

GENDERED CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN CHINA:  
SEX, SEXUALITY AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE  
REFORM PERIOD

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## ABSTRACT

China has experienced rapid economic and social change since the beginning of the 'Open Door' policy in 1978. Yet at the same time, the legacy of the Mao era remains and elements of Confucianism have been revived and circulate in the reform period (Hershatter, 1996; Rofel, 2007). As a result, traditional views concerning gender roles and sexual attitudes and practices persist within this environment of social and economic change. This thesis examines the ways young women in China consider sex, sexuality and intimate relationships in this context. Based on semi-structured interviews with forty-three young women in Shanghai, I investigate the theme of continuity and change in a period of economic and social transformation. Despite the Party-State rhetoric of equality, I consider how essentialist notions of femininity and masculinity are present in the reform period and contribute to the definition of womanhood. I also explore how sex continues to remain a sensitive topic, with young women positioned as sexual gatekeepers, responsible for negotiating and reconciling individual desires against wider societal sanctions. I examine the limited discourse of desire and sexual autonomy available to women and how this translates into a pragmatic approach in partner selection. My findings also reveal how marriage remains an expectation of all women (and men) and is the only legitimate context for sexual expression for women in the reform period. I contend that the norm of marriage is further reinforced through the stigmatization of unmarried women as *shengnü*. As a result of this changing economic and social environment and the pull of tradition, I argue that reform China offers young women a series of contradictory expectations when it comes to sex, sexuality and intimate relationships.

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## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

All work presented in this thesis is my own and has not been previously published. This thesis has not been presented to any other University for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas.



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

I became interested in China and Chinese culture through my experience as an English language teacher in Shanghai. Having lived in several other foreign and developing countries, Shanghai fascinated me with how the city mixed elements of traditional Chinese culture alongside international and Western influences. I lived in Shanghai for nearly two years teaching at an English language school near a well-known university. Most of my students were young women and were enthusiastic to learn from a Western peer.

Part of the core curriculum I taught was a small class where up to four students would have direct contact with a native English speaker. In these sessions it was at times easy to stray from the planned lesson. Often students and I would chat freely and frequently our conversations would become more like cultural exchanges. I remember asking my female students questions about their daily lives and was struck by the matter-of-fact manner in which they described the gender discrimination they routinely encountered. For example, I asked about their opinions on the one-child policy and was surprised by the straightforward fashion in how they stated boys were ‘preferred’ to girl children. It appeared as though they accepted this traditional thinking as a given reality, and disagreeing with and/or challenging this long-standing preference was not considered. In fact, some women even told me they endorsed this preference, stating how they hoped to have a son rather than a daughter in the future. Other students would describe to me the pressures they felt to succeed in order to provide for their parents in old age.

Conversations like these were commonplace and my students would often explain to me the responsibilities and obligations they felt to their families. They did not challenge the one-child policy or mention personal desires or choice; rather although ‘unfair’, the one-child policy was seen as a law to be followed and family obligations were non-negotiable. There was no consideration of acting on individual wants or desires and

these issues were taken-for-granted commitments to expect in the future. It was from these opinions that I started to think about gender relations in China.

In retrospect, I suspect I was struck by these statements because of my American upbringing and feminist politics. These ideas of familial obligation, duty and unquestioning acceptance were very foreign to me. As a result, I decided to probe deeper into this area. I set out to investigate the challenges and opportunities young women were faced with in their daily lives. With China's economic and social landscape transforming so rapidly, I wanted to explore young women's opinions on the ideas of generational change, career ambitions, sexuality and their futures. Given the extent of change and from personal interest, I decided to focus this thesis on the topic of sex, sexuality and intimate relationships in the reform period.

My thesis is divided into seven chapters. The next chapter will explore the literature that has emerged since the reform period concerning gender relations and sexuality. I will review China's historical background and the ways certain elements, such as Confucianism, remain relevant when discussing gender in China today. I will also engage with the modernization and individualization theories of Giddens (1991, 1992) and of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) and with their critics, and address the applicability of these theories to the Chinese context.

Chapter 3 will examine the methodological approach I used for data collection in Shanghai in the summer of 2012. In this chapter, I explain the rationale for a feminist methodology and reflect on the research process as a whole. I consider the ethical implications of my work and the steps I took to ensure best practice. I discuss the obstacles I encountered in the field and specifically focus on the insider-outsider dynamic faced whilst interviewing. I also give an overview of the interpretative and coding procedures used to form the analytical chapters of this thesis.

In Chapter 4, I explore the topics of sexuality and sex education in reform China. I begin by discussing the current sexual climate and the Party-State moralist agenda which attempts to discourage any 'deviant' and 'corrupting' acts. I investigate how

marketization has contributed to the rise of several phenomena which challenge Party-State efforts to impose sexual and moral control. Following this, I examine participants' experiences of sex education and the ways in which sex remains a taboo topic in the reform period. I consider the relationship between the limited discussion of sex at school and at home and the Party-State agenda. I will also look at how sexual culture and the socio-economic arena shape ideas about partner selection.

In Chapter 5, I explore participants' views on dating, premarital sex and ideal partners. I discuss the dating culture that has emerged as a result of reform and the gendered behaviours and roles that participants expected of a potential partner. I then examine their attitudes to premarital sex and the ways sex was conceptualized as a risk for young women. I also consider their thoughts on ideal boyfriends and husbands and girlfriends and wives, and analyse these in relation to traditional ideas about gender. I discuss the theme of marriage and unmarried women in Chapter 6. I explore how participants viewed marriage as an inevitable and taken-for-granted stage in a woman's life course. I illustrate the pressures that exist to conform to the married ideal, how they serve to enforce the married norm and the ways in which participants dealt with these pressures. I also investigate the stigma associated with remaining unmarried and *shengnü*, or 'leftover women'. I consider the ways the negative characterization of single women reinforces the heterosexual married ideal.

In the final chapter, I reflect on what my study offers to understanding changing gender relations in China. I consider the limitations of my study and present my thematic conclusions. I illustrate how the landscape of reform China presents young women with competing and at times contradictory positions when it comes to sex, sexuality and intimate relationships. I also discuss the overall theme of continuity and change present in the reform period. I examine how the essentialist rhetoric, limited discourse of desire and sexual autonomy and the norm of marriage influence perceptions of femininity and ideal womanhood in reform China.

## CHAPTER 2

### MAKING SENSE OF MODERNITY IN CHINA: CHINESE WOMEN AND ECONOMIC REFORM

China's transition from a planned to a market economy has resulted in significant lifestyle changes for the average citizen. Beginning in 1978, China's 'Open Door' policy has allowed for the decollectivization of rural farmlands, the loosening of once strict *hukou* policies, housing reform, and increased international contact, all of which have affected daily life. Throughout the last three decades, studies have observed these developments, generally focusing on transformations in family life and in employment trends (see for example Liu, 2007; Fong, 2004b; Riley, 2012; Parish and Farrer, 2000; Hanser, 2002; Hershatter, 2007). In order to contextualise the social and legal status of young women contemporary China, especially since the Chinese landscape continues to change at a rapid pace, it is important to examine the shifts that have occurred since economic reform and their effect on women.

I will begin by exploring the Chinese modernization process and the ways this varies from other East Asian and Western projects. I will briefly review the theories of modernization and personal relationships of Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, and consider their applicability to China. I will then consider the effects that economic reform has had in contemporary China, specifically addressing pertinent social changes that have occurred as a result of reform. Following this, I will critically examine the unequal impact economic reform has had for women, particularly illustrating the inequalities that remain and have emerged in terms of employment, the family and sexuality.

#### THEORIES OF LATE MODERNITY AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

In order to make sense of women's changing social worlds in the reform period and the consequences that modernization has had for women, it is necessary to situate the

Chinese modernization process within contemporary debates of modernity. Due to recent intensification in global flows of information, ideas and people, the world has experienced significant economic, social and cultural change. These transformations and developments, it has been claimed, are the result of a shift from the modernity of the industrialization period to “late” or “second” modernity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). According to Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim and Anthony Giddens, social relations in this new phase of modernity have changed greatly and given rise to women’s economic liberation and reproductive freedom, resulting in the transformation of relations between the sexes as well as the rise of the individual (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002). However, the universalizing claims made by Beck, Beck-Gernsheim and Giddens are insufficient when examining not only contemporary gender relations in the West, but also in China.

Modernity cannot be fully explained without examining gender relations as women and men experience modernity in different ways (Tanabe and Tokita-Tanabe, 2003). When it comes to gender, Beck and Giddens consistently ignore the socio-cultural limitations placed upon women throughout the world. The claims made by these prominent theorists include: the increased participation of women in the labour force; decreased marriage as well as fertility rates; and the emergence of both feminist and gay and lesbian liberation movements (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Although these trends can be noted within the West and throughout a number of countries around the globe, they are by no means universal. Historical and cultural situations vary and means of modernization, as well as industrialization, differ depending on setting. Thus, it is essential to take into account the historical and social context of each country when considering theories of late modernity (Tanabe and Tokita-Tanabe, 2003; Jackson, 2011).

Moreover, what modernity may mean in both the East Asian and Chinese contexts also varies. Especially when applying the late modernity framework within East Asia, it is imperative to keep in mind that modernity is frequently conceived within Western terms (Tanabe and Tokita-Tanabe, 2003; Bhambra, 2009). The West generally remains the

main point of reference for non-Western societies when discussing economic development and modernization, with differences and similarities assessed between nations. However, as Tanabe and Tokita-Tanabe note, “[it is] more fruitful to discuss ‘forms of modernity’” to describe the multiplicity of modern societies in the world, all which have local characteristics as well as global elements (2003: 2-3). Arif Dirlik (2003) takes this notion further through the use of the term, “global modernity”, which encompasses not only the general homogenizing forces of globalization, but also recognises the differences between and within countries. For Dirlik, the variations and contradictions that are present are a very feature of contemporary modernity and are just as common as the normalizing elements (2003: 276). Therefore it is essential that conceptions of late modernity, particularly when referencing non-Western countries, take into account the importance of global and local histories, traditions and customs.

Tradition continues to be relevant when considering modernity in the Western context, and when it comes to modernity in East Asia, and especially in China, it is also important to note the (perhaps different) relationship between the traditional and the modern. As Tanabe and Tokita-Tanabe (2003) argue, while non-European cultures sought to imitate Western societies in some ways, it was also seen as essential to keep certain traditional aspects in order to distinguish themselves from the West. Therefore, “the search for the modern non-European self is bound to contain hybrid elements of what is seen as modern West and traditional East, which remain in uncomfortable coexistence” (2003: 4). Moreover, as Kyung-Sup Chang illustrates through the use of the term “compressed modernity”, the modernization process in East Asia has occurred at an extremely rapid pace, especially when compared to the West (1999: 31). In East Asia, therefore, modernity has involved a complex process of ‘picking and choosing’ elements of the West to incorporate and balance alongside tradition. As a result, the individual is faced with a complex task of negotiating which aspects to include or exclude in their own personal lives (Tanabe and Tokita-Tanabe, 2003).

Although there are similarities in culture between China and other East Asian countries, when considering the modernization projects of the region, differences become evident.

Arguably more 'modern' than China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan could fit into Giddens' and Beck's definitions of late modernity. These countries have experienced similar forms and patterns of rapid development, including economic success, declining fertility rates and rising individualism (Chang and Song, 2010). In contrast, China's modernization is different in nature, as it is an internally driven project, unlike in East Asia and many other Western countries (Xu, 2000). Moreover, China is generally not considered a post-industrial society and portrayed as 'catching up' to the rest of the region. With no welfare state, limited political and social democracy, and ties to the patriarchal Confucian family tradition, China's modernization agenda clearly takes a distinct shape (Tam et al., 2014). Thus with differences between China and the region, there can be no assumption that China's development path will have the same effects as those seen in East Asia and in the West.

It is therefore important to recognise the unique features of modernity in East Asia and in the Chinese context. Although sharing some aspects of cultural heritage with the rest of East Asia, China's modernization agenda is different compared to other nation's entrances into the global economy. With the specificity of the Chinese context in mind, the consequences of this modernization process are not uniform. It is important to recognise this distinct setting in order to understand and situate the changing social world of young women in the reform era. In the following section I will give a brief overview of Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's accounts of late modernity and personal relationships, and then consider their applicability to the Chinese context.

### *Giddens, Late Modernity and Intimacy*

Giddens (1991) claims that late modernity has arisen due to significant developments in the world economic order, advancements in information and communication technology and an increase in the mobility of people and ideas. All of these elements, according to Giddens, have had an impact on the global and local patterns of public and private life. As a result, modern institutions throughout the world are now more dynamic and subject to change, with traditional patterns of organization and bases for relationships becoming no longer relevant (Giddens, 1991). Contemporary society is heavily influenced by the

increasing global connectedness of all spheres, economic, social and cultural, thus resulting in a larger global consciousness and a more uniform world order.

For Giddens, the expansion of these connections appear to be a force that is unstoppable, with media and communication as well as financial markets and systems increasingly linked around the world, resulting in a strengthening of the relationship between the global and the local (Giddens, 1991). This intensification has consequently produced a heightened reflexivity of the self, where each individual is faced with multiple and diverse choices on a daily basis. Since the modern world has changed so much, decision-making for every person is now a much more complicated endeavour, as traditional courses or paths to choose from are no longer predictable or taken-for-granted (Giddens, 1991). The increasing diversity of choices has also given rise to more risks that, rather than separate individuals, bring each person closer together, since former traditional bases of identity have disappeared and are being reconfigured. Moreover, globalization has led to shared concerns and morals, or a global consciousness, which has in turn resulted in a more unified and shared world system. Thus, as a result of “detraditionalization”, each individual is increasingly connected to the wider world order, which in turn has become more universalized and uniform (Giddens, 1991).

Giddens views late modernity as a positive period of transformation, a result of the increasing interconnectedness from unrelenting globalizing forces. However, it must be noted that Giddens fails to recognise the unequal distribution of the effects of globalization throughout the world. His portrayal of globalization and the increasingly connected world system represents very much a Western, homogenizing view and universalizing opinion of the globalization phenomena, ignoring the differences as well as the vast inequalities that have resulted from globalization. As Brian Heaphy states, although Giddens’ “arguments about global risks, challenges and opportunities may be partially convincing, his arguments about the opportunities that global modernity offers for mutual interrogation, the demise of ‘otherness’ and difference and the unifying potentials of global insecurities are less so” (2007: 86).



For Giddens (1992), the increasing reflexivity of the self has had an impact on personal and intimate relationships, which are now embarked upon by social and economic equals. Giddens believes that there is a new “contingency in personal life”, where people now only engage in personal relationships for as long as mutually beneficial (Giddens, 1992: 62). This “pure relationship” involves the democratization of the relationship between couples, especially between men and women. Women, according to Giddens, are more assertive in their sexual demands than ever before, and equality is now expected between partners rather than a hoped for ideal. Through his concept of “plastic sexuality”, women are freed from the ‘burden of reproduction’ and able to enjoy more equal sexual relationships (Giddens, 1992). Love, for Giddens, is not a sign of a stable relationship, but remains contingent and unstable, or what he terms “confluent love”, as each individual now chooses to enter into and separate from a relationship. Thus the “pure relationship” exists only for as long as mutually beneficial for the parties involved and is seen by Giddens as a sign of the democratization between the sexes (Giddens, 1992). Yet, as will be explored below, Giddens’ conceptualization of intimacy is very abstract and limited, particularly when considering the Chinese context.

### *Beck, Second Modernity and Intimacy*

For Ulrich Beck, the rise of “second modernity” has led to both increased levels of risk as well as an intensified awareness of these risks. The new dangers that have arisen are applicable to everyone, regardless of nationality or location, and contribute to an environment of uncertainty. Individuals are forced to react to such a risk-filled world through reflection, described by Beck as an instinctual reaction (Beck, 1994: 8). Moreover, second modernity has given rise to the process of individualization. Basic rights and responsibilities are increasingly focused away from collectivities and instead on the individual. The changing nature of global economic forces, where conditions of competition, increased mobility and expertise are now a requirement for survival, has resulted in the disappearance of former social guidelines. Each person is now in charge of their own successes and/or failures, as previous rules that once regulated the direction of the social have now vanished (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). The dissolving of these parameters has therefore, according to Beck, resulted in the individual being fully

responsible for negotiating the various possibilities, opportunities and even dangers of everyday life with little guidance. This process has been labelled the “do-it-yourself” biography, where the individual is solely responsible for his or her own actions and livelihood (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002). As a result, personal relationships are a site of such individualizing tensions, constantly being remade and evaluated.

Risk appears to take on an equalizing effect for Beck, as every individual is subject to the same types and possibilities of risk. However, Beck fails to recognise the diversity within the general population, and that individualization could actually contribute to some experiencing more risk than others (Lash, 1993). Additionally, the destructive risks described by Beck, such as environmental disasters, are claimed to be solely the product of second modernity. Yet, as Lash (1993) observes environmental disasters and catastrophes have been documented for centuries.

More recently, Beck and Grande (2010) have acknowledged the diversity of modernization agendas in different parts of the world. They state that some basic elements of second modernity “cannot simply be ‘applied’ in different contexts in different parts of the world; neither do they operate at the global level” (Beck and Grande, 2010: 420). Through the idea of “cosmopolitanism”, Beck and Grande note the ways in which the European model of modernization is comprised of unique aspects, including the welfare state and capitalism, which have enabled the growth of a climate of democratic individualization. This is in complete contrast to China, where “there is neither a culturally embedded democracy nor a welfare state... Individualization in China, in contrast to Europe, has not been institutionally anchored in a system of basic rights” (Beck and Grande, 2010: 421). Rather, since the Party-State controls many aspects of everyday life, rights and individualism, seen as inalienable in the West, are “granted as privileges” in China (Beck and Grande, 2010: 421).

Despite this recent change in thought, however, Beck’s new claims have not been applied to his conceptualization of gender relations in late modernity. When it comes to gender, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argue that women’s participation in the

labour force, as well as the increasing emphasis on the individual, has resulted in women and men constructing separate, individualized biographies. Consequently, relationships and family life are no longer able to rely on the gender roles of the past, with women bound to the domestic sphere and economically dependent on men. Rather, couples are now forced to negotiate the modern ways of living while simultaneously reconciling this with the individualized biography (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). This negotiation, while opening up the potential for a more democratic relationship, may also result in tension, or an “intimate battle” (Heaphy, 2007: 126). Couples must now figure out different ways of living that do not rely on traditional structures while simultaneously adapting to more individualized lifestyles. This adjustment may result in women and men becoming more aware of the inequalities that were once present. The impetus to construct an individualized biography, combined with the realities of family life, may therefore result in tense situations between women and men (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim view conflict in personal relationships as the main result of second modernity. Although like Giddens, they do see a potential for democratization or more open relationships, disputes are likely to arise due to the conflicting nature of the individual biography and the new demands of modern life. Individuals, faced with uncertainty and the risks of daily life, are looking for meaning in personal relationships, while at the same time expecting the independence that is required in second modernity. Thus, love becomes central just at a time when it is the riskiest. Love, for Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, becomes the ultimate and impossible goal in second modernity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; see also Smart and Shipman, 2004; Heaphy, 2007).

To summarise, it is evident that despite the differences between the theories of Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, both theories maintain that there has been general shift towards an increasing global connectedness and, as a result, some universalizing tendencies, such as the detraditionalization of culture or unification by the threat of risk, have arisen. Contemporary life is marked by greater uncertainty and the increasing reflexivity of the individual. For both Giddens and Beck, the individual remains central

to their analysis, with changes in personal life examined to represent the transformations that have occurred at the institutional and global levels of everyday life (Heaphy, 2007).

Beck, Beck-Gernsheim and Giddens argue that relationships in late modernity now mandate a negotiation of the ways in which to be and relate as a couple. While Giddens emphasizes more democratic relationships between women and men, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim focus on the tensions and conflicts that have arisen due to the changing nature of modernity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). Both theories of intimacy view the liberation of women as directly influencing a change in gender roles and a move away from traditional forms of coupledom. Whereas Giddens sees the democratization of relationships as an inevitable consequence of late modernity, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim view relationships as having only the possibility of becoming more democratic, depending on whether or not a couple is able to resolve the daily conflicts of modern life. At the same time, they also note how women in particular are caught in a “difficult balancing act” between working for others and creating a life of their own. In this sense, they do recognise that women’s experiences may be less individualized than men’s (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 65).

### *Critique of Intimacy in Late Modernity*

As many critics note, Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s accounts of sexuality, intimacy and relationships, regardless of geographic location, are problematic (Jackson, 2011; Heaphy, 2007; Jamieson, 1999). Perhaps most striking is that the existence of gender equality remains unquestioned by both theories of intimacy in late modernity. As Lynn Jamieson (1999) notes, as a result of Giddens’ lack of engagement with feminist work, he ignores the relationships between the personal and the political as well as the public and the private. Moreover, according to Jamieson, Giddens’ “pure relationship” is subject to critique for a variety of reasons, including how his conceptualization of intimacy is not only narrow in definition, but also not unique to the late modern period. Importantly, since he does not recognise the persistence of gender inequality, Giddens instead places more emphasis on agency than on the structural barriers that impede women’s equality and shape women’s and men’s personal lives. Furthermore as

Jamieson argues, if the “pure relationship” was present in today’s society, one would expect to observe a greater emphasis on equality rather than on gender difference in women’s and men’s experiences of sex and intimacy (Jamieson, 1998, 1999).

Giddens’ conceptualization of intimacy also remains very abstract, ignoring not only structural inequalities, but also failing to provide any detail of specific changes that have occurred. As Carol Smart (1996, 2007) notes, when describing the contingency of the “pure relationship” and “confluent love”, Giddens does not detail his idea of an unfulfilling relationship beyond the suggestion of a partner’s shortcomings in sexual compatibility or in the domestic arena. In fact, the ways in which Giddens highlights these factors conceals and obstructs other reasons which may, particularly for women, contribute to the end of a relationship namely, domestic violence and other forms of abuse as well as economic deprivation (Smart, 1996). As Smart argues, the individual is not “a free-floating agent” when it comes to relationships and each person’s decisions are bound by structural factors like class, gender and ethnicity, and also embedded in culture and history (2007: 29). Although Giddens does not specifically exclude these ideas, it does not concern him. His analysis also projects the idea of a harmonious couple where once the passion dwindles, each partner is able to leave the other on terms of equality. Not only does the idea of “confluent love” give the impression that the break-up of a couple is easily done and people are able to move on, but Giddens also fails to acknowledge that those involved in a relationship may have children (Smart, 1996; Gabb, 2008). The idea that children are important and figure into a couple’s decision to stay together is completely absent from his ideas of intimacy in late modernity.

