went back home. Otherwise, I must always stay with him except go back to my dormitory for sleep…Once he said he planned to go home, so I rushed back to my dorm to tell my roommates joyfully: "let's go shopping!" When we were ready to go, he told me he wasn't going home and asked me to keep him company. I cursed him in my mind

> "What the fuck!" What I did at that time was to tell my roommates "I'm leaving [to meet my boyfriend]." But I don't know why I did like that. Now I recalled it, I only had the three words ["What the fuck!"].
>
> (Fei, aged 28)

I felt very stressed when I listened to this story and put myself in Fei's shoes. I could not imagine myself being forced to spend every single day with the same person. However, Fei had been negotiating this experience for nearly three years. She had suffered very much in this relationship due to her controlling ex-boyfriend, who had managed to dominate every aspect, however mundane, of her daily life and interpersonal relationships. Despite there being no explicit academic explanations of what Fei had experienced in Chinese intimate contexts, some western scholars who have done research on some similar experiences in intimacies have defined them as "coercive control" (Stark, 2007).

Stark (2007) in particular presents coercive control as gender-based violence. Although men could also be the victims of coercive control, they largely assume the role of abusers in Stark's research, since the exercise of coercive power is heavily dependent on the mobilisation of gender inequalities. In this sense, "coercive control" is defined by Stark as a long-term power relation where men establish dominance over women through a series of frequent but covert controlling tactics, such as humiliation, isolation, gaslighting, intimidation, economic abuse, and regulating and micromanaging a woman's everyday life. In Fei's case, "isolation" was one of the controlling tactics used by the perpetrator. His need for Fei to always be near him greatly restricted her mobility and further had her isolated from her social networks. Stark (2007) points out the importance of social networks, which could be safety zones for victims to get help and autonomy, and plan resistance strategies. Although it is difficult to determine if Fei's partner deliberately or strategically derogated her interpersonal relationships, particularly her friendships, it is a fact that he managed to take Fei away from her social networks and have her every move under his watch and

control.

> He was a very handsome, capable person in our university. The most important is he was the leader of the university debate team and very eloquent. Every time we argued, he would pull me aside and say "Well, let's tease out the logic." Every time it turned out that I was wrong, and he was right. He had never [admitted his mistakes] but just tried to convince me through his first, second, third, fourth, fifth point...Anyway, I was always wrong.
>
> (Fei, aged 28)

When I heard the words "*Well, let's tease out the logic!*", a pushy and arrogant male image who attempted to present himself as unchallengeable and authoritative popped into my mind. Always denying Fei's understanding and only highlighting his "logical" and "convincing" points, Fei's ex-boyfriend aimed to make her feel irrational and obedient to him. This process is theorised as "gaslighting", which is "a type of psychological abuse aimed at making victims seem or feel 'crazy' [and] creating a 'surreal' interpersonal environment" through "mind-manipulating strategies" (Sweet, 2019, p.851). This mind-manipulative strategy used by Fei's boyfriend is culturally entrenched in the misogynistic assertion that men are rational and able to control their emotions, whereas women are irrational and overly emotional (Sweet, 2019). In the Chinese context, sexism is often presented through people's perceptions, actions, and language in everyday life, such as the widely used proverb "long hair, short wit" (*toufa chang, jianshi duan*). "Long hair" here exclusively refers to women. This proverb has long been used to culturally entrench and perpetuate the idea that women are "ignorant", "unlearned" and "narrow-minded", as ordinary Chinese women had not been allowed or not had opportunities to receive an education until the 1950s, when the PRC government launched an anti-illiteracy campaign, which reached rural areas, in order to improve the public's education level nationwide (Zheng, 2016).

Despite progress in women's education, gender stereotypes continue to impact on

contemporary China. Gender differences in mathematics performance in early school years are non-existent in China (Liu, 2018, p.524), and the average academic performance of girls was even better than that of boys in both the Senior High School Entrance Examination *(zhongkao)* and the College Entrance Examination *(gaokao)* according to the research on the academic performance of the students in 100 high schools of a southern developed city in 2010 (Mouganie, and Wang, 2020). However, women, who are still stereotyped as less smart or with weaker logical thinking than their male counterparts in both academic areas and workplaces, have been constantly underrepresented in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields (Liu, 2018). Stereotype threat theory argues that "widely shared cultural beliefs in the superiority of one group over another create a psychological threat that directly disadvantages the individuals experiencing discrimination" (Liu, 2018, p.524).

In Fei's experience, her boyfriend's manipulative tactic was based on the stereotypical cultural belief that women are more emotional and less rational than men. Additionally, Fei had mentioned more than once how socially outstanding her ex-boyfriend was and how ordinary she had felt when they were in a relationship: "*He was one of the most popular and influential students in our university…I felt that I was not very good-looking, and I was not good enough for him*" (Fei). Sweet (2019) states that abusers fabricate stories to violate victims' sense of reality and distort their perception of everything, from the minutiae of everyday life to their partners' entire biographies. The boyfriend's impressive performance on campus dramatically distorted how Fei perceived him and reinforced her insecurity in the relationship. So, when he tried to brainwash her through some purportedly "convincing" and "logical" reasons, Fei found it difficult to reflect on or challenge his manipulative tactics, and fell into the trap that the man had created for her based on the entrenched gender stereotypes. .

Fei was not an exception. Ai Ai had been in a relationship with a short-tempered, controlling man, who picked at her life habits, dress, hairstyle, and housework quality,

always trying to change her. Based on Stark's research on battered women's stories, he discovers that micromanaging how women perform their genders in everyday life is another typical tactic of coercive control. Male perpetrators often challenge victims' feminine self-presentation and require them to perform a particular type of femininity by criticising their appearance, cleaning, mothering, and caring skills (Stark, 2007; Anderson, 2009). In Stark's research, many male abusers managed to establish their control over women in this way. In Ai Ai's case, when the man found that she had not adopted his suggestions on how to dress or do household chores, he became angry and humiliated her: "*I've never seen a woman [so messy] like you!*" This humiliation did have worked for a period. Ai Ai did not give up changing herself and pandering to her boyfriend's needs after being criticised for not fitting into the stereotypical femininity, until she could not bear his bad temper any longer.

Both Fei and Ai Ai, who eventually escaped from their abusive relationships, were lucky to survive coercive control. However, Bao Li, the Peking University student who died after prolonged exposure to coercive control, lost her agency in dealing with IPV, largely because her boyfriend Mu Linhan persistently manipulated gendered and cultural norms to degrade her femininity, womanhood and confidence. After finding out that Bao had had her first sexual experience with her ex-boyfriend, Mu blamed her for not being a virgin: "*For a girl, the second sex experience is meaningless...I don't want anyone to touch my girl, regardless of the past, the future or the present...How can my life be so terrible! I never even got a complete girl!*" (Southern Weekly, 2019). Besides suffering from Mu's frequent critiques of her past "disrespectable" act, Bao was often forced by Mu to describe the sexual details with her ex-boyfriend, which was followed by more overwhelming humiliation each time. Although much medical research has demonstrated that only about two-thirds of women will bleed when the hymen is broken, women's bleeding in their first experience of sex and an unbroken hymen is often deemed as proof of their virginity, chastity and purity (Wang, 2017). The proverb "starving to death is less urgent than losing chastity" (*e si shi xiao, shijie shi da*), which means there is nothing worse than

losing one's chastity/moral integrity, implies the great importance that Chinese people have attached to chastity. This proverb was first put forward by Cheng Yi, one of the founders of Neo-Confucianism in Song Dynasty (Huang and Zhang, 2008), and then developed further by Zhu Xi, another influential scholar of Neo-Confucianism. Cheng originally argued that one should not compromise their moral integrity in order to survive. He further exemplified that it is an act of "losing chastity" for a man to marry a widow, and for a widowed woman to remarry; even if one dies in poverty, one cannot afford to lose their chastity (Huang and Zhang, 2008). Although the proverb was originally intended to regulate both men's and women's "unchaste" behaviours, it has been most frequently used to regulate women's virginity since the Ming and Qing Dynasty (Huang and Zhang, 2008).

In contemporary China, this norm takes the form of the "female virginity complex" (*chunü qingjie*), which describes "how people's 'fetishisation of female virginity' remains strong for both men and women" (Wang, 2017, p.145). Although premarital sex is increasingly practised among young Chinese people, female virginity is still an important criterion in men's dating and marriage selection; a woman, like Bao Li, who failed to "protect" her virginity will be degraded as valueless, "easy", and a "slut" (Wang, 2017), and will be vulnerable to harassment from her boyfriend or husband for being "unchaste". Some male participants in Wang Xiying's research claim that women's virginity was an important criterion for them to establish relationships, since virginity is a sign of a woman's value (Wang, 2017). Some of my participants criticised that some men and their parents may reduce the bride price if their girlfriends have cohabited with them. In other words, those women who lose their "virginity" before marriage will risk being "devalued". By contrast, virgin women appear to be more empowered in courtships. According to Xiao's (1989) research, women's resistance to premarital sex could increase their cultural capital, which further increases their decisive power in courtships. Such power soon declines or disappears the moment they lose their virginity. Bao Li's case suggests that the cultural notion of "women's virginity" is likely to be instrumentalised by male

abusers, who could exercise coercive control over women through mobilising this gendered concept.

According to some information disclosed by *Southern Weekly* (2019), a friend of Bao's claimed that Bao's personality "dramatically changed" within only about one year; she changed from an optimistic and independent university student to a "little woman" (*xiao nüren*) who felt guilty and ashamed of being a non-virgin. Based on the influential cultural belief of the "female virginity complex", Mu managed to manipulate Bao through degradation, humiliation and slut-shaming. In other words, these tactics are effective for some male perpetrators to exert coercive control over women in a cultural context where gender inequalities, stereotypes and norms are still entrenched and widely practised. Although Bao had attempted to challenge Mu's views on virginity at the very beginning, her mind was changed gradually as Mu constantly humiliated and degraded her: "*he said all men will mind if [their girlfriends] are not virgins. The more they love you, the more they mind. He told me he loves me much, and I was convinced by him*" (Southern Weekly, 2019). The tactics of shaming and humiliation can result in a woman losing her ability to affirm her femininity and evaluate herself properly, thereby having to heavily depend on the feedback of others; hence the damaging effects of humiliation on women from their male partners will be magnified further (Stark, 2007).

Regarding my participants and Bao Li's experiences of being coercively abused, "PUA" is a term more frequently used in the discussion of these stories. PUAs originated from the US, referring to "men - overwhelmingly straight and cis - whose 'art' is picking up women" (White, 2019, p.58); PUA, which has been popular in American nightclubs since the 1970s, is an emotional manipulation technique used by men to quickly attract and seduce women into having one-night stands (Liu, 2021). In 1977, Eric Weber published a book titled *How to Pick Up Girls*, which was seen as the first "textbook" teaching pick-up tactics (Liu, 2021). In the early 21st century, when China's reform and opening-up were further developed, some Chinese students

overseas translated a series of articles and books about western PUA culture, which facilitated its development and popularisation in China (Liu, 2021; Guo and Yin, 2021). The earliest known online PUA platform was established in 2007. "Demon Consultant" (*Mogui Zixunshi*) founded the "Pickup" (*Dashan*) group on *Douban*, a social networking service website for information sharing. Subsequently, there emerged an increasing number of "tutors", who presented themselves as skilled at picking up women, organising both offline and online courses to teach PUA culture. As PUA thrives in China, many men treat it as a "love bible", because it teaches single young men the specific techniques of dressing themselves up, fabricating themselves as well-off/middle-class men with good taste, and approaching and socialising with women, which helps them find girlfriends or have one-night stands.

With more companies, platforms and websites providing similar PUA training services, some Chinese PUA classes have formed more effective and efficient "pick-up" guides, including a series of detailed verbal tricks and manipulation strategies, in order to recruit more students, gain more market share and maximise profits (Zhang, 2020). However, these techniques are devastating at the same time. For example, the "Five-step Trap" is an infamous strategy, including "curiosity", "exploration", "fascination", "destruction", and "emotional abuse" (Gong and Yu, 2020; Zhang, 2020). In the first step of "Curiosity", a PUA will set himself up as a president of a company, a poet, a prodigy or other such characters, disguise himself, and make up stories according to different "character settings" in order to arouse the targeted women's curiosity about and interest in him. The second step is "exploration", which means that after attracting the targeted women's curiosity, a PUA will try to show his weakness or miserable experiences to win women's sympathy. Following that, he will fascinate women with the illusion that they can heal his wounds, which is the third step: "fascination". In the fourth step, a PUA will try to reject the women and make them doubt themselves and feel guilty. After the first four steps, the victims will feel emotionally dependent on the PUA very much, so they become vulnerable to various forms of coercion and abuse. In the final step, many

women are easier to be defrauded of money; some self-harm or even commit suicide after being encouraged by PUAs. During this period, victims are under the control of PUAs and lose their agency or capacity to reflect on their relationships. A man who manages to make a woman commit suicide or self-harm is seen as having male power and masculine charm (Xia and Chen, 2022, p.139). The aim of PUAs is to "manipulate and commerciali[s]e women's bodies, feelings and sexuality, as simple objects of male desire, potency and success" (Guo and Yin, 2021, p.609). "[W]ealthy and politically influential men are able to trade their assets for unmarried young women's youthful beauty" (Guo and Yin, 2021, p.614) in neoliberal China, which becomes a key reason for male PUAs to fabricate themselves as middle-class elites to seduce young beautiful women. For women, however, PUA culture is explicitly and intentionally abusive, which objectifies women and causes them to get cheated and harmed.

The term "PUA" further came into public view since a series of incidents of IPV were reported, especially the "Bao Li incident" in 2019. The tactics that the perpetrator Mu had used to control Bao were widely discussed. Many articles demonstrated in detail that these tactics are very similar to those taught in specialised PUA courses; some bloggers and online influencers whose targeted audiences are women specifically wrote articles to analyse PUA culture and reveal its rationale and controlling tactics. For example, the WeChat public account "*Ta Kan*/Her Publication" published an online article titled "I hope all girls could read this article seriously after Bao Li's suicide" (Yiren, 2019), which analyses the PUA tactics that Mu had used to control Bao. This article got more than 100,000 views. The public account on WeChat "Wandering in Love" (*Langji Qinggan*), which was an online platform teaching PUA culture, gained over ten thousand followers within half a day on 13 December 2019 − the day after Bao's case was first reported − and received numerous comments. Many women posted screenshots of *Langji Qinggan* in their WeChat Moments and commented "Do not follow me if you follow this account!" After gaining hundreds of thousands of followers, Langji Qinggan was blocked by the WeChat official platform

on the same day (North American International Students Daily, 2019). Soon, the Chinese government stepped up a crackdown on PUA platforms and courses in response to the tragedy of Bao Li.

Since a series of incidents of IPV were reported, especially the "Bao Li incident" in 2019, young women were becoming increasingly wary of a variety of manipulative tricks, reflecting on whether they have experienced any gaslighting, or psychological and emotional abuse in their intimate relationships. In the comment area of the article "I hope all girls could read this article seriously after Bao Li's suicide", many women wrote down their own or their female friends' stories about experiencing PUA culture, summarised methods to identify PUA in intimacies, and encouraged each other to get out of toxic relationships. For instance, one of the top comments reads: "*My best female friend had experienced PUA culture. It should be known by more girls and women. Love ourselves and get away from such relationships to avoid tragedies!*" Although young women are not the target audience/consumers of PUA culture, they are the primary potential victims of it. Some serious, shocking gender-based violence within intimate relationships, such as the Bao Li incident, have made PUA notorious among the Chinese public, particularly among young women.

As "PUA" has become increasingly known among young Chinese people since the Bao Li incident, its meaning has gradually evolved and expanded. PUA has become an expression and a concept in Chinese culture to connote coercive controlling abuse, and some of my participants used the term in this way. When Fei stated that "*I think my previous relationship was somewhat related to PUA*", she tried to reflect on what had made her uncomfortable in the relationship, rather than focusing on whether her ex-boyfriend had been trained in PUA culture systematically. She questioned how the man suppressed and controlled her and how bad she had felt in the relationship. This situation is often echoed in many young Chinese women's reflections on or narratives about their intimate relationships on social media, which indicates that many young women are starting to focus on the violence that seems "subtle", "minor" and easily

ignored in intimacies since PUA culture has become publicly known. Therefore, I argue that "PUA" now is not limited to its original context, where men fabricate themselves as middle-class elites to seduce beautiful young women through specific strategies (Guo and Yin, 2021), but it is also widely used in situations where one experiences a diversity of coercive controlling violence in intimacies, such as gaslighting, psychological, mental and emotional abuse, whether or not these violent acts are premeditated or strategically planned by perpetrators. Some PUA tactics are very similar to "coercive control" strategies. Gaslighting, humiliation and mind-manipulation, which appear frequently in coercive control, are also often used by Chinese PUAs. Besides, PUA culture and coercive control are both aimed at controlling/manipulating women's bodies and sexualities through mobilising varied socially entrenched gender norms, inequalities and stereotypes. In this sense, "PUA" could stand for "coercive control" in the Chinese dating context.

The use of "PUA" has subsequently expanded to other domains in addition to heterosexual intimacies. Young people report experiencing "PUA" in natal families, workplaces or on campuses, where they feel manipulated, controlled, exploited, and suppressed by their parents, bosses, teachers and supervisors. It is also questioned if our patriarchal sociocultural norms have provided toxic soil for the growing popularity of PUA/coercive control. Hence the next section will explore how specific political tools and cultural capital in China have contributed to the legitimation of IPV affecting Chinese women, such as "PUA" or "coercive control".