Furthermore, claims of “detraditionalization” in the late modern theories are not only problematic when considering East Asia but also within the West. As Neil Gross (2005) illustrates, Giddens fails to distinguish between “regulative” and “meaning constitutive” traditions. With this differentiation, one is able to see that regulative traditions, which have a moral connotation, are in fact diminishing in importance whereas meaning constitutive traditions remain present in larger linguistic and cultural frameworks. This change can be illustrated in the example of the declining regulative tradition of

institution of marriage in the United States, while the meaning constitutive tradition of romantic love remains powerful (Gross, 2005).

It is clear that Giddens and Beck paint a “culturally monochrome” picture of personal relationships in the West (Smart and Shipman, 2004: 494). A variety of forms of marriage and relationships, as well as different reasons for engaging in both, are evident across various cultures. As Smart and Shipman (2004) observe, youth of transnational families in Britain tend to mix certain elements of both their traditional culture alongside British culture, and particular aspects of both may or may not increase in importance with the passage of time. Thus, they conclude that not only do these theories of intimacy “marginalize difference”, but also the individual portrayed in Beck’s account was conceived without thought to the varying degrees of familial and societal pressures and influences for the average individual (Smart and Shipman, 2004: 506). Whilst this critique is solely applied in relation to the UK, it is important to keep the concept in mind when thinking of the global context and in particular, China.

Thus, it is evident that Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim generally present a Eurocentric version of modernity and intimate relations. As Tam et al. (2014) contend, when considering late modernity, it is important to take into account differing local geographies and culturally specific influences. Notably, the continuing presence of Confucianism and its patriarchal foundations “continue to shape gender politics of family and relationships” in East Asia (Tam et al., 2014: 2). With this in mind, I would now like to examine the modernization process in China and the applicability of these theories of modernity and intimacy.

#### CHINA, MODERNITY AND INTIMACY

When it comes to the modernization theories, several of the claims made by Beck and Giddens have no firm hold when considering the Chinese context. For instance, the entry of women into the workforce, although a prominent feature of Western modernity, was not made under the same conditions in China. Rather, women within China were

mobilized under the Mao regime to participate as equal stakeholders for the Communist cause (Hershatter, 2007). Moreover, low birth rates, contraceptive access and marriage rates are not appropriate indicators of late modernity within China, as the one-child policy has been in effect for over three decades and marriage remains nearly universal (Kam, 2010; Greenhalgh, 2003). Although there has been some progress, lesbian and gay liberation movements, a sign of late modernity for Giddens, remain concentrated in urban centres and lesbian and gay identity continue to be marginalized (Kam, 2010; He, 2001; Jackson, 2011; Kong, 2011).

The “do-it-yourself” biography of Beck and rise of the individual have also become prominent themes discussed in the new age of late modernity. However, both historical and local country context must be considered when discussing such concepts, especially when examining China. Within the West, the idea of inalienable individual rights and entitlements has had clear grounds to develop and expand with institutional support for centuries. The development of a rights movement has been much more constrained in China as a result of continued Party-State interference (Tam et al., 2014). Although overall private life has become more free, especially when compared to the Maoist collectivization period, the rights rhetoric in China generally remains concentrated in consumer campaigns and “bears the heavy influence of state power and the traditional notion that an individual’s identity and rights are dependent on, instead of independent from, the state” (Yan, 2010: 501).

Other family structures and cultural traditions, like the nuclear family ideal or the concept of ‘free’ choice in marriage may also in fact be unique to the West (Smart and Shipman, 2004). Many societies, including China, do not share such family practices and marriage traditions described by Beck and Giddens (Jackson, 2011; Smart and Shipman, 2004). In particular, the patriarchal foundations within Chinese society continue to influence the actions and choices of individuals, especially women. Moreover, family practices throughout China, and indeed most of East Asia, remain heavily influenced by the patrilinealism of Confucianism (Jackson, 2011; Tam et al., 2014; Jackson et al., 2013; Sechiyama, 2013).

The influence of Confucianism, although not as visible as in previous times, remains a prominent feature when considering the institution of the family in China.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the way in which Confucianism structures the family, through hierarchical relations, ancestral worship and filial piety, is seen as central for overall familial and societal harmony. Women in the Confucian tradition are positioned as carers of the family and responsible for the continuance of the ancestral line through the birth of a (male) child (Tang, 1995). In fact, their ‘natural’ role as wife and mother continues to be celebrated and endorsed through the ‘return home’ rhetoric that is currently being promoted by the Party-State due to economic restructuring (Bulbeck, 2009).<sup>2</sup> Thus, there has been little room for the development of expressions of sex and sexuality for women beyond this narrative of reproduction and familial obedience. Although the influence of Confucianism today is not as obvious, remnants of Confucian teachings continue to underpin gender relations, and unequal gender relationships, rather than being seen as overt adherence to the ethical code, are regarded as just “‘the way things are’” (Jackson, 2011: 22).<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, classical Confucian thought emphasizes the importance of the collective good over that of the individual, a concept which is increasingly becoming harder to reconcile within China’s ever-expanding marketization (Jackson, 2011; Bell, 2010). Confucianism explicitly denounces the idea of profit-seeking, a notable and unanticipated consequence of economic reform. Particularly since the year 2000, Confucianism has been reaffirmed through Party-State rhetoric in an attempt to prevent ‘moral deterioration’ resulting from

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<sup>1</sup> As an ethical code, Confucianism has played a central role in the development of Chinese culture in all realms, from ancient China to present-day. Even when denounced as a feudal practice in the Mao period, its influence could still be seen in the organizational structure of the *danwei*. Developed by Confucius and his student Mencius, and later formalized by Han philosophers, Confucianism advocates the idea of a harmonious society, organised by orderly and hierarchical social relations. Confucianism is structured by five main types of relationships. These include: state-subject; father-son; husband-wife; elder brother-younger brother; and friend-friend (Tang, 1995). Of note is how family plays a central role. By the Han dynasty (206 BC-88 AD), Confucianism had been cemented into daily life, influencing social, economic and political behaviours (Yao, 2001). Importantly, Confucian teachings stressed three main acts of filiality: the importance of ancestor worship; parental respect and obedience; and the continuation of the ancestral line (Ruan and Matsumura, 1991; Barbalet, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> This will be discussed in more detail below.

<sup>3</sup> The recent Confucian revival will be discussed in more detail below.



the new market economy. This is perhaps best illustrated by the numerous campaigns launched by the Party-State which focus on self-discipline, such as the 2005 ‘Harmonious Society’ campaign that aimed to control wider dissent and President Xi’s recent calls against corruption and greed (Hu, 2007; Chin, 2014; Kang and Blanchard, 2013).

Thus it is important to acknowledge the specificities of China and East Asia when considering modernization. The case of China is unique in that the Party-State maintains a high level of control and historical influences continue to be culturally relevant. With this in mind, the modernization agenda simultaneously restricts and offers new opportunities for action for young women in the reform period. On the one hand, economic reform has permitted women to gain financially with some prospect of economic independence. In relation to their personal lives, women are permitted to be more active in negotiating their romantic lives, perhaps more able to express non-normative sexualities and even engage in premarital sex. On the other hand, however, deep-rooted gender inequality due to the patriarchal environment promoted by both Confucianism and the Party-State remains a prominent barrier to women’s full equality (Bulbeck, 2009).

#### ‘SOCIALISM WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS’: ECONOMIC REFORM AND THE OPEN DOOR

In 1978, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) made the radical move from a planned to a market-based economy. Commonly referred to as the ‘opening’ of China to the international realm, economic reform ushered in a new wave of national development. These significant changes have included: the dismantling of the *danwei*, the loosening of *hukou* restrictions, the decollectivization of rural farmlands and increased contact with the international sphere. Armed with a new modernization agenda, in the last three decades the Party-State has enabled China to become the second largest economy in the world. With a population of 1.4 billion and a Gross Domestic Product that has increased tenfold since 1978, China’s transition to a market-based economy has undoubtedly been economically successful (Cheek, 2006; Pan, 2006; CIA Factbook, 2014).

The new market economy, combined with increasing contact with the international arena, has encouraged an increase in independence and autonomy and has allowed for a new distinction between public and private spheres to be made. As a result, there has been a relaxation of Party-State control in many areas of personal life (Cheek, 2006; Pan, 2006). With a higher degree of freedom in everyday life, citizens now enjoy much more mobility, both financially and physically (Gittings, 2006). However, the effects of reform for the average person have been uneven. Rapid economic expansion in the last three decades has contributed to a strong rural-urban divide. Per capita income remains below the world average; while the rich continue to gain financially, the poor, generally concentrated in rural areas, struggle to make ends meet (CIA Factbook, 2014). Moreover, reform has exacerbated already existing inequalities between women and men (Jackson et al., 2008; Bulbeck, 2009). In the following section I will review notable social effects of reform, specifically exploring generational changes, the emergence of a consumer culture and continued historical and state influences.

### *Generational Changes*

One of the major social effects of reform has been significant generational change. Young adults<sup>4</sup> in China now live in an extremely different social world compared to their parents just a generation ago. The transition to a one-child family as well as to a market economy has resulted in a variety of benefits, challenges and concerns. Experiencing extraordinary attention from both parents and extended family, the current generation are often criticized for their lack of empathy, sense of responsibility and self-centred behaviour. At the same time, these young people face enormous pressure to be

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<sup>4</sup> By the terms 'young adults' and 'young people', I am referring to people between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. Other studies that have examined sexuality in China, including Farrer's (2002) ethnography, have also used the term 'young people' to describe those aged between eighteen and thirty-five. Although there appears to be no singular agreed upon definition for these terms, most international organizations, including the World Health Organization, United Nations and World Bank, place the start of young adulthood at age eighteen. Some organizations define young adult between the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine, whilst others support the classification of young adult as between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. For instance, Erikson's (1980) 'Stages of Human Development' suggests that young adulthood takes place between ages twenty and forty. Meanwhile, the United Nations uses term 'youth' more liberally depending on country context, where youth might include those people aged fifteen to thirty-five years old (UNESCO, 2014).

the best academically, socially and eventually financially as parents place all their expectations, hopes and dreams on their only child, regardless of sex. Particularly in urban areas, where the policy is strictly adhered to, parents invest heavily in their child's future, especially when it comes to their education. Notably, girls of these families, with no brothers to compete with for resources, are now able to reap the benefits of full parental attention and investment (Fong, 2002).

Often, this single child generation is referred to as “the generation without faith”, as they no longer commit to the Communist rhetoric of the Party-State (Wu, 2005: 185). At the same time, however, they remain constantly exposed to Party-State ideology through state-mandated education and other public Party-State campaigns. The current generation tend to follow both local and global trends in fashion and pop culture, hold different attitudes towards politics and have individualistic tendencies, further highlighting the generation gap between their parents and mainstream youth culture (Wu, 2005). As Yan writes, the “contemporary individual is more interested in his or her personal happiness and the well-being of a narrowly defined private family” (Yan, 2011: 45). As a result, young people in contemporary China are regularly exposed to contradictory messages of the Party-State that encourage the pursuit of self-interests and development, whilst at the same time promote nationalist and moralist campaigns (Wu, 2005; Arnett, 2005; Yan, 2011).<sup>5</sup>

Young women and men in China are therefore faced with negotiating their own personal ambitions in local and global contexts while trying to satisfy parental and nationalistic expectations. As Fong (2004a) found in her ethnography of urban youth, young people were quick to critique aspects of Chinese lifestyle and culture, especially when compared to Western industrialized societies. Feelings of frustration and disappointment at the ‘misfortune’ of being born in China were expressed and could not be reconciled with ambitious goals of further education and employment (Fong, 2004a). At the same time, however, her respondents remained deeply dedicated to their country, regardless of desires to study or work abroad. This loyalty to China was expressed through idioms of

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<sup>5</sup> The moralist agenda of the Party-State will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

filial devotion and the repeated use of the propaganda slogan, “Study hard to repay the motherland” (Fong, 2004a: 643). As young women and men encounter opportunities their parents could never have imagined, they consequently must balance their personal ambitions with Party-State ideology.

Since the 1950s degrees of independence from the family have been encouraged for young people, and they have gradually been able to develop their own form of youth culture.<sup>6</sup> This, combined with economic reform, has created more opportunities that are now available to young people (Yan, 2009). In particular, the loosening of *hukou* restrictions in the early 1980s has allowed for both young women and men to enjoy greater mobility. Now, young rural women and men have the opportunity to work in larger villages or cities as migrant workers and are able to experience new ideas and lifestyles. Upon returning to their natal village, elements of urban culture are transmitted to their hometown (Yan, 2009). Due to increasing migration opportunities as well as advances in technology, contemporary urban culture appears to be rapidly penetrating the formerly isolated rural areas and urban taste in forms of pop culture, including music and movies, are spreading. Moreover, foreign trends are also increasingly infiltrating youth culture, particularly with music, demonstrating the growing globalized consumer culture (Chau, 2006; de Kloet, 2005).

The increasing flows of foreign and urban youth culture have also led to changes in behaviour in young people’s private lives. In particular, transformations in courtship

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<sup>6</sup> Importantly, the CCP extended its influence through the mobilization of youth, providing opportunities for a generation of young Chinese women and men to participate in the public sphere. Traditionally, the family unit was the centre of all social activity, with young people rarely having opportunities to interact with others outside their familial circle. Upon the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, however, youth were directly targeted by the Party through the establishment of a variety of political organizations, including the Communist Youth League, the All China Women’s Federation, village militias as well as less formal organizations, such as performance propaganda troupes (Yan, 2009; Chau, 2006). In addition, a universal education system was introduced by the Party, thereby allowing young people another opportunity to socialize outside of the family realm. Now able to participate in society away from familial constraints, youth became very active members in society and enthusiastically joined the various political outlets available. Overall, ideological influences of the Party, transmitted through youth organizations and the education system, contributed to ideas of familial separation and the spirit of collectivism, thus resulting in a general decline and influence of parental authority during this time (Yan, 2006, 2009).

practices have been observed in both rural and urban areas. Young adults in China are reformulating traditional boundaries of sex and sexuality through practices including adolescent dating, commonly known as 'premature love', and increasing instances of premarital sex and cohabitation with partners have also been observed (Farrer, 2002, 2006; Chau, 2006). For example, dancing, once banned during the Mao era, now serves as a site of sexual articulation in various settings, like in dance halls or in discos (Farrer, 1999, 2002). As Farrer notes, the disco has turned into a site to both enter and experience “global modernity” of fashion, sexuality and consumption (1999: 149-150). Although discos and dance halls are generally only available to urban youth, rural youth also engage in their own forms of youth culture, utilizing public spaces differently. Temple festivals, school classrooms and social activities like drinking, all assist in the production of rural youth culture (Chau, 2006).

### *Consumer Culture*

Alongside these generational changes, another direct effect of economic reform has been a surge in consumerism and commodification (Gittings, 2006). In addition to a variety of internal reforms, the Party-State lessened restrictions on foreign imports during the 1980s. During this initial period, consumption was seen by the Party-State as a way to maintain a form of stability by keeping citizens content during a period of major economic restructuring that had resulted in sudden unemployment, high inflation and immense rural-urban inequalities. By 1992, the Party-State officially endorsed the importance of a consumer culture, with Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour calling for the acceptance of economic reform and modernization. Political ideology of the past, including ideals of personal sacrifice, has now been replaced with a form of individualism emerging from a consumer culture that involves the purchasing of non-necessity and luxury items (Yan, 2009; The Economist, 2014). Those who cannot afford to engage in this rising materialism are excluded. This exclusion is represented in not only purchasing ability but also in the numerous new spaces, such as shopping malls and leisure activities, that have been created and popularized, demarcating physical as well as class divisions (Hanser, 2005).

The consumer culture that has arisen provides a stark contrast to the Mao period just three decades ago. Previously in the collectivist era the slogan “Hard work and plain living” was often used in order to encourage the masses to subsist on a minimal amount. Stories of role models, like the soldier Lei Feng, were told frequently, emphasizing frugality as well as revolutionary fervour (Yan, 2009: 208). In collectivist communities, similar lifestyles in housing and food were standard and any large variation was seen as excessive and bourgeois. The individual pursuit of non-necessity items was officially condemned in state ideology, so much so that any individual pleasure was frowned upon and places such as dance halls and luxury item stores were forbidden and closed down during this time (Yan, 2009). Yet since reform, campaigns like the “Four Selves”<sup>7</sup> in the 1980s, have encouraged self-development and self-reliance of both women and men (Bulbeck, 2009). It is evident that citizens, particularly in urban areas, are using Party-State sanctioned rhetoric to form a more self-centred and individualized form of expression. Young people are now frequently engaging in activities for their own individual pleasure, including leisure activities as well as in more abstract desires, like travel abroad (Fong, 2004a; Bulbeck, 2009).

### *Continuing Influences*

Whilst contemporary China has indeed experienced significant changes economically, politically and socially, historical influences and Party-State control remain prominent features of everyday life. In particular, Confucianism remains an omnipresent element in Chinese culture and in fact Confucian values have seen a resurgence in recent years. Despite repeated efforts by Mao to cleanse the country of ‘feudal’ practices, Confucianism has never quite disappeared from Chinese culture. Although not officially embraced by the Party-State, the government promotes key attributes of Confucianism on a regular basis, including filial piety, family values and ideas of a peaceful society (Bell, 2010). For instance in 2005 former President Hu Jintao actively encouraged the establishment of a ‘Harmonious Society’ in relation to China’s economic and social development, urging citizens to embrace the diversity of the nation. Current President Xi

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<sup>7</sup> The ‘Four Selves’ include self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance and self-improvement.

Jinping has also drawn on Confucianism, openly quoting from Confucius in public speeches and frequently using Confucian teachings in his campaigns to denounce the mounting greed, corruption and supposed moral decline of the nation (Chin, 2014; Kang and Blanchard, 2013). Although Western governments perceive such rhetoric as a move to further assert Party-State control, Party leaders see it as an attempt to foster social cohesion and development within the country (Cheek, 2006). Confucian elements can also be observed in other aspects of Chinese culture, further demonstrating its endurance. At the Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games in 2008 for example, quotes from the classical Confucian text *The Analects* were read. The Chinese Confucian Foundation was established in 2006 and other Confucian Institutes for study of the classics have also emerged since economic reform, promoting values of morality and education (Yao, 2001; Hu, 2007).

Particularly for the younger generation, the appeal of tradition has weakened overall due to the impact of modernization, influx of foreign culture and advances in science and technology. Increases in competition as well as changing family structures and child rearing practices for most signify that Confucianism is no longer necessary or an element of daily life. Older cadres who grew up under the Maoist system still remember the denunciation and repeated negative campaigns of backwardness, and are willing to place Confucianism as a tradition of the past (Rozman, 2001; Bell, 2010). Yet despite these perceptions, most people are unaware just how frequently Confucian practices permeate everyday living. Elite examinations to serve the country, the importance of *guanxi*, or networking, reputation and gift giving within politics and social relations, as well as an ultimate respect for hierarchy and authority remain central features of contemporary Chinese society and are key in East Asia (Rozman, 2001; Hu, 2007). Thus as Yao (2001) states, there exists an essential contradiction of Confucianism. Although no longer as obvious in modern society, Confucian values “penetrate the life of people and underpin the attitudes and behaviour of common people”, forming a “self-contradictory approach to Confucian identity, namely, ‘Confucianism’ without the name of Confucianism” (2001: 326).

Although looked upon as unnecessary in this new age, some theorize that perhaps with the accelerated modernization and success of the country, there has been a renewed confidence of traditional Confucian thought (Bell, 2010; Hu, 2007). Intellectuals agree, however, that the return to Confucianism must be accompanied by significant changes to its original form. Although there are many varieties of Confucianism, the updated ‘Modern’, ‘New’ or ‘Leftist’ versions hope to address the issues of modernity and globalization facing the nation today (Yao, 2001). Moreover, intellectuals from all disciplines, including economists, scientists, philosophers and businessmen are increasingly looking to Confucianism to assess China’s current social and economic status. For instance, while Confucian thought is traditionally opposed to profit-seeking, it is often invoked in contemporary China in an attempt to counter the mass consumerism taking place. With economic reform having allowed for an increase in competition as well as autonomy of the individual, and although unable to reject Westernization completely, there is a general belief that turning to China’s traditional culture may help resolve problems of materialism and greed that have recently surfaced (Bell, 2010).

Filial piety, one of the three fundamental tenets of Confucianism, also remains a continuing influence in the reform period. As Evans (2008) explains, “Filiality – the requirement that children fulfil expectations of material care and ritual respect of their parents – has long been considered a pillar of China’s cultural and social tradition” (Evans, 2008: 172). Despite the social and economic changes that have occurred, providing material support for the elderly continues to be an expectation of parents and children in the reform period (Qi, 2014). With parents investing and involving themselves in their child’s life to a high degree, even in adulthood, most children feel obligated to provide for their parents in old age. In fact, the 1950 and 1980 versions of the Marriage Law address filial piety, with the 1980 Marriage Law giving parents the right to demand monetary assistance from their children if they are found to be neglecting their filial responsibility (Qi, 2014: 7).<sup>8</sup> As only elderly childless couples are

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<sup>8</sup> The Marriage Law will be discussed in more detail below.



eligible for government support in old age, filial duty remains important for survival in the reform period.

Notably, expectations and manifestations of filiality have changed since the beginning of the reform period. For instance, although the majority of children do want to provide for their parents in old age, most are unwilling to place all care and considerations above their own personal relationships (Qi, 2014). Furthermore, as a result of the loosening *hukou* restrictions, economic reform has enabled young men and women to migrate to urban centres more easily. Yet as Lin (2013) found, being a filial son remained important to young migrant men. Despite living away from home, his participants continued to send remittances back home in order to fulfil their filial obligation.

Moreover, although traditional Confucian thought places filial responsibility primarily on sons, daughters are now seen as able to provide parental support in old age. This change is thought to be partly due to an unintended consequence of the one-child policy. Since parents now invest substantially in their child regardless of sex, young women are now seen as having the potential to provide (Fong, 2002). In fact, as Qi notes, daughters are even sometimes perceived to be better caregivers, “since daughters are not only able to contribute financially, but more importantly provide emotional and practical physical support” (2014: 15). Moreover, although traditionally women cared for their in-laws in old age, another change in filial practice has been that most young women now prefer to care for their own parents and are more easily able to refuse providing support for their in-laws (Qi, 2014). Although women still earn less than men, parents now accept that their daughter will have the capacity to gain economically and be able to support them financially in old age. It must be kept in mind, however, that when these young women do enter the workforce, they will continue to face discrimination in the workplace in terms of wage and occupation, just as their mothers did (Fong, 2002; Liu, 2007; Hong, 2007; Hu and Scott, 2014).

Despite allowing more freedom when it comes to economic competition, the Party-State continues to be a far-reaching force shaping the lives of the people. Unlike in the Mao

period, where people were monitored daily through the *danwei* and direct Party-State interference, now the Party-State exercises public control through different avenues, including censorship campaigns, the promotion of a moralist agenda as well as through government-sponsored institutions. The developing sense of individualism has clearly become consistent source of anxiety for the Party-State when it comes to its citizens. This fear of social unrest and instability is, according to Timothy Cheek (2006), well-founded. Officials in the Party-State responsible for the ‘opening’ in 1978, leaders such as Deng Xiaoping, experienced the terrorizing campaigns of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and remember well the ensuing chaos, or *luan*. Thus, partly because of these recollections, the current Party-State is determined to prevent and avoid *luan* at all costs, as evidenced in the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident as well as in current media censorship campaigns. In fact, maintaining this internal stability is such a primary focus for the Party-State that more money is spent on domestic security than on national defence (Hong Fincher, 2014: 23). The Party-State’s promotion of a ‘Harmonious Society’ and ideological campaigns encouraging conservative moral values is another way of promoting internal stability on a day-to-day basis. Sex and sexuality are linked to these movements as well, with the policing of ‘morality’ through the Marriage Law, government-sponsored matchmaking events and campaigns against commercial sex work deemed essential in preserving the order and stability of the nation (Ruan and Matsumura, 1991; Sigley, 2001, 2006; Evans, 1997; Alford and Shen, 2004; Hong Fincher, 2014).

Party-State response to the changing social landscape has been to disseminate and emphasize conservative rhetoric concerning marriage and family as both “political liberalization and sexual liberalization are equally problematic” and therefore must be restricted as necessary for fear of moral corruption (Sigley, 2006: 45). For instance, although sex has increasingly been discussed in the public sphere since the 1980s, Party-State reaction has been one of concern and apprehension of social disorder, particularly when it comes to the younger generation (Zhao and West, 1999; Hershatter, 1996). Thus whilst the Party-State encourages the pursuit of a modernization agenda and economic competition both nationally and internationally, it simultaneously continues to monitor

autonomy of the individual (Jackson et al., 2008). This supervision becomes even more apparent when examining the status of women in the reform period.

#### WOMEN AND ECONOMIC REFORM

Despite Party-State commitment to women's issues, gender inequality remains deeply implanted within Chinese society. Economic change and the one-child policy have contributed to profound shifts in women's personal lives (Zhao and West, 1999; Mu, 1999). Women have experienced dramatic changes in lifestyle, including new financial pressures of reform and modifications in child-rearing practices and family structure (Pan, 2006: 30). With traditional gender norms and practices remaining largely unchanged, especially concerning the role of women in marriage as responsible for maintaining familial harmony, women are faced with the double burden of caring for and raising of family members and the household, as well as dealing with the demands of the new market economy (Pan, 2006; Jackson et al., 2008; Chen, 2004). Traditional Confucian values, such as filial piety and the preference for sons, also remain prevalent, yet are impossible to fulfil due to both policy constraints and the expenses of childrearing.

The rejection of the economics of the Mao period has encouraged the resurgence of a rhetoric of gender difference, with women described in terms of biological difference and reproductive capacity (Zhao and West, 1999; Evans, 1997).<sup>9</sup> With official statements on gender resembling those of the 1950s, gender equality is clearly not a state

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<sup>9</sup> Upon the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there was an immediate call for equality between the sexes. Representing this commitment was the Marriage Law of 1950, where feudal practices of arranged or forced marriage were abolished. Women were now to become 'productive' members of the nation, freed from childcare and household responsibilities. It was during the 1950s that narratives around sex and sexuality were discussed in terms of self-denial and self-sacrifice of the individual. Sex and sexuality were presented in a negative light, with engaging in illegitimate forms and discussion of sexual relations considered taboo (Hershatter, 1996). Publications during this time also reinforced this notion of controlling of human urges and desires, with most being strictly limited to health and hygienic matters (Evans, 1997). Traditional concepts of *yin* and *yang* continued to play a role during the 1950s as well, with emphasis being placed on the 'natural' differences between the sexes, further cementing the gendered binaries of the passive, submissive female and the dominant male desire. Thus although removed from the official modernization rhetoric, sexuality was seen by the CCP as a site to be controlled in order to avoid and prevent chaos and the moral depravity of society within the new regime, placing the interests and the good of the nation over that of the individual.

priority (Hong Fincher, 2014).<sup>10</sup> There is therefore a profound disconnect between what may be desired by women and what is demanded economically and politically (Mu, 1999: 140). Although women are “no longer tools of reproduction”, the enactment of the one-child policy and economic reform have contributed to Party-State “policing of [women's] personal lives”, the regulation of their sexuality and the reinforcing of gender inequality (Pan, 2006: 29; Zhao and West, 1999: 11). In the following section, I will detail the mixed effects of three decades of reform has had for women, specifically examining the labour market, the institution of marriage, the family, sexuality and intimate relations.

### *Employment Practices*

In contrast to the rhetoric of gender equality and the Maoist image of the capable Iron Girl<sup>11</sup>, since the 1990s, there has been a general call from the Party-State for women to leave the workforce and ‘return home’. Due to vast structural changes experienced in the urban *danwei* since reform, State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) have been unable to compete with joint ventures of foreign-owned businesses, resulting in numerous layoffs. In order to ease the extreme increase in unemployment from failing SOEs, the Party-State has issued calls for women to ‘return home’ to their ‘natural’ roles as wife and mother (Bulbeck, 2009; Liu, 2007). Although China has one of the highest female employment rates in the world, the numbers of urban women in employment have fallen significantly since the 1990s (Attané, 2012). For example in the 1980s, 77.4 per cent of urban women were in paid employment, compared to 2010 where approximately 60.8 per cent were employed (Hong Fincher, 2014: 36; Attané, 2012: 8).

Reinforcing the call to ‘return home’ has been the (re)emergence of rhetoric highlighting both physical and mental differences between women and men, with women’s

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<sup>10</sup> Even the All China Women’s Federation, meant to encourage women’s interests, is generally seen as an instrument of Party-State control (Hong Fincher, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Iron Girl’ was a term used during the Cultural Revolution to symbolize women’s equality with men. As Emily Honig explains: “The Iron Girls – strong, robust women capable of performing jobs more commonly done by men, such as repairing high-voltage electric wires – symbolized the Maoist slogan that ‘whatever men comrades can accomplish, women comrades can too’” (2000: 97).

femininity and delicate, domestic nature emphasized (Xu, 2000; Hong Fincher, 2014). Women's physical strength, equality and power, formerly encouraged under Mao, are now considered bizarre. The Party-State has encouraged this stance by claiming that 'returning home' is the ultimate definition of a Chinese women's virtue. Not only an expression of "sacrifice, tolerance and generosity", the Party-State presents this option as "[women's] contribution to economic reform" (Xu, 2000: 53).

With women's bodies now considered inferior to men's due to biology and increasingly sexualized, this has allowed for recurrent, and often overt, gender discrimination, especially when it comes to employment practices (Zheng, 2001). As Dillon (2007) notes, many employers have ignored the legislation intended to protect women as a result of the emerging competitive market. Women are generally paid less than men, the first to be let go or placed on extended maternity leave (Attané, 2012; Dillon, 2007). Particularly because of pregnancy and care obligations, women are seen as problematic in the workplace, and as a result, employers tend to hire less qualified men over skilled women (Bulbeck, 2009; Liu, 2007; Hong Fincher, 2014).<sup>12</sup> The 'return home' rhetoric and discrimination by employers work together to support inequality, and gender equality in employment practices is no longer a priority for the Party-State (Xu, 2000).

Although the 'return home' campaign primarily affected older women in SOEs, the language and ideas surrounding it appear to be influencing young women. In her survey of Chinese youth, Chilla Bulbeck (2009) found that young women are increasingly rejecting the gender sameness of the Mao period experienced by their mothers. Revolutionary clothes formerly worn are "laughed at" and the Iron Girl is seen as an unnatural phenomenon. Instead, contemporary young women are eager to highlight their gender through the consumption of feminine products and hyper-feminine dress (Bulbeck, 2009: 109). Moreover, although aware of the gender discrimination found in the workplace, Bulbeck found that her respondents attributed this to the 'natural'

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<sup>12</sup> In fact one of my participants, Betty (25), told me how at a job interview, the management insisted that she sign a 'no pregnancy' clause as part of her contract.

physical differences between the sexes. Thus it is evident that the ‘return home’ rhetoric has had a deep effect upon the next generation of Chinese women.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the structure of the job market and the opportunities available to women have changed dramatically since reform. Alongside a decline in women’s participation in both political and managerial positions, women have increasingly been clustered in distinct industries, since women are now “expected to seek jobs which suit their supposed biological characteristics” (Xu, 2000: 54). While urban women are generally concentrated in the service sector, women who migrate are commonly finding employment in textile industries as they are seen as more suited for light, detailed work (Bulbeck, 2009; Xu, 2000). Women are now no longer expected to be able to do whatever men can, and as a result, are “advised to choose traditional women’s work” (Xu, 2000: 55).<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, in contrast to the ‘Iron Rice Bowl’<sup>15</sup> image of egalitarian and communal living during the Great Leap Forward<sup>16</sup>, a ‘Rice Bowl of Youth’ has emerged in employment trends, particularly in the service sector (Zhang, 2000; Hanser, 2005; Hong Fincher, 2014). Young women, working as waitresses or in public relations and other entertainment industries, are now generally found wearing heavy makeup and sexualized clothing. These *xiaojies*, or misses<sup>17</sup>, are often referred to as the “pink collar class”, suggesting elements of femininity, sexuality and daintiness. Clearly, this image is in strong opposition to the Iron Girl of the Mao period (Zhang, 2000).

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<sup>13</sup> These sentiments are similar to those found in the former Soviet Union, with women engaging in forms of hyper-femininity after the collapse of the Soviet regimes (Johnson and Robinson, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> This was an opinion that was echoed in many of my interviews. Several participants made comments about how certain subjects or jobs were unsuitable for women, like medicine or construction work, as they would interfere in a woman’s home life.

<sup>15</sup> “Iron Rice Bowl” is a phrase that commonly refers to the guaranteed job security that was present during the Mao regime.

<sup>16</sup> The Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) was a campaign led by Mao to rapidly industrialize and begin collectivization. The campaign was a failure, ending in the Great Famine and the death of millions (Dikötter, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> The term *xiaojie*, although frequently used for ‘miss’, can also be used as slang to refer to prostitutes (see for example Liu, 2008; Ding and Ho, 2008).

In the contemporary job market youth appears to be a “kind of currency” (Zhang, 2000: 99). Representing the idea of modernity through the feminization and sexualisation of young women, youth now seems to be a prerequisite in the reform era, distinguishing “‘productive’ bodies from unproductive ones” (Hanser, 2005: 582). Those women who do not fit this image, such as rural migrant workers and/or older women, are therefore excluded from participating in the new economy. Youth, no longer just a transition period to adulthood, has been changed and developed alongside the current consumer culture into a social and marketable category (Zhang, 2000). Concealing this current sexualisation and occupational segregation of young women in the reform era is the Party-State rhetoric promoting natural, biological differences between the sexes (Hanser, 2005).

Young women in contemporary China are therefore faced with contradictory messages concerning women’s status in the public sector. On the one hand, women’s equality is technically supported in the reform period, through specific legislation and economic opportunities available in certain arenas. Yet at the same time, while women are encouraged to see themselves as equal, differences between the sexes conceived as ‘natural’ are repeatedly highlighted in both public and private spheres. Additionally, young women are also encouraged to be active participants in the production of a feminine and sexualized self, which is to be pursued through the consumption of beauty products (Bulbeck, 2009).

### *Marriage and the Family*

Marriage and the family remain central arenas where sexuality continues to be monitored by the Party-State and subject to a rhetoric of gender inequality. Traditionally thought of as the “cell of society”, the family is a primary site of importance and control within China (Sigley, 2001: 123; see also Micollier, 2003; Woo, 2006). Confucian values, historically central to the formation of the family, also continue to play a role in familial relations, though perhaps at a less obvious level in contemporary China. In addition, the structural and behavioural changes resulting from economic reform,

including the individualist and youth culture that has developed, have also had a significant impact on marriage and the family (Micollier, 2003).

For women, a trend of agency and independence has been noted in recent decades when it comes to familial decisions, especially concerning marriage. Traditionally in the transition from adolescence to wife and daughter-in-law, young women have played a minimal role. Especially within the rural household and from the influence of Confucian conventions, daughters were seen as a drain on familial resources, as they were considered temporary members of their natal family and once married would eventually join their husband's family.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, a new daughter-in-law was often perceived as a source of disruption once she joined her husband's family, potentially challenging family allegiances, especially when it came to inheritance issues. Stories about conflicts with disobedient daughters and scheming mothers-in-law were frequent (Yan, 2006, 2009).

Yet since the 1950s, young women have been more active agents in challenging patriarchal norms when it comes to marriage. Mate choice, marriage negotiations and timing of family division are all avenues in which young women are asserting greater authority and autonomy. With the advent of the original Marriage Law and the development of youth culture throughout the 1950s, young women were able to have greater input, including final veto power, in the selection of a husband. More recently, as Yan (2006, 2009) observes in rural China, other aspects of courtship have gradually undergone change and expansion, including more freedom in mate choice as well as a steady increase in and acceptance of premarital sex between engaged couples.

Young women have also become more involved in the management of bridewealth, the wedding gift provided by the groom's parents. Traditionally, the bride had no involvement in the negotiation of bridewealth, however, according to Yan, since reform, brides have increasingly been involved in the discussion and, in some cases, have

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<sup>18</sup> The common idiom "A married out daughter is like spilt water", demonstrates this idea of a daughter being a 'wasted' resource and investment, as she will eventually marry out of her natal family (see Evans, 2008: 61).



gradually demanded larger amounts of money and more extravagant gifts (Yan, 2006, 2009). Moreover, the timing of family division, where the bride and groom form a household independent of the husband's family, has changed significantly. Before reform, this division was delayed for as long as possible, partly as an expression of filiality, but also due to the economic advantages provided by the married son's labour. Newly married couples today, however, appear to be establishing their own residency immediately after marriage, often at the request of the young women. A multi-generational family, formerly an expression of filiality, is now commonly seen as a failure in parenting. Although short-lived, as these demands and decisions reflect a specific period in a woman's life, it is possible that young women have been able to gain and exercise greater independence when it comes to mate choice and marriage arrangements (Yan, 2006, 2009).

In other East Asian countries like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, marriage rates have steadily decreased and the age of first marriage for women and men has gradually risen.<sup>19</sup> Yet despite cultural similarities with the region, marriage in China is a practice that is nearly universal. Marriage and the family are seen as important to a strong and moral society, and most marry before the age of thirty (Davis, 2014; Mann, 2011; Jones and Yeung, 2014). Seen as fulfilling part of Confucian duty by the creation of ancestors and providing security in old age, as well as contributing to overall societal stability, marriage remains an important rite of passage in the reform period. Marriage idealizes and stabilizes the notion of the 'Harmonious Society', especially as Hong Fincher notes, "From the government's perspective, married couples are much less likely to cause trouble" (Hong Fincher, 2014: 22-23). As a result, those who remain single, especially women, are highly stigmatized. Importantly, the focus of the singleness discussion has primarily been on the 'marriage squeeze' and the growing number of single men who cannot find wives, an effect of the skewed sex ratios from the one-child policy (Attané, 2012; Ji and Yeung, 2014). Even the Party-State, which generally turns a blind eye to

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<sup>19</sup> For example, in 2010 the mean age of first marriage for women in Japan was 29.7, 30.1 in South Korea and 30.4 in Taiwan. This is in significant contrast to the average age of first marriage for women in China, at 24.7 years old (Jones and Yeung, 2014; United Nations, 2013).

the gendered consequences of the policy, is outspoken over “rootless single males and their unruly behaviour” (Mann, 2011: 132-133; see also Hong Fincher, 2014).

A succession of Marriage Laws has also been enacted in order to promote women’s rights and equality. Yet, it is worth noting that all of the Marriage Laws, especially the 1950 and 1980 versions, although aiming to improve the status of women, only address women in relation to their status via the family, through marriage and reproduction (see Mann, 2011: 132-133). The Marriage Law of 1950 abolished arranged or forced marriage and took direct action to allow women to become ‘productive’ members of the nation, freeing them from childcare and household responsibilities through collectivization. Although now equal legally, the Marriage Law did not change the attitudes held by older generations instantly. Notably, the older generation feared that with the new law, marriage would be taken as a ‘loose’ affair, resulting in damage to the institution as a whole. This is particularly of relevance as the same worry of ‘loose’ marriage is currently being expressed in China, culminating in the latest reform of the Marriage Law in 2011 (Mann, 2011; Hooper, 1975; Asian Correspondent, 2011; Tatlow, 2011).

As a result of the original Marriage Law, women were also allowed to initiate divorce proceedings. According to Woo (2006), however, the Party-State actually intervened in all divorce proceedings through the *danwei*. Consequently, the *danwei* replaced the family as the primary decision maker in the private sphere. Divorce therefore became “highly politicized”, and was only considered if it “advance[d] the greater goal of the socialist collective” and was assessed “within the broader context of existing political campaigns” (Woo, 2006: 65; see also Mann, 2011; Liu, 2007). Thus, with the establishment of collectivization and the *danwei* work unit, family affairs, and women's agency, were subsumed under the Party-State.

In 1980, the Marriage Law was revised, demonstrating the Party-State’s new commitment to economic and social reform. As one of the first non-economic laws of the period, the 1980 Marriage Law allowed for divorce in circumstances of “broken

emotion” between partners (Woo, 2006: 66; Alford and Shen, 2004: 251; see also Evans, 1997). Under this version, couples wishing to divorce are subject to mediation by the local Bureau of Civil Affairs before a divorce is granted, thereby continuing to make the process public via the Party-State system (Woo, 2006). This modification can also be seen as part of the Party-State’s commitment to economic development. As Mann (2011) argues, the emphasis on “emotional and sexual satisfaction in marriage provided a context for women’s retreat from the workforce into the home in urban areas” (2011: 78). The Marriage Law was amended yet again in 2001, including for the first time references to domestic violence, as well as extramarital affairs, and clarifying custody arrangements, grounds for divorce and ensuring alimony payments (Woo, 2006; Alford and Shen, 2004). Importantly, the law does not recognise cohabitation of unmarried couples nor does it protect 'third party' partners, who may be involved with someone who is married (Evans, 1997).<sup>20</sup> Thus despite important changes, these omissions reflect the wider moralist agenda of the Party-State.<sup>21</sup>

More recently, the Marriage Law was revised in 2011 to include new sanctions concerning the division of property in the event of divorce. Previously, property was considered to be held jointly between a woman and a man once married. However, the Supreme Court has now ruled that the party whose name is listed on the mortgage or deed will receive the property in full in the event of divorce. Prior to the ruling, property was generally divided equally between the two parties. Although the revision does not specify the gender of the deed holder, traditionally it is the groom or groom’s parents who purchase the family home upon marriage. In fact, this practice is so common that in urban areas men buying property before marriage is considered “a defining feature of masculinity” (Hong Fincher, 2014: 84).<sup>22</sup> Thus, the ruling not only ignores women’s

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Third party’ partners, such as *xiao san* and *bao ernai*, will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

<sup>21</sup> Notably, although China’s rate of infidelity is on par with other countries, disapproval over adultery and extramarital sex is quite high. As Zhang et al. (2012) found in their survey, 95 per cent of women and men under the age of forty-nine disagreed with extramarital sex. Women in particular did not approve of men who used commercial sex (Zhang et al., 2012: 869). Despite increasing reports of infidelity, this perhaps suggests that people agree with and support the moralist agenda of the Party-State.

<sup>22</sup> In fact, the belief that a man should purchase a home is so widespread that women are actively discouraged from purchasing homes themselves for fears of “scar[ing] off potential husbands” as it is “considered shameful for [her] to own a home before marriage” (Hong Fincher, 2014: 87, 83). Rather

contribution to home and family life, through childrearing and care work, but it also reinforces traditional gender roles as well as effectively leaves a woman homeless if she undergoes divorce (Asian Correspondent, 2011; Liu, 2011b; Tatlow, 2011).

The Court upheld this amendment as a measure to dissuade young women from entering matrimony for monetary reasons and instead to look to their future “partner’s virtues rather than their wealth” (Liu, 2011b). These sentiments closely echo those felt by the older generation of the 1950s, with the passing of the original Marriage Law, where concerns were expressed that with free choice of marriage partner, marriage would become a light-hearted affair (Hooper, 1975). The primary rationale behind the ruling is China’s escalating divorce rate, which has increased from approximately 2 per cent in the 1970s to 27 per cent in 2013 (Wu, 2014; Liu, 2011a). Property disagreements figure prominently in recent divorce cases, and estimates suggest that over 3.5 million couples applied for divorce in 2013, an increase of 12.8 per cent from previous year (Shanghai Daily, 2014; Wu, 2014). Consequently, the Court believes that it is upholding and protecting an important cultural value through the new Marriage Law’s reassertion of morality (Tatlow, 2011; Asian Correspondent, 2011).

Moreover, due to the larger economic inequalities faced by many Chinese citizens today, most women are at a disadvantage when filing for divorce proceedings. In particular, access to fewer financial resources limits the feasibility of women bringing divorce cases to courts (Woo, 2006; Chen, 2004). In a new age of personal autonomy, however, Woo (2006) has found that more women initiate divorce proceedings in order to not be perceived as 'victims'. An environment of “self-fulfilment” and independence is therefore becoming more evident, with women increasingly exercising their individual rights under the law (Woo, 2006: 68, 75). Future research will be necessary to examine the impact of the latest Marriage Law and women’s feelings towards divorce. One thing that remains clear is that despite increasing incidents of divorce, the overall marriage rate continues to rise (Davis, 2014).