**What Makes Violence Legitimate?**

Before I asked the question about how my participants deal with a controlling/violent partner, I had expected to receive many answers about "resistance", "revolt" or "fight". However, my participants gave me a reality check: not every woman is privileged enough to fight back. The "privilege" here is not only about visible social/economic advantages, such as their urban, middle-class, or well-educated and

professional backgrounds, but also about something invisible, like the ability or vocabulary to reflect on themselves, their relationships, and the cultural and political environment they are based in. On the basis of the conversations with my participants, I have tried to figure out what factors make Chinese women vulnerable to IPV, or what makes coercive controlling violence acceptable in China. I discovered that words like "do what somebody says" (*tinghua)* and "cultivate" (*peiyang),* which indicate a controlling and dominating context, frequently appear in dating conversations; the idealisation of "love" and "romance" in Chinese culture and media contributes to women's self-sacrifice and the romanticisation of violence within intimacies. Meanwhile, the propaganda of "harmony" (*hexie*) and "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang*) − the capacity to induce positive emotions, attitudes, and actions in both individual and collective levels (Yang and Tang, 2018) − has intensified individual women's sacrifice and suffering so as to serve the state's political goals. Based on these findings, I argue that the cultural capital and political propaganda in mainland China, ranging from the daily language used within intimacies and the idealised concept of love to the widely disseminated political slogans of "positive energy" and "harmony" (*hexie*), have ideologically worked to legitimise intimate partner and gendered violence in contemporary China

*Coercive Language Used in Everyday Intimacies*

> After dinner, I used a cloth to wipe the table for an environmentally friendly purpose. He wanted me to use wet wipes to save time. Just because of this trivial matter, he was mad at me and even broke bowls. He blamed me for *buting tade hua* (not doing what he said).
>
> He often said to me "There's no girl I can't get!" "I'm going to *peiyang* (cultivate) you as what I want you to be!"
>
> (Wenting, aged 28)

*Tinghua* (do what somebody says) is a term normally used in parent-child or adult-child relationships. According to Wang (2017), *tinghua,* which often appears in intimate conversations between heterosexual romantic partners as well, "treats women as children rather than adults and displays men's superiority to obey their demands" (p.106). The term *peiyang* (cultivate) means to educate and train over a long period of time with a certain aim to make something/somebody grow, which is often used by Chinese parents to refer to the education and upbringing of their children. The case of Siwen (see Chapter 5), who was violently punished by her parents for not behaving well, could be a way of *peiyang,* since it highlights the pattern of constructing women through violence in order to make them fit in filial and gender norms. In Chinese parent-child relationships, the position of the parents gives them the authority to decide on how to "cultivate" a powerless child's growth and development.

It is noteworthy that the term *peiyang* appears very often in official Chinese governmental documents or propaganda slogans. For example, the *People's Daily* published an online article in 2018, titled "To Cultivate Young People to Shoulder the Responsibility of National Rejuvenation in the New Era". This article propagandised the cultivation of a young generation with ideals, abilities and responsibilities and the state's imperative to cultivate socialist builders and successors according to the "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" (Zheng, 2018). From the perspective of the party state and government, young Chinese people, who are or will be the main social labour force, should be carefully guided, trained, and educated to serve the state's economic and political agenda. The popular use of *peiyang* in the Chinese state-citizen relationship, adult-child relationships and heterosexual intimate relationships indicates unequal power dynamics: the subjects performing the action of "cultivating" are the Chinese state, adults/parents, and men/male partners, who are more advantaged by physical strength, resources and (gendered) power, while the objects being cultivated are Chinese citizens, children, and women/female partners, who are often being surveilled, regulated and controlled. Wenting's boyfriend positioned himself in the role of a powerful parent or the state,

regulated her behaviours and made her always obedient to him, which indicates a gender hierarchy in Chinese heterosexual intimacies. This hierarchy, which is culturally entrenched, is embodied through the use of language in Chinese everyday lives, and indicates that men are culturally entitled to occupy such an absolute position of power and control in intimate relationships: a partner becomes both government and parent in a way that subjugate and infantilise women.

*Idealised Love and Romanticised Violence*

> Yue: What do you think of violence within intimacies?
>
> Ting: If he really likes you and loves you very much, he will not continuously abuse you despite some violent behaviours. He will restrain himself.
>
> (Ting, aged 27)

I recall Ting's confident eyes and determined tone every time I read the transcript of this conversation. For one thing, she considered that a violent partner who has love in his heart deserves tolerance and forgiveness. For another, she believed that the violent lover would change for her. This belief in love seems frequently apparent in fairy tales: that is, love is seen as able to conquer all difficulties, including violence. However, I found that the women who idealised their partners, held this "fairy-tale" romantic belief and tried to practise it were not uncommon in my fieldwork. Mi Mi told me a story of her roommate Sylvia, who had cohabited with a man who once raised and waved a glass pane to frighten Sylvia in the middle of a quarrel between them. After the incident, he explained that he did not try to abuse Sylvia but just wanted to frighten her because he had lost his temper. Although Sylvia was not physically hurt, Mi Mi persuaded her to leave him as soon as possible, since he appeared prone to violence:

> I said "it was scary! He dared to frighten you with a glass pane today, then how

> will you hand it if he uses a knife to stab you tomorrow?" Who knows it was because they were very affectionate towards each other or for some reasons else? You know what she said to me? She said "No, he won't! He just wanted to frighten me." She was very confident [that the man wouldn't hurt her]. I asked her "What if he abuses you someday?" She told me "No way. He won't hurt me."

Sylvia firmly believed that her boyfriend had just "lost his temper" for a while and showed unconditional trust towards him, which suggests how she idealised her partner and viewed her relationship through a fairytale lens. Some researchers (Wood, 2001; Hayes and Jeffries, 2013) endorse that women in heterosexual intimacies who hold the belief of "fairytale romance" and believe that "love conquers all" find it difficult to leave abusive relationships, as they consider that abusers are not being "themselves" when they are violent and will change for them. To practise their belief of the fairytale romance, they would bear violence, sacrifice themselves and make concessions repeatedly in abusive relationships. Regarding the relationship between love and IPV, Hani commented:

> An example is the case of Bao Li. I think she was kind of carried away by love…I haven't been blinded by love, and I don't know if it is because I did not meet true love [so I would not like to bear violence or sacrifice myself in the relationship]. But I think it seems not difficult to keep rational when you are in love.

Hani was torn between two narratives. She rationally considered that love should not be an excuse for violence; however, she romanticised abuse and self-harm, since she seemingly read Bao Li's suicide as self-sacrifice for love. Hani proposed a very important question here: why do many people think that love is worth our sacrifice? "Love" is not a rare word in my interviews. Many participants claimed that they would not marry until they find the one that they love. Several women, like Hani and

Ting, tried to analyse IPV through the perspective of "love". To answer Hani's question, it is important to make sense of how the concept of "love" functions and impacts on contemporary Chinese lives and relationships.

The concept of "love" has experienced dramatic changes from premodern to post-socialist China. It is *qing* (affection) instead of *ai* (love) that was more widely used in premodern Chinese literary works to describe the love between two adult individuals before the early 20 century. In many works, the *qing* between men and women is extremely idealised and romanticised, such as in *Mudan Ting* (Peony Pavilion), a famous play written by Tang Xianzu in the Ming Dynasty. This play describes the story of a woman from a noble family, Du Liniang, who falls in love with Liu Mengmei, an ordinary scholar appearing in her dream, and finally dies for this illusionary love that existed only in her dream. Her ghost keeps looking for her lover and finally finds him in reality. Ultimately, she comes back to life and marries her lover. One of the most famous lines in the play is "*Qing* (love/affection) once begun will never end. The living may die for love, and the dead may revive for it as well". Since individuals' practice of love and intimacy in premodern China was unfree, "shaped primarily by age-old cultural values including patriarchy, filial piety and a sense of duty to the family" (Sun and Yang, 2020, p.2), marriage was a familial decision in Imperial China: "Young people typically conformed to Confucian expectations of parental obedience and married the mate whom their parents had chosen for them" (Davis and Friedman, 2014, p.6). The notion of "matching doors" (*mendang hudui*), which means marrying someone from a similar background, predominated in premodern China; mutual love was not considered a criterion for mate selection. However, the suppression of free love and restricted opportunities to cultivate love in real life at that time stimulated many intellectuals and writers to create literary works about romance and love, in which they tried to criticise the legitimated practice of arranged marriage. Tang Xianzu was one of the writers who gave "*qing*" a power that transcends life and death. This challenges the traditional etiquette and hierarchy that constrained free love in feudal China.

In the early 20th century, the western concept of "romantic love" came into China as China opened its door to western cultural influence. Fused with the Chinese-style romance of "scholar-beauty" (*caizi jiaren*) (Karandashev, 2017, p.131), free love and marriage based on free love were advocated by young intellectuals during this period. In 1950, the People's Republic of China enacted its first Marriage Law after the new regime was established. The 1950 Marriage Law prohibited traditional arranged marriage and promoted freedom of marriage and divorce, but it did not translate to freedom of love and romance because "the traditional kinship network, gender relations, social institutions, and old mentality coexisted and were closely intertwined in curbing the growth of a dating culture" (Wang, 2021, p.958). In other words, traditional perceptions and practices of marriage and love continued to impact on Chinese people, although some of them had been banned by legislation. For example, the ongoing practice of arranged marriage continued to impact young people's mate selection; younger generations depended on their parents' network to look for spouses. Thus parental intervention remained strong during this period (Wang, 2021). During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), "romantic love" was condemned as a "petty bourgeoisie sentiment" (Pan, 2006, p.31); any literary works and films about "love" would be strictly censored and even banned (Wang, 2021).

The concept of romantic love was rejuvenated in the reform and opening-up era from 1979 onwards. The PRC's Marriage Law of 1980 explicitly identified "the complete breakdown of affection" (*ganqing que yi polie*) as legitimate grounds for divorce for the first time (Pan, 2006; Davis, 2014), which suggests the institutionalisation of romantic love within marriage. Before the revision of the Marriage Law in 1980, Chinese citizens were allowed to divorce only when there was a "proper" reason (Woo, 2006; Zhou, 2015), such as one of the parties being sentenced for a crime or making political transgressions (Ma, 2019). The breakdown of affection was not seen as a legitimate reason for divorce. Since the 1980s, as Jankowiak (1995) states, "what is new is the state's legal endorsement of free choice and, thus, love as a basis for

marriage and, more important, the eagerness with which that endorsement is being embraced by the younger generations of urbanites, who demand that love and marriage be synonymous or, at least, possible bedfellows" (p.180).

Culturally, literary works concerning love and romance flourished, and the media industry reopened from the 1980s onwards, which enabled the Chinese to consume different pop culture products featuring western notions of romantic love. Since 1976, more than 500 new magazines have been published in China, many focusing on the subjects of romantic love, dating and free marriage. The TV and film industry has also increased the production of romantic themes in everyday life. Contemporary love stories present love as an ideal and a virtue, which reflects the implicit value that Chinese people today place on romantic experiences and, where appropriate, reveal a tendency to become immersed in love itself (Jankowiak, 1995). The literary, art and media products which depict how love can overcome all obstacles, such as geographic, racial, cultural, class and age boundaries, aroused young Chinese people's imagination and yearning for romantic love (Wang, 2021). Love stories about miseries, conflicts, broken hearts and crushes are preferred by the Chinese public (Karandashev, 2017). The legitimation of "free love" through law and the dissemination of "romance" through popular culture have collaborated to make "romantic love" a new ideal and important as a modern mate selection criterion in Chinese everyday life since the 1980s. Chinese people today unprecedentedly value love, romance and mutual affection in their courtships, marriage, and other intimate relationships.

*Qing* in Imperial China was depicted to occur between humans and ghosts (*Peony Pavilion*), humans and animals (*White Snake*), or between humans and immortals (*Best Match*), and was given the power to challenge feudal ethics and transcend sociopolitical hierarchies, species and life and death in premodern Chinese literary works. "The ideali[s]ation of romantic involvement in contemporary Chinese literature and film is remarkably similar to its treatment in Imperial China"

(Jankowiak, 1995, p.169), as love plays an unparalleled part in contemporary China. In the new millennium, "romantic love" is presented through diverse genres and media, and is embodied in different forms. Some TV series, such as *The Journey of Flower* and *Ashes of Love*, tell the love stories that happen between immortal beings, trying to highlight the purity, sanctity and immortality of love. Both series have been very popular and influential in mainland China: *The Journey of Flower* won the 2015 National Drama Festival Top Ten Influential TV Dramas, and its total number of broadcasts exceeded 20 billion, becoming the second most-watched TV show of the year in 2015 (MNW, 2015); *Ashes of Love* won a series of awards in 2018 as well, and its ratings were at the top of the rankings for a few weeks when it was launched on Jiangsu Satellite TV, its first broadcast platform (Asian Entertainment Net, 2018). These TV dramas, whose targeted audience is mostly young women (Sohu, 2019), create the images of women who are loyal to love, sacrifice and suffer for their lovers. The popularity of these dramas indicates an emerging evident notion in pop culture that love hurts and "true love" deserves anything, even pain, harm and self-sacrifice.

Internet literature is another important space which represents young women's imagination and expectations of romantic love. In most cases, the writers who produce "women-oriented literature" (*nüxing xiang wenxue*) (Sun and Yang, 2020, p.13) are women; the readers are mostly women as well. Genres like "sweet stories" (*tianwen*) and "pampering stories" (*chongwen*) enjoy great popularity among young Chinese women, which are normally characterised by sweet and affectionate interactions in a couple, and a powerful man lavishing "care and attention on his romantic interest" (Sun and Yang, 2020, p.14). This sweet and light-hearted genre is not exclusively popular in online literature. Many films and TV series also prevail by means of the preference for this genre by young women. All these cultural products attempt to idealise the concept of love, describing it as pure, sacred, sweet and worth one's self-sacrifice, which may potentially influence how the public perceive and understand love and romantic relationships. Romantic love, despite being endowed with a great sense of nobility and aesthetics in literature and art, is likely to become a

gendered norm and constraint for women in a sociological sense. Both Ting's and Sylvia's perception of violent partners in intimate relationships indicates their idealisation of love and romance to a large degree. Though one cannot categorically prove that how they understand love has been influenced by contemporary pop culture regarding love, they have inevitably been exposed to the above popular cultural representation of love and gendered intimacies. Therefore, the potential influence of pop culture on how my participants understand and talk about their relationships and romantic experiences should not be overlooked.

Peng, 31 years old, was cohabitating with a woman named April when I interviewed her in the living room of her flat. They appeared to have a very good relationship, and Peng often used the stories that happened between them as examples to answer my questions about "marriage", "intimacy" and "IPV". April stepped out of her bedroom and tried to join our conversations near the end of my interview with Peng. When discussing the topic of intimate partner violence, April shifted the serious conversation to an ambiguous interaction between her and Peng:

> April: Be careful, I am violent! (laughed, turned her face to Peng and spoke in a tone of "playing cute" (*sajiao)*).
>
> Peng: That's all right. It's not the first time I've been hit by you. I'm used to it (smile).
>
> April: But I haven't been violent to you yet.
>
> Peng: Come on, come on! That's enough! (laughs).

As an onlooker who witnessed their flirtation, I could feel the affection flowing between them. However, this situation confused me. Some questions popped into my mind: Why did they suddenly flirt with each other when talking about a serious and

distressing topic? Why did Peng look satisfied and happy when she said she had been hit by April? I seemed to figure these questions out when we had an exchange below:

> Yue: What do you think of intimate partner violence?
>
> Peng: The situation depends. Some may think it is violence, but some may think it is just a flirtation.
>
> Yue: Where is the boundary between "violence" and "flirtation"?
>
> Peng: It's confusing. I'm thinking about this as well. It is difficult to differentiate indeed. Some people are violent indeed, so I don't think I can get along well with such people. If it is just a quarrel or just a small fight, like you break a vase or a bowl, it's not a big deal I think...I think only when a person cares too much about you, your words can irritate her/him. If she/he doesn't care about you at all, she/he doesn't care what you say, and won't lose her/his temper with you...Maybe her/his way of expressing care is different from others. Other people would take care of you or buy you gifts to show their care, but he/she would show his/her care more aggressively and violently. In this situation, you need to be more tolerant.

This narrative embodies how Peng perceived and expressed love and understood and evaluated violence in intimate relationships. She regarded IPV as a way to show care and affection to some extent and accepted the aggressive way through which her partner showed love to her. Peng saw some violent behaviours as flirtation that could strengthen the romantic relationship, which confused me in the interview. "Flirtation" sounds like something romantic, so I found it difficult to relate it to violence. At the end of our discussion on "violence", Peng used a proverb to clarify her idea on this topic: "*I think hitting is a sign of affection, scolding is a sign of love (dashiqin mashiai). No hitting and scolding, no love*". This explanation helped me make sense

of her ideas further. I realised that while love and romance are unprecedentedly practised, celebrated and diversely represented in contemporary China, intimate partner violence is romanticised and legitimised at the same time, which makes love hurt.

The idiom of "*hitting is a sign of affection, scolding is a sign of love"* originally came from the lyrics of a famous TV series for children *Good Dad, Bad Dad*:

> Good Dad, good dad, I have a good dad.
> No dad does not scold the child; No child does not get spanked.
> Hitting is a sign of affection; scolding is a sign of love. He is still my good dad.
>
> (*Good Dad, Bad Dad*, 1987)

This TV series tells the story of Dian Dian, a primary school student, and his father, depicting how the father takes care of Dian Dian's daily life, educates him and sometimes spanks him when the father is short-tempered, or when Dian Dian makes mistakes. The series, which contained content about the domestic abuse of children, was very popular in China in the 1980s and 1990s and won the National Outstanding TV Drama of the 9th Flying Apsaras Award (Sohu Yule, 2003); the theme song was very popular and instantly recognisable to Chinese audiences as well. "*Hitting is a sign of affection, scolding is a sign of love*" soon became a proverb which referred to parents scolding and spanking children as an expression of love and intimacy, the purpose of which is for their children's good.