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women are instead persuaded, and at times pressured, to use their savings to help male relatives purchase homes before marriage.

### *A Heteronormative Environment*

Despite rapid changes and increased contact with the international sphere, the Party-State also defines and constrains other areas personal life. Heterosexual relations remain the only legitimate form of relationship in China, and same-sex relationships are not legally recognised. Consequently, heterosexuality is viewed as the only socially acceptable relationship (Sigley, 2006). Since economic reform, however, gay culture, and to a lesser extent lesbian culture, have become more visible than in previous decades and some government ministries have even briefly addressed homosexuality due to pressure from both intellectual and women's groups (Yau, 2010; Chen and Chen, 2006; Kam, 2006; Mann, 2011). For instance, in 1997 the charge of 'hooliganism', a euphemism for homosexuality, was removed from China's criminal code, and in 2001 the Ministry of Public Security announced the right of each citizen to choose their own sexuality (Bulbeck, 2009; Mann, 2011; Kong, 2011). In spite of such meagre admissions, however, the lives of both lesbian women and gay men are consistently marginalized through both government and social actions and a limited understanding and acceptance of same-sex relationships (Tam et al., 2014; Zheng et al., 2011; Kam, 2010). Social prejudice and stigmatization is widespread, and as Mann notes, pressures to conform to the heterosexual ideal come "not from fear of criminal conviction, but from fear of losing a job or having one's sexual preferences revealed to fellow workers, or worse, family members" (Mann, 2011: 152).

Since the 'Open Door', elements of international and Western lesbian and gay culture have influenced the lesbian and gay scene in China, as evident in the use of Taiwanese, Cantonese and English terms to describe sexuality and identity. This preference for international vocabulary can be seen as a rejection of traditional Chinese terminology for describing lesbian women and gay men, which carry negative connotations, and perhaps a yearning for a more 'modern' lifestyle (Ho, 2008; Rofel, 2007). Additionally, access to new communication technologies, such as internet chat rooms, have enabled the formation of national lesbian and gay networks (Ho, 2008; Kam, 2010). Since the 1990s, and particularly after the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, lesbian and gay groups, hotlines and bars have been set up, helping to organize, teach as well as

provide safe spaces for discussions and meetings (He, 2001; Rofel, 2007). Particularly in urban areas, increased mobility and access to the internet have allowed lesbian and gay groups to form, bringing together those people otherwise marginalized by political and social norms (Kam, 2006). Interestingly, although lesbian and gay identity definitively conflict with Party-State heteronormative doctrine, most lesbian women and gay men appear willing to support the ideological rhetoric of reform and subsequent state control (Ho, 2008).

Heterosexuality is further reinforced through the social and cultural beliefs imposed on lesbian women. In particular, both lesbian women and gay men experience strong pressures to conform to the societal expectation of heterosexual marriage. With marriage nearly a universal practice in Chinese culture, the pressures experienced by lesbian women to marry are particularly severe. As Lucetta Yip Lo Kam (2010) illustrates, in Chinese culture marriage is considered the ultimate marker of adulthood. By entering into a marital union, one is confirming their role in the adult world and therefore taking responsibility for the formation of a new family unit.

Parents also face this negative pressure for their child to conform to societal norms and see it as their duty to help or suggest a spouse for their child. A variety of coping mechanisms to tolerate this unending pressure to marry have therefore been developed by lesbian women in post-reform China. Some choose to marry against their own sexual and personal preferences, generally to placate both parental and societal demands, while others engage in more open relationships. Kam (2010) has also observed a relatively new arrangement, whereby a lesbian woman and gay man choose to marry each other in order to satisfy and evade societal pressure. Most of her participants note the difficulty in telling parents their sexual preferences, however, there is an indication that the younger generation are more willing to announce to their families that they will choose to remain single (Kam, 2006, 2010).

Historically, marriage has had political, social and economic importance in China. With the *danwei* previously controlling all aspects of social services provision, such as health

care and apartment arrangements, a married couple would receive preferential treatment over a single person. Moreover, it is generally felt that married people receive more social recognition, as they are welcoming the challenge of adulthood. Those who are over the acceptable age of marriage, considered to be between the ages of twenty-five to twenty-nine, are considered *daling qingnian*, or ‘overage young people’, viewed as a veritable crisis in modern day China (Wu, 2014; Shanghai Daily, 2014). Unmarried women, in particular, are subject to negative labels and societal gossip, being referred to as an ‘old girl’ and/or ‘leftover woman’ which connotes unattractiveness, shortcomings and thus flaws within her “internal essence” (Kam, 2010; To, 2013).<sup>23</sup> Economically, it is seen as almost impossible for a woman to survive financially without a male provider, particularly with current housing costs. Not marrying, therefore, is perceived as a purposeful act of defiance and a rejection of one’s obligation to both family and the state.

It is apparent that within Chinese society, a heteronormative relationship leading to marriage is the only socially acceptable lifestyle. Party-State actions support this notion, promulgating the idea that those relationships valid under the law are morally superior than those that do not fall into this category (Sigley, 2006). Although the Party-State has officially lessened external policing via the *danwei*, the institution of the family is now the primary unit of enforcing heterosexual marriage. While much research remains to be done on lesbian women’s experiences in China, it appears that in general, lesbian women in China feel the pressures to marry acutely and have devised a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with such problems. Most lesbian women find themselves marrying men in order to avoid social stigma as well as in an act of filial devotion to their parents (Kam, 2006, 2010).

The reform era has ushered in a period of mixed effects for women. On the one hand, women now experience more freedom in their personal lives, especially when considering employment, marriage and within the family. At the same time, the narrative surrounding these areas of personal life is heavily gendered, echoing the rhetoric of

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<sup>23</sup> This pressure to marry and negative labels will be explored further in Chapter 6.

gender difference from the beginning of the Mao period. Rather than place women on equal footing with men, women now experience overt discrimination in the workplace and are seen as primary nurturers and carers in the home. The rejection of the Maoist androgyny has also encouraged the development of a sexualised femininity. As a result, reform has fostered an environment of inequality, supported on the micro level through the individual and family as well as on the macro level of the Party-State.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have set the scene for the status of women in China today. In order to situate the experiences of young women, I have examined the ways in which the modernization process in China differs from that observed in the West and in other parts of East Asia. I have also illustrated how the theories of modernity and intimacy of Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim are limited in scope when considering the Chinese context. Arguably not a post-industrial society, China's Communist past as well as lingering cultural influences have contributed to a specific modernization agenda. Internally driven, the Chinese modernization process has enabled a climate of great social transformation. These changes have included generational ones as well as growing consumerist tendencies and an increased amount of personal freedom in daily life. Yet, despite such shifts in private life, the historical legacy of Confucianism and the overarching reach of the Party-State remain strong and relevant factors in everyday life.

When it comes to the status of Chinese women, economic reform has produced mixed results. The rejection of the Mao period and the continuing importance of the family and marriage have positioned women as primary carers and nurturers and endorsed the pursuit of hyper-feminine beauty standards. Moreover, economic restructuring has allowed for overt gender discrimination and sex-segregated occupations in the workplace. Importantly, the rhetoric of essential sex differences and (re)emerging emphasis on biology are elements that are repeatedly noted when examining these arenas.



When it comes to sexuality and intimacy, this narrative of natural, biological difference becomes even more evident. As I will illustrate beginning in Chapter 4, the tension between change and continuity in the reform era is clear in my examination of attitudes towards sex, ideal partners, marriage and unmarried women and the way these elements interrelate. Before examining the current sexual climate in China, in the next chapter I will detail the methods I used to conduct my fieldwork in Shanghai.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **RESEARCHING CHINESE WOMEN: A METHODOLOGICAL ACCOUNT**

In this chapter, I address and reflect on the methods I used to carry out my study. As my research interests lay in exploring young women's thoughts and opinions concerning sex, intimacy and ideal partners, I selected a feminist qualitative approach in order to fully investigate these issues. I begin by discussing the rationale for the use of feminist and qualitative methods. I will then detail the ethical considerations I took and the process of interviewing I used to collect my data. This is followed by a critical reflection of my experience of conducting cross-cultural research. I then conclude with a discussion on the process of interpretation and analysis used for this thesis.

As a researcher who identifies as feminist, the use of a feminist research method to examine my research interests was essential to complete this study. Especially when carrying out cross-cultural research, a feminist method is particularly important, due to the emphasis on the experiences of women from their own perspective (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994; Maynard, 1994). Whilst it has been widely agreed that there is no one single feminist research method, there are several identifying features of feminist research (Brooks and Hesse-Biber, 2007; Burns and Walker, 2005). Firstly, as Letherby notes, feminist researchers employ a "method which enables women's experiences to be distinct and discernible" (2003: 102). Aiming to be a "holistic endeavour", feminist researchers "hold different perspectives, ask different questions, draw from a wide array of methods and methodologies, and apply multiple lenses that heighten our awareness of sexist, racist, homophobic and colonialist ideologies and practices" (Brooks and Hesse-Biber, 2007: 4). Rather than searching for an objective truth, feminist researchers believe that paying attention to specific and distinct experiences of women contributes to a more complete understanding of the social (Brooks and Hesse-Biber, 2007; Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994). Finally, a feminist method demands that the researcher takes into account their own assumptions and presence, and the ways in which this affects the research (Neuman, 2000). To research the experiences of women of a different culture, a

feminist approach, with its aims of heightened reflexivity and awareness of social location, seemed the most appropriate and effective method.

Qualitative methods are often viewed as being compatible with feminist research. With an emphasis on detail and the process of meaning-making, qualitative methods offer the researcher an in-depth and flexible approach to examining the social (Ambert et al., 1995; Denzin and Ryan, 2007; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Moreover, the importance qualitative research assigns to historical, cultural and social context is a crucial element of research design. Highlighting the importance of interpretation, qualitative research demands that the researcher recognise the ways in which both she and the participant are “always positioned culturally, historically and theoretically” (Freeman et al., 2007: 27). As a result of these factors, for my cross-cultural study, a qualitative approach proved to be the most effective as my research aimed to explore young women’s points of view on several personal themes in-depth.

As Reinharz notes, qualitative interviewing is exploratory and “offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher” (1992: 19). Since I wanted to explore in detail specific themes, I decided that semi-structured interviewing would be most effective in order to guide the interview on themes of sexuality and modernity. Additionally, semi-structured interviews would provide enough flexibility to adjust and pursue relevant tangents that I may have been unaware of prior to entering the field (see Gabb, 2008). A semi-structured approach would also allow the participant room to expand and stress certain elements of their narrative as well (Denscombe, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2007).

## RESEARCH DESIGN

I chose to conduct my study in Shanghai for several reasons. As the largest city in China, with a documented population of over twenty million people, Shanghai offers an international and diverse environment (CIA Factbook, 2014). A former treaty port, the city has a rich history and is now considered a primary site of financial prosperity.

Frequently Shanghai is portrayed as a cosmopolitan and global city with a unique urban culture. Wasserstrom notes that Shanghai is distinct in that it has undergone a “special modernity”, characterized by rapid development and foreign influences, such as café and fashion cultures (2010: 110). In fact, as Farrer (2002) observes, most residents of Shanghai perceive the city to be more ‘open’ and ‘modern’ than the rest of China. I was confident that I would be able to encounter a variety of women, both native and non-native Shanghainese, who would be willing to speak with me on the topics of dating, marriage and sexuality.

Shanghai was also selected due to my own knowledge of the city. I had previously worked in Shanghai as an English teacher and as a result, I was already familiar with the city. Importantly, due to my past experience, I had a large network of former students, colleagues and friends already established. This network of *guanxi*, or personal connections, was key to the success of my study. As will be detailed below, my personal contacts significantly assisted in recruitment and interview participation. Without this network, my study would have been greatly hindered.

Before my departure, I took great care in considering the ethical implications of my research (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007; Homan, 1991; Lewis, 2003; Gabb, 2008). I followed the ethical guidelines as stipulated by the University of York and recommended by the British Sociological Association to create an ethics review form.<sup>24</sup> I submitted this form to the university ethics committee, where it was assessed and approved in Spring 2012.

As a researcher traveling to a foreign country, I was particularly concerned about ensuring my participants’ informed consent (Reinharz and Chase, 2003; Mason, 2002; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002; Gabb, 2008). I prepared an information letter, consent form and confidentiality agreement for any interpreters and/or translators I employed. I wanted to be sure to “express as clearly as possibly to

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<sup>24</sup> See <http://www.york.ac.uk/about/organisation/governance/sub-committees/ethics/> and <http://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/27107/StatementofEthicalPractice.pdf>.

participants their expectations and the boundaries of the research relationship” (Reinharz and Chase, 2003: 81). The forms, however, were written in English and I was worried that respondents would not fully be informed of their rights as participants. As a result, I had all three forms translated into *Putonghua*, or Mandarin, by a professional translator and then checked by a third party to ensure accuracy.<sup>25</sup>

Before leaving for Shanghai, I conducted three pilot interviews with Masters students at the University of York, all of whom were Chinese nationals, to help gauge the effectiveness of my interview schedule as well as to practice my interviewing technique. As this was the first time I had ever interviewed for research purposes, I found the pilot study very useful. Not only did it help to improve my confidence and skills as a researcher, but it also allowed me examine the effectiveness of my questions and check and adjust the flow of my interview schedule. Through the pilot study, I was also able to revise questions that felt awkward or were poorly phrased or timed.

Prior to my departure, I also began the recruitment process. I decided that a combination of snowball and convenience sampling techniques would work best, given the amount of personal information and depth I hoped to explore. Such a sampling strategy was also useful due to the fact that I would be in the field for a limited amount of time. As soon as I had arranged my travel dates, I started to connect with my contacts in Shanghai, including my friends, former students and co-workers, announcing my upcoming trip. I emailed the information letter and consent form to each contact, to allow people to ask any questions or voice any concerns in advance as well as to enable my call for participants to be distributed widely. During this time I also posted my information letter on several local websites. I wrote on local Shanghai blogs, expatriate websites and dating websites in hopes of widening my sample further. In the end, only one participant (Samantha) was recruited in this manner.

My response rate from my connections and potential participants was quite high. I began to try and make firm appointments with these contacts before leaving, in order to

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<sup>25</sup> See Appendices A-C for all three forms.

maximize my time in the field. I gradually realised, however, that most people were reluctant to schedule an appointment too far in advance. This was an issue I would confront once again in the field, as most participants wanted to meet immediately or within twenty-four hours, rather than make a date further in the future. As a result, I departed for Shanghai with only two firm interviews scheduled.

#### DOING CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH

It has been well documented that undertaking cross-cultural research<sup>26</sup> offers both significant challenges and benefits with regards to the researcher-researched relationship (see Mohanty, 1988; Fielding and Thomas, 2008; Reinharz, 1992; Patai, 1991). As an American researcher embarking on a research project in a foreign country, it was essential to prepare myself for the cultural sensitivity necessary in undertaking such a study, as cross-cultural research runs the risk of cultural appropriation (Patai, 1991; Opie, 1992; hooks, 1984). In order to avoid this, researchers carrying out cross-cultural research must critically examine their own motivations and assumptions as well as recognise their positionality (Dunbar Jr. et al., 2003). Reinharz has suggested four guidelines for those wishing to undertake cross-cultural research, including: “the importance of cultural specificity; the necessity of intensive study; the possibilities of commonalities among women of different cultures, and; the need for a critical evaluation of study materials” (1992: 111). With these principles in mind, I set about organizing my study.

Having lived in Shanghai for nearly two years as well as continuing to learn about Chinese history, culture and current affairs, I believed I had sufficient specific cultural knowledge to carry out my study in an informed and well-planned manner. I thoroughly immersed myself in relevant literature before departing for the field. I also tried to improve my Chinese language skills in hopes of making the interview setting more equal and to counter feelings of American and Western ethnocentrism. I left for the field

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<sup>26</sup> By cross-cultural research, I am referring to research that takes place in a culture that is not native to the researcher.

hoping my interviews would be more like a facilitated conversation, where each participant would be eager and feel comfortable sharing with me.

I conducted my fieldwork between June 1, 2012 and July 30, 2012.<sup>27</sup> My initial participant profile was women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-two, who were Mainland Chinese and had completed, or were currently enrolled in, higher education. I chose to focus my study on women from Mainland China as this group, despite regional differences, would have experienced similar cultural upbringings and have had shared cultural understandings. In addition, I felt that this age range would enable me to speak with women who were likely to be considering and debating issues of dating, marriage and intimate relationships. Women who were enrolled in or had graduated from university were selected, as these women were likely to have similar backgrounds, expectations and life goals. Moreover, university educated women would be more likely to have a comprehensive knowledge of English, which would be advantageous for my study.<sup>28</sup> Once in the field, however, I connected with women older than thirty-two. I decided to include them in the study, as I was eager to hear their views, particularly on the *shengnü* phenomenon. I was also worried that I would not be able to meet my goal of speaking with twenty-eight women during my limited stay.

In the end, however, I exceeded my expectations and in total I conducted thirty interviews with forty-three heterosexual, Mainland women.<sup>29</sup> All had completed higher education and were between the ages of twenty-two and thirty-six, with a mean age of twenty-seven. Interviews were carried out on an individual basis and also in groups. Of the forty-three women I interviewed, fifteen participants were already known to me through my connections in Shanghai. The remaining twenty-eight were recruited via snowball and convenience sampling methods, being referred by an acquaintance or someone who had participated in the study. Just over half (55.8 per cent) of my participants were native Shanghainese.

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<sup>27</sup> This period of time was selected due to Chinese visa restrictions. Tourist visas are only issued for a period of sixty days.

<sup>28</sup> The use of English in my interviews will be discussed in more detail below.

<sup>29</sup> This number includes my pilot study.

Due to my limited amount of time in the field, I was eager to speak with as many women as possible. Having established *guanxi* networks was key to recruitment. As is evident from Figure 1, twenty participants were referred to me by women who had participated in the project. Not only did my connections facilitate access to potential participants, having these contacts also contributed to the content of the interview. Being referred by an immediate friend most likely made these participants more willing to share, as they already knew what the interview was about. Liu also notes the importance of *guanxi* in her study, yet she found that when the links between herself and an interviewee were too distant, the interview itself was “stilted and difficult” (Liu, 2007: 17).

I was ultimately surprised with how well my topic was received and how much interest my project generated. Upon reflection, this enthusiasm to participate may have been due to the topical nature of my project and personal interests of participants. Most women told me how interesting they had found the interview and several women continue to send me follow-up emails about women’s rights issues in China. As a result, I feel this sampling method was quite effective, as it was respondent-driven, and the majority of interviewees appeared to have had an enjoyable experience (Noy, 2008).

On average, each interview lasted approximately one hour and fifteen minutes, with the shortest being forty-five minutes and the longest being two hours and forty-five minutes. As will be discussed in more detail below, interviews were conducted in a mixture of English and *Putonghua*. With the exception of one, every interview was conducted in a public café, restaurant or common space. This was partly due to my own personal safety concerns of being in a foreign country; I always made sure someone knew my whereabouts when conducting interviews. I also thought that a café or restaurant might be considered a more neutral and non-threatening environment. Most participants met me on the weekend or just after finishing work, where we would have tea or eat dinner and simultaneously have the interview. After beginning to transcribe whilst still in the field, I realised that being in a public space in the most populous city in China,



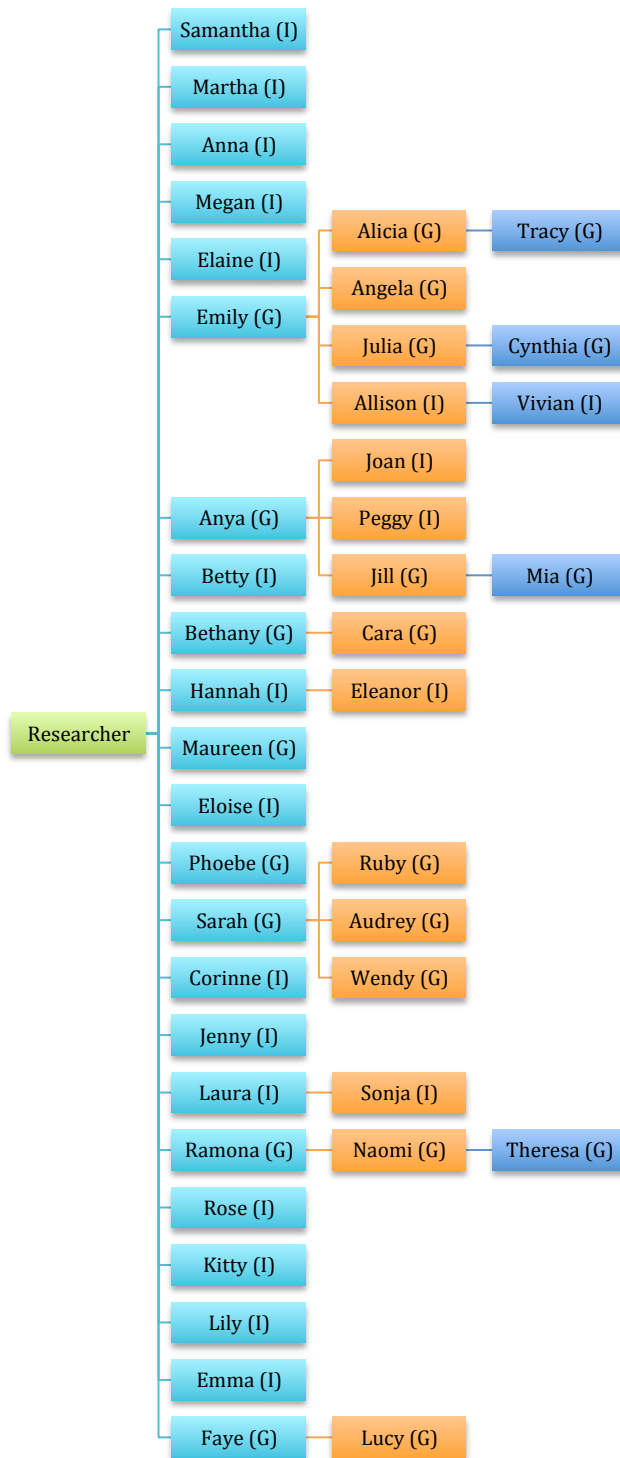


Figure 1: Illustration of Sample

Key:  
 G = Group Interview  
 I = Individual Interview

background noise on the recording was of concern. I therefore had to make a big effort to search for quieter places throughout the city in order to ensure the quality of the recording.