There are many proverbs sharing similar meanings, such as "mother feels pain in her heart while beating her son" (*da zai er shen, tong zai niang xin*) and "spare the rod and spoil the child" (*bu da bu cheng qi*). Subsequently, "*dashiqin mashiai*" has not remained limited to the parent-child relationships but has been expanded to other intimate relationships. In this cultural context, where violence is legitimised in the name of "love", "care", "romance", or "affection", women would be more vulnerable

to abuse and coercion in intimate relationships. For example, the sentence "if you love me, you will…" appears frequently in real life to push women to sacrifice for their partners. Anna complained about a similar idea prevailing in recent years: "*Some people say when a woman meets somebody she loves, she is willing to give birth for him*". In the contemporary era, when romantic love is celebrated and advocated, women's sacrifice in intimate relationships is regarded as a way to prove their loyalty to love, which may lead to many women bearing and normalising violence in intimacies, or, as Anna implies, sacrificing their bodies to pregnancy and childbirth even when they may not necessarily want children or feel ready/willing to parent.

"*Hitting is a sign of affection, scolding is a sign of love*" connotes the same power dynamics as some language, such as "cultivate" and "do what somebody say", used in intimacies. Abusers could be parents, men, and governments, while the abused could be children, women, and citizens. Violence here is "legitimate", allegedly inflicted for the abused ones' own good. This popular proverb indicates that the boundaries between love, care, sacrifice, and violence are blurred in Chinese people's intimacies; the story between Peng and April suggests that the typical paradigm of love-violence is prevailing as a cultural norm even in queer relationships.

The normalisation of IPV is represented and prevalent in cultural products as well. A typical example is the "heart-tormenting" (nüe) genre, which frequently appears in literary works and media products. This genre normally features a plot where the protagonist is physically, psychologically or mentally abused by his/her beloved partner. For example, the series *Ashes of Love* and *The Journey of Flower* are both famous for their *nüe* plots. In the former TV drama, Run Yu, who is characterised as loving the female protagonist Jin Mi, cheats and takes advantage of her. Nonetheless, his love is still represented as pure, selfless and moving. In the latest TV series *Master of My Own*, the female protagonist Ning Meng works as a secretary for her boss Lu Jiming. Although Lu often oppresses her in the workplace through the tactics of PUA, like gaslighting and humiliation, Ning still falls in love with him eventually. The

romance, love and IPV represented in Chinese media in the 21st century symbolise, and meanwhile shape, young women's understandings and choices of intimacy to some extent. The media frequently represents love within the context of control, jealousy, and violence, so this "violent romance" is often tolerated, accepted or even expected by some women, who try to conflate abuse with signs of intimacy and love (Papp et al., 2017).

Since there is little research on how the media and popular culture shape public perceptions of romance and intimacy in the Chinese context (Sun and Yang, 2020), it is difficult to conclude that my participants who romanticised the violence within their relationships were undoubtedly influenced by the representation of love in contemporary Chinese media and culture. However, the popularity of idealised love and romanticised violence in the media provides cultural capital for the legitimation of violence in young Chinese women's intimate relationships. Through the representation of love as immortal, pure, sweet, and even worth dying for, the media contributes to the culturally normalised belief that a romantic relationship is something imperative in a woman's life (Papp et al., 2017), as well as something that should hurt. When a woman finds her social identity constructed based on romantic relationships, it would be difficult for her to escape from an abusive relationship. Worse still, intimate partner violence might be viewed as a sign of care, love, and romance in this context.

*Political Propaganda: "Harmony" and "Positive Energy"*

> I don't think I had found a way to handle it (the relationship with the controlling boyfriend). I had always made concessions because my family is one of those super-harmonious (*chaoji hexie*) environments where my parents rarely quarrel. I am afraid of quarrels from the bottom of my heart. When he got mad at me, I told myself "Forget about it! Forget about it! Forget about it! (*suan le*)" I just kept the peace and made a concession. I dealt with it every time

like this. As a result, he took it for granted that I should compromise with him all the time.

(Fei, aged 28)

When I asked Fei if she had tried to deal with her controlling boyfriend, she attributed her inability and inexperience in coping with intimate conflicts to her "super-harmonious" natal family. A harmonious family has long been a pursuit in life for Chinese people. Despite not being a new term, "harmony" became a particularly significant concept for propaganda in the new millennium, and the desire for harmony at the individual, societal and national levels is unprecedentedly reinforced today, since the social problems brought about by rapid economic development, such as corruption, unbalanced development between rural and urban areas and so forth, have become increasingly prominent in China (Han, 2008).

"Harmony" (*hexie*) is an old but far-reaching concept in China. It contains philosophical implications in the Chinese context, such as the notion of "Heaven and Human in Harmony" (*tianren heyi*) (Han, 2008, p.143), which depicts a state of harmony and unity between human beings, society, and nature, and is elaborated in Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese Buddhism. As a traditional and influential cultural concept, this term was borrowed by the party state that officially proposed to build a "Socialist Harmonious Society" (*shehuizhuyi hexie shehui*) in 2006 (Han, 2008). "Harmonious Society", along with the concept of "Scientific Development" (*kexue fazhan guan*), was brought up in response to a series of challenges resulting from surging socioeconomic developments under Deng Xiaoping's and Jiang Zemin's leadership, such as massive unemployment, corruption, the urban-rural gap and a defunded welfare system (Zheng and Tok, 2007). President Hu Jintao described "Harmonious Society" as "'a scientific development concept' which shifts China's primary focus from a purely economic growth model to a more balanced, Confucian-style approach" (Geis and Holt, 2009, p.75). This transition was accompanied by increasing governmental concerns with livelihood issues and social

problems, such as corruption, environmental problems, health care, education, the widening gap between rich and poor, etc. (Han, 2008; Geis and Holt, 2009).

The governmental propaganda of "harmonious society" in the early 21st century came along with the resurgence of Confucianism, where "male authority starts with the family and permeates every level of the societal hierarchy" (Ho et al., 2018, p.491). Family, "considered the foundation of the state" (Guo and Yin, 2021, p.613), should be stable and harmonious. Hence women's roles as wives and mothers in the family are highly emphasised. It is believed that a woman who is able to embrace her wifely and motherly duties, or even sacrifice herself for her family, will contribute to a happy and harmonious family. Millions of "harmonious" families will further benefit the construction of a "socialist harmonious society". The notion of the "Socialist Harmonious Society" proposed by Hu continues to play a role in Xi's propaganda. Since Xi Jinping came to power at the Eighteenth Party Congress in November 2012, the party started the campaigns of disseminating the "Core Socialist Values" (*shehuizhuyi hexin jiazhiguan*), which contain twelve values that "the state, society and citizens should aspire to, incline towards, and act by" (Gow, 2017, p.99); "harmony" is one of the twelve Core Socialist Values. The values set out the basic principles that Chinese citizens should follow when they work in different fields or assume different identities.

Due to its structural and political importance to society, family is particularly emphasised by the party state. *People's Daily* published the article "Promoting Socialist Core Values to Take Root in the Family" to disseminate Xi's speech on "family (*jiating*), family education (*jiajiao*) and family tradition (*jiafeng*) in the new era" (Shen, 2020). The speech particularly stressed that "only harmonious families can lead to a harmonious society"; family harmony and stability are presented as of great significance to consolidating the party's governance, safeguarding the nation's long-term peace, promoting Chinese citizens' happiness and well-being, and realising China's Great Rejuvenation (Shen, 2020). China's Great Rejuvenation has long been

a governing idea by the CCP since 1997 and was further developed by Xi Jinping, who proposed the slogan "China Dream" in 2012, declaring "*We must make persistent efforts, press ahead with indomitable will, continue to push forward the great cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and strive to achieve the Chinese dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation*" (BBC, 2013). Xi's rhetoric of the China Dream of Great Rejuvenation is obvious: by recalling the achievements of ancient Chinese civilisations and the national humiliation of modern China under colonial aggression by imperialists since the First Opium War (Britain's Invasion of China, 1840-1842), the CCP creates collective trauma and memory for the Chinese, reinforcing the narrative of the Communist Party leading the Chinese people to victory and a better future, thereby strengthening its governing legitimacy and authority (Carrai, 2021).

Since the realisation of the China Dream of Great Rejuvenation cannot do without harmonious families and society (Shen, 2020), contemporary China's gender agenda highlights the specific duties that women should take to serve harmonious and stable families: "women should cultivate the moral self and regulate the family (*xiushen qijia*), be industrious and thrifty in managing a household (*qinjian chijia*), maintain the harmony and prosperity of the family (*hemu xingjia*), and lead family members to build a good family" (Shen, 2020). It is noteworthy that the phrase *xiushen qijia* comes from the Confucian classic *The Great Learning* (*daxue*), one of the influential Confucian collections of Four Books. *Xiushen qijia* is an excerpt from a longer passage: Cultivate oneself (*xiushen*), Govern one's family (*qijia*), Govern one's country (*zhiguo*), Bring peace to all (*ping tianxia*). In Confucianism, these split terms form a complete context: to bring peace to all, one should first govern a country well; to govern the country successfully, one should first be able to govern one's family well; to govern one's family successfully, one should first learn to cultivate oneself. Although the original meaning of this long phrase indicates a relationship between individual achievement/cultivation and political ambition, I do not consider that the use of *xiushen qijia* in CCP's propaganda aims to encourage women's political

participation. Instead, the other two phrases, "*qinjian chijia*" and "*hemu xingjia*", have helped complete the whole context: women should be self-cultivated with morality and family-management skills to harmonise the family.

In contemporary China, the pursuit of family harmony is far more than an individual desire but a significant way to regulate society and further solidify the CCP's governing powers. To achieve this goal, women's sacrifice is critical. This is evident in how the state tries to push young urban women into marriage as soon as possible through a variety of measures, such as the stigmatisation of unmarried women as "leftover women".

The One-Child Policy and the notion of son preference have collaborated to create a severely imbalanced gender ratio in births. According to the 2020 Edition of China Marriage and Family Report (Liang, et al., 2022), in 2020, there were 34.9 million more men than women in China's total population, and 17.52 million more men of a marriageable age between 20 to 40 years old than women of marriageable age. Men's difficulties in getting married and satisfying their sexual desire are seen to increase potential threats of violence and disruption, such as the rising rate of rape and the intensification of the trafficking of women. For the party state, the men of marriageable age who have not married could be one of the potential "unstable factors" (*buwending yinsu*) that will negatively influence social security and governance. In other words, women are considered the key to addressing men's difficulties in getting married, thus protecting social stability and security. Hence unmarried women above 27 years old are stigmatised as "leftover women" officially, and are considered "unwanted", "valueless" and "sick", which aims to pressure young women to marry and take on the wifely and motherly responsibility of harmonising the family and society as a whole. Overall, women's rights, desires and needs are ignored; they are further restricted within domestic spaces, where they are forced to act as responsible wives and mothers who serve husbands and children, stabilise the family and society, and sacrifice for the state's regime ultimately.

The "emphasis on harmony makes it difficult for those subject to authority to question it, because they are then disrupting harmony" (Ho et al., 2018, p.491). Ho, Jackson and Kong (2017) characterise this as "hierarchical harmony", since "it inculcates subservience in both the public sphere and the private sphere of intimacy, limiting what it is possible to say and do" (Ho et al., 2018, p.491). The young women in my participant group are politically pressured to shoulder the responsibility of keeping all of society in order and at peace. They are held responsible for men's violent behaviours and are taught that putting up with abuse is something they must do in order to keep Chinese society "harmonious".

Back to Fei's story: her father is a short-tempered man - according to her narrative - while her mother is "*a person who is willing to sacrifice for the family and bond family members*" (Fei). The "super-harmonious" family environment - as Fei called it - is pursued through her mother's constant self-sacrifice and compromises. The conjugal relationship of Fei's parents not only echoes the traditional Confucian ideas that men are dominant and superior while women are virtuous and inferior (Wang and Ho, 2007) but also follows the "harmonious family model", which is widely propagandised by the party state. Watching her parents' role modelling, Fei put herself in the role of her mother, constantly sacrificing her own needs to maintaining a seemingly harmonious but unequal (in terms of gender and power/agency) romantic relationship.

Despite feeling uncomfortable, hurt, and angry when being abused by her boyfriend, Fei kept telling herself "Forget about it!" (*suanle*), forced herself to forgive him and maintained a quiet and unconfrontational demeanour. *Suanle* is often used in the Chinese context when "someone stops/gives up doing something or no longer cares about something after failing to do it", which could be translated as "never mind/forget about it/let it go/forget it" in English. S*uanle* embodies Fei's strong sense of surrender in making the relationship better on the one hand; it also reflects a way

through which she suppressed her negative feelings and kept "positive" on the other. However, her positivity did not help end the abuse that she had experienced. Instead, she had to make concessions again and again whenever they had conflicts, in order to maintain this relationship for longer. Although positive psychology argues that "psychological well-being is largely within an individual's control" (Sinclair, Hart and Lomas, 2020, p.26), positivity might be toxic in some challenging situations, such as abusive or unequal intimate relationships. For instance, some scholars discovered that for the victims of domestic abuse who had attempted to improve their relationships through being more optimistic, grateful, tolerant and forgiving, their positivity increased the likelihood of the recurrence of abuse, because the abusers interpreted the victims' forgiveness as acquiescence to continued abuse (Sinclair, Hart and Lomas, 2020). Held argues that the pressure to be happy and optimistic under challenging circumstances can actually reduce happiness. It can also drive people to ignore or deny negative emotions, such as sadness or anger, impeding their ability to realistically assess their life circumstances (Sinclair, Hart and Lomas, 2020).

It is noteworthy that the idea of "keeping positive" has been endorsed and disseminated by the party state for a decade since 2012, which is called "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang*) in Chinese official discourse. In Yang and Tang's (2018) definition, "positive energy" refers to:

> The capacity to induce positive emotions and/or attitudes, the potential to induce constructive/conciliatory discourses and/or actions, in individuals or collectives such as the society and nation. Those positive emotions/attitudes/thoughts so induced are also simply referred to as positive energy, as is any event/discourse that is said to contain positive energy.
>
> (p.15)

"Positive energy" was mainly used in four ways/meanings and did not contain any political implication before it was brought into the party state's official lexicon in

2012:

> (i) as a layman's appropriation of a supposedly scientific jargon; (ii) as a concept associated with Chinese folk beliefs; (iii) as a way to refer to acts of charity/philanthropy; and (iv) as a notion spoken in the context of personal emotional or psychological matters.
>
> (Yang and Tang, 2018, p.10)

In 2012, this term became one of the most popular online buzzwords in China and was borrowed by the state, appearing in official declarations and publications very often in the same year. After the endorsement by President Xi and the CCP, "positive energy" came into full bloom in various forms of Chinese state media from 2013. In the same year, *Qiushi*, one of the CCP's publications, published an article titled "Beware of Negative Energy on the Internet" (Shi, 2013), which calls for a boycott of negative news and critical content online − particularly those addressing social problems multidimensionally − and encourages netizens to disseminate "positive energy" and create optimistic attitudes towards the society and the state. In this case, some media reports about disclosing social issues, such as gender-based violence, were seen as reporting "negative energy", thus becoming suppressed. Hence "positive energy" essentially refers to "attitudes or emotions that are aligned with the ideological or value systems of the party-state, or any discourses that promote such an alignment" (Yang and Tang, 2018, p.2) since it was appropriated by the party state.

In the current Chinese context, the term "positive energy" contains three levels of meaning: individual-personal, societal-cultural, and political-national/global (Yang and Tang, 2018). At the first level, "positive energy" embodies individuals' optimistic characteristics, that is, self-confident, inward-looking, reflective, peaceful of mind, etc. At the societal-cultural level, this term concerns all acts of charity and virtue that could bring about a "positive" influence on society and the public. "Positive energy" features ideological/political values at the third level, which mainly incorporates

nationalism, patriotism, and socialism (Yang and Tang, 2018). Obviously, Fei's concessions, tolerance and self-sacrifice after being abused mirror a "positive energy" at the individual level; however, I also argue that this positivity, possessed by an individual woman, is related to the "positive energy" propagandised at the other two levels. Some Chinese media have produced a series of TV programmes with "positive energy" to select and reward the "Great Mothers" and "Most Beautiful Mothers" in China, who had sacrificed themselves for their sons and husbands, and always kept "optimistic" despite facing many predicaments in their lives. Their positive attitudes toward their difficult lives and spirits of self-sacrifice were labelled as "virtues" that were disseminated nationwide. By dissemination, the "positivity" initially possessed by individual women became "positive energy" at a societal-cultural level. These "positive" acts and examples will thereby allegedly contribute to harmony and stability at a national level. Under the national propaganda of "positive energy", many Chinese women seem not to have another choice but to "keep optimistic" and endure when they are suffering violence. Only by sacrificing women's interests can the family, society and the nation be harmonious, stable and prosperous. This therefore puts pressure on women, like my participants, to quietly endure violence and gives them no legal resource or cultural/community support when they find themselves in abusive relationships.

**Privileged Daughters: Navigating Violence in Romantic Relationships**

As intimate partner violence is thus ideologically legitimised in the Chinese context, it seems difficult for many Chinese women to escape from toxic relationships. In my fieldwork, I discovered that women's strategies to navigate IPV, particularly coercive control, were diverse, some of which were subtle and covert, while others were more explicit and even violent. I argue that the form of single Chinese women's resistance, challenge and solutions to intimate partner violence reflects their privileged advantage as China's only-child generation to a great extent.

*Geographical Mobility*

After graduation, Fei and her boyfriend moved to the UK and Taiwan respectively for postgraduate studies. They maintained a long-distance relationship, during which Fei accidentally found out that her boyfriend was dating another woman. She was angry and heartbroken but still decided to forgive him as usual. Despite the long-term forgiveness and resilience, the relationship did not last too long after that. After experiencing infidelity, a long period of being controlled, psychological violence and emotional abuse, this relationship was finally ended when she was in the UK.