I also kept a field diary during my time in Shanghai. I did not write in this diary during the interviews, as I thought it would not only be inconsiderate to my participant, but also make the interview feel too formal. With so much information presented, I often found myself writing in my field diary immediately after the interview, on the bus or the subway, so I would not forget anything. I would generally record my overall thoughts and impressions about each interview, making note of how the interview went as well as any key themes or takeaways from our conversation.

I presented the information letter and consent forms in both English and *Putonghua* to each participant prior to every interview, usually over email. I was aware that that obtaining written consent from participants might be difficult due to a general cultural reluctance to sign official forms (see Liu, 2007). However, obtaining signed consent from participants proved less difficult than expected. In fact, every person I contacted was eager to participate after reading the information letter and most had little concern about the consent form. Before beginning each interview, I presented the participant with two hard copies of each form (one for my records, one for theirs) and was sure to detail their rights as participants as well as answer any questions or concerns they may have had regarding their involvement. I reminded participants about anonymity, confidentiality and how I planned to use the recording of our conversation in my PhD and in possible future publications. I also told them that if they felt uncomfortable with any questions or did not want to continue with the interview, they were free to withdraw at any time. This did not happen with any participants and I feel that overall, my participants were unconcerned with the ethical implications of my research. This may be due to the fact I was already a known and credible figure to some or had been referred by a trusted person. It is also possible that because my research was based in the UK, any confidentiality or anonymity concerns participants may have had were dismissed. This difference in nationality and ethnicity may explain why some native Chinese

researchers, such as Liu (2007), have had difficulty in obtaining written consent for their qualitative research projects in China.<sup>30</sup>

Overall, the practice of interviewing was very enjoyable. As noted, my topic was well received and participants often arrived to the interview ‘prepared’ to talk. It was evident that several participants and I had several similar experiences and life concerns during the interview, particularly amongst respondents who were in the same age group as myself and also unmarried. My semi-structured interview guide proved beneficial, as interviewees expanded on certain themes that I had been unaware of and was subsequently able to probe for more information. I did find, however, I had to adjust my interview schedule while in the field, particularly around the section of the interview that discussed sex. As public discussion of sex remains fairly taboo in Chinese society, and perhaps even more so with a stranger, I was very conscious of the phrasing as well as the timing of my questions around sex. I thought that I had worded the question well and in a sensitive manner, yet every time I asked it, it felt too sudden, like it was disrupting the flow of the interview.<sup>31</sup> I gradually realised that if I asked about couples living together prior to marriage, before asking about premarital sex and sex education, it seemed less disjointed and more of a natural progression. Once I started to do this, I found that interviewees were more likely to address the issue of premarital sex on their own, rather than me explicitly prompting them.

The majority of my interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis; however, I did carry out nine group interviews, where two or more people attended the interview. The group situation usually occurred when I knew the participant beforehand and had asked her to think of friends who might be interested in taking part in the study. The main participant would then arrive for her interview appointment, bringing along one or two

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<sup>30</sup> Yet this difference could also be a result of Liu’s sample as well. Whilst my research focuses on young women in the reform period, Liu interviewed older women who had worked in the Mao era. During this period, the *danwei* kept personal files (*dang’an*) on every worker (Liu, 2007). These files were used by higher officials to make decisions about workers’ daily lives, including their work assignments, granting permission to marry and later in the Cultural Revolution, to determine class and revolutionary status. Perhaps out of apprehension over their personal file, this influenced her participants’ reluctance in signing consent forms.

<sup>31</sup> See Appendix D for my interview schedule.

of her friends. I felt that it was inconsiderate to turn someone away who was volunteering their time to speak with me, so I decided to conduct the interview as a group. In the end, nine groups, involving twenty-two participants, were interviewed in this manner.

The first time I encountered this scenario I was a bit unsure of how to handle the situation. I had agreed to meet Sarah (25), a former student of mine, for an interview one evening. Little did I know that she had actually invited three of her friends, including another former student, to join in the interview with us (Wendy, Ruby and Audrey). I was caught completely off-guard by the situation, as this was one of my first interviews in Shanghai. Moreover, I was conscious of my former status as a language teacher to two of these participants, and was worried about sounding too much like an authoritative teacher.<sup>32</sup> I tried to approach this group more like a peer, who wanted to have an informative yet relaxing discussion. I found myself being nervous and in fact skipping questions, as it was difficult to gauge everyone's feelings and reactions to my questions. For example, I felt that one participant in particular, Wendy (27), was starting to feel impatient with the rest of the group and the time they were taking to answer each question. Because I was aware of this tension, I started to rush through particular sections of the interview, rather than dealing with the situation more effectively.

Despite this initial stumble, I think that overall, the group interviews actually went well, especially once I knew in advance more than one person would be present. As I gained more confidence as an interviewer, I felt better prepared for these encounters and able to guide the conversation more easily. Initially, I was worried that having more than one person present might hinder the discussion and that participants might be unwilling to speak about potentially sensitive issues in front of their friends. In the end, I do not think that this happened. I feel that participants not only felt informed about what they were agreeing to speak about beforehand, but were generally comfortable discussing these issues among one or two close friends.

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<sup>32</sup> In my old position as an English language teacher, teachers taught small classes of four people. This first group interview strongly reminded me of this situation.

The atmosphere in the group interviews was very relaxed, with jokes told by participants lightening the mood as well as facilitating discussion. For example, in my group interview with Ramona, Naomi and Theresa, lasted two-and-a-half hours:<sup>33</sup>

[NZ: How are you similar to or different from your mother?]

Naomi: We're both very easy to compromise on things. With my father, with my boyfriend or maybe family, we're able to easily agree with others. This is something that's similar.

Ramona: Really? Will you compromise?

Naomi: I think so, yes.

Ramona: I don't know! You don't easily agree with people! You're picky!

(Naomi, 30 and Ramona, 27)

Participants openly disagreed with and poked fun at each other during group interviews, which I feel helped illuminate further insights to the interviewees themselves and contributed to greater rapport.

My group interview with Anya, Mia and Joan was also memorable. All three participants engaged in lively discussion and in fact, I barely had to direct the conversation:

NZ: What do you think about living together before getting married?

Anya: No, I will never choose that. It's not an option.

Jill: But many classmates of mine, and my friends too, they aren't married but they're living together.

Anya: But I think money is an important influence here, because they want to save money if they live together.

Mia: Yes, that's why.

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<sup>33</sup> My transcription method and the use of English will be detailed below.

Anya: It's just one apartment instead of two. And for girls, if they live with a Chinese boy, they don't need to pay rent.

NZ: Really?

Anya: Yeah, the boy will pay the rent.

Jill: Yes.

Mia: Yes, the boy would pay it and the girl saves money.

Jill [to NZ]: You didn't know that?

(Anya, 27, Jill, 25 and Mia, 26)

Here, the group scenario helped to clarify and explain a growing custom. Anya, Mia and Jill spoke animatedly over a variety of topics, confirming and revealing certain opinions that without the group interview, may not have been as clear. Fielding and Thomas (2008) also note the benefit of group interviews, as they help in identifying a range of views as well as eliciting a variety of perspectives. Overall, the group interviews, particularly when only with two or three people, encouraged, rather than hindered discussion.

### *Developing Rapport*

Much has been written on the nature of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Reinharz and Chase, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2007; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). As I sought to employ a feminist methodology, I was careful to be aware of the "role I play in the interview process in terms of my power and authority over the interview situation" as well as my relationship to participants and my personal research goals (Hesse-Biber, 2007: 114). As Reinharz and Chase (2003) and Oakley (1981) suggest, disclosing personal information to participants during the interview can be a way to equalize the interviewing relationship. Moreover, DeVault and Gross note that "strategic disclosure" is often seen as beneficial for feminist methodologies, as a way to make apparent "personal information...research interests and political commitments" (DeVault and Gross, 2007: 181). I felt that I needed to be prepared to answer any of the questions I was asking of participants, in order to balance the interviewing relationship (Phoenix, 1994; Carter, 2004; Ribbens, 1989). I was sure to give each participant time,

generally at the end of each interview, to ask me any questions or add any additional comments to our discussion. Many took this opportunity to ask me questions about my personal life, including questions about my mother, my partner and personal goals, which I answered readily. Moreover, when I felt an interviewee was hesitant to share, I noticed myself telling stories about my personal life in order to help create an atmosphere of trust. For instance, a fair number of interviewees became suddenly shy when I asked how they learned about sex. By sharing my own experiences of sex education, I believe this helped participants feel more comfortable and able to trust me.

I also devised several warm-up questions to help participants relax (see Gabb, 2008). Asking questions about family life proved to be helpful in putting participants at ease, especially those who were strangers. Another tactic I used to develop rapport was through language. I knew some basic *Putonghua* already and although I had been taking lessons for a year prior to my fieldwork to improve, I was worried about the language difference and the potential barrier that it could impose. As I discovered through the course of interviewing, speaking in *Putonghua* at the beginning of an interview was definitely a great way to develop rapport with participants. Most found it amusing, which helped ease any nervousness that may have been present. Hall (2004) also describes using a similar strategy to develop rapport when carrying out cross-cultural interviews.

### *Interviewing Friends and Strangers*

Reflecting on my time in the field has led me to consider the differences between interviewing people I knew and strangers who were referred to me. The researcher-researched relationship with participants I already knew was generally very relaxed, as most were friends and/or former colleagues. As Cotterill (1992) has noted, sometimes it is difficult to know when to turn the recorder on when interviewing friends, as this signals the beginning of a formal discussion. This was true in my study as well, especially with close friends, and after some initial embarrassment, it was easy to forget about the recorder and chat freely.

In addition to knowing the participant, several of my interviewees were former students of mine. In these interviews, I was conscious of my former role as the participant's teacher. I did not want her to feel 'forced' to answer, or indeed feel obligated to participate in the interview. I tried to counteract this feeling by offering personal information, making jokes and trying to make the interview feel more comfortable and an overall less formal experience. Although I would not say I had been a stern teacher, these types of comments from me, particularly about my personal life, would have never been volunteered in my previous position.

Interviewing strangers also proved to have advantages. As Cotterill observes, respondents may feel more at ease and in control when speaking to a "friendly stranger" as opposed to an acquaintance (1992: 596). I do think some participants felt freer to describe personal feelings due to my stranger status. For example, after asking my first warm-up question, Allison (27) answered in great detail, immediately addressing the issues in her romantic life, giving lengthy description about the pressures she was experiencing to marry. It was evident that she had come prepared to tell me, a complete stranger, about her romantic troubles.

Julia also behaved in a similar manner, stating at the beginning of the interview that she was a *shengnü*. It was clear that she wished to speak about it right away, skipping my opening question about her family:

NZ: So I thought first you could tell me a bit about your family?

Julia: Well, the relationship between me and my parents is very, very nice. The only thing they are struggling with right now is that I don't have a boyfriend and they kind of push me, they think I'm a 'leftover' girl, this is the only issue that we argue about if I spend more than two days with them.

(Julia, 28)

Again, I was able to tell that she had arrived to the interview prepared to discuss her feelings about the issues at hand. Vivian (24), also a stranger, described in detail the



breakdown of her last relationship. In the end, the interview had the feel of a therapy session as she recounted her emotional state for half of the interview. Clearly, these participants had arrived prepared to discuss their romantic lives and I do feel my stranger status played a role in such frankness. Rhodes (1994) and Gokah (2006) also note the advantage of ‘stranger value’ that may allow for more openness and information provided by participants, with the assumption that the interviewer is less judgemental. As will be discussed in more depth below, it is likely that my stranger status, as well as foreign status, encouraged such detailed responses.

### *English Language Use*

Although I had been taking lessons to improve my *Putonghua* for over a year, it was not extensive enough to conduct a full interview with my participants. As a result, I enlisted the help of several professional interpreters and translators, making sure to ‘match’ the interpreter to my participant profile (Edwards, 1998). Before each interview, I was sure to have an interpreter on ‘standby’ at all times. Every time I arranged an interview, I offered the participant the option of having an interpreter present. Despite my assurance of confidentiality, however, the majority of participants turned down my offer to provide one. Consequently, the majority of interviews began in *Putonghua* and switched to English, or were conducted completely in English.

Even though I made a conscious effort to make the researcher-researched relationship more balanced, the use of English in the majority of interviews must be taken into account, as I am sure that it did influence what was said and unsaid by participants. Song and Parker have similarly suggested that the interviewees who spoke in English in their study “were bound to feel more constrained and less comfortable in expressing themselves” (Song and Parker, 1995: 252). Importantly, being interviewed in a foreign language further highlights the ways in which the researcher ultimately controls the interview, rather than the respondent (Bourdieu, 1996). Thus, the interviews were completed on my terms as a researcher. I tried to combat this feeling of unease by learning specific phrases and expressions to aid in establishing rapport and to use throughout the interviews for clarity (Liamputtong, 2010; Hall, 2004).

It is possible that participants turned down my offer for an interpreter for several reasons. Firstly, I suspect that this decision was mainly due to the nature of the topic, particularly around personal relationships, dating and privacy concerns. Although I did my best to ensure confidentiality with interpreters, perhaps this was not convincing enough to my respondents. Another reason for English language preference may have been due to my sample itself. As fifteen of my participants were either former students or colleagues, we had only ever interacted in an English-speaking environment. It therefore felt more 'natural' to speak in English, and to have chatted through a third party would have been quite awkward.

I also suspect that participants' English language preference was due to an eagerness to display their English language skills to a foreigner. At times, I felt that participants' insistence on using English was in fact a way for them to demonstrate their modern outlook and/or non-traditional points of view. For example, Tracy and Alicia were eager to demonstrate their English language ability and looked down on those girls who they considered to be 'less travelled':

Tracy: We're a little bit not-normal...

Alicia: We're a bit more up in the air,

Tracy: No, we're not up in the air. We just represent a certain category. But the common, mainstream girls are someone like Alex, they're different. She's only been abroad for one year. Not long.

(Tracy, 32 and Alicia, 25)

Upon reflection, I do feel that participants like Alicia and Tracy, who emphasized their English language fluency and insisted on using English for the interview did so to distinguish themselves from other women who were less 'modern', 'cosmopolitan' and perhaps even progressive.

In the end, only three participants chose to have an interpreter present in their interview. In each case, the interpreter herself actually ended up being a friend of mine, who had recruited the participant. In fact, in the one group interview that involved an interpreter, the interpreter herself agreed to be interviewed at the same time. Having the interpreter-friend relationship worked well, as it was already built on trust, and helped elicit responses. Additionally, these friends understood my project goals and aims and were able to convey accurate meanings and connotations to respondents.

During the interviews where interpreters were used, I did feel a little excluded, as I could not completely follow the conversation in *Putonghua*. There were instances where the interpreter and participant engaged in animated conversation and frequently the effect did not carry over in translation. I also noticed that although I looked at and directed my questions to the participant, she would respond to the interpreter. I generally felt less involved and removed from the interaction during these interviews.

#### INSIDER-OUTSIDER RELATIONSHIP

The insider-outsider relationship is a dynamic present in all types of qualitative interviewing, regardless of cultural setting (Ryen, 2003; Merton, 1972). As a cross-cultural feminist researcher, this has become a key point of reflection for me, particularly as “how we identify ourselves and how we are identified by respondents affects not only relationships during the research process, but also the data collected” (Letherby, 2003: 123). In cross-cultural research, being an outsider is full of both challenges and advantages. For instance, issues of misinterpretation and/or lack of comprehension are even more common in this type of research (Ryen, 2003; Shah, 2004). At the same time, as Liamputtong succinctly states, “being white is not always an obstacle” (2010: 116). Importantly, the position of outsider also offers “the advantage of naïveté” in the interview scenario (Ryen, 2003: 443). Hesse-Biber (2007) notes that some advantages to being an outsider include the asking of questions that may be taken-for-granted as well as perhaps seeming less biased to your interviewees. Although I was

known to some, overall I do feel my position as a cultural outsider had advantages during the research process.

Being an outsider contributed to more detail in responses from participants. Frequently, my questions were answered with “You know, in China...”, with a description of the tradition or practice. Although I usually did in fact ‘know’ about the idea or custom, I pretended not to, in order to encourage discussion. Song and Parker (1995) and Carter (2004) observe, in instances where ethnic identity is not shared by interviewer and respondents, “taken-for-granted assumptions that remain just below the surface...are likely to be made more explicit” (Carter, 2004: 347). My outsider status definitely contributed to participants explaining certain aspects of Chinese thought and culture that may have otherwise been left unsaid.

I also feel my outsider status contributed to greater rapport, frankness and even openness with some participants. As noted with the consent form, most participants did not hesitate when it came to signing, which I believe was partly due to the fact that I was American and representing an overseas institution. Moreover, as my interviews focused around questions that may not have been necessarily common to discuss in an everyday context, participants may have felt freer to discuss these issues with a foreigner, particularly one who is perceived as having been raised in a liberal country. Archer also notes how “the white interviewer can gain access to particular knowledge/views that respondents say they would not have, for various reasons, raised with another Asian interviewer” (2002: 126). This seems to have been the case in my experience, as respondents were perhaps more candid when discussing topics like premarital sex and sex education than they might have been with a Chinese interviewer.

As noted above, I made sure participants had the opportunity to ask me questions about my life and opinions on the same issues at the end of each interview. Participants were very interested in life in America, as I was about theirs, and I think that this cross-cultural interest helped facilitate the interview process. Overall my interviews were more like a cultural exchange in that they promoted greater knowledge of two cities, areas

and, to some extent, even countries. Frequently, I was asked “What is it like in America?” or “What about women in America?”, especially in relation to marriage customs, premarital sex and my own personal life. Most participants wanted to hear my opinions on these issues and were surprised at times that I too was ‘traditional’ on some topics and unlike the American women they had seen on Western TV. At times, it was easy to forget that we were actually having an interview, as we were speaking animatedly and having an enjoyable conversation.

At the same time, I was cautious about disclosing too much about my personal views during the interviews for several reasons. As Ribbens (1989) suggests, participants may feel that interviewer self-disclosure is disruptive to their own narrative and therefore an annoyance. Moreover, interviewer disclosure also runs the risk of influencing participant responses, as they may feel the need to respond in a socially acceptable manner (Cotterill, 1992; Ribbens, 1989; Song and Parker, 1995). I was concerned that if I expressed my views openly, participants might tell me what they thought I would like to hear, rather than their own opinion. Except when I felt it was necessary to encourage participants to speak, I generally only disclosed my personal views when prompted at the end of an interview, after asking all of my questions, so as to not disturb or interfere with participants’ narratives and opinions.

As Reinharz and Chase state: “What feminist researchers share regardless of their status as insider or outsider in relation to interviewees, is a commitment to reflecting on the complexities of their own and participants’ social locations and subjectivities” (Reinharz and Chase, 2003: 84). Importantly, engaging in cross-cultural research from a feminist perspective has allowed me to reflect upon my own identity, including my ethnicity (Hall, 2004). This acknowledgement has helped increased my awareness of my positioning and the ways in which participants placed me in the interview setting. Rubin and Rubin also note “how interviewees perceive us and how those perceptions influence what they are willing to say and how openly they are willing to talk” is key in the research process (1995: 40-41). Whilst in the field and upon reflection, although I was an insider in terms of gender and age, I feel that most interviewees positioned me as a

trusted outsider who would be non-judgemental. I believe that I was often seen as a woman from a different and more liberal society and it is possible that this greatly contributed to the frankness of some participants when discussing their personal lives.

#### POWER DYNAMICS

The balance of power between researcher and interviewee is a topic of great concern when conducting feminist research. As noted, investing one's identity into the research relationship is a way to counteract uneven power distribution. Yet power relations within the interview are not fixed (Tang, 2002; Ribbens, 1989). Cotterill states that "interviews are fluid encounters where balances shift between and during different interview situations" as "no two interviews are the same" (1992: 604, 600). Although the interviewer does have authority over the final interpretation and product, participants do exercise power and control in the interview situation.

Often the interviewer is faced with accommodating interviewees and differences in status and/or age may affect the interview itself (Beoku-Betts, 1994; Cotterill, 1992; Hall, 2004). Although most women I interviewed were similar in age to me, one instance in particular stands out in where status overtly played a role. My interview with Elaine (36) remains memorable, as it was a challenging experience. She was introduced to me by a mutual friend who was eager to help me with my participant recruitment. After meeting Elaine, I was taken aback by her abrupt manner and immediately felt intimidated, especially when I learned that she was almost ten years older than me. As I pressed on with my questions and listened to her responses, my frustration grew as I felt that she was not taking my interview seriously and gave the impression that I was wasting her time. In one instance, she complained about the working mothers in her office, how they take too much time off to take care of their children and how it is unfair to the rest of the office. I could tell by her tone that she was exaggerating this statement and was not seriously reflecting about her opinion. Interestingly, as soon as I turned the recorder off, she admitted to me that she did think it must be difficult and challenging to be a working mother.

Elaine also omitted what I perceived as important information. She had told me that she was thirty-six and single and, consequently, I began to ask questions about dating and being a single woman in China, with the hopes that she would describe her own experience. It was not until after the interview that I later found out, from another participant, that Elaine had in fact been married and divorced twice. Although divorce remains a taboo issue in China, I was disappointed that Elaine had chosen not to share this with me, especially as she was aware of what my research was about. I felt that as a researcher, I could have guided the interview in a more productive way had I known this information. Perhaps in her refusal to divulge this information, this omission reveals more about the stigma of divorce for women in contemporary China.

Elaine was not the only participant who omitted information during the interview. Betty (25), a former English student of mine, was very eager to help me with my project. We had met the week before the interview to catch-up, where she had spoken at length about the difficult relationship with her mother. A week later at the interview, however, she did not portray their relationship as strained at all. I did not feel comfortable pressing her on this issue, as she obviously did not want to share this information on an 'official' record. Although the researcher does ultimately hold the power in interpretation, clearly power relations in the interview scenario are fluid. Participants do exercise a form of control in the ways in which they choose to disclose or withhold information throughout the interview.