> In fact, I did not feel sad but felt relieved. I felt like the shackles or the responsibilities that had been placed on me were dropped…I didn't even feel the pain of the breakup…I broke up with him, and I felt so happy. I hung out with friends, kept fit and became more beautiful. Then I felt that I could live so positively! You don't have to think about others' thoughts at all, and you can live like you want, which made me reflect that the previous relationship was a failure.
>
> (Fei, aged 28)

The cross-national geographical distance greatly restricted Fei's ex-boyfriend's control over her. Without her everyday life, such as social activities and daily schedules, being regulated by the man, she regained her agency to build social networks and make her own life plans. In a similar vein, Wenting managed to end her relationship with a controlling man after she went to another city for a long-term business trip. Mobility appears to be an effective way for the abused women in my participant group to forge their own safety zones, where they could "secure moments of autonomy, rehearse survival or escape strategies, plan resistance, regain a momentary sense of control of self-worth, and recover pieces of their lost voice or subjectivity" (Stark, 2007, p.216). According to Jones and Schechter, control encompasses a broad range of restrictions on "speech, movement, and social

connection, objective constraints such as control over money, information, and decision making, and the gender-specific regulations" (Stark, 2007, p.221). In foreign safety zones, therefore, where women can gain physical distance from their abusers, they become insulated from these restrictions and able to access the resources, information and relationships that the perpetrators cannot control. Despite no original intention to cut the relationship through geographical mobility, it did provide both Fei and Wenting with an opportunity to escape from their "control freak" boyfriends' grip.

Moreover, for Fei, physical mobility enabled her to escape a toxic political and cultural environment where women are expected to be self-sacrificing, family-centred and obedient, and where intimate partner violence is legitimised and accepted. After she migrated to the UK, the change of culture, language and political context disempowered the culturally abusive tactics she had experienced in China. Some cultural and political notions like "harmony" and "positive energy" do not bear any public, cultural value in the UK, so she did not have to keep sacrificing for an abusive relationship but had the opportunities to escape from it. A totally new cultural and political environment could rescue some abused women from the long-term situation where they had been treated as submissive and inferior, and empower them with the agency to create the life they want. As Fei said strongly, "*I felt that I could live so positively!*" It is noteworthy that this does not mean that the UK is a better or a less gender-imbalanced place to live compared to China. The UK's domestic violence statistics are just as harrowing, and women are violently disadvantaged and subjected to gendered violence in the UK too. However, migration, which enables a change of cultural environment and codes, can help women of a certain economic class and education level to re-evaluate the norms that have been oppressing them in their home culture and to imagine alternative ways of being and relating.

However, it should be noted that not each woman experiencing IPV is as privileged as Fei and Wenting, who were able to travel from one continent/city to another, and

thereby geographically distance themselves from their abusers. Fei came from an affluent urban family. Although she was not the only child and had an elder sister, she could still get sufficient support from her parents, who were well-educated and professional, and financially capable to raise two children. Fei was fully sponsored by her parents to pursue a Master's degree in the UK. Despite growing up in a small town, as the only daughter in her family, Wenting had always been pressured by her parents to study hard in order to change both her own and her family's future: "*My parents have put all their own aspirations for academic pursuits on me*". Fortunately, she managed to find a decent job as a film producer in Beijing after obtaining her Bachelor's and Master's degrees at prestigious universities. As the One-Child generation, both Fei and Wenting are the beneficiaries of this birth control policy, who do not have to compete with brothers for resources, and receive unprecedented love, investment and care from their parents. Their situations were largely improved by their privileged status as educated, professional, urban One-Child-generation daughters. However, it is worth noting that being empowered by mobility, essentially by class, education and professional status, does not work all the time when handling IPV, particularly for those women who are less-educated or coming from working-class and rural areas.

*"Violence Must Be Curbed By Violence"*

Chang and Siwen are the youngest participants in my fieldwork, who are cousins and close to each other. I did not intend to interview them at the very beginning because they were only 23 years old and did not meet my recruitment criteria (25 years or older). However, when I met and talked with them, they showed huge interest in Chinese feminism, gender politics and my research, so I decided not to stick to the criteria rigidly and invited them to participate in my interviews. This was a sudden decision. I interviewed them together at Chang's home. When I asked the question, "how will you deal with a controlling partner who rejects your breakup and threatens you?", Chang proposed a series of solutions, including asking friends for help, calling

the police and applying for a restraining order. However, she found that all of these solutions seem problematic and cannot help her avoid danger competely. When Chang gave her final answer, she got an active response from Siwen:

> Chang: I have read a piece of news which reports that a woman, who filed for divorce five times, was violently assaulted by her husband in front of the courthouse... It (Such violence) can only be avoided by bringing a "hatchet man" with you. I've seen some bloggers saying that you could carry a knife with you. Violence must be curbed by violence (*yi bao zhi bao*)! If dating this kind of person, you must break up with him firmly. If you are afraid of his revenge, what you have to do is to prepare [a weapon] with you.
>
> Siwen: Yes, yes, yes! This makes up for [women's] disparity in strength.
>
> (Chang, aged 23; Siwen, aged 23)

"Violence must be curbed by violence" is a Chinese idiom which refers to resisting violence by violent means. Although the use of violence may cause certain damage, the necessary force is understood as a powerful guarantee to prevent greater losses. Wang (2017) argues that urban Chinese young women, as the only daughters in their families, can be more willful, aggressive, and assertive in dating relationships. In her interviews with both young Chinese men and women, she discovered that "women's aggression was quite common for both severe violence and minor violence, played a huge role in cases of mutual violence and was extremely obvious in cases of minor violence" (Wang, 2017, p.95). This finding is different from much existing research, which sees women as victims. Many young women in my interviews presented themselves as brave, assertive and even violent to varying degrees, claiming that they dared to use violence in self-defence if encountering intimate partner violence. This aggressive form of doing gender and femininity, as Wang (2017) argues, is a response to the new global trend of "girl power".

According to Aapola et al. (2005):

> Girl Power draws on previous women's movement but argues a new, "girl-centred" feminism. It reclaims the word "girl" and sometimes focuses on young women's anger as feminist tool. It seems that many major issues faced by young women, especially regarding body and sexuality. At the same time, it emphasi[s]es autonomy, sassiness, and is sometimes depicted as sexy and assertive.
>
> (p.203)

Although "girl power" originates from the women's movements in the 1990s, mainly formed by young, white and middle-class women in the US, it soon spread around different regions of the world. It "positions young women as feisty, ambitious, motivated and independent" (Aapola et al., 2005, p.26), and embracing infinite possibilities and opportunities. In China, independent, ambitious, powerful and autonomous female images are preferred by young Chinese women, most of whom are One-Child-generation daughters, enjoying unprecedented family support, and pursuing success, autonomy and empowerment in their careers, romantic relationships and daily lives. However, it is noteworthy that as the by-product of neoliberalism, "girl power", like some other neoliberal feminist concepts, is classed as well. It is celebrated by urban One-Child-generation daughters, most of whom are educated, professional and pampered by their parents since their childhoods. In this sense, Chang and Siwen, as the only daughters in their families, seemed enabled by privilege to show their anger, aggression and even violence in relationships.

Additionally, an important reason for some young women in my fieldwork resorted to "hot violence" (*re baoli*) − which refers to "visible" verbal and physical violence in intimate relationships − to ensure individual security is that they were disappointed by the current Chinese laws and public institutions, which fail to provide women with sufficient security and protection from abusive relationships.

> Canada does a better job [in terms of solving IPV cases]. In Canada, you only need to call the police and report your partner has had violence against you. The police will take him/her away directly without asking anything. I know this because I had a German friend, who was reported by his girlfriend. She lied that he had abused her. He was arrested and sent straight to prison for seven days. He had just returned from a business trip and found there were two customs officers at the airport looking for him with his photos. He was like "what's going on?" He was taken to jail by the officers and spent seven days there. Woooow! ...If I were in China, I might sacrifice myself to be hurt physically so that I can use the injuries to apply for a restraining order or have him convicted. If you only see him planning abuse, he won't be arrested and convicted.
>
> (Zilu, aged 27)

Zilu pointed out some of the problems with how the Chinese government and legislation deals with IPV. In March 2016, the "Anti-domestic Violence Law of the People's Republic of China" came into force. As the first law aiming to eliminate domestic violence, despite huge progress, the anti-domestic violence law has many loopholes and limitations. First, this law mainly applies to heterosexual families and marriages. Although it stipulates that the violence committed between people living together with other than family members shall be executed with reference to the provisions of this law, this does not quell the controversy of whether the violence that happens in premarital cohabitation relationships is domestic violence or not. The statement of the law, drafted by the Legislative Affairs Office of the State Council, clarifies that violence between people in a relationship, such as a dating relationship and cohabitation, is not substantially different from violence between members of the general society (Lu, 2017). In this sense, the victims of IPV in non-heterosexual intimacies, cohabitation, and dating relationships are not protected by this law. The vague definition of domestic violence in various Chinese state laws has brought great

trouble to the handling of other cases of violence in non-marital intimate relationships.

Second, the advent of restraining orders seems to be a step forward, which aims to avoid the escalation of violence, but which institution/sector should be responsible for the execution of restraining orders has not been specified (Lu, 2017; Bi, et al., 2021). According to Zheng (2022), it is difficult for abused women to apply for restraining orders, except with the provision of evidence. Third, the legal measurement of domestic violence is only limited to physical hurt. There is a lack of specific criteria for measuring psychological violence, such as gaslighting, manipulation or other coercive control tactics, though this has also been classified as a type of domestic violence. The determination of the fact of domestic violence requires police records, injury identification and warning letters as evidence, without which it is hard to make a case for domestic violence (Wang, 2018). In Bao's case, there was little evidence to accuse Mu of abusing Bao. Only chat records can be used as part of the evidence, but clearly, the evidence is not sufficient because these conversations only stay at the level of "encouraging suicide", not "enforcement" or "action". Thus, in reality, many women, as Zilu states, have to expose themselves to violence for a longer time to get the evidence needed to convict their abusers.

Some young women had also noticed the problematic parts of Chinese laws in dealing with intimate partner violence, so they preferred to depend on individual power to solve such problems. Chang and Siwen were not the only participants who agreed to use violence to resist violence. Some other participants had also shown their courageous to use violence to fight back against IPV: "*I may do something 'unspeakable'. Maybe I would kill you...This is my defence*" (April); *I will do anything I can to kill you if you threaten me!*" (Su). I found it interesting since women using "hot violence" is regarded "unfeminine" according to the gendered normative order. However, there was still a small portion of my participants, all of them were born after 1995, declared that they would consider using this direct and violent way to fight

back against their abusers. Their courage and resilience in resisting IPV not only reflects their distrust of the state's power to solve gender-based violence but also reveals a neoliberal way of doing gender and femininity in contemporary urban China.

## Conclusion

Based on the dating stories young Chinese women, this chapter presented varied manifestations of "coercive control". By exploring the power dynamics in young Chinese women's romantic relationships, I argued that PUA culture, as a form of "coercive control" with Chinese characteristics, is universally existent in Chinese dating culture. PUA/coercive control, as a covert form of IPV, is normalised and legitimatised in China, since the everyday language used within intimacies, the idealised understanding of love, the romanticisation of violence, and some widely disseminated political propagandas have provided cultural, ideological and political soil for the legitimatisation of varied forms of IPV. However, many young Chinese women, most of whom are One-Child-generation daughters, are privileged to escape from their abusive relationships through physical mobility and violence, although whether such strategies can be replicated and deployed by those unprivileged women from rural areas and lower classes, or less-educated, are still questionable.

# Chapter 7: *"Endless Births and Lives!":* When One-Child-Generation Daughters are Expected to Be Mothers

## Introduction

> Just three weeks after the result of China's Seventh Population Census was released, the Politburo meeting of the Communist Party of China Central Committee announced that it would change the existing population control policy, and allow a married couple to have three children.
>
> (BBC News, 2021)

After nearly 3 decades of the One-Child Policy, it was abolished in 2015 and replaced by the Two-Child Policy. In just 5 years, the birth planning policy was updated again. The introduction of the Two-Child Policy and Three-Child Policy aimed to deal with the increasingly serious population ageing problem. By the end of 2015, the number of people in China aged 60 and above took up 16.1% of the whole population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016), and continued to increase. The One-Child Policy, issued in 1979, which had aimed to curb the rapid population growth and create a "high-quality" population for China's modernisation, was subsequently held responsible for the increasing ageing population. Through workplace penalties and other coercive measures, such as forced sterilisation and abortions, the state managed to control rapid population growth while this policy was in operation. More than two decades of the One-Child Policy, however, had unintended side effects. It led to the shortage of a young labour force and a decline in economic productivity. In response to the serious low fertility and population ageing issues, the Chinese government had to promptly adjust the family planning programme in order to mobilise a new and larger labour force to aid economic recovery.

However, the introduction of new birth planning policies has thus far failed to stem the continuing decline in the birth rate. Although the introduction of the Two-Child Policy contributed to a brief baby boom in 2016, the birth rate declined for the six consecutive years from 2016 to 2022, from 12.95‰ to 6.77‰; the number of people over 65 reached an unprecedented high of 14.9% in 2022 (Tatum, 2021; BBC, 2023; Ren, 2023). According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, China witnessed its first decline in the total population in 2022 since the country had suffered a famine in the early 1960s, with 9.56 million births and 10.41 million deaths in 2022, a decrease of 850,000 in the total population from the end of the previous year (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). In recent years, local governments at different levels have introduced a series of policies to encourage childbirth, although many of them have been questioned and criticised by the public. For example, most provinces have designed and issued a policy to extend maternity leave for women; Sichuan province relaxed birth registration requirements in 2023, which means marriage is no longer considered the premise for childbirth here.

In the process of population regulation, women's bodies have become the main object of governmental intervention, utilisation and control. Forced IUDs, sterilisation and abortions on women were effective ways to reduce childbirths 30 or 40 years ago; by contrast, the State Council declared recently that they now intend to "reduce abortions for non-medical reasons" (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021), though there have not been concrete measures introduced yet to this effect. The governmental policies, measures and speeches about increasing fertility have made many Chinese women worried and panicked. Some women complained online that they were pressured to have children by their communities and local maternal and child-care service centres through frequent and regular phone calls and texts (See Chapter 4). Some women worry about whether abortion and contraception will be restricted in the near future, after the state has begun to adjust its birth planning policies in an effort to increase the birth rate (Wang, 2021).

Although the party state regards population control – the regulation of women's fertility specifically – as an important strategy to develop the neoliberal economy, I argue that young Chinese women born under the One-Child Policy are not passive subjects who are fully manipulated in neoliberal and authoritarian China. In this chapter, I will explore the following questions: What specific restrictions and dilemmas do single Chinese women of the One-Child generation face regarding childbirth? How do neoliberalism and state power wield an influence on Chinese women's reproduction? How do young women find agency or empower themselves in a variety of reproductive predicaments in the current, unique political climate for gender inequality and reproductive autonomy?

Between late 2020 and early 2021, I spent eight months interviewing 30 single women of the One-Child generation. Just as I completed my interviews, the state introduced its Three-Child Policy. Hence my interview data cannot present single women's ideas about the latest population policy. However, many of them discussed the Two-Child Policy, introduced in 2016, so single women's attitudes and behaviours towards pronatalist policies promoted by the state can be reflected through their views on the Two-Child Policy. I noted that most of my participants were not optimistic or positive about institutionalised and normative childbirth. Six of them firmly resisted childbirth; two of them expressed a strong willing of not having a child most of them called for the liberalisation of reproductive rights for unmarried women; some had tried/would try to make use of normative marriage to achieve their own reproductive aims. Based on my findings, therefore, I argue that single Chinese women are able to negotiate individual reproductive autonomy through making use of the opportunities, space and gaps left out by neoliberalism and the increasingly authoritarian and patriarchal state, although the transformative political, economic and cultural climates have caused a growing gender inequality in urban China and asserted new forms of pressure on unmarried Chinese women today, unique to this moment in time.

**Normative Childbirth: Difficulties in (Not) Being a Mother**

Anna, 27 years old, had been in a stable relationship with her boyfriend since 2012, with whom she had just got engaged a few months before I interviewed her in 2020. Although they had not yet applied for a marriage license, they had already felt the pressure from their parents to have children.

> My boyfriend was on his annual leave last month and returned to his [parents'] home to discuss our wedding ceremony. His mother said: "You two should have a baby soon after you get married. You two have been in a relationship for so many years. If you don't have a child soon, I would think there is something wrong with you guys!"

Anna was not the only one who was pressured to marry and have children soon. Lily's roommate Olivia experienced a similar situation. Olivia was pursuing a PhD degree in Beijing, but her boyfriend's parents pressured her to marry soon so that she could have children as soon as possible. These young women's experiences indicated a common perception of marriage and childbirth shared by many Chinese people. It is normally assumed that marriage means children, and that couples will have children as soon as they get married (Evans, 2002). Childless women after marriage are normally stigmatised as physically or psychologically "sick", and their husbands are seen as "too weak" in China (Evans, 2002, p.348). Sometimes, even if a DINK (double income, no kids) couple precisely claim their no desire for children, there would be gossip that the couple is too "sick" to give birth to a child (Evans, 2002). My participant Shan extremely desired marriage and childbirth, and was also afraid of being stigmatised as a "sick" woman: "*I suspect other people are gossiping about me. Do they think I have [physical or mental] problems?*" Her concerns also imply that being childless after marriage would be seriously stigmatised in China, as the fear of social stigma becomes an important reason for many people to have children, whether they like children or not.

Back to Anna's story, she told me that she did not like children at all, and her ideal life was to practise DINK with her husband. When discussing children and womanhood, she said:

> Children mean nothing to me, so I don't want them. I don't agree with my elders or cousins who think a woman's life would be complete if she has a child. Why do I need a child to complete my womanhood? In addition to my sacrifice, what a child will bring to me is just nightmares. Her/his bad temper leads to my bad temper. Even though you meet someone you love, I don't think you have to [give birth]. Some people say when a woman meets somebody she loves, she is willing to give birth for him. I love my boyfriend very much, but I don't want to get pregnant just due to his preference.
>
> (Anna, aged 27)

Anna was very angry with the so-called idea of "complete womanhood", which attempts to define a standardised, normalised life for a woman that implies pregnancy and childrearing after marriage. For example, this is the idea that a "complete" woman should not avoid or evade any of her key gender roles, including daughter, wife, mother, and mother-in-law; otherwise, her life would be deemed unworthy. Motherhood, which has traditionally been considered most important to "complete" a woman's life, is seen as a "natural obligation" and "desirable state" for all women (Evans, 2002, p.348). Contemporary urban women in China appear to have more life options, like singledom and childlessness, due to their financial independence and access to ideas about gender equality and autonomy (e.g. neoliberal ideas of individualism) that may lead to ideological resistance against or at least questioning traditional values; however, childbirth is still a near-universal practice in China, and the notion that "motherhood is a woman's most important mission" remains accepted widely. One of my participants, Shan, who was desperate to have children but had been diagnosed with an ovarian disease, worried that her womanhood would be

incomplete if she could not give birth. "*I think the reproductive value of a woman is very important. A woman without a child is incomplete, whom the society is prejudiced against. So is her husband".* Shan's feelings of pressure to procreate stem not only from her affection for children but also from the cultural stigma on childless women and society's stereotypical definition of womanhood. As Evans (2002) states, the life of a childless woman would be considered incomplete, unfulfilled, miserable, and unworthy; a woman who does not give birth is viewed as too old, and physically or mentally sick to varying degrees. Many women have internalised such norms about "womanhood", and have no choice but to procreate the next generation to "prove" their claim to normative, socially acceptable womanhood.

It is noteworthy that Anna mentioned another widely recognised idea regarding childbirth in the interview: "*If a woman truly loves a man, she is willing to bear children for him*". This proverb, which links the concept of love to procreation, could be very effective to coerce a woman into having children because the discourse about "romantic love" is particularly popular in contemporary China. The institutionalisation of romantic love within marriage (Pan, 2006; Davis, 2014), and the dissemination of "romance" through popular culture (Wang, 2021) collaborate to make "romantic love" become a cultural ideal and an important criterion in modern mate selection and Chinese daily lives since the 1980s (see Chapter 6). A rising number of women value emotional connections and mutual affection in courtships. Rooted in this context, women's personal procreative decisions are closely tied to romantic love. "Bearing a child for my beloved man" is regarded as the ultimate way for a woman to show her commitment to love; the practice of love has become a coercive excuse to force women to self-sacrifice or go against their own desires and choices. Although there are many cultural obstacles making it difficult for a married woman to resist motherhood, it is not impossible for them to negotiate their reproductive choices. Some young women in my participant group, all of whom were singleton daughters, imagined or managed to employ some effective and pragmatic ways to negotiate their decisions (not) to be mothers through manipulating existing

marital and gender norms.

> I want to look for a divorced man, fifteen to twenty years older than me, who has children already. I don't want to have children. I have thought about being DINK. If I remain DINK till our forties, I would be too old to have children, but he would be not. In this situation, [if he wants to have a child someday], our marriage might easily fall apart. So I prefer to marry a man who has a child already and doesn't have reproductive needs for me. That would be more stable.
>
> (Su, aged 25)

Su was pursuing a Master's degree in Germany and dating European men when I interviewed her. Rather than domestic roles as a wife and a mother, she focused more on individual interests and self-development in a marriage. Although divorced people, particularly those who have children, are heavily stigmatised (divorced men are far less stigmatised than divorced women) in Chinese culture, she still preferred to marry a divorced man who had children already, so that she would not have to give birth. However, it is worth noting that Su desired for a marriage that is stable and solid, and unconsciously considered children as the core element of a stable and happy family. Besides, she also alluded to other gender norms and stereotypes related to ageing men and women: ageing men may remain "hot" while ageing women would lose their womanhood, since they are childless and seen to lose their youthful beauty. In spite of a gendered, normative understanding of marriage, childbirth and age, her marriage plan seemed to nonetheless enable her to avoid undertaking normative social responsibilities and achieve a kind of empowerment within marriage by shaping the romantic and marital life based on individual choices and desire.

In contrast to some women I interviewed, who embraced marriage but resisted motherhood, some other women desired for children, even though they were unmarried. Shan was in tears throughout the whole interview, not only because she

longed for marriage and children, but also because the man whom she wanted to marry and have children with was already married. She was also told by the man that he would not make her any promises, which intensified her sorrow and worries. At the end of the interview, she said: "*As long as I can get pregnant, and have children with the man I am in love with, everything would be all right. It's not just about marriage.*" Shan expected to have a child with the man she loved, but she clearly knew that this is almost impossible in China. Her experience mirrored a dilemma faced by many single Chinese women, particularly those who hope to have children outside of marriage. "Normally, without a marriage license, one cannot get a birth certificate in China, resulting in no *hukou/residence registration system* for the new-born baby, which thus puts great pressure on young people to marry" (Ji, 2017, p.8). As a significant proof of identification for Chinese citizens, *hukou* refers to "a residence registration system that provides registered residents with essential social services, such as access to education in local schools, subsidised medical care, pensions, and eligibility to apply for subsidised public housing" (Nakano, 2014, p.160). Children born outside of marriage are called "illegal births" and have been difficult to register with *hukou* (Nakano, 2014; Zhao and Basnyat, 2019) – at least until, recently, as some new policies about *hukou* and childbirth have come out in some provinces, though not nationally.

Culturally, unmarried women who are pregnant or give birth would be seriously stigmatised, as extramarital birth is considered a "moral" issue in China. Many single mothers may lose support from their family members and sometimes experience both verbal and non-verbal abuse from family and social networks. It is difficult, nearly impossible, for an unmarried woman to bear and rear a child in present-day China. Unmarried women do this sometimes, of course, but they are at the risk of being morally stigmatised and losing support from public institutions and their social networks.

Just after I finished my fieldwork in May 2021, the Three-Child Policy replaced the

Two-Child Policy. Soon after, many provinces issued different local policies to encourage childbirth. According to the "Regulations on Birth Registration Services of Sichuan Province" in January 2023, from 15 February, birth registration in the province will no longer be restricted by marital status; restrictions on the number of births will be removed; and the process for birth registration will be simplified (The People's Government of Neijiang Municipality, 2023). In other words, any newborn children could be registered with *hukou*, no matter whether their parents are married or not. Likewise, Guangdong, Anhui and Shaanxi provinces have also lifted their restrictions on birth registrations. Although the regulation is aimed at stimulating birth rates rather than protecting the human rights of women or children, it is indeed a milestone in the pursuit of Chinese women's reproductive rights and autonomy.

Additionally, many participants had called for the government to remove the restrictions on unmarried women's right to use assisted reproduction technology (ART). In recent years, the willingness of single women to freeze their eggs has continued to increase. According to the China Assisted Reproduction Research Report 2023, more than 60% of the respondents hope to preserve their fertility through egg freezing. Among them, women aged between 30 and 34 showed the highest willingness to do so; the willingness of those well-educated was higher (Ren, 2023). During the interviews, many young women mentioned the story of an online Chinese influencer, Ye Haiyang. As a lesbian woman, she resisted heterosexual marriage but desired to have children. In 2017, she went to the US and spent over 800,000 CNY, equivalent to around 120,000 USD in the same year, to buy sperm and then birth a mixed-raced daughter. Five years later, she gave birth to a second child in the same way. All the participants who mentioned the story of Ye Haiyang claimed that they would consider doing the same thing if possible.

However, it is currently almost impossible for most unmarried Chinese women to use assisted reproduction technology (ART) such as egg-freezing technology and test tube baby programme in mainland China. According to national regulations, ART is

exclusively applied to heterosexual married couples (Zhu, 2021). Jilin province stipulated in 2002 that if a woman has reached the legal age for marriage, decides not to marry and has no children, she may have one child by means of legal assisted reproductive technology, but the implementation of the regulation is not promising, since it is contrary to the national regulations and policies (Ling and Yan, 2023). Due to such limitations, some well-off unmarried women seek ART overseas.

Although some new birth planning policies and regulations, combined with ART for those who can afford it, make childbirth outside of marriage seemingly promising, it is still difficult for most unmarried women to have their own children given the unsupportive social welfare system and biased cultural environment for single mothers. However, some young women, including several of my participants, find creative ways of making full use of social norms and institutions to achieve empowerment and independence, and to meet their individual reproductive needs and ambitions.

Emily, a friend of Peng's, identified as an asexual woman. She got married and then divorced immediately after giving birth to a child:

> None of us knew she was married. She only informed us when she had a baby, and she was planning her divorce for the next step (laughs). We asked "Sister! Why didn't you tell us that you were married?" She said "It wasn't worth telling you, was it? I don't like him. I just wanted to have a child. That's why I told you when my child was born. This is the big thing in my life!"
>
> (Peng, aged 31)

I was surprised at Emily's "creative" method, which instrumentalised marriage as a pragmatic step towards what she actually wanted: a child who could legally access *hukou*. Since marriage is a "legal license" to have children in most of China, it seems an effective and pragmatic way for women, like Emily, to make full use of this license

to fulfil their reproductive ambitions. Emily was not an exception. Yanan also viewed marriage as a tool to realise her reproductive goal, despite having no interest in marriage:

> I have strong reproductive anxiety...I think the Chinese government should liberalise the reproductive rights of single women...If I have enough money, I hope I can have a big enough space where my husband and I live in separate spaces and don't interfere with each other...He is just a "[reproductive] tool"! (laughs)

I laughed out loud when I heard her thoughts on the role of her future husband. In contrast to some other women, who still harboured the view of "giving birth for my beloved men", Emily and Yanan instead spoke about themselves as autonomous subjects who actively chose to reproduce for themselves rather than in service of cultural norms that pressure women to marry for the benefit of husbands, partners, and/or the government and wider community. In this situation, men were objectified and became framed as reproductive resources who served these women's reproductive desires, as opposed to wielders of gendered power over women. For these young Chinese women, marriage is no longer something that must be treated seriously and stuck to for a life time, or emotionally invested in. Rather, it could be an effective legal tool for them to find agency and a way to meet individual reproductive needs and ambitions.

**Responsible Motherhood: How to Define a "Qualified" Mother?**

> Once you are pregnant, you have to do birth inspections and mother care and eat healthy products; after you give birth to a child, you need to "sit the month (*zuoyuezi*)", and pay for a babysitter and milk powder. The quality of milk powder of domestic brands is not assured, so you have to buy the imported; paper diapers also need to be overseas brands…Children' clothes are the most

> profitable (expensive), with few fabrics and high prices. Kids grow fast, so you need to buy new ones soon. Hence, it's a lot of money to spend on a daily basis, even if the kid is healthy. If he/she is in poor health, [you will spend more].
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> (Tao, aged 33)

Tao was one of the six childbirth resisters in my interviews, who spent much time complaining about the troubles and risks of childcare, and specifically calculated the cost of having a baby in addition to the resources invested in education. Both Tao and I were surprised at the amount of expense for childbearing and childrearing after she calculated it in detail. Besides the mentioned expenses, a couple even needs to set aside money for the future purchase of marital housing for their son if they give birth to a boy. Given that "superior education" (*youyu*) has become the new mainstream childcare norm since the One-Child Policy, it is increasingly common for Chinese parents to prioritise their children's financial and educational futures. As Xie (2021) states, "the financial cost of raising a 'quality' child in Chinese cities like Beijing to meet the new standards of middle-class consumption is high" (p.129). Therefore, most of my participants shared the idea that each step for pregnancy, childbearing, childrearing, and education should be cautiously planned and fully prepared for. In this situation, many of them expressed a similar view that they have not felt financially or psychologically able enough to take on the responsibility of taking good care of a child.

> It can't be like you only consider your own reasons, such as age or reproductive desire, to have a child. It should be considered whether you could be responsible for this child, [and] whether you are able to make him/her stand at the same starting line with his/her peers…When I lived in Japan, I met a woman from Shanghai, who divorced and had a son... She told me her son could have gone to a better university in the US, but he chose an ordinary one because of her weak financial capacity. When her son hoped to study a Master's programme, she said "I've been overdrawn for your four-year

undergraduate study." Hence the son had to give up and choose to work.

(Peng, aged 31)

Peng underlined the need for a parent's financial ability to raise a child, which she considered a primary consideration before choosing childbirth. The story of the woman from Shanghai particularly gave Peng a warning regarding "responsibility". As the only daughter in the family, Peng had witnessed how her parents had fully supported her education, or to raise a "quality" child (implying highly, even internationally educated children) in Japan for eight years. Her words implied that the incapability to provide full support to children means irresponsible motherhood, which would bring risks to children's growth and even prevent them from succeeding in the fierce market competition of the future.

Peng was not the only participant who underlined the importance of parental responsibility, wrapped up with financial capacity and status/privilege. In the fieldwork, I discovered that "responsible motherhood" or "responsibility" were the most frequently mentioned conditions for these young unmarried women to measure their reproductive decisions. Chang, another motherhood resister, proposed that rearing a child well requires *"[parents] to ensure she/he (the child) could grow up to be an upright and honest person and to tell the child right from wrong and feel happiness".* Chang emphasised the responsibility of parents to parent/educate their children well, in terms of both schooling and (moral) value, which has especially taken root. The views on "responsibility" indicate a deep-rooted eugenic ideology in Chinese cultural consciousness since the introduction of the One-Child Policy in the late 1970s. The central slogan of this birth control policy was "superior birth and superior education" (*yousheng youyu*), aiming to improve the national "population quality" (Kipnis, 2006). Eugenic ideology reflects social Darwinist values (Xie, 2021), intensifying competition between children (and implicitly their parents/families) in China. Essentially, it is for the production of competitive, enterprising, and "high-quality" generations that serve the country's neoliberal economic development,

which thus in theory will enhance China's competitiveness in the world capitalist system (Fong, 2004).

This eugenic ideology has been so deeply ingrained in Chinese culture that parents, particularly mothers, are required to fulfil the responsibility of taking good care of their children and bringing up "high-quality" offspring. In terms of the strict public requirements for motherhood, Muqing commented angrily:

> Most people around me take the roles of wives and mothers so seriously that they often conduct "moral blackmail/coercion" (*daode bangjia*) on others. They often comment "Why would a mother leave her child?" Why not? I can't even feed myself! The moral blackmail on women is so serious! People make up some stories, and say something like "Being a mother makes a woman strong (*wei mu ze gang*)"…Damn it! Go to Hell!

"Being a mother makes a woman strong" comes from a proverb that says "While a woman is vulnerable naturally, being a mother makes her strong" (*nüzi ben ruo, wei mu ze gang*). This proverb clearly stereotypes femininity, and simultaneously deifies mothers and naturalises highly responsible motherhood. The high social expectations for responsible motherhood have been reinforced since the reform era. By comparison, women's identities as wives and mothers were comparatively weakened and neglected in socialist China, because labour, rather than any other social realms or communities, "served as the principal cultural site for the production of identities" (Rofel, 1999, p.122). Chinese state performed a version of gender equality where women were equal to men in this discourse, and chiefly focused on shaping the desexualised social identity of both men and women as socialist labourers in the public domain, while neglecting citizens' other identities in the private space.

However, China's transition from socialism to neoliberalism deteriorated women's status in the public sphere and subtly reinscribed some pre-socialist, traditional

gendered roles in the private domain. The privatisation and abandonment of state-owned enterprises in the market reform period led to mass unemployment. Women were the first to be sacked because they were considered less able and less competitive, as well as burdened with the "natural" responsibility of looking after family members and doing housework (Gong, 2002). They have been encouraged to "return home" (*huigui jiating*) since the 1990s when the state started to optimise labour reorganisation; the importance of women's role as "*virtuous wives and good mothers"* (*xianqi liangmu*) for the family, society and the country has been constantly propagandised as well. At the same time, the media run a series of campaigns to select "Great Mothers" and "Most Beautiful Mothers" who "moved/inspired" China (see: Figure 1). By publicising how these women sacrificed for their children and families, the media attempt to promote the so-called "innate" and "great" motherhood that each woman is supposed to be endowed with, invoking bio-essentialist constructions of womanhood, which are in themselves rooted in eugenic ideology.

**Figure 1**: (Top 10 Greatest Mothers of China, 2001)

Modern Chinese women are pressured to be "qualified" and "responsible" mothers, that is, following a series of medical rules and social norms during pregnancy, childbearing, and childrearing (Xie, 2021), in order to provide children with adequate material, emotional and financial support, and sometimes sacrificing themselves for the sake of their children. In response to such pressures, many of my participants have

adopted strategies, such as resisting childbirth, delaying motherhood, and limiting the number of births they commit to, to minimise or eliminate the risks and pressures of childcare on themselves.

> It's very difficult to end a relationship if you have children. After you have a child, you are not able to choose freely. I know I am a person who really wants to be responsible. I will think that "She/he will have to grow up in a divorced family [if I am divorced]". I will absolutely sacrifice myself for the sake of my children. I am very clear that I will be such a person, so I think it is better not to have children. Why would I get myself in trouble?
>
> (Siwen, aged 23)

Siwen, who firmly resists marriage, is a childbirth resister as well. Out of her sense of responsibility, Siwen believed that she would not make her child live with a single parent even at the expense of her own happiness. As divorce is still stigmatised in China to varying degrees, anybody associated with "divorce" is stigmatised in different ways, whether one is a divorced woman or a child raised in a divorced family. Children living in single-parent families are normally seen as "disadvantaged in academic performance, cognitive and noncognitive development and psychological development" (Zhang, 2020, pp.85-86), which also invokes eugenic ideology. So, divorced parents who raise "broken" families and "wretched" children are viewed as irresponsible.