#### DIFFICULTIES AND CHALLENGES

Overall, my time in the field went smoothly and I did not encounter too many obstacles. I did face challenges in some interviews, however, particularly when participants expressed opinions different from mine. As noted earlier, I aimed to treat my participants respectfully and was eager to hear their opinions on a variety of topics. Prior to entering the field, I had read about interviewing techniques, suggesting how to probe and respond appropriately and effectively to keep the participant at ease (see Fielding

and Thomas, 2008; Denscombe, 2003; Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Clough and Nutbrown, 2007). As advised by the literature, in instances where a participant held an opinion radically different from mine, I found myself expressing understanding. Despite it being challenging, I frequently found myself replying, “Oh, that’s interesting” or “I see”, rather than disagreeing or saying anything contradictory. I noticed myself doing this in the field and it was even more apparent after completing the transcription process. I felt that if I openly disagreed with or challenged participants not only would that hinder the discussion but also reaffirm our “unnatural situation” (Ribbens, 1989). I wanted respondents to see me as a non-judgemental listener, yet there were several instances where such a response was difficult for me to maintain.

For example, when Cara told me outright that she was not a feminist, I found it difficult to keep my own opinion to myself:

Cara: I hope that my husband earns more than me [laughs].

NZ: Why?

Cara: Because I think I’m a bit of a non-feminist. So I hope my husband will be someone who is more capable than me.

NZ: Ok, I see.

(Cara, 22)

Several other participants also emphasized the importance of being with a man who was more capable than themselves. Others described the innate superiority of men in certain fields or in ability. Hearing such responses from women was difficult and disappointing, especially as a woman who completely disagrees.

Another topic where I found myself feeling frustrated at responses was on the subject of employment. Corinne, Eleanor and Sonja, while recognising discrimination in the workplace, felt that there was nothing to do but accept it: “People just think that way, you can’t really change them. And we’re not powerful enough to change the situation” (Corrine, 30); “Well, we have no choice” (Eleanor, 28); “Well, we just have to accept it!



[Laughs] We have no choice! Because we are women!” (Sonja, 25). To comments like these, on issues that I not only feel passionate about, but would also normally be very vocal about, I said nothing.

I also felt uncomfortable hearing some stories told by participants. For instance, Peggy (26), at the end of our interview, came to some strange conclusions about the reasons women “turn into” lesbians: “Like their dad, maybe, has had affairs, or their dad left home or something, so they gradually turned”. Additionally, Alicia told me about a conversation with her parents and her current relationship status:

Alicia: Well my parents, they just want to make sure I don't get involved with a woman.

NZ: Really?

Alicia: Yeah they keep saying ‘Alicia, it's ok, just keep going, just make sure you don't like women!’

(Alicia, 25)

Alicia's response highlights the heavily heteronormative society of reform China. Rather than ask a follow-up question, like why her parents felt that way, and possibly challenging her viewpoint, I said nothing. In retrospect, I wish I had probed further on the topic.

Not all participants surprised me in a negative manner. I was amazed when participants openly shared with me what seemed like quite personal information. Joan (26), a stranger, described to me how she had witnessed her father physically abusing her mother and her brother while growing up within the first ten minutes of meeting me. Anya (27), a woman who I had only known in a professional capacity, told me how, throughout her childhood, she felt that mother did not really love her, as her mother had given up her older sister for adoption in hopes of having a son. Listening to these stories was emotional and at times challenging. I felt overwhelmed that these women would volunteer such intimate details of their lives after we had just met.

## RETURNING FROM THE FIELD: TRANSCRIBING, ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING

Upon returning from Shanghai, I continued to manually transcribe each interview. As noted above, most interviews were generally over an hour, and as a result, transcribing was a lengthy process. Poland (2003) notes several challenges exist during the transcription process. In particular, the “tidying” of phrases and language makes the transcript more easily readable, but may also result in alternative interpretations of the data (Poland, 2003: 272). I have adjusted the extracts presented in the thesis in the interest of readability. Importantly, these adjustments were made after the analysis phase, with the exception of certain simple grammatical errors.<sup>34</sup>

Due to the large number of interview transcripts, I used the computer program AtlasTi to aid in the analysis process. I decided to examine my transcripts in a thematic manner, beginning by open coding (Fielding and Thomas, 2008; Mason, 2002). While open coding, I kept a ‘code diary’, where each code created had a specific definition. This was to ensure consistency throughout the process as I worked through such a large amount of data. To aid in interpretation, I frequently consulted my field diary to remind me of the specific circumstances of each interview. Through meticulous transcription, consulting my field diary and the creation of a codebook, I have aimed to be as understanding and faithful as possible to participants’ words (Reinharz and Chase, 2003). The coding and transcription process resulted in the reading and re-reading of the interviews several times, which enabled me to start focusing on specific, recurring themes. I then began to outline the themes relevant to my research questions, on dating, marriage and sexuality, drawing on participant extracts to support the main ideas being expressed. These outlines have formed the basis of this thesis.

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<sup>34</sup> For example, third person pronouns in *Putonghua* have the same pronunciation, yet are written differently (tā =她, she, tā =他, he). It is a common mistake when speaking English to use the wrong pronoun when referring to gender. I chose to correct these errors when transcribing. For example, “My mother, he is a good woman” was corrected to “My mother, she is a good woman”.

Any interpretation from a feminist perspective is complex, as it “is a political, contested and unstable process between the lives of researchers and of those the researched” (Holland and Ramazanoglu, 1994: 127). As Reinharz and Chase note, “Interpreting women’s words and stories requires a delicate and reflexive balancing act” (2003: 86). Feminist researchers must bear in mind not only the social location of their participants, but also of themselves. This is often achieved through reflexive practice as well as through the use of “strong objectivity”(Harding, 1991).

The interpretation of interviews from a feminist perspective is complicated further when examining interviews from a cross-cultural study. As Mohanty suggests, in order to avoid outright appropriation of Others, “the use of careful, politically focused, local analysis” is essential (1988: 73). Researchers must be wary of being reductive in their statements, ignoring the importance of context, specificity and intricacy of other cultures (Mohanty, 1988; Opie, 1992; Patai, 1991). At the same time, while being aware of this risk, Ribbens and Edwards (1998) argue that in cross-cultural research, ‘Other voices’ cannot be heard by a public Western audience without researcher as interpreter. The researcher “must continually confront questions of nature and assumptions of the knowledge we are producing and who we are producing it for”, utilizing “high standards of reflexivity and openness on the choices made” (Ribbens and Edwards, 1998: 4). I have tried to remain aware of my power and authority as not just a researcher, but also as a white middleclass American woman throughout the research process. In this methodological account I have attempted to make clear my decisions and rationale for them in Shanghai and after returning to the UK. I have aimed to be as reflexive as possible in hopes of aligning myself and work within the feminist research tradition.

The procedures I have detailed in this chapter led to a thematic analysis of my interview transcripts. I selected the themes of sexuality, intimacy, ideal partners and marriage as these were most pertinent to my research question. In the next chapter, I will explore the sexual climate in the reform period and participants’ perspectives on the topic of sex education. Following this, I will focus on their opinions regarding dating and partner

selection. My analysis will conclude with an examination of marriage and attitudes to unmarried women in contemporary China.

## CHAPTER 4

### **“WE DON’T TALK ABOUT SEX”: APPROACHES AND ATTITUDES TO SEX EDUCATION AND SEXUALITY**

In order to fully explore young women’s sexuality in China, a comprehensive understanding of the sexual climate in economic reform is essential. Despite a discursive ‘explosion’ around sexual matters at the end of the Mao period, discussions of sex and sex education continue to be limited and remain sensitive topics in reform China (Hershatter, 1996). The Party-State monitors these issues in order to uphold and reinforce the ‘socialist morality’ believed to be essential for the progress of the nation (Aresu, 2009). Due to such cultural constraints, there is a clear lack of open dialogue around sex, both in schools and with parents. The limited amount of information presented in schools demonstrates that sex is a part of the Party-State’s agenda of managed individualism, reinforcing the notion that sex should only occur within the married, monogamous ideal. The effects of the Open Door policy as well as developments in technology have, however, offered young people in China new ways of subverting this parental and wider Party-State control to find out more information about sex.

In this chapter, I will examine the current sexual climate in reform China, specifically exploring participants’ own experiences of sex education and learning about sex. I will begin by investigating the Party-State’s stance on sexual matters in the reform period. In this section, I will underscore the Party-State’s vision of a socialist society and the tensions and conflicts that have emerged regarding sexual matters in economic reform. Following this, I will explore participants’ experiences of learning about sex, including the silences around sex at school and within the home, and the general cultural reticence in discussing sexual matters in China. I will then look at the variety of methods they used to find out about sex and, in particular, I will highlight the noticeable absence of pleasure and desire in almost all of their narratives.

## THE SEXUAL CLIMATE IN REFORM

The sexual climate in contemporary China has undergone significant transformation in the last three decades (Wang and Ho, 2011). With equality between the sexes proclaimed in 1949, sexuality and gender were no longer seen as essential to the nation's modernization project. Rather, throughout the Mao period, issues of class and loyalty to the nation were at the forefront of the Party-State modernization agenda. The 'social evils' of prostitution, polygamy and adultery were immediately abolished under Mao, further removing the topic of sex from the public sphere. When sex was discussed during this period, it was usually in publications such as health and marriage manuals, and generally focused on matters of sexual hygiene. In these texts, men and women were portrayed in essentialist terms, with the differences between the sexes underscored (Evans, 1997). With emphasis now placed on the heterosexual, married couple, sexuality in the Mao period primarily focused on the importance of one's "reproductive citizenship" that was seen as essential for the nation's development. Any relationship that fell outside the monogamous, married ideal was condemned as immoral and bourgeois (Wang and Ho, 2011: 195).

As a result of the shift to a market economy, post-Mao China has undergone rapid urbanization, technological expansion, experienced a surge in consumerism, increased internal migration and greater contact with foreign countries. These factors have all contributed to and influenced the current Party-State approach when it comes to matters of sex and sexuality (Pei et al., 2007). In general, there has been an overall shift from a Maoist suppression of sexuality to an endorsement of the "pursuit of individual desire" (Wang and Ho, 2011: 185). At the same time, however, the post-Mao Party-State is concerned with the effects of this slogan and the potential deterioration of social values within the nation. Consequently, there have been numerous legislative measures and campaigns created in order to reinstate the socialist morality deemed appropriate (and necessary) by the Party-State.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> For example, the 1989 'Six Vices' Campaign was aimed at combating the 'moral decay' resulting from prostitution in the reform period (see Hershatter, 1997). The more recent 'Eight Blames and Shames' Campaign (2006) aims to underscore the importance of Confucian values such as self-discipline in reform

The modernization agenda resulting from economic reform has also included a renewed interest in the sciences, particularly in sexology and sociology. This rekindled scientific interest can on the one hand, be seen as backlash to the Mao period, with the scientific (and the wider) community wanting to study and treat women and men differently. At the same time, however, it has also contributed to a more medicalized approach towards sexuality and a renewed interest in biological essentialism. In these sciences, the physiological differences between women and men are now stressed, with the binary construction of the active male sex drive and passive female frequently reiterated (Pei et al., 2007). As Gail Hershatter notes in the reform period, “What is considered appropriate or transgressive to desire, what in sexual behaviour is considered 'natural' or dangerous, what provokes pleasure or anxiety, often sort themselves into realms labelled 'male' and 'female'” (1996: 92-93). Women are described in terms of their reproductive capacity and their biological differences from men, whilst men are conceived as active agents with innate biological drives (Evans, 1997; Zhao and West, 1999). With women’s bodies becoming more sexualized and considered inferior to men’s due to biology since reform, this has resulted in recurrent and, as noted, often overt gender discrimination, particularly in employment practices (Zheng, 2001; Bulbeck, 2009; Xu, 2000). Gender inequality therefore remains deeply implanted within Chinese society, as is evident in the similarities between official rhetoric of sex and sexuality from the 1950s and that of contemporary times.

Additionally, Party-State concerns with population have reinforced the renewed interest in sexual matters. A drastic shift has taken place within Party-State rhetoric concerning sexuality, from one of procreation as the main purpose of sex, to one of sexual pleasure and desire. This change can be partly attributed to the introduction of the one-child policy in 1979. With Confucian values previously promoting sex only within marriage and for the sole purpose of producing (male) children, the one-child policy clearly does not advocate sex solely for the purpose of reproduction. This idea of sex for pleasure

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(Hu, 2007). In February 2014, a new ‘Sweep Yellow’ Campaign was also announced and is aimed at fighting prostitution, drug use and gambling (Wong, 2014).

therefore marks a distinct departure from Confucian values that have influenced China for thousands of years. Rather now, the discussion of sex and reproduction is primarily focused on eugenic concerns of controlling the quality and quantity of the population (Aresu, 2009). Additionally, expressions of romantic affection and discussions of sex as pleasurable that were once denounced as bourgeois and lowly during the Mao period, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, now figure more prominently in wider conversations of sex and sexuality and thus provide evidence of a general shift in perceptions of sexuality in present-day China (Pan, 2006).

Beginning with the 1980 Marriage Law reform, it is clear that some individual autonomy is now tolerated by the Party-State. When it comes to sex, previous sexual behaviours that were once considered 'abnormal', such as multiple partners or masturbation, are now gaining more acceptability (Pan, 2006; Huang et al., 2011). Additionally, since the 1980s, there appears to be slightly more tolerance in talking about sex publicly, especially in media outlets. As Gail Hershatter (1996) notes, movies and books produced since economic reform have had significant impact on defining sex and sex roles, with some materials echoing traditional Confucian thought. Men in these depictions are often portrayed with a focus on their sexual needs, while women are seen as “objects rather than subjects of desire”, and increasingly defenceless (1996: 89). More recent publications also suggest the growing acceptability of talking about sex, where in some instances, women’s standpoint is in the foreground. The novels *Shanghai Baby* (2000) by Wei Hui and *Candy* (1997) by Mian Mian provide explicit examples of overt themes of sexuality with Chinese women at the forefront, openly engaging in and discussing sex and sexuality (Farrer, 2002; Zhong, 2007). Although there appears to be some development of a more individualistic approach to sexuality by women, the traditional portrayal of active males and subordinate, passive women remain prominent features of these novels. Thus although discussion of sex and sexuality is no longer as taboo as in previous decades, the dialogue remains deeply gendered when examining the sex roles deemed appropriate for women and men. Furthermore, these novels were banned by the Party-State for their potential corrupting influence, demonstrating the wider Party-State attitude towards sexual matters and fears over societal instability and



immorality.

### *Rise of 'Spiritual Pollution'*

Alongside rapid urbanization, migration, technological advances and increased foreign contact, the modernization agenda adopted by the Party-State has also contributed to significant changes in lifestyle and values (Wang et al., 2005). When it comes to sexuality, economic reform has unexpectedly contributed to the proliferation of commercial sex work, an increase in pornography, a rise in the divorce rate and reports of adultery and the emergence of corporate sex cultures. The Party-State has taken a firm stance against these behaviours and in fact has launched several campaigns to combat the 'spiritual pollution' now seen as threatening the morality and stability of the nation. These new developments and ethical changes are frequently attributed to increased contact with the West, particularly the values associated with capitalist consumer culture. As Wang and Ho note, "it has been politically expedient to blame China's problems with sexuality as being due to the influence of pernicious foreign culture, specifically the capitalist West" (2011: 195). This is evident in the Party-State response to recent trends involving sex, including increases in pornography and commercial sex work and the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

With the modernization agenda ushering in a wave of consumerism, "consumption has become the hallmark of a new, modern citizen" in China (Zheng, 2006: 163). Engaging in this new consumer culture is therefore a way to express individual difference as well as demonstrate societal standing. A person's status in society is no longer determined by political commitment; rather, purchasing power is now of utmost importance. One is now expected to consume in the 'right' matter, and those who cannot are excluded (Yan, 2009). The commercial and leisure culture that has emerged due to market reform has also enabled the extensive growth of the commercial sex industry, including the sale and distribution of pornography as well as a dramatic rise in prostitution (Zheng, 2006; Xiao et al., 2011). As will be explored below, pornography in contemporary China is a readily accessible and established market. The Party-State definitively prohibits the sale and distribution of "yellow materials", seeing it as essential in the fight against "social

decadence” (Sigley, 2006: 53). Despite censorship campaigns, the internet also has enabled easy access to pornographic content (Zhang, 2011a). As it is so widespread, it appears that the moral stance of the Party-State has proven ineffective as pornography has become established in the commercial culture of contemporary China (Evans, 1997; McMillan, 2006).

Prostitution is another issue that has increasingly been under scrutiny since the beginning of the reform period, appearing to be more prevalent than ever. Claimed to have been ‘eradicated’ under Mao, the sudden ‘revival’ of prostitution in the 1980s after economic reform can be attributed to several factors. Rapid expansion of the economy has created a large division between the poor and rich, with the gap continuing to widen. In the new market economy where inequality dominates, money is therefore increasingly becoming an incentive to enter the trade. The Party-State has responded with renewed and repeated legislation banning prostitution as well as police crackdowns. Partly due to health concerns, the Party-State's main efforts in deterring prostitution stem from the ideological basis that it not only tarnishes the country's reputation, but also contributes to the instability of society (Ruan and Matsumura, 1991; Zhong, 2007; Sigley, 2006; Zheng, 2006).

The trade itself appears to have developed and changed as well. Before reform in 1978, the economic consequences of an unequal, gendered society were the main factors contributing to women's involvement in prostitution. Yet in contemporary China, prostitutes now “seem to enjoy a certain degree of agency” (Micollier, 2003: 8). For instance, as Pan Suiming has observed, there are seven categories of the modern-day prostitute, illustrating not only the variety of options available to women, but also the difficulty in making a clear distinction between those women who do or do not provide sexual services (Pan, 2003). For some, it may be seen as a path to upward mobility, yet for others, sex work may be a result of harsh economic circumstances.

Additionally, the *bao ernai* phenomenon, or ‘keeping a second wife’, is a sexual arrangement that has emerged since reform, becoming a lively topic of debate in recent

decades (Zhang, 2011b; Shen, 2008a). Generally the term describes the practice of a foreign businessman, or wealthy Chinese government official, from Taiwan, Hong Kong or Singapore, who has relocated for business purposes to a Special Economic Zone on the Mainland and engages in extramarital sexual encounters with young, Chinese women (Shen, 2008b). The encounters can be either for a short period of time, perhaps with a bar or karaoke hostess for an evening, or for much longer periods of time. In both situations, the Chinese women involved are given monetary compensation for their participation in the arrangement and women who are considered *bao ernai* often receive luxury gifts and items, monthly stipends and housing. Most astonishing is the widespread practice of this arrangement. According to a 1993 survey, 70 per cent of all married expatriate Taiwanese businessmen have engaged in the practice, yet Shen (2008b) is inclined to think that is an underestimate.

The recent phenomenon cannot solely be attributed to the ‘opening’ of China and influx of Western ideals. Business cultures throughout the region, including Taiwan, Japan and South Korea, are known to promote activities that exemplify masculinity through excessive drinking and sexual ‘play’, as it is thought that such ‘entertainment’ can help increase productivity and profitability (Lee, 2008; Shen, 2008b). As Liu (2008) found in her study of Chinese saleswomen, women working in male-dominated office environments were frequently forced to negotiate this sexual business culture, wooing clients in bars and karaoke venues whilst at the same time attempting to preserve their professional personas. With men being able to participate freely in these sexual business cultures, women are forced to monitor their business and personal reputations as “restrictions on women’s autonomy in sexual discourse” remain (Liu, 2008: 94).

Referred to as ‘drinking flower wine’ in Taiwan, these practices illustrate the male-dominated business culture within East Asia and reinforce the idea of male superiority within a capitalist economy (Shen, 2008a, 2008b; Zhang, 2011b; Zheng, 2006). As Shen (2008b) observes, these men, as “situational singles”, generally give six justifications for such transgressions, including: the idea that it is a necessary part of their job; the biological need and emotional loneliness they feel while away from their wives; the

“cheapness” of the local, Mainland Chinese women; that it is a practice common of other transnational men; they are “performing charity” as the women are in need of money; and the peer pressure of colleagues and business partners to engage in the practice (Shen, 2008b: 59). The emphasis on biological need was also found in Zheng’s (2006) study, with male consumers of the sex industry (and the general public) frequently citing the innate, biological necessity for men to engage in the practice, echoing the wider essentialist thought now present in the reform period. Moreover, the rising economic disparity between men and women further enables commercial sex work, resulting in an increase in the availability of emotional comfort for sale and wealthy men more able to afford the purchase of these services. Thus the men engaging in this “economy of intimacy” not only further the exploitation of certain groups of women but also reassert their masculine dominance over other groups of men (Zhang, 2011b; Chou, 2011).

Official response to commercial sex work and extramarital relations has been one of severe condemnation. The 2001 Marriage Law in China explicitly outlawed bigamy and extramarital cohabitation and the 2007 Party disciplinary code states that engaging in the practice of *bao ernai* is a dismissible offence (Zhang, 2011b). Although prohibited and highly criticized, the Party-State has not acknowledged the root causes of the *bao ernai* phenomenon and commercial sex work, ignoring the larger economic and gender inequalities that have facilitated the practices, yet consider them among the foreign ‘polluting’ forces of morality now present in China.

The commercialisation of sex through the increase in distribution and sale of pornography, the growth of the prostitution industry as well as the development of a sexual business culture have all contributed to changes in sexuality in contemporary China. Importantly, it is male desire that has shaped these industries, placing women as objects of longing (Micollier, 2003). Moreover, the Confucian essentialist binary of active and sexually aggressive men and dependent, passive women is consistently reiterated in these expressions of sex and sexuality. The Party-State feels that these acts are a result of economic reform, blaming in part the ‘immoral’ influence of the capitalist

West (Wang and Ho, 2011). Consequently, the Party-State discussion around sex and sexuality is very conservative, as the topic is seen as potentially corrupting and enabling these unwanted behaviours. Sexual conduct deemed ‘appropriate’ by the Party-State is therefore at the heart of government policy in keeping and enforcing societal stability and morality alongside the desire for economic development.

#### SILENCES AROUND SEX

Within such an environment, it is clear that learning about sex in reform China could potentially be a difficult endeavour. Sex education<sup>36</sup> is a subject of great debate in contemporary China. On the one hand, the Party-State is reluctant to promote an open discussion of sex, fearing the possible social chaos and immoral effects of such a dialogue. On the other hand, sex education is necessary for young people in a country with a rapidly changing sexual climate and national family planning policy. Sex education in Chinese schools is therefore promoted as a way for young people to “establish the ‘correct outlook’ on love, marriage, family and giving birth”, an agenda that supports and sustains the heterosexual, married ideal and wider societal stability (Aresu, 2009: 535-536).

In the West, debates about sex education at school generally concern the inclusion of alternative sexualities, emotional content and abstinence-only programmes. Although Western approaches are not uniform nor without limitations, Western parents are seen as primarily responsible for providing a foundation of sex education and are often chided if they shirk this obligation. Within China, however, the situation is radically different and often the discussion of sex does not happen at all (Gao et al., 2001). Schools and parents rarely address the topic of sex, and young people frequently lack basic knowledge concerning sex, reproduction and contraception (Zheng et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2004; Shanghai Daily, 2010; Xiao et al., 2011). These silences serve to reinforce the notion that sex is only a topic of concern for married, heterosexual adults. As a result, young

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<sup>36</sup> By sex education, I am referring to education that encompasses not only reproduction, but also includes other psychological and sociological elements of sexuality, such as family planning, relationships, sexual health and expression of sexuality.

people are forced to search for alternative sources of information, relying on peer networks and the media in particular. Overall, in my study, participants recalled the limited amount of information they received from school and from parents, demonstrating the continued sensitive nature of discussing sex.

### *Silence At School*

Sex education at school was non-existent during the Mao period. Rather, information was generally given to women and men just before or after a wedding ceremony in the form of marriage manuals or sexual artefacts (Gao et al., 2001; McMillan, 2004). Sex education in schools was first introduced in the 1980s and is frequently referred to as ‘adolescent education’. These classes, however, generally focus on physiological processes, ignoring topics of contraception and sexual health, and may even include teachings on “sexual morality” and warnings about engaging in premarital sex (Farrer: 105; Evans, 1997: 36; see also Farrer, 2006; Gao et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2004; Chen et al., 2008; Zhang et al., 2007). Stress is often placed on the importance of “moral discipline”, heterosexuality, monogamy, marriage and the family, reinforcing the moralist agenda of the Party-State (Aresu, 2009: 538; see also McMillan, 2004). This approach to sex education can also be seen as an extension of the renewed interest in science considered key for the success of the modernization agenda in the reform period. Not only are these materials promoting a moral education, but they also reaffirm the notion that, “most, if not all, areas of life are capable of scientific analysis, and that science can reveal the right and wrong ways of being sexual” (McMillan, 2004: 204). As a result of such a superficial and limited scientific discussion, messages of safe sex are ignored and obscured, despite the Party-State’s commitment to nationwide family planning.

With such an uncompromising approach to sex education, it is unsurprising that participants received hardly any sex education whilst in school. Those who did experience some sort of sex education class described only discussing the topics of puberty and bodily hygiene. These ‘body knowledge’ classes frequently served as the limit of sex education provided by schools. For example, Faye’s (30) sex education

course centred on issues of puberty: “Yeah, we did [have this class]. But no mention of sex. It wasn’t talked about. More about how the body changed, and how we had to take care of ourselves. But nothing about sex. In China, we don’t have typical sex education in school or at home”. Physiological changes were evidently the focus of Faye’s education, with safe sexual practices completely absent. Without any mention of STIs, HIV/AIDS or contraception, this class served to provide the bare minimum of education deemed appropriate for young people in school. This approach from a school and the Party-State is curious, especially as it is in direct contradiction with the wider Party-State goals of population planning.

The details of sex were also avoided in Eloise’s (28) lesson: “Well, in middle school, we had a class where the girls were in one room and boys were in another room, so we were separated. And we didn’t talk too much about sex, it was just the biological part and, like, personal hygiene, no details or anything”. Any references to sexual themes were once again avoided and no advice was provided about contraception or safe sex. Clearly Eloise’s lesson served as the limit of sexual knowledge deemed appropriate for young people to have.

Emma also received lessons with a focus on puberty:

I think at around eighteen years old I got some. But it wasn’t called sex education, it was just about your body and what your body has. Our teacher separated the boys and girls, and we just got told ‘Your body is doing this, this and this’. And how to deliver a baby, how it’s delivered. But we were just told, like, the theory of sex, you know, about the womb and the egg, where the baby comes from. Not like sex education, not that. Just, like, body knowledge... So they taught us, like, body knowledge and also talked about healthy habits, something like that, like you should take care of your body, hygiene and so on. (Emma, 30)

Notably, Emma was eighteen years old when she was taught formally about

menstruation and the ways in which a woman's body changes. Yet most young women would have already undergone these changes well before the age of eighteen. In this instance, not only was any direct sexual content avoided, but the lesson on puberty was clearly provided too late.

Elaine remembered her lessons at school on adolescent changes:

Well, I think we only had two or three lessons to learn about it. I think at that moment, the teacher showed us some pictures. And how your periods work, stuff like that [laughs]. I think at that moment, no one really took it seriously, especially in my generation. But I don't know about nowadays, because, more and more people are growing up faster, more mature. It's different now [laughs].  
(Elaine, 36)

Elaine's experience highlights the theme of generational change. As one of the 'older' participants, any discussion around sex in her adolescence would have been highly unusual. Often the current generation, raised under reform, is perceived to be (more) sexually experienced, due to the liberal values associated with the reform period and increased Western contact. Such sentiments are increasingly reported in the national news as well, further highlighting (and perhaps to some extent, sensationalising) the sexually promiscuous only child generation (Global Times, 2012; Li, 2011).

The vast majority of participants, however, did not receive a sex education lesson at school. Although it appeared to be in the curriculum, participants noted that it was common for the teacher to avoid discussing the topic altogether. Several studies report similar findings in China, where sex was meant to be discussed in class, yet teachers skipped the subject or students were asked to read by themselves (see Zhang et al., 2004; Gao et al., 2001). Such actions were recalled with amusement by participants and seen as 'normal', further supporting the notion that sex remains a sensitive topic in reform China. As Hannah remembered:

[Laughing] Well, it's in the book, but in that class [laughs] the teacher will say



‘Ok, you can read it by yourself’...Some schools, they just skip that part. And as students, we were really excited for this lesson, because we had read the book and were like ‘Oh yeah, we’ll talk about this in class’. But then the teacher just said, ‘Ok we’re going to skip that chapter, you can read it at home’. It was so disappointing! [Laughter] But some schools, because there are like boys and girls in the class, they will separate them. I think very few schools teach it.  
(Hannah, 30)

Hannah’s example illustrates the general, overarching cultural reticence in discussing sex in public. Teachers, most likely raised under the Mao regime, probably did not have any formalized experience of sex education. Avoiding the topic is preferable, as it does not contradict the Party line of social morality and reaffirms that there is a sanctioned, appropriate time to learn about sexual matters and that is within marriage. Hannah also touched upon how she and her classmates were eager and wanted to have this discussion at school. As will be explored below, this often results in using a variety of alternative methods to gain more information.

Anna (24) recalled her teacher’s embarrassment when discussing sex, “[We had] just a little bit, I think, when I was in middle school. Just a little. It was really funny! [Laughs]. They had a course, you know, and the teacher said that ‘Uh, you guys just refer to the book’ [laughs]”. Sex is clearly seen as a personal matter as well as an inappropriate topic for young people to concern themselves with. Anya also discussed the lack of sex education at her school. Yet again, her teacher did not address the topic:

We don’t have any sex ed classes. I think in middle school, we had a book, a biology book, and there was one chapter talking about sex. And the teacher would tell us like ‘You can read it by yourself’ [laughter]. And you know we were like waiting for this, we were really excited to see how the teacher would teach us this. Actually, we weren’t interested in the content, we were interested in how the teacher would teach us. Because sex is still a very, very personal thing in China. (Anya, 27)

Such an example is further evidence of how sex education is far from comprehensive. Moreover, Anya's story serves to underscore how the subject of sex remains quite private in China. As a topic, sex is seen as so personal, that public discussion of any kind is considered bizarre. A general cultural aversion (and perhaps embarrassment at the possibility) of a discussion of these issues is therefore at the centre of school silences around sex.

Notably, only two participants received sex education at school, Bethany and Cara. They explained:

Bethany: We had some lessons, like they give you some bananas and then some condoms and tell you how to put them on. And like, they have every year, we had AIDS day, like, where they will emphasize sex education. And in middle school, I think we did have some classes, when the girls start their period. And they would separate the boys and the girls.

Cara: But I think, only students in Shanghai or Beijing, they might have these classes. But in other cities in China, they might not get anything.

(Bethany, 22 and Cara, 22)

At age twenty-two and native Shanghainese, Bethany and Cara were unique in that they had both received some sort of sex education. Notably, Bethany and Cara were the only participants to mention sexually transmitted diseases and contraception. Such comprehensive education is most likely due to their urban upbringing in Shanghai, where sex education initiatives specifically designed for and implemented in the city have been increasingly applied (Shanghai Daily, 2011). Often perceived as a more international, 'open' and 'modern' city, this example illustrates the extent to which location affects the quality and amount of information presented. It is likely that they would not have received such comprehensive instruction in a rural area, or perhaps even in an urban location ten years earlier. Moreover, the exchange between Bethany and Cara highlights the generational change taking place in present-day China. Whereas

previously sexual themes and sex education were issues rarely discussed in public, the urban environment has become increasingly tolerant of sexual matters in the public sphere in recent years (Honig and Hershatter, 1988).

As Zhang et al. (2004) note, there is no standard sex education curriculum in reform China. As evidenced by participants, most discussions of sex education in middle school or high school provided limited and superficial knowledge of puberty, basic physiology and bodily hygiene, and did not address issues of sex or sexual safety. Teachers frequently avoided discussing sex in the classroom and instead asked students to learn by themselves. Studies by Gao et al. (2001) and Zhang et al. (2004) detail similar findings, where if discussed at all, sex education lessons focused on biological changes rather than sexual knowledge and safety. These findings further support the notion that sex is viewed as being under the scientific realm of study in reform China (McMillan, 2004; Aresu, 2009).

The limited of discussion of sex in the classroom and reluctance of teachers to discuss sex clearly serves to uphold the notion that there is a sanctioned time and age for learning about sex: within marriage. Moreover, the silence at school can be seen as part of a general reticence to openly discuss sexual matters in Chinese culture. Perhaps teachers' unwillingness stems from their own upbringing under the moralist ideology of the Mao period, where discussing sex or having boyfriends would have been unheard of and possibly even seen as counter-revolutionary (Farrer, 2002).

This lack of information and discussion can and does have real consequences. Importantly, the limited knowledge provided is in direct contradiction to the Party-State's family planning agenda. As recent studies have found, sexual knowledge and contraceptive use among unmarried adults in China is very inconsistent (Zhang et al., 2004; Parish et al., 2007; Gao et al., 2001; Lou et al., 2004; Sudhinaraset et al., 2014). Without proper, informative education, young women and men are more susceptible to STIs, HIV/AIDS, unplanned pregnancies and resulting abortions. Such outcomes undermine the Party-State's population planning programme, place unnecessary strain

on government resources and destabilize the Party-State's goal of promoting "socialist morality" (Aresu, 2009: 538).

### *Silence From Parents*

Alongside the limited discussion of sex at school, most participants described a general, overarching silence on the subject of sex from their parents. Such findings are similar to Harriet Evans' (2008) study of mothers and daughters in reform China, where few daughters had spoken to their mothers about sex. As Evans notes, the mothers in her study were raised under the Mao regime, where the "heavily moralistic ideology" of the period appears to have informed and influenced the reluctance to discuss sex (2008: 154).<sup>37</sup> Moreover, as the generation before reform did not receive any sex education, frequently it was expected that their child, like themselves, would "know what to do" once married (Zhang et al., 2004; Gao et al., 2001; Cui et al., 2001; Chen et al., 2008). This idea was generally expressed by participants as well, where in most cases, parents had not spoken to their daughter about sex. In fact, sex was frequently described as 'too private' an issue to be discussed:

Laura (28): In China, most of the parents won't have this kind of, you know, discussion with kids. No, no.

Emily (28): I never, ever mentioned it to my parents. Never, ever.

Angela (28): In China, it's a bit taboo to do that.

Eleanor (28): We're used to not talking about this with them. And you know, Chinese parents, they are used to being silent on this issue.

Joan (26): Yeah, I could never discuss sex with my parents. In China, we don't talk about sex.

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<sup>37</sup> Jackson and Ho (2014) also observe Hong Kong mothers' reluctance in discussing sexual matters with their daughters.

It was therefore seen as ‘normal’ and expected for parents to not discuss any sexual matters with their children. Unlike the West, the notion that parents should be or are responsible for teaching their child about sex was completely absent. Rather, it was seen as rare and even surprising for sex to be discussed with a parent.

An exchange between Anya, Jill and Mia, also made clear that sex is considered a taboo subject:

NZ: Did you ever talk to your mom about sex?

[Laughter]

Jill: No, no!

[Laughter]

Anya: Never.

Mia: I couldn’t, I never would.

Anya: See we had no way to get information about sex. So we found out by ourselves!

Jill: Like Anya and I are friends, and Mia’s my sister, but we would never talk about this together.

Anya: Yeah, I just would talk about this with my very, very, very best friend. Not with common friends, never.

(Jill, 25, Anya, 27 and Mia, 26)

Clearly sex is seen as a highly sensitive topic. Importantly, Mia further emphasized that not only could she not discuss sex with her mother, she would choose not to if the opportunity presented itself. Sex is perceived as an extremely private affair. As a result, with no discussion about sex from parents or at school, the responsibility falls on young people themselves to find out more information.

Martha also had a similar experience. She had never spoken to her mother about sex, even after she started university:

No, never. I'm not sure if all girls are like me, but when I was in university, I lived in a dormitory and rarely went home. Maybe once a month. And she didn't talk about sex with me, even then. I think she wouldn't dare talk to me about it. When you asked me this question, I still can't remember how I learned about it! [Laughs] But I'm lucky I know what it is! [Laughs] (Martha, 35)

As an 'older' participant, Martha came to learn about sex eventually. Highlighting her mother's silence on the topic supports Evans' (2008) idea that mothers raised under Mao were reluctant to discuss sex with their own child. Importantly, Martha is not angry with her mother for her silence; in fact, the idea of her mother speaking to her about sex is not even seen as a possibility. Rather, Martha is comfortable with not having had this conversation, further demonstrating the way in which sex is viewed as a highly private and personal matter.

When conversations about sex did occur, they were usually at a 'later' age. For instance, Samantha (24) shocked her mother after university, when her mother spoke to her about sex for the first time. She stated, "She was surprised that I knew so much! [Laughs] Because she had never talked to me about it before". Clearly, discussions with a parent concerning sex are a rare occurrence. Generational changes in opinion were also evident in Corinne's narrative. Although she received a somewhat superficial account of menstruation from her mother, Corinne explained that sex was a topic that was never discussed:

Nooo!! Never! No. She's very traditional. And she asked me once about me and my ex and if he had touched me. And I said 'I don't want to talk about it. Why do you ask me questions like that?' It's so embarrassing, right? (Corinne, 30)

Despite being thirty years old, Corinne was quite uncomfortable at the prospect of having a discussion about sex with her mother. Whilst Corinne agreed with the idea of premarital sex, the awkward nature of this conversation with her mother is evident.

Theresa had also never spoken to her mother about sex until the age of thirty-two:

My mom was shocked. You know for her, she always thought I would wait to have sex until marriage. But last year, last September, around then, I told her that I wasn't a virgin [Laughs]. And she was shocked! [Laughter] Yeah, it was quite embarrassing, because it was right before my health examination. And when we went to the hospital, and my mom said 'Don't let the doctor examine you there, you know, that part, your secret'. And I told her that I'm not a virgin anymore! [Laughter] And she was shocked! [Laughter] (Theresa, 33)

Such a strong reaction from Theresa's mother highlights the generational change taking place in the reform period. Theresa's attitude toward sex is much more open, and she dismisses her mother's concern over her virginity as nonsensical and silly. In contrast, Theresa's mother's shocked reaction demonstrates a conservative attitude towards premarital sex as well as the continued preoccupation with virginity for young women in China.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the use of the term "your secret" by Theresa's mother further underscores the cultural reticence in discussing sexual matters. With sexual parts not named, having a discussion concerning their use seems unlikely.

One participant, however, did express wanting to discuss sex with her parents. As Ramona (27) stated, "I want to tell my mom, but I don't know how to start this conversation!". Ramona's desire to discuss sex with her mother can be seen as a sign of changing generational expectations. Perhaps some of the generation of reform now hopes for and is beginning to expect an open conversation with a parent around sex. Yet, given the silences surrounding the topic of sex, it is unsurprising that Ramona felt it was a struggle to begin this discussion.

### Avoiding the Topic of Sex

In the West, the lack of discussion around sex is frequently seen as a method parents employ to 'protect' children, as a way to maintain childhood 'innocence' and sustain the boundary between childhood and adulthood (Robinson and Davies, 2008; Robinson,

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<sup>38</sup> This will be examined further in the following analysis chapter.

2012). In her studies of the West, Robinson (2012) has noted that often children's curiosity and questions around sex are ignored, as their interest is seen as inappropriate due to their age. This tactic endorses the notion that discussing sex is potentially corrupting of children, that it 'gives ideas' to young people and will encourage sexual activity. Innocence is seen as preferable to any sexual knowledge and as a way to regulate any possible sexual behaviour (Geasler et al., 1995; Frankham, 2006).

In China parents are also generally reluctant to discuss sex with their children. However, rather than a protectionist stance, this sentiment stems from an overarching cultural reticence to discuss such a private issue publicly with young people (Cui et al., 2001). Participants frequently referenced the ways in which the topic of sex was avoided by their parents at different ages. Emily remembered asking her mother about sex as a child:

Emily: You know what my mom told me? She said, 'After your dad and I got married, we went to the hospital, the doctor gave us some shots and then we got you'.

Angela: And sometimes parents, they tell these lies. Like 'We just kissed and then you came!' [laughter].

Emily: When I was a young, and my dad would shower, and my mom always went inside. And so I asked, 'Mom why do you always get to go inside and I can't?' And she said, 'Well he's my husband', and I said, 'What does that mean?' [laughter]. I was very curious when I was a kid.

(Emily, 28 and Angela, 28)

This exchange between Emily and Angela demonstrates the ways in which parents are reluctant to discuss sexual matters with their children. The boundary of childhood and adulthood is reinforced in this example, with married adults being portrayed as the only people who can have this special knowledge.

Phoebe brought up this sentiment in an exchange with Maureen:



Phoebe: I think it's a joke in China, that sometimes, maybe girls or boys, they ask their parents 'Where did I come from?' and the parents will say, 'You are from a boat, that's where we got you'.

Maureen: They never tell the truth.

(Phoebe, 28 and Maureen, 25)

"Never telling the truth" was therefore seen as a common strategy employed by parents to avoid discussing sex with their child. Upon reflection, most participants saw these stories as amusing and as a part of childish curiosity. In no way did they question or challenge the fact that their parents did not explain sex to them. In fact, these responses from parents were considered standard and normal, so much so that participants endorsed this strategy, seeing it as a form of good parenting.

Lily speculated about the reasoning behind parental silence:

I think most Chinese parents don't want their children to think about it or even talk about it. I think they might think it's not appropriate for kids to be thinking about these things. They think it's not the time. They think that when you get married, then you will know [laughs]... Parents are afraid of children learning about sex too young! [Laughs] (Lily, 27)

The idea of instinctively 'knowing' about sex once married was therefore seen as a primary justification by parents to not speak to their child about sex. Similar sentiments were also expressed in Gao et al.'s (2001) study, where parents believed that their children "would grow up and automatically know what to do on their wedding night" (2001: 730). Marriage is therefore seen as the only appropriate time to gain this knowledge.

Peggy described her experience:

Peggy: I think for me, even though I went to college, I still didn't really know, like, what's going on between men and women. I didn't really know. And, like, my parents, like, they're, like, really happy parents, and, like, they're educated, but they didn't teach me.

NZ: Really?

Peggy: No.

NZ: You never talked about sex?

Peggy: Like even before I went to college, they didn't say anything. They just said, like, 'Protect yourself'. And like my dad, he taught me how to do self-defence against the guys, but they never mentioned about, like, yeah, you know. (Peggy, 26)

Peggy highlighted the ways in which her parents did not broach the topic of sex at all with her. What Peggy does stress, however, is the importance of defence against an unnamed risk. The risk here is evidently young men, who are portrayed as sexually aggressive and perhaps even dangerous and uncontrollable. This idea echoes the essentialist rhetoric reinforced in the reform period, where men's urges are seen as biologically unstoppable. As a young woman, Peggy is therefore at risk and in need of protection.

Moreover, in this conversation with her parents, sex is not actually named. Rather, it is alluded to and hinted at through her father's warning of "protection". This indirect manner of describing sex is further evidence of the ways in which sex continues to be a taboo topic, not for open discussion. Wong and Tang note similar findings in their study and the ways in which "open and direct discussion about safer sex behaviours is rare", with sex commonly referred to in "signals and codes" (2001: 120).

Julia also recalled an incident with her mother where the subject of sex was avoided. She stated:

Julia: I think I was eighteen. And I was still kind of very stupid. I was eighteen and it was summer, so I was still living with my mom and my dad, it was just so hot and very cool in their bedroom. But, one day, I asked my mom, ‘Will I get pregnant if I sleep in the same bed as my dad?’ and my mom said, ‘No, no, no’. I had no idea! So I asked my cousin. And my cousin told me, ‘Do you remember the theory I told you two years ago [about a lock and a key]? So it’s not going to happen,’ and I was like ‘Oh’.

Cynthia: That also happened to me as well. We always ask those stupid questions, because we don’t know!