Moreover, Siwen's view implies that married Chinese women often have no choice but to sacrifice personal needs to maintain an unhappy but seemingly "complete" marriage once they have children. This is because parenthood, especially motherhood, indicates "undertaking responsibility for the children and making a sacrifice for the benefit of children" in Chinese culture (Li, 2020, p.119), so it is taken for granted that mothers should not divorce once they have had children. In addition to these sociocultural reasons, Chinese society has not yet established a comprehensive

welfare system for single mothers to relieve their multiple burdens and to protect their rights. Hence mothers have to face many problems once they are divorced, such as fewer career development opportunities, damage to their interpersonal relationships, physical and mental health problems, etc. (Li, 2020). Siwen's resistance to childbirth is not simply due to her high personal sense of responsibility towards children, but also because of the risks associated with the numerous predicaments that women face in terms of marriage, childcare, and divorce.

This high sense of personal responsibility led to some young women, like Siwen, Peng, Chang and Tao, to resist embracing motherhood, and also influenced some other women who had decided to delay childbirth until they felt financially and psychologically ready for children. "*I may not have a child until I am psychologically strong enough. I am now trying to improve myself and am unable to be responsible for another life*" (Ting); "*In Beijing, some people around me, who have children, have calculated that if a couple can't make 50,000 CNY per month, they'd better not consider childbirth...Some people, like my sister and me, won't have a child if we are not financially able enough*" (Fei). For most of my participants, who had decided to have children, having a one-and-only child is all they can do under the increasing pressure of "high-quality" childcare.

> I have always advocated to have only one child. That is enough! If you can give all your love to this only child, and take care of her/him well, that is good enough. Unless you are those with deeper pockets!
>
> (Lily, aged 27)

Although the state has enacted new birth planning policies to encourage childbirth, most single women in my interviews were not optimistic about having more than one child. In the 1950s, pronatalism prevailed in socialist China, and citizens were encouraged by the government to give birth so as to sustain the supply of labo[u]r for socialist construction. The system of "distribution according to population" in the

collective period provided a strong stimulus for population growth. Having more children meant not only more food, land, and resources from the state but also more labour to support the entire family. By comparison, economic reforms and birth control since the late 1970s have worked together to make it impossible for most families to have several children. With the rising living costs in urban China and the marketisation of education, medical care and housing, the cost of raising more than one child is likely to be far greater than the financial benefit that children can bring to a family. Consequently, as more than a generation of families has embraced the One-Child Policy and changed their fertility patterns in accordance with the law since the 1980s, a norm has now been established which makes young couples more likely to regard an only child as a cultural ideal (Blair and Madigan, 2021) and/or as their only valuable/financially sustainable option. Most single women who are only daughters, like Lily, prefer to invest all their resources in raising a "high-quality" child rather than to comply with the new fertility policies propagandised by the party state.

Single Chinese women's choices regarding childbirth currently indicate a burgeoning "defamiliation" (Chang and Song, 2010; Chang, 2014). This term is used to generalise a social trend of rapidly increasing marriage deferral, childlessness, fertility reduction, and divorce in some East Asian societies, such as South Korea (Chang and Song, 2010; Chang, 2014). This phenomenon is ascribed to "compressed modernity" (Chang and Song, 2010). Compressed modernity refers to "a civilizational condition in which economic, political, social and/or cultural changes occur in an extremely condensed manner in respect to both time and space, and in which the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements leads to the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system" (Chang and Song, 2010, p.544). Under such modernity, national or social institutions such as the state, industrial economy, firms, unions, schools and welfare systems are increasingly ineffective to perform social functions, which results in individuals having no option but to depend on intimate relationships or family for help and security (Chang and

Song, 2010; Chang, 2014). In other words, "East Asian families have functioned as a highly effective receptacle of compressed modernity and late modernity" (Chang, 2014, p.38). Since family is so overloaded that it cannot further undertake social functions, it tends to spell out individual risks rather than social resources for people in many East Asian societies, such as South Korea, so an increasing number of Koreans attempt to mitigate the family-associated risks by intentionally reducing family relations, controlling the effective scope and duration of family life.

This dilemma in South Korea is shared by many neighbouring East Asian countries, such as mainland China. The state-led market reform contributes to China entering into a neoliberal era, when the economy has been rapidly developing within several decades. However, as the party-state concentrates resources on promoting economic growth, rather than improving social welfare (Fong, 2004), Chinese people face the predicament that the national institutions fail to undertake social functions, while attempting to transfer economic burdens to the domestic/private space of the family unit or the individual through the propaganda of mutual support between generations and the legislation of "filial" actions. This follows a global capitalist trend, albeit with local Chinese cultural characteristics. The legislation stipulates that "adult children must meet the financial, medical, housing and social needs of their elderly relations as long as they have the ability. Disregarding this obligation can be punishable by law" (Liu, 2008, p.415). Consequently, the younger generation, particularly adult singleton children, are experiencing unprecedented financial and emotional pressure to practise filial obligation as well as take family responsibility. A popular formula, "1-2-4-plus", reflects the dilemma faced by adult singleton children in China, which means that "during their working years, a couple may have to support one child and four parents, and in some cases, up to eight grandparents as well, without the help of any sibling" (Liu, 2008, p.410). With the introduction of the Two-Child and Three-Child Policy, some couples have to support more than one child. Bearing such pressure, many young people, such as the participants in my fieldwork, decided to mitigate the family-related risks through limiting their prospects of further family relations, in the

form of postponing or rejecting marriage and childbirth, and reducing fertility.

**Childbearing & Rearing Risks: A Loss of the Desirable & Desiring Self**

In the year 2019, a popular science article appeared online, titled "The shit, urine and flatus that no one told you about in childbirth: Pain or freedom?" (Huakaifugui, 2019) Based on oral stories from more than 10,000 mothers, the article presented the physical trauma women face during and after childbirth. Within half a week, the article had 5 million views, 13,000 retweets and 10,000 comments on Sina Weibo. For the first time in my 25 years, I was introduced to the idea of how much pain women go through in childbirth. I was completely shocked. However, I was also aware that nobody had ever told me about this, not even my mother. Women's physical and mental issues caused by childbirth have long been silenced among the Chinese public, particularly among the older generations.

Despite unprecedentedly unveiling the plight of women's fertility to the public, the article was quickly reported and deleted from Weibo. Some men complained that this article was so toxic and misleading that their wives and girlfriends were now reluctant to have children, whereas many young women, like some of my participants and me, commented on how grateful they were for the article. Regarding childbirth, women have always been silenced about the reality of their reproductive experiences, which embodies a structural suppression of women's self-expression in Chinese society. In my interviews with single women of the One-Child generation, however, I discovered that many of them paid close attention to women's health during and after pregnancies. Some of them spoke about their worries about childbearing or even resisted childbirth to avoid the sacrifice of their health, body shape and youthfulness, which indicates a prevailing gender norm related to beauty and ageing, and is further reinforced by consumerism.

> It is so hurtful to give birth! I have watched a video, in which the blogger

> shared her experience on childbearing. She did not experience very serious problems, but just got some issues like uroclepsia and pelvic floor muscle relaxation. These are the one-off injuries of childbirth, which become a lifetime problem due to the lack of follow-up repairs. Her point is that women can choose to have children, but you have to know and understand all the problems that will arise when you reproduce.
>
> (Chang, aged 23)

Chang was one of the participants who had described to me the "shocking" postpartum risks they had learnt about on the Internet. In China, the knowledge and topics about sex, pregnancy and reproduction continue to be sensitive and tabooed, although it is argued by some scholars that China is experiencing a "sexual revolution" and witnessing increasing non-normative intimacies (Pan, 2006). The "abstinence" attitude is commonly predominant in China, in spite of political unrest historically (Aresu, 2009). Sex is moralised, and sex education at school and at home is "silenced". Even mothers rarely tell their daughters about sex and their own childbirths and postpartum problems. I still remember a friend of mine telling me that she did not know that menstrual blood flows from the vagina instead of the urethra until her second year at university. According to a survey of Chinese adolescent students in 2017, among 1,840 Chinese students from high schools and universities, the students who did not learn about AIDS/HIV, pregnancy, reproduction and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as physical health during school, took up 36.16%, 70.26% and 39.78% respectively (Zhao et al., 2019).

The Internet seems increasingly important for young people to learn about sex due to the lack of sex education at school and at home. It is reported that 68.44% of university students acquired sex knowledge through the Internet; nearly half had seen pornographic videos, texts and photos (Sina, 2020). On the one hand, there are concerns that pornography would mislead young people's views and behaviours towards sex and reproduction (Zhao et al., 2019); on the other hand, the Internet

simultaneously makes possible the quick spread of scientific sexual knowledge and personal experiences regarding sex and reproduction. Whether it is the widely discussed online article I mentioned or the blogger Chang referred to, young women are increasingly sharing their personal experiences about sex and fertility through the Internet, which in turn provides women with a channel to further understand and discuss procreation, postpartum health, and their own bodies. As a result, with the information and knowledge about childbirth gathered online, Siwen and Chang claimed that an important reason for not having children is the irreversible physical hurt it would entail. For women who find it impossible to refuse motherhood at all, they may attempt to reduce the number of births to lessen such physical hurt: "*I will give birth to only one child at most. If my husband's family could accept childlessness, I won't give birth…[Childbearing] is too painful!*" (Ai Ai).

In addition to the physical pain and problems caused by childbearing, many young women's fear of childbirth stems from their anxiety of being "out of shape" and experiencing a "loss of youthfulness" after reproduction. Hani, who did not want to give birth, considered childbearing "horrible" because she worried that it would make her "*fat and turn old*". Fang, who was negotiating with her boyfriend about not having children after marriage, gave a similar reason: "*Giving birth will make a woman turn old.*" According to Jasienska (2020), for women, "lower high-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels, permanent weight gain and greater abdominal obesity, may persist for many years after birth" (p.3). Marcinkowska et al. (2017) demonstrate that women having fewer children look younger. Despite a certain medical basis for the relationship between fertility and appearance, young women's desperation for youthfulness, beauty and femininity highlights a prevailing gender norm that beauty and youthfulness is one the most important parts of womanhood. If a woman is ageing or out of shape for any reasons, her womanhood would be derogated. Consumerism, as the by-product of neoliberalism, has reinforced this gender norm.

In socialist China, gender equality was an important part of the state's political agenda.

The state produced a de-sexualised social identity through neutralising femininity and eliminating gender differences (Zhang, 2007), for the purpose of encouraging women to participate in the labour force. In this period, "iron girls (*tie niangzi*)" (Figure 2), who were portrayed as tough, brave, technically skilled, and physically strong, with vigour and speed that compete with men's and normally wearing a "unisex blue trouser suit" (Liu, 2014, p.19), became a mainstream image of womanhood.

Figure 2: (Women can hold up half the sky, n.d.)

However, the market reform since the 1980s dismantled the unified masculine female image of the Maoist era and reclaimed "the female self" by highlighting sex differences (Liu, 2014, p.20). As Wang (2003) elucidates, "urban China was engulfed by a rising discourse of femininity that aimed at combating Maoist perspectives of gender equality and widening gender differences" (pp.167-168). Women are encouraged by the mass media and the consumer market to be engaged in various feminine expressions, such as "white-collar beauties", "virtuous housewives", and "enterprising strong women". "Hot mom/Spicy mom" (*la ma*), which usually refers to expectant mothers in their 20s and 30s who are framed as beautiful, sexy, and well-groomed, become an ideal for contemporary Chinese women. In 2013, the TV

drama *Hot Mom* (2013) represented a typical neoliberal image of a mother who is desirable, beautiful, and enterprising (Figure 3). As shown in the picture, an attractive woman who dresses professionally stands there, holding a child in her left arm, resting her right hand on her hip, and blowing a gum bubble. She looks confident, professional and able to handle both her career and childcare very well. The representation of "mother" in the TV drama breaks some traditional and stereotypical representations of mothers as virtuous, self-sacrificing, out-of-shape and undesirable. However, it implies a neoliberal understanding of womanhood and motherhood: women should be attractive, desirable, and financially self-reliant, and pursue a "felicitous work-family balance" (Rottenberg, 2014, p.422).

Figure 3: (*Hot Mom*, 2013)

Information and products about women's fashion, health, sex, and lifestyle has boomed, which has stimulated women to invest in their feminine beauty (Liu, 2014, p.20). As a consequence, women today are increasingly anxious about their figure, appearance, and age, as the mass media create standard models of female beauty for ordinary women through over-publicising the femininity and beauty of female stars (Liu, 2014). For example, "fair skin (*bai*)", "slim figure" (*shou*), and "youthful

appearance (*you*)" have become the latest aesthetic trend commonly pursued by young Chinese women. The rise of the neoliberal capitalist market constructs a common standard for "beauty", "sexiness" and "desirabiliity", and then capitalises on it. To remain youthful and desirable, new mothers participate in postpartum recovery courses, particularly ones focused on restoring the pre-pregnancy body. Many "sitting-the-month centres" (*yuezi zhongxin*), providing childcare and postpartum recovery services for mothers during their first postpartum months, declare that they could help new mothers regain their former slim figures through specific diets and exercise, which is growingly popular among young mothers. Unmarried/unpregnant women, such as some of my participants, find it difficult to make reproductive decisions for fear of the physical and aesthetic impact of childbirth on their bodies and appearance.

For young Chinese women, physical damage and loss of desirable bodies are not all the risks of having children. All my participants were born under the One-Child Policy from the 1980s to 1990s, though a few of them have a sibling. Some of my participants did not want to have children because they preferred to prioritise their own happiness and personal desires: "*I will lose myself from the very beginning because you need to give the child love*" (Muqing); "*The child is an outsider who will interfere with my life*" (Peng). The market reform since the 1980s contributed to the birth and growth of the Chinese middle class, who were able to offer substantial resources and material goods to their only children (Blair and Madigan, 2021). As the "little emperors" and "little empresses" (Croll, 2006; Blair and Madigan, 2021) who have enjoyed unprecedented resources, love and care, the One-Child generation prefer to make "immediate gratification and self-fulfilment [their] primary goal, with less emphasis upon attaining the statuses of spouse and parent" when they grow up (Blair and Madigan, 2021, p. 2355). For one reason, parenthood often signifies sacrifice and responsibility, which would hinder young adults from pursuing individual happiness; for another reason, an emergent new life will inevitably compete with the young parents, who are of the One-Child generation, for the resources, attention, and space

that they already have. Thus, when asked about her opinion on motherhood, Hani complained: "*I have to pay all my attention to the child. That's too much for me to do! I can't!*"

To maximise their individual happiness, my participants adopt different strategies to deal with the pressure to give birth. As a "*sexual person*" (Zilu), Zilu preferred her current free single life with her sexual partners in Canada rather than a life with a child who "*will make me hurt and cost a lot of money*" (Zilu). She claimed that she did not plan on having children for at least five to ten years because she wanted to "*enjoy the current life status for another couple of years*" (Zilu). Since her parents were based in China and unable to supervise her life, Zilu found it easier to postpone marriage and childbirth and maintain her preferred intimate relationship. Anna, who could not resist childbirth, designed a plan to maximise her ambitions and desires:

> I think this [childbearing and child-rearing] will bring lots of unhappiness in my life, so I need to discuss this with these parents before marriage on who is going to take care of the child. My partner must take the main responsibility! Don't bother me!
>
> (Anna, aged 26)

Anna experienced great pressure to give birth from both her own and her husband's families, despite having no desire for children. To free herself from intergenerational conflicts, Anna admitted that she would give birth eventually. However, her concession was not unconditional. She claimed that she would give birth to only one child at most; besides, she would bargain with her family members to make them undertake more childcare, thereby minimising her own sacrifice for the child. Likewise, Fang was negotiating with her boyfriend about not having children after marriage. Since her boyfriend still urged her to have a child for the purpose of old-age support, Fang had decided to make him take on the childcare as much as possible, once they have a child after marriage. It is uncertain whether their conditional

compromises would definitely empower them after their childbirths, but I noticed that these young women were making efforts to prioritise individual needs and exercise agency in their own lives.

Various individual desires, such as sexual, material and affective self-interest have been brought out, presented, discussed, and celebrated through mass media and public culture since the market reform era (Rofel, 2007). A newly produced generation, who were born since the 1980s and have no memory of the socialist era, are "more concerned with expressing their feelings and pursuing their own desires and ambitions through consumerism, sexual practices and relationships, making money and travelling" (Ho, et al., 2018, p.489) than their predecessors ever were. Zooming in on young Chinese women of the One-Child generation, their reproductive choices, decisions and plans are imprinted by neoliberalism. For one aspect, the Chinese neoliberal market provides a platform for women's feminine expressions through consumerism. However, the presentation and dissemination of normalised and stereotypical young and beautiful women's bodies in the consumer market and mass media arouses women's anxiety about their appearance and bodies, thus strengthening the gender stereotype and norm that women must remain youthful and good-looking all the time. Therefore, many young Chinese women, like some of my participants, choose to delay and resist childbirth or reduce the number of births to lessen physical damage and maintain youthfulness and beauty as much as possible. For another aspect, the birth planning policy produces a "desiring" generation, who are more wilful and focused on self-interest and personal desires. Some participants in my fieldwork resisted and delayed childbirth, and cleverly planned for their prospective childrearing in order to maximise their individual interests and desires, and minimise self-sacrifice in/after childbirth.

**Motherhood Penalty: A Trade-off between Motherhood and Career**

Almost all my participants were either professionals or postgraduate students who

have promising careers. When I interviewed them, two of them were preparing for their postgraduate study at overseas universities; two were working, preparing for certification exams, and doing Master's degrees simultaneously, which they hoped would "*contribute to career prospects*" (Yanan); some had devoted most of their time to their work and had clear career plans for the near future. Although these young women were enterprising and self-motivated, making every effort to pave their road to success, many of them worried about the difficulties and predicaments women are known to face in the workplace, particularly once they become mothers.

> Although Chinese legislation protects pregnant women, many of them are still fired during pregnancy, which is just done in some subtle ways. For example, your workload will be suddenly increased before the maternity leave; or [the company] will do everything they could to deprive your rights in order to force you to resign. [The employers] won't sack you directly otherwise they have to take the legal liability, but they will try everything [to make you leave].
>
> (Ai Ai, aged 26)

According to Wang (2003), a series of laws and policies have been enacted to protect women's equal employment rights since the market reform, including "forbidding laying off women during pregnancy, labour or breastfeeding" (p.169). Despite so, there are still many employers who break the laws but evade punishment, as the laws are difficult to execute "in a market economy in the absence of a sound legal system" (Wang, 2000, p.169). Many participants told me that they had been asked by HR managers about their marriage and reproductive situations and plans when they were seeking jobs. For pregnant women or mothers, many companies may coerce them to leave through insidious practices, such as increasing workload, reducing salaries/allowance and diminishing their power and importance in their jobs. It is estimated that a woman's wage drops by about 20 percent when she has one child (Shen, 2022). One of the participants, Kate, told me a story of her colleague Daisy, who had been a capable director of her working department. After she came back to

work after her second childbirth, she was moved to an "unimportant" post while her previous leading post was soon replaced by a man.

By comparison, women seemed to have experienced a completely different form of gender egalitarianism in workplaces during Mao's era, although they also faced gender segregation and gendered unequal pay there. To achieve economic goals and accelerate the construction of socialist China, the government managed to push all nationals into the labour force. The slogan "Women hold up half the sky" emphasised the significant role of women in socialist economic development. Also, the state declared that women's liberation cannot do without "going out to work", which made many women believe that paid work in public domains is necessary and glorious for women (Liu, 2007, p.27). Urban women were allocated a job in danwei and enterprises, while rural women worked in the production brigade to earn work points (Liu, 2017). The government required the work unit (*danwei*) and state-owned enterprises to employ a certain number of female workers to contribute to women's involvement in the labour force (Gong, 2002). During this period, the employment rate of Chinese women was among the highest in the world and gender pay gaps were low (Ji, et al., 2017). Employment assisted in improving women's status in the domestic domain because women's income was significant to their families in socialist China (Wang, 2000). To ensure urban women devote themselves to work, the state built a series of welfare institutions affiliated to state-owned enterprises and *danwei*, such as "dining halls, laundries, and childcare and healthcare cent[re]s" (Ji, et al., 2017, p.767), which helped women out with the heavy household duties to some extent.

The market reform since the 1980s reshaped the gender landscape in China. Although women appear to have more opportunities and increasing mobility as a result of it, they are facing new challenges and precarities in neoliberal China. To improve market competition, state-owned enterprises were urged to reduce the number of workers, optimise labour reorganisation and enhance productivity in the reform era. As women

normally had a lower educational level and mainly took on domestic labour, such as childcare and household chores (Wang, 2000), they were the first to lose jobs during the reform period. Moreover, to save costs and enhance efficiency, the restructuring of state-owned enterprises came along with the privatisation of social welfare, services, and facilities, so the domestic burden has since been re-shouldered by women (Ji, et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, women's future is not completely unpromising. Economic development has provided millions of jobs annually, a large number of which were created in a highly gendered form (Fong, 2002; Wang, 2000). For example, the rise of the service industries and secretarial jobs, and the emergence of private business have provided a variety of employment opportunities for women. At the same time, however, the market "exacerbate[s] gender discrimination and segregation in the labo[u]r market as well as other private and public spheres" (Zhang, 2007). Technical and managerial jobs are "male work" while women are mainly favoured for the non-technical jobs or service sectors (Wang, 2000). The government propagandised the naturalisation of women's reproductive and domestic duty and encouraged them to "return home". Additionally, Confucianism, promoting the ideologies such as "men as breadwinners and women as homemakers (*nanzhuwai, nvzhunei*)" and "virtuous wives and good mothers (*xianqi liangmu*)", resurged, which further solidified traditional gender roles and labour divisions. In this context, the dilemmas of married women, especially mothers, worsened. Employers often consider that mothers spend so much time on domestic labour and childcare that they cannot focus on their work, which would consequently result in low work efficiency and low productivity. Therefore, mothers become disadvantaged in workplaces, experiencing unequal pay, unemployment, and difficulties with getting jobs and promotions. Women's employment dilemma in the reform era indicates "how the neoliberal discourse of competitiveness, efficiency, and productivity along with the meritocracy discourse are woven systematically into employment practices" (Liu, 2021, p.8).

Mi Mi's mother, who worked in the same *danwei* as her husband, had competed with him for the same promotional opportunity. But the superior leader persuaded Mi Mi's mother to abandon this opportunity and give the position to her husband, because "*he is a man, who should have a higher social status*" (Mi Mi). As a result, Mi Mi's mother reluctantly gave up this opportunity due to explicit social pressure to do so on account of her gender. This example not only mirrors the blatant and undisguised gender discrimination in Chinese workplaces but also implies that the traditional gender norms and labour divisions remain entrenched in Chinese public minds. Men are encouraged to pursue success in careers because they have been taught to be the "pillar" (*ding liang zhu*) in the family and take on the responsibility to support the whole family. By contrast, women have always been disciplined to be "virtuous assistants" (*xian nei zhu*) in the family, who take care of all the domestic affairs so that their husbands could focus on their careers.

For divorced single mothers, particularly those from lower socioeconomic classes, their working and living conditions are even more difficult and precarious. Wenyin's best friend divorced and brought up her child on her own. Since her ex-husband was also in poor financial condition when they were getting a divorce, the woman had to mainly depend on herself and her parents to rear the child. At the height of her financial difficulties, she did sex work secretly. When I interviewed Wenyin, she told me her friend's financial situation was getting better, and she had been offered a full-time job opportunity. However, because she had had to look after the child and could not start the new job as soon as possible, she eventually lost the work opportunity. Based on research conducted in Zhuhai City, Li (2020) shows that single mothers are often faced with many problems, such as "lower income, and worse economic conditions, lower employment and career development opportunities, worse physical and mental health and poorer interpersonal relationships and less chance of remarriage" (p.114). A defunded welfare system and the lack of social support worsened their situations. Since many single mothers often prioritise their children, they would "subordinate their own needs to the needs of their children and are even

willing to sacrifice their career development" (Li, 2020, p.120).

Since the state removed its One-Child Policy and reintroduced the Two-Child and Three-Child Policies, the governments at different levels issued regulations and policies to encourage fertility. According to China's national policy, the statutory maternity leave is 98 days. Since the Three-Child Policy, many provinces have increased maternity leave on this basis. Henan and Hainan provinces added an additional three months of maternity leave; Jiangxi and Qinghai provinces increased maternity leave to 188 days. Some provinces increased maternity leave based on the number of births. For example, Zhejiang stipulates that women can take 158 days off for giving birth to a first child, and 188 days off for giving birth to a second and third child; Shaanxi stipulates that an additional 15 days would be added to the 158 days for giving birth to a third child (BBC, 2021). However, such policies, which seemingly protect women's rights, were critiqued strongly by the public. Many women worried that this policy would further disadvantage women, particularly mothers, in workplaces (BBC, 2021). Companies and enterprises would be less willing to offer jobs to women because women may have multiple children to take care of and be absent from work for a longer time.

To avoid the dilemmas that exclusively belong to mothers and compete for the same career opportunities as men, many women determined to give up motherhood. Fang mentioned the stories of several of her female leaders, some married and some divorced. All of them were childless and had devoted their time, energy and focus to their careers. "*She often worked after 9 pm, all alone. She put so much energy into her work that she managed to get an equal [position] with a man*" (Fang). In a similar vein, Kate's former leader became the only major female leader in the history of her *danwei* at the cost of a lifetime of singledom, childlessness and a serious work-related injury. These examples clearly show Chinese women's difficulty in sustaining both motherhood and career at the same time.

In addition to gender discrimination in the public space, another important reason for women's resistance and antipathy to childbirth lies in the predomination of the traditional gendered labour division in today's China. The proportion of Chinese men involved in domestic labour and childcare remains low. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, Chinese women did 2.6 hours of unpaid work (housework, family care, etc.) per day while Chinese men only spent 1 hour on it (World Economic Forum, 2020). The buzzword in recent years, "widowed parenting" (*sangoushi yuer*) satirises the absence of fathers in childcare and children's education, and illustrates the burden born by mothers in the domestic space. Due to the lack of their husbands' share of domestic work and of the support of welfare institutions, women have to assume more responsibility within families. Hence they are more likely to select jobs that are more flexible and require less energy and fewer working hours, which would then mean lower pay (Becker, 1991 cited in Shen, 2020). Accordingly, for many Chinese women, career and motherhood are incompatible goals. Some feel pressured to make a trade-off between being a "good mother" and an "enterprising strong woman (*nü qiangren*)", and to sacrifice one of the two. For the young single women in my interviews, most considered it difficult to balance their careers and motherhood. Therefore, some claimed that they intended to "delay childbirth until 35 years old" (Fang) in order to invest the best part of their lives in developing their careers. Some even resisted motherhood entirely. As Kate said: *"If I don't have a career, I would die. So I would rather have no kids at all!"*

**Conclusion**

This chapter has detailed the predicaments and difficulties that contemporary Chinese women face regarding motherhood and childbirth and exemplified the strategies for young single women to find agency and achieve empowerment under a variety of pressures. The party state has tried to produce specific subjects for China's neoliberal market by introducing and updating a series of birth planning policies, in which women's bodies have been objectified and instrumentalised, and women's fertility has

been under strict regulations. Economic, political, and sociocultural transformations since the 1980s have resulted in growing gender inequality, but have simultaneously created plenty of gaps, opportunities and space for Chinese women to exercise agency.

Among the thirty participants, six of them firmly resisted marriage and childbirth. Three of the resisters aged between 31 and 35 years old, who were normatively regarded "a bit/too old" to have a child since the "best" age for a woman to give birth is before 30 years old. One of the resisters, despite only 23 years old, had already planned to make her boyfriend do a ligation operation to ensure that she would not become pregnant accidentally. Two of my participants expressed a strong willingness to not have a child. One was an ascetic Buddhist, while the other, 38 years old, was in a romantic relationship with a married man who already had a child. She expected the man to divorce as soon as possible, so that she could establish a socially "recognised" and "moral" relationship with him or even establish a family with him and his child. Under the great pressure of being both responsible mothers and enterprising professionals, five participants clearly indicated that they would postpone motherhood and only give birth to one child. The strategies that single women of the One-Child generation adopted to deal with reproductive norms and predicaments reflected their different identities and diverse life courses.

Young women's difficulties in self-determining reproduction, their high sense of responsibility towards children, their increasing anxiety about the loss of the desirable bodies and desiring self, and their worries about the motherhood penalty in workplaces are embodiments of Chinese women's predicament in contemporary China. However, these also become critical reasons and a stimulus for single women to resist normative motherhood and childbirth, and negotiate reproductive autonomy. Young women of the One-Child generation could manipulate a series of marital, reproductive, social, and gender norms and national policies in economically neoliberal and politically authoritarian China to imagine, plan and practise their

reproductive choices, so as to empower themselves in a political, cultural and gendered ecology that is far less “liberating” and much more invested in traditional, Confucian gender normativity than the neoliberal propaganda of equality and modernisation might suggest.

# Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis explored how unmarried Chinese women of the One-Child generation exercise agency and leverage their privileges in their intimacies, social interactions and everyday single lives to achieve empowerment. It challenges the argument that only daughters born since the 1980s have been straightforwardly empowered to challenge gender norms thanks to their unprecedentedly privileged status (Fong, 2002). This thesis responds to Fong's statement about the empowerment of only daughters in China by re-framing influential theories and concepts of power, privilege, agency and empowerment for women of the One-Child generation. In this concluding chapter, I retrospect the thesis and highlight the links between the three analysis chapters, pinpoint the key contributions of this project, reflect on the limitations of this research and look to the future research possibilities on women of the One-Child generation.

**Reviews of and Connections between Analysis Chapters**

Although the One-Child Policy since the 1980s has long been criticised for its brutal and coercive measures, it is argued that urban only daughters born under the One-Child Policy have been the biggest beneficiaries of it (Fong, 2002). With no siblings, brothers in particular, to compete for resources with them, urban only daughters become the "apple of their parents' eyes", enjoying parental investment in their education and careers, and care and love from the whole family from childhood to adulthood. As Rofel (2007) and Yan (2010) have discussed about "desiring subjects", the market reforms since the 1980s produced One-Child-generation daughters as desiring, self-responsible and autonomous subjects, leaving their parents with a strong sense of insecurity. Parents fear that their only daughters would fall off the track of gendered and filial norms. As a result, domestic violence and coercion by parents against daughters remain common even in daughters' adult years. However, in

spite of being privileged in terms of resources, many unmarried women of the One-Child generation remain vulnerable to and pressured by deep-seated gender and cultural norms in their natal families, including filial piety, albeit such norms are manifesting in new ways in the post-reform era.

Single women's understanding of gender, sexuality and intimacy, which is first perceived, learnt and practised in their natal families, can greatly impact on their practices in forming intimate relationships outside of their natal families. For example, one of my participants' mother had always balanced the relationships between family members, taken on the burden of resolving various family issues, and unified the family, often at the expense of her own interests. This had tremendously influenced the way her daughter had dealt with an abusive relationship and intimate partner violence: the participant imitated her mother's self-sacrificing role in the family, and tried to make her romantic relationship harmonious at the expense of her own desires and feelings.

Love and tension between One-Child-generation daughters and their parents also influences their choices and decisions in marriage and reproduction. Some women chose to marry and procreate in order to protect their parents' emotional well-being and *mianzi*, since acting in accordance with normative social values and goals (Zhang, 2009) is one of the best ways to exercise filial piety; some women knew that their parents had invested heavily in raising them, so they found it difficult to have children readily in case they could not provide better resources for their own children. The intergenerational relationship is so important that it interferes, influences and even determines how many single women of the One-Child generation build and handle intimacies, and make their reproductive decisions.

If the natal family is the first place where one learns about gender and intimacies, the romantic relationship is somewhere where one builds up close bonds, and practises gender, love and intimacies with someone outside the natal family. Since intimate

relationships have been diversified (Pan, 2006; Yang, 2018), many of the young women of the One-Child generation whom I interviewed had experienced coercive control when establishing romantic relationships. Coercive control, which is different from physical violence, is covert, difficult to identify and permeates many aspects of intimate relationships. Although "PUA" (pick-up artist) is not a new term in the Chinese context, this term, in my thesis, has been given a new meaning, connoting coercive control, since the Bao Li case in 2019, and transcended the earlier use and meaning (Guo and Yin, 2021). The popularity of PUA in the media and discussions in daily life proves that this kind of covert intimate relationship violence is being noticed and reflected on by more people. Young women are particularly concerned and vigilant about this, although many of them have been deeply trapped in such abusive relationships and find it difficult to escape. Our language, culture, and political discourse constantly legitimise IPV, such as PUA/coercive control, even causing many women to blur the boundaries between love, romance, sacrifice and violence.

It is worth noting that coercive control is not exclusively limited to romantic relationships. My interviews with 30 single Chinese women of the One-Child generation showed that this form of violence is equally prevalent in parent-daughter relationships. Many parents manage to manipulate the parent-daughter relationships and reinforce their parental authority by showing their emotional vulnerability and physical weakness, mobilising the community and using cultural concepts, such as "face" to exert control or influence over their independent daughters. These methods are not violent, but I have argued that they are coercive and controlling tactics that challenge the idea that only daughters in China have been straightforwardly empowered by their parents to challenge gender and social norms, as Fong (2002) says. Rather, I argue that these privileged daughters continue to be engaged in a variety of power struggles in both private and public spaces, including their natal families.

On a broader level, we have the cultural and political soils to legitimise coercive

control in different aspects of our lives. In order to regulate the population, the state deployed the One-Child Policy, which coerced urban women to give birth to only one child, otherwise their husbands and themselves would be punished in varied ways; a series of stigmas, such as “leftover women”, “abnormal”, “sick” and “incomplete womanhood”, were popular in contemporary China to coerce women to sacrifice for the state’s political and governing goals. Political propaganda and policies, cultural capital, and everyday used language have worked together to coerce individual Chinese women’s sacrifice and suffering to serve the state’s economic and political goals.

Although it is widely believed that motherhood is the most important part of a woman’s womanhood, many single women of the One-Child generation seem to have a changing and increasingly ambivalent attitude to marriage, childbirth and traditional gender norms. Fong et al. (2021) have found that many young people of the One-Child generation are skeptical about and fear of marriage and childbirth. Similarly, some of my participants resisted motherhood firmly since it would lead to a variety of risks for them, while others were more eager to find non-normative or non-institutionalised ways to negotiate motherhood. In present-day China, where the population policy has been repeatedly updated since the 1980s and especially in the past few years, unmarried women’s negotiation of reproductive decisions and choices is greatly influenced by neoliberalism and state power. The two forces not only affect how single women, as reproductive subjects, make reproductive decisions, but also impact on how they, as One-Child-generation daughters, navigate the intergenerational power relations with their parents, and on how they deal with IPV and their relationships with controlling partners when these occur.

The three analysis chapters focused on three socially sanctioned and prominent gender roles for women: daughters, partners/wives, and mothers I looked at how these daughters of the One-Child generation, who are widely seen to be unprecedentedly privileged, negotiate these gendered identities and responsibilities, and explore how

they compromise, struggle, resist, and activate agency in various power relations. The experiences of these young women dealing with different power relations with their parents, partners and reproductive and gender norms indicate that Chinese women of the One-Child generation, one the one hand, face new gendered predicaments in economically neoliberal, politically authoritarian and culturally Confucian China, despite the privileges afforded to them by unprecedented access to resources; one the other hand, they could manage to achieve autonomy and empowerment in natal families, romantic relationships and their interactions with reproductive norms through taking advantage of their resources and privileges, and manipulating a variety of gendered and social norms in China's contemporary neoliberal gender order.