(Julia, 28 and Cynthia, 32)

Although she was aware that to become pregnant implied a man and a woman having been in the same bed, Julia did not understand the physical mechanics of sex. Rather than give her daughter an explanation, Julia’s mother ignored the topic of sex all together, with Julia remaining confused until speaking with her cousin. Despite Julia being a legal adult, her mother’s silence on the topic of sex is further evidence of the taboo nature of sex. Interestingly, Julia does not fault her mother for her reluctance in discussing sex; rather, her mother’s silence is seen as a normal response. Moreover, Julia’s example also supports Gagnon and Simon’s (2005) idea of sexual scripting. Although Julia was aware that a man and a woman in bed together signified the possibility of a child, she only partially possessed the scripts to understand what actually happens for sexual intercourse. Julia’s questions therefore are a result of being kept ignorant until a very late age and not having access to entire scripts.

A few participants, however, did recall receiving a superficial account of menstruation and bodily changes from a parent, with a handful having broached the topic of sex. Naomi (30) was one of the few who had discussed sex with her mother. Importantly, she emphasized that her mother was unusual in comparison to other mothers: “There was no hesitation between me and my mom. Yeah, we just talked. Like, how to be careful. And how not to get pregnant. And if you get pregnant, do not be afraid to tell me. It was very open. My mom was quite open”. Naomi’s mother was one of the only mothers to

explicitly mention sex and contraceptive measures. Yet interestingly, the focus is on pregnancy and the negative consequences for unmarried women. Unmarried pregnancy in particular is a concern as it often results in abortion due to family planning regulations. Although widely available, abortion is commonly seen as a moral shame, negatively affecting a woman's reputation forever.<sup>39</sup> The risks of sex therefore fall completely on women, who are seen as primarily responsible for managing the consequences of sex.

Hannah was another of the few participants who had directly spoken with her mother on the topic of sex:

Hannah: Well, because like, my mom, because she's a nurse, so we had a lot of books about it at home. So, it was ok for me to read the books. And also my auntie, my youngest auntie, she's like twelve years older than me, so we're more like friends. She also bought a lot of magazines.

NZ: So could you talk to your mom if you had questions?

Hannah: Yeah. I think this is one thing that is often different from other families. Because it was ok for my mom, but not my dad [laughs], it was ok for my mom to tell me.

(Hannah, 30)

Hannah was therefore able to rely on the women in her family as sources of information about sex and able to ask questions. Importantly, Hannah emphasized the unusualness of her family, as most Chinese families are seen as more conservative and unwilling to have a direct discussion about sex with their child.

Parental silence on the topic of sex is part of the larger cultural reticence in discussing sexual matters. This is a dangerous (and illogical) strategy, however, and potentially places young women at more risk, as without proper sex education, they may be more susceptible to STIs, HIV/AIDS transmission, unplanned pregnancies and resulting

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<sup>39</sup> This will be discussed in more detail below.

abortions (Zhang et al., 2004). As emphasized by participants, sex in China is seen as a highly personal and private matter and therefore not for public discussion. Parental upbringing under the Mao regime may also contribute to this general reluctance in discussing sex. Moreover, with sex being seen as only permissible and appropriate for married adults, most parents may feel the discussion unnecessary and/or perhaps that it will encourage their child to become sexually active.

Unlike the West, where parents are encouraged to have these discussions with their children, Chinese parents in this study generally ignored the topic of sex. Although a few participants had spoken to a parent about sex, most did not expect this dialogue to occur at all, believing this silence to be normal part of Chinese parenting. In fact, those mothers who had openly discussed sex with their daughters were described as unusual and untraditional. Yet, perhaps the landscape is beginning to change, with some participants hoping to be able to have this conversation with a parent in the future.

### *Consequences*

Despite accepting the lack of conversation about sex at school and at home, participants were concerned about the resulting negative consequences due to this silence. Several participants recalled stories where their limited sexual knowledge had led to an awkward situation. For instance Joan, who was from a rural province, recalled in detail two memories of embarrassment:

At home, we run several small shops nearby. And we don't sell tampons, we just have the pads. So once I was there, and I sold some pads to a girl. And the woman, she's my neighbour, she said 'Give me a bag' and I said, 'Why, it's just one thing?'. And she said 'Because I need to take it home' [laughs]. And she knew! And I didn't, because I was young. Because I didn't know what you do, I didn't know you couldn't carry it around. I had no idea about this. Even though I did read some romance books and stuff, I didn't know this. I read these really early, I was like ten or eleven years old. And I was also very mature compared to the others. I had my period early, like, eleven or twelve years old. I got it before

that. I had no idea what it was, what that thing was bleeding. I didn't know this. So, I just kept changing my underwear. I didn't tell my mom, I couldn't say 'What's that?' ... Yeah, it was very weird. And then my mom saw it, after some time. I was really nervous. And she said nothing really and then she gave me some pads. And we never talked about it again. No one told me what to do. And many, many times, in my high school, it's a small and poor town, and so girls will wear dirty pads. We had no education about how long you should wear your pad, how often you should change your pad. It's very bad, the education. Very bad. (Joan, 26)

Joan's example highlights the deep rural-urban divide in contemporary China. Whereas some native Shanghainese participants may have received a superficial 'body knowledge' class at school, Joan's rural upbringing contributed to her lack of even this basic knowledge. Not only was Joan herself unaware of menstruation, she noted that other women around her were also uninformed about rudimentary biology and hygienic standards. Clearly, a real need for improvement in sexual and hygienic education, particularly in rural areas, is necessary. Moreover, Joan also described her embarrassment at being unaware of the 'correct' feminine behaviour in purchasing sanitary napkins. Her example gives insight into the process of feminine socialization, where she learned how to behave and react 'properly', in accordance with social norms.

Another perceived consequence from the limited discussion of sex was remaining immature. It was suggested that learning about sex 'later' was detrimental to overall personal development. For instance, as Peggy (26) stated "I think basically, Chinese kids are more, like, immature than Western kids". Notably, this idea of lateness was often underscored by participants who had spent time abroad and were aware that the Chinese approach to sex education and sex varied significantly from Western cultures. For example, Joan (26) had lived abroad in the United States and was shocked to discover the active dating life of the teenager in her host family. She expressed her surprise exclaiming, "At fifteen, we know nothing!".

Hannah also agreed with this idea of immaturity and lateness. She had recently read a story on a social media site:

Hannah: Oh I read on Weibo [a Chinese social networking site], a couple, like, they got married. And they'd been married for one or two years. And the woman, she wasn't pregnant, so they were a bit worried and maybe thought there was something wrong with her. So they went to the hospital. And finally, the doctor found out they just slept in the same bed, but they never had had sex.

NZ: Really?

Hannah: And the woman was still a virgin! And they thought as long as they slept together, they could get pregnant! [Laughs] It's ridiculous!

(Hannah, 30)

This story was perceived as “ridiculous” and comical to Hannah, who thought such a scenario could never possibly happen in the West. In fact, this urban legend is so widespread, a nearly identical story was cited in Gao et al.'s (2001) research as well, demonstrating the wide circulation of this rumour and recognition of China's conservative attitude towards sexual matters. Considering the limited discussion of sex in China, this mythical scenario could in fact happen. As Gagnon and Simon have argued:

Without the proper elements of a script that defines the situation, names the actors and plots the behaviour, nothing sexual is likely to happen. One can easily conceive of numerous social situations in which all or most of the ingredients of a sexual event are present but that remain nonsexual in that not even sexual arousal occurs. (Gagnon and Simon, 2005: 13)

Hannah's example illustrates the ways in which sexual scripts are learned, acquired and accumulated over periods of time. Thus although the two people involved have access to components of a sexual script, clearly not all elements have been acquired for intercourse. Where the couple in Hannah's story understood that a baby resulted from two people having been in the same bed, they had yet to obtain all the necessary scripts for sex.

Participants also emphasized the perceived differences between China and other countries around the sensitive nature of sex. With participants frequently comparing Chinese women to Western women, the unintended consequences of ‘late’ sex education were seen as detrimental.<sup>40</sup> As Julia and Cynthia observed:

Cynthia: ... We also have very bad sex education. They don't really teach it!

Julia: --There's no education!

Cynthia:--Yeah, there's no real sex education in school. At least in my school there was no real sex education. And maybe one very general lesson, and then you never really talk about it at home, so you kind of really don't know how that stuff works... Because Chinese women always grow up slower than Western girls. Maybe it's not a good thing when you are not so really, like, mature?

(Julia, 28 and Cynthia, 32)

Growing up ‘slower’ than Western girls was therefore seen as harmful for Chinese women, especially when it came to sexual matters. Western women are perhaps perceived as having greater sexual freedom and autonomy when compared to Chinese women. Maturity is described as a desirable quality, with the West encouraging the development of this characteristic. In contrast, China is viewed as too conservative and traditional when it comes to handling sexual matters, especially regarding women.

Joan also dismissed the traditional attitudes held by Chinese women in her rural hometown:

I never thought about [premarital sex], I never would have agreed before university. I thought you couldn't do that, that you couldn't even have sex! [Laughs] And then I came out of university and then I went abroad. I have some girlfriends in [Southern China] and they are still virgins. And they, somehow,

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<sup>40</sup> Perhaps this was due to my outsider status (see Chapter 3).



they *still* think that sex is kind of a dirty thing, and this kind of thing is something you only do with your husband, *still*.

(Joan, 26)

Joan's example demonstrates the changing values now present in reform China. For Joan, being open-minded about premarital sex was seen as a sign of modernity and progress, especially for a woman. Her repeated use of the word "still" highlights the negative opinion she held towards conservative attitudes concerning premarital sex. Exposure to an urban environment and international travel resulted in Joan's attitudinal change, demonstrating the influence and effect of wider globalization. This example not only highlights the changing sexual landscape of China, but also demonstrates how this change is bound by geographic location. As Higgins and Sun (2007) note, alongside economic discrepancy between rural and urban areas, traditional values, particularly those that concern sex and sexual morality, are seen as much more firmly cemented in rural areas, especially when compared to more 'modern' cities like Shanghai. Joan looks down upon the women from her rural province, considering them backward and old-fashioned by comparison.

An additional motive for improving sex education was therefore the notion of China adopting a more modern approach to sex as a nation. Conservative attitudes towards sex were seen as traditional and backward. Although this opinion was generally expressed by those participants who had lived or travelled abroad, China becoming more 'open' regarding sexual matters was seen as a sign of 'progress' and central in helping women become more 'mature'. Perhaps this reflects an underlying desire for a stronger discourse of sexual autonomy for women. At the same time, these opinions are clearly in direct contradiction to the moral, socialist agenda being promoted by the Party-State in this period of economic change. Rather than accepting and/or loosening control over the domains of sex and sexuality, behaviours that do not fit into the Party-State sanctioned, heterosexual, married ideal are viewed as detrimental to the overall stability of the nation. Further legislation, moralist campaigns and censorship hinder the discussion of sex as well, making the dialogue surrounding sex and sexuality very contentious.

## LEARNING ABOUT SEX

Since sex was a topic rarely discussed at home or at school, I asked participants to consider how they had learned about sex. Often this question was met with great laughter and perhaps embarrassment, further evidence of the private nature and perhaps the unusualness of such a conversation. Overall participants revealed that they had gathered information about sex from a variety of sources, including through actual experience, peer groups and through media. As will be demonstrated, some of the sources relied upon are in fact quite problematic when considering both the accuracy of the information and the wider messages about gender relations.

### *Actual Experience*

Often, actual experience with a partner was cited as contributing to an understanding of sex:

NZ: Did you have any sex education?

Allison (27): Never. My boyfriend taught me! [Laughter] Sometimes I joke with him, like ‘You’re really my teacher! My teacher of love!’

Eleanor (28): [Laughs] My boyfriend taught me!

Martha (35): Well, a boyfriend taught me! [Laughs]. You know, I didn’t try to learn from books or something, you know [laughs]. For me, I don’t think I really tried to find out, it’s just something that you end up learning.

Emily (28): I think my sex education was practicing with my first boyfriend! [Laughter] He was American.

From these extracts, it is evident that despite a lack of comprehensive sex education at school, participants were not deterred from engaging in sex. Direct experience appears

to have contributed greatly to their overall understanding of sex. Yet without a solid foundation of practical sexual knowledge, and in particular, knowledge of safe sex practices and contraception, the unintended health risks of sex are quite high.

Moreover, narratives of individual desire or pleasure are completely absent in these extracts. In fact, the sex described here is one type of heterosexual sex initiated by boyfriends. Men are portrayed as active subjects, whereas participants themselves are acted upon. It appears that the women here are at the mercy of the version of sex presented by their boyfriends. Importantly, it is necessary to question where the boyfriends themselves are getting their information about sex. As will be explored below, a reliance on pornography for sexual information is common in China, and given the gender roles that are portrayed in pornographic content, it is important to question the ways this may affect and influence young men's perceptions of sex.

An additional aspect to note is that sex initiated or taught by boyfriends may have an element of coercion. Wang and Ho (2011) and Wang et al. (2007) have illustrated that an extreme amount of pressure exists for women to have sex as a result of the "virginity complex" still commonly held in China (Wang and Ho, 2011: 186). Young men are eager to have premarital sex, yet at the same time, still emphasize the importance of a woman's virginity before marriage. Often young men place extreme pressure on their girlfriends for premarital sex, with tactics of persuasion, intimidation, blackmail and harassment commonly used to achieve this 'goal' (Wang and Ho, 2011: 192; see also Song et al., 2014). As will be explored in Chapter 5, women are placed in the role of sexual gatekeeper and faced with the physical and reputational risks of premarital sex, and even losing their boyfriend for noncompliance. As a result, premarital sex for young women may involve coercion, with some women "giv[ing] in with regret" (Wang and Ho, 2011: 186).

### *Peer Group*

As Allen (2003) has noted in the West, young people frequently rely on peer groups as a primary source of knowledge for sexual matters, as they are seen as more approachable

than parents or teachers. Considering the extent to which the discussion of sex is perceived as taboo in China, it is of little surprise that participants cited close friends as a common source of information when it came to learning about sex. Most were able to recall specific incidents and/or gatherings in which they learned about the mechanics of sex. For example, Julia found out about sex through her cousin:

When I was sixteen, I think. I was with my cousin. And she had had her first experience, she was eighteen then, in her last year of high school. And she had a boyfriend. But I was too naïve. I didn't know the theory of it, and she just explained to me. And she explained the theory of how it's like a lock and a key and I was like [makes face] 'What?!'. (Julia, 28)

Close family relatives were therefore able to provide direct and potentially useful information. Importantly, the lesson on sex presented by Julia's cousin is of one type of heterosexual, penetrative sex. This notion reiterates the essentialist rhetoric present in the reform period, where men are "constructed as the active party" and the focus is "on the workings of the penis" (McMillan, 2004: 208, 210). Only one version of sex is presented to Julia, with attention paid to the man acting upon a more passive woman.

Cynthia also remembered in detail how she learned about sex. Whilst living abroad in Canada, Cynthia befriended a woman who gave her her first "real" sex education:

I still remember my first real sex education. It came from a Canadian lady, I had a Canadian girl friend. And she knew that I was still a virgin and I was like twenty-four years old. And she said, 'You have to do it. I mean, it's like don't wait for it anymore' [laughter]. And then she brought me to a sex toy shop to show me....Yeah, so she said 'I'm going to teach you, this is this, this is that', and then she actually bought me a small one and said 'This is a gift. Go and use this and tell me what you think'. And then it was in my drawer for at least eight months, I didn't even touch it. It was so scary! Where do I put it? I don't know how to play with it?! [Laughter] And then she was also drawing me pictures,

telling me this and that. And we were in a bar, and her boyfriend was there, and her boyfriend asked us ‘What are you guys doing?’ and I said ‘Oh nothing, just drawing pictures’ [laughter]...And then, she actually, also, kind of set me up with a kind of cute Canadian, and then she said ‘You know he’s good looking, just do it, do it!’ And actually, it was my first time, a Canadian boy. And then I said ‘Ok, I have to learn something before I do it’. I went home and asked my roommate, a Chinese girl. And she had had a boyfriend for a long time, several years. So I asked her, I said ‘Ok, I will probably have a lot of questions, and we’ve never talked about it, but I need your help, basically, some sex education. How do I use a condom?’ and then she said ‘Ok, I’ll teach you.’ And then she went home to go and get a condom from her boyfriend, and the boyfriend was very surprised, ‘What are you going to do with it?!’ [laughter]. So we locked the door in her room, we *literally* locked the door. And she used a banana, to show me how to use it on a banana....So, that’s me, at twenty-four. I was already twenty-four years old. I think that’s a little bit late. Because I felt, I’m a woman, and I feel ready, and I don’t want to be really old and to not know what it’s all about. It’s not healthy, right? (Cynthia, 32)

Yet again, only one version of sex is presented in Cynthia’s narrative, a type of heterosexual sex that focuses on penetration. Women are seen here as objects, being acted upon by a man. Moreover, despite being given a vibrator, ideas about individual pleasure are not present in Cynthia’s story. Rather, the focus is on learning about penetration rather than on her own individual sexual satisfaction. Moreover, Cynthia’s lack of knowledge concerning sexual safety is surprising and she herself finds it troubling that her sexual knowledge came at such a late age.

Notably, knowing too much about sex was also seen as risky for a woman’s reputation. As Bethany mentioned:

Actually, when girls get together, the most common topic we talk about is boys! [Laughs] And boyfriends, and how to get a boyfriend, and that kind of stuff. And

I think I have a lot more sexual knowledge than a lot of other people, than girls from other cities. Like, when I went to university I thought, ‘Whoa, maybe I know too much!’ [laughter]. And I think I was very embarrassed. For you to know too much, especially for girls, it’s not very good. Yeah, I was just like ‘Wow, I know too much!’ [laughter]. (Bethany, 22)

An unmarried woman being too knowledgeable about sex may imply to others that she is sexually experienced and/or prepared for sex. This knowledge may influence a woman’s overall social reputation and potentially decrease her marriageability (Wong and Tang, 2001). As a result of being too knowledgeable for her age and unmarried, Bethany was careful to limit the amount of sexual knowledge she presented to others.

### *Media*

Participants also consulted different types of media that contributed to their understanding of sex. The usefulness of the internet was frequently underscored, being seen as a place to “get answers to your questions” (Megan, 25). As Faye (30) described, “On the internet, everything is there! You can find out everything! [Laughs]”. Allen notes that in the Western context, the internet is “a valuable source of support for youth who are denied information from more conventional avenues” (Allen, 2008: 579). The preference for the internet as a source of information can easily be understood due to the anonymity and privacy it provides, especially considering how the topic of sex is so little discussed (Higgins and Sun, 2007; McFarlane et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2004). With such reliance on the internet, however, it is important to question the quality and accuracy of the information available, especially in a country with heavily censored web access (Zhang et al., 2007; Lou et al., 2006; Li et al., 2004).

A variety of other media were also cited as sources of information. For instance, Bethany (22) mentioned popular comic books: “For me, I found out through *manga* [laughs]”. Samantha (24) also listed several sources of information which contributed to her understanding around of sex: “[Laughs] From the internet! And some TV series! And the movies. Like, for example, *American Pie*? [Laughs] Many women in my

university, we would get together in our dormitory, and watch movies like this together”. Importantly, these participants both cited foreign sources of information, demonstrating the changing landscape of China and effects of the Open Door policy.

Pornography also proved to be a common source of information for participants. Western studies have illustrated the ways in which young men consult and rely upon pornography for sexual information. For instance, Allen’s (2003) study demonstrated young men’s preference for this medium whereas nearly seventy-five per cent of young women surveyed had never engaged with it. Yet such findings do not appear to apply in reform China. As Zhang et al. note in their study of young people’s sex education, seventy per cent of young women and men surveyed across China gathered information about sex from pornography, with only 1.3 per cent and 1.7 per cent obtaining information from their parents and school, respectively (2004: 116). Everett Zhang notes similar statistics in his study of university students, with over sixty-eight per cent having watched pornographic content online (2011a: 114). As noted above, with the surge of consumerism in the reform period, pornography in contemporary China is readily accessible and has become an established market. Despite Party-State sanctions against it, the pornography market continues to flourish, with DVDs and other materials sold on the street (McMillan, 2006). Easily acquirable, participants relied heavily upon pornography as a source of sexual information.

Several participants described incidents of ‘group learning’ about sex after arriving at university. Often this group learning involved watching movies, usually pornographic movies, whilst living in a dormitory. An exchange between Jill, Anya and Mia highlighted not only the lack of sex education in reform China, but also the prevalence of watching pornographic content in a group:

NZ: Did you ever have any sex education?

Jill: No.

Mia: No.

Anya: Never.

Mia: In China, we don't have this.

NZ: So how did you learn?

[Big laugh]

Anya: We learned from porn! We learned from porn!

[Laughter]

Jill: TV! I think, maybe I don't know! You know, when I was in university, we had a small TV set. And my roommates, we went and got a DVD. And we all got together, and we all watched together!

[Laughter]

Anya: I would never do that with other girls! I think I'm too shy!

[Laughter]

Mia: I just read in a book.

Jill: But we weren't that shy! Because my roommates, we were all close, so it was ok, it was no problem, we just closed our door! And so we were sitting all around the TV. It was really interesting! [Laughter]

Mia: I know many boys do that, but with girls, I think they're too scared!

Jill: Maybe our minds were too open! [Laughter]

(Jill, 25, Anya, 27 and Mia, 26)

Notably, pornography is being used purely for informational and educational purposes; there is no mention of watching for individual pleasure. Rather, these young women were 'studying' the video for instructional reasons.

Pornography was also seen as a way to learn by Phoebe and Maureen:

Maureen: Um, videos? But I didn't watch too much.

Phoebe: I didn't learn in school. I think the boys went and got a porn DVD or tape. Or maybe it was online [laughs].

NZ: Did you ever talk to you girlfriends about it?

Maureen: Yeah. In middle school. Because they passed the DVD around. And because we were interested in it, we watched it.



Phoebe: We did it in university, in our dormitory. We watched it on someone's computer. The girl, she borrowed it from her boyfriend.

NZ: Oh really?

Phoebe: Yeah. We always got the resources from the boys! [Laughs]

NZ: What did you think?

Phoebe: We were just curious!

Maureen: I just watched for five minutes and then I gave up!

NZ: Did you ever talk to your parents?

Maureen: They rarely talked to me about sex.

Phoebe: We just studied it from DVDs [laughs].

(Maureen, 25 and Phoebe, 28)

For Phoebe and Maureen, pornography was used to satisfy general curiosity about sex. They watched the films purely for study. Individual desire and pleasure are again notably absent in their narrative, demonstrating the way pornography is relied upon as an educational tool. Maureen was also careful