**Contributions**

This thesis investigated a series of strategies that single women of the One-Child generation could use to negotiate autonomy in their daily lives. Geographical mobility appeared twice in the chapters, which seems to be an effective way for many privileged young women to escape from toxic relationships and coercive family dynamics. This strategy responds to Fong (2002), who argues that financial and educational resources are essential for Chinese women's empowerment. However, if women's success to empower themselves is only ascribed to the resources and cultural capital that they possess, that would ignore the importance of their exercise of agency in their everyday lives. This thesis explored not only some of the strategies that privileged single Chinese women of the One-Child generation could use to achieve autonomy, such as "mobility", education, access to knowledge and networks that could offer support and alternative ways of gendered being, but also some tactics that even less privileged women could use to empower themselves to varying degrees. When women find it difficult to resist some gendered dilemmas straightforwardly, they could work with social and gendered norms, such as performing gendered and social roles as filial daughters, virtuous wives and good mothers, which may become their bargaining chips to exchange for self-autonomous space. For example, some

participants compromised by agreeing to produce the next generation so that they could gain more decision-making power in other spaces of their lives. In such cases, compliance to gendered norms become not a more compromise with patriarchy, but a form of "soft" power to exercise autonomy.

This thesis challenged the use of "empowerment" and "power" in relation to China's One-Child generation and singleton daughters in some of the existing scholarship. I argue that power relations are neither static nor a zero-sum game, which contradicts Yan (2003), who attributes young people's gain of autonomy in the natal family to a power decline for their parents and a power rise for themselves. Instead of a simple power shift from one side to another, I presented how power flows between parents and their daughters, and argue that intergenerational relations are fluid, variational and dynamic. Fong (2002), who argues that only daughters "have more power to challenge detrimental gender norms and use helpful ones than ever before" (p.1098), simply regards power as resource, which could be gained, lost and transferred. This thesis has also queried Fong's point, and demonstrated that our understanding of power in relationships should transcend the notion of "power as resource". Power could also be interpreted as domination, a productive force, and as a form and part of resistance/agency/empowerment. Specifically, this thesis elaborated on how power as a repressive and negative force dominates women's bodies, sexualities and actions, on how power as a productive force creates the subjectivity of One-Child-generation women, and on how power as resistance/empowerment enables these women to act in response to the forces wielded over them by others.

Another important contribution of this thesis is its development of the first in-depth analysis of PUA culture from the perspective of coercive control, a form of intimate partner violence. The term "PUA" had existed in China before it became widely known by the Chinese public in 2019. However, previous academic analysis and discussion of this term mainly focused on how PUA culture functions as the "love bible" that teaches ordinary single men to fabricate themselves as

well-off/middle-class men and allure women (Guo and Yin, 2021). I discover that the use and connotation of the term did not begin to change and expand until the Bao Li case in 2019. Although the mass media have begun to analyse PUA as a means of IPV, academia has not kept pace with it. Since there are few qualitative studies on IPV in China, and most of them focus on physical violence, Chapter Six of the thesis urgently discussed coercive control in the Chinese context, and redefined and reinterpreted PUA in Chinese intimate relationships by referencing the popular concept of "coercive control" in Western academia, contrasting with the earlier definition and discussion of PUA in China (Guo and Yin, 2021). Additionally, although Zheng (2022) shares a similar argument with me that IPV is a structural problem historically generated and perpetuated politically, economically and culturally, she only focuses on domestic violence, heterosexual marriage and physical violence, failing to explore other forms of IPV, such as psychological and emotional abuse. This chapter addresses these gaps through telling the stories of my participants, heterosexual or non-heterosexual, who have been subjected to both physical and non-physical IPV in their romantic/dating relationships. Although romantic love has been an ideal in contemporary Chinese people's lives, few studies have demonstrated how violence is romanticised in such a context where romantic love is widely accepted and yearned for. Therefore, this chapter contributes to understandings of coercive control in the Chinese context, as a subtle, imperceptible and covert IPV, and to comprehending how Chinese culture, politics, and language coerce women to internalise the toxic idea of "self-sacrifice" and endure violence for the sake of harmony, love and romance.

**Future Research Directions**

Given the qualitative nature of this study, my sample of 30 single women over the age of 25, most of whom were based in urban China and overseas, was necessarily not fully representative of the entire population of Chinese women in this age group. However, the diversity of the locations I chose has, to some extent, enriched my data

and samples. For instance, the only woman who came out to me during the interview proudly shared that she had lived in Shanghai, London, and Toronto. These open and diverse metropolitan cities created a bubble for her, particularly in terms of negotiating her sexuality. In contrast, two women from remote small towns in the northeast China were often troubled by the frequent gossip about their romantic relationships by people around them.

I interviewed merely a small number of participants who were born after 1995, although I relaxed its criterion in the later fieldwork stage. However, this small portion of young women born in 1996 and 1998 obviously brought me very heterogeneous data. Xie (2021) interviewed 30 young women born between 1980 and 1990, who were the first generation of only daughters. In her research, I noticed that the views and actions on marriage and childbirth of the first generation of only daughters were different from those of my participants, most of whom were younger than her participant cohort. My participants showed more skepticism, fear, worries and resistance to childbirth and motherhood. This made me reflect on whether the interview data would be richer if my recruitment criterion had been relaxed earlier, although the fact that my participant cohort included more women born in the 1990s means that I have been able to shed a light on the subtle generational changes that appear to be unfolding between Chinese women born between the 1980s and their younger One-Child generation counterparts.

My interviews ended in May 2021, which was the eve of the introduction of the Three-Child Policy. Since its policy was introduced, some provinces and cities have successively released more detailed policies to support the new population policy. In 2022, China's population declined for the first time since the early 1950s; in early 2023, some provinces and cities relaxed their *hukou* registration policies for non-marital births. These events have been widely discussed in the Chinese media. My interviews concluded before I could gather my participants' views and attitudes towards the latest fertility policy and subsequent supportive policies. Since my

fieldwork took place in the period of the Two-Child Policy, the strategies adopted by single Chinese women to deal with reproductive norms were limited by the situations and legal policies before May 2021. For example, some participants spoke about needing to achieve their reproductive goals through marriage, so as to register their children with *hukou*. However, they may no longer have to do so in some specific provinces and cities as of 2023.

Although I did interview single Chinese women about their experiences and exercise of agency beyond domestic spheres, such as on university campuses and in workplaces, this thesis did not include this part, since I found that the data addressing public space was not as rich or suggestive as that which explored intimacy and relationships. However, I still consider that it is salient to explore how young Chinese women, as the One-Child generation, navigate a variety of powers and negotiate autonomy in public domains. On campuses, in workplaces and even in broader society, what forms of gendered predicaments will they face? Will the strategies that they use to achieve autonomy in domestic spaces or intimate relationships also be effective in public spaces? Will their privileges as urban One-Child-generation daughters also be important for them in gaining autonomy in public spheres? Will there be any other new strategies that they could use to empower themselves in public spaces? I hope that this thesis may provide some ideas for future exploration of women's self-empowerment in both public and private spaces. More important, I expect that this thesis will offer some insight into how women navigate powers in their intimacies and useful strategies for single young Chinese women to negotiate autonomy, empower themselves in their daily lives, and shed a light on how resourceful, active and wilful China's One-Child generation daughters are, even when they appear to be working with, rather than against the norms that oppress them.

# Appendices

**Appendix 1:** Project Information Sheet

## *A Study of the Empowerment of Single Women in Urban China*

You are invited to participate in the interview focusing on the empowerment of single women in China. Before you decide whether to take part in the research, it is important for you to understand what the research is about and why it is being conducted. Please take some time to read the following information carefully and feel free to ask me any questions about the research. Take time to decide whether you would like to join in the interview.

**The Aim of the Project**

This research aims to explore the identities of Chinese single women with professional qualifications/careers, and attempts to explore their attitudes to gender norms and expectations in urban China.

**Why is the research carried out?**

Single women in their late 20s and over are bearing the burden of social pressure (from natal families, workplaces and society at large) to marry, and are also stigmatised, discriminated against, and marginalised in media and society. This research will focus on the potential of educated, professional unmarried women to contribute to gender equality in China, by exploring the empowerment of single women as well as their predicaments.

**Who is doing the study?**

The study is based at the Centre for Women's Studies of the University of York and is being conducted by the full-time Ph.D researcher Yue Liu.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

You will be invited to have a face-to-face interview with the researcher about your experiences of being empowered and dis-empowered in your daily life, and also your experiences of and opinions about living as an unmarried woman. The interview will last for one to two hours and be conducted in a private room of a public location, such as a cafe or a tea house. You do not have to answer the questions that you would not like to. It would not be a problem if you want to stop the interview at any time. I would like to audio record the interviews and I will ask you about this before we start. If you prefer not to be audio recorded, I will take notes. If you experience particular distress, I could recommend some support organisations for you, such as the Maple Women's Psychological Counseling Centre (tel: 010-68333388; website: http://www.maple.org.cn), which is an NGO providing professional counseling help for women.

**Why should I take part in the project?**

By participating in the project, you will contribute to the research that aims to dispel the social stigma and pressures affecting educated unmarried women in China, as well as educate the wider society about the issues and experiences affecting women in this group.

**Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. I will send an information sheet about the research to you via email or social media before you make a decision. If you decide to take part, you will be given an informed consent form to sign before the start of the interview. If you would not like to sign your names, I will record your consent verbally. You are free to withdraw at any time within 3 months of the interview without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw, or a decision not to take part, will not affect your rights.

**What will happen to the data?**

All the data collected from you will be kept confidential. All the notes, transcripts, and audio records will be anonymized and stored in password-protected computers and locked cabinets. Anonymous audio recordings will be kept as secure computer files for 3 to 4 years until the researcher finished the Ph.D programme, and the transcripts will be stored till the final work is published. All data will be treated in accordance with the UK's General Data Protection Regulation, which protects your privacy and prevents misuse of your data. See: https://www.york.ac.uk/records-management/dp/.

**On what basis will you process my data?**

Under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the University has to identify a legal basis for processing personal data and, where appropriate, an additional condition for processing special category data.

In line with our charter which states that we advance learning and knowledge by teaching and research, the University processes personal data for research purposes under Article 6 (1) (e) of the GDPR:

*Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest*

*Special category data is processed under Article 9 (2) (j):*

*Processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes*

*Research will only be undertaken where ethical approval has been obtained, where there is a clear public interest and where appropriate safeguards have been put in place to protect data.*

In line with ethical expectations and in order to comply with common law duty of confidentiality, we will seek your consent to participate where appropriate. This consent will not, however, be our legal basis for processing your data under the GDPR.

**Will you transfer my data internationally?**

Yes. The University's cloud storage solution is provided by Google which means that data can be located at any of Google's globally spread data centres. The University has data protection compliant arrangements in place with this provider. For further information see, https://www.york.ac.uk/it-services/google/policy/privacy/.

**Who can I talk to for more information or advice about the study?**

The researcher is Yue Liu, a Ph.D candidate based at the University of York, UK. If you have any queries about this research, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher Yue at: email: yl4660@york.ac.uk; WeChat ID: ly188366116936. You can also contact the ELMPS committee at elmps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk for more information about the research ethics.

**What happens next?**

If you would like to take part, please contact the researcher. I will then get in touch with you as soon as possible to tell you more about the research and answer any questions that you may have. If you then decide to take part, I will arrange a time and location for the interview with you.

**Right to complain**

If you are unhappy with the way in which the University has handled your personal data, you have a right to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office. For information on reporting a concern to the Information Commissioner's Office, see www.ico.org.uk/concerns.

**Thanks for reading this information leaflet!**

# 中国都市单身女性赋权研究

您被邀请参加此次有关中国单身女性赋权问题的访谈。在决定是否参加该项目之前，请先了解该项目的研究内容和研究目的。请花一些时间仔细阅读以下信息，并随时向我询问有关该研究的任何问题，之后再决定是否参与该访谈。

**研究目的**

这项研究旨在探讨具有高等学历和良好职场前景的中国单身女性的身份问题，并探究她们对中国社会中性别规范的态度。

**为什么要进行该项研究?**

25 岁以上的单身女性正承受巨大的婚姻压力，这种压力来源于其原生家庭、职场和社会，同时她们也遭受着来自社会和媒体的污名、歧视和排斥。这一研究将着眼中国单身女性的权利和困境，从而探索受过良好教育的职业未婚女性在促进中国性别平等问题的能力。

**研究者是谁?**

该项目以英国约克大学的女性研究中心为研究基地，由全日制博士研究生刘悦进行。

**如果我参与该研究会如何?**

我们将邀请您与研究人员进行面对面的访谈，以了解您在日常生活中获得权利和被剥夺权利的经历，以及您对未婚生活的看法和见解。采访将在咖啡厅或茶馆等公共场所的包间内进行，持续一到两个小时。您可以拒绝回答您不想回答的问题，同时可以随时停止采访。我会在采访正式开始前，再次询问您关于录制音频的问题。如果您不想被录音，我将以记录笔记的形式进行采访。如果您因采访感到难过或压力，我会推荐一些专业咨询机构为您提供专业的心理咨询服务，如北京红枫妇女心理咨询服务中心（电话：010-68333388 网站：http://www.maple.org.cn），作为一个非政府组织，该服务中心为女性提供专业心理咨询和辅导。

**我必须参加该研究吗?**

您可以自行决定是否参与。在您决定是否参加之前，我会通过电子邮件或社交媒体给您发送一封信息表。如果您决定参加，您会收到一份知情同意书以供签署。如果您不想手写签名，我会录音记录您的口头同意。您可以在访谈后的三个月内随时退出该项目而无需给出任何理由。决定退出或者决定不参与该项目将不会影响您的权利。

**数据将会如何处理?**

从您那里收集的所有数据将被保密。所有笔记、笔录和音频记录都将被匿名保存在受密码保护的计算机和上锁的柜子中。匿名录音将作为安全的计算机文件保存 3 至 4 年，直到研究人员完成博士学位为止。在研究论文最终发表后，转录文本将被删除。所有数据将按照英国的《通用数据保护条例》进行处理，该条例保护您的隐私并防止滥用您的数据。请参阅：https://www.york.ac.uk/records-management/dp/.

**您将根据什么处理我的数据?**

根据《通用数据保护条例》(GDPR)，大学必须确定处理个人数据的法律依据，并在适当时确定处理特殊类别数据的附加条件。

根据章程规定，我们通过教学和研究促进学习和知识的发展，本校根据 GDPR 第 6 条第 1 款（e）项的规定，出于研究目的处理个人数据:

*数据的处理需基于为了公共利益而进行的任务*

*特殊类别数据根据第 9 条第 2 款（j）项进行处理:*

*数据处理需为了公共利益，出于存档目的，出于科学研究和历史研究目的或出于统计目的*

*仅在获得伦理批准，有明确的公共利益并且已采取适当的保护措施来保护数据的情况下，才能进行研究。*

为了符合道德规范并为了遵守习惯法的保密义务，我们将在合适的情况下征求您的同意。 但是，此同意将不是我们根据 GDPR 处理您的数据的法律依据。

**我可以与谁联系以获取有关该研究的更多信息或建议?**

该项目的研究人员是英国约克大学的博士候选人刘悦。如果您对此研究有任何疑问，请随时通过以下方式与她联系：电子邮件：yl4660@york.ac.uk；微信号：ly18366116936。您也可以通过 elmps-ethics-group@york.ac.uk 联系 ELMPS，以获取更多与研究伦理相关的信息。

**接下来会发生什么?**

如果您想参与该访谈，请联系研究人员。我会尽快与您联系，向您详细介绍这项研究并回答您可能遇到的任何问题。如果您决定参加，我将安排与您面试的时间和地点。

**投诉权**

如果您对本校处理您个人数据的方式不满意，您有权向信息专员办公室投诉。有关向信息专员办公室投诉的信息，请访问如下网站 www.ico.org.uk/concerns。

**感谢您阅读该信息表 ！**

**Appendix 2**: Consent Form

**Name of Researcher:** Yue Liu

| | |
|---|---|
| Have you read and understood the information sheet? | Yes ❒ No ❒ |
| Do you understand that your participation in the study is voluntary? | Yes ❒ No ❒ |
| Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study? | Yes ❒ No ❒ |
| Do you understand that the data you provide will be kept confidential? | Yes ❒ No ❒ |
| Do you understand that you can withdraw from the research within 3 months after the interview for any reason? | Yes ❒ No ❒ |
| Do you agree to take part in the study? | Yes ❒ No ❒ |
| If yes, do you agree to your interviews being audio recorded? *(You may take part in the study without agreeing to this).* | Yes ❒ No ❒ |

Name of Participant (in BLOCK letters):_____

Signature of Participant:_____

Date:_____

Name of Researcher (in BLOCK letters):_____

Signature of Researcher:_____

Date:_____

研究人员：刘悦

| | |
|---|---|
| 您是否已经阅读并了解信息表内容? | 是❒ 否❒ |
| 您是否知晓您的参与是自愿行为? | 是❒ 否❒ |
| 您是否有机会提问问题? | 是❒ 否❒ |
| 您是否了解您的数据将会被保密? | 是❒ 否❒ |
| 您是否了解在您参与采访后三个月内可以以任何理由退出研究吗? | 是❒ 否❒ |
| 您是否同意参与该研究? | 是❒ 否❒ |
| 如果同意参与该研究，您是否同意您的采访被录音? | 是❒ 否❒ |

受访者姓名：_____

签字：_____

日期：_____

研究员姓名：_____

签字：_____

日期：_____

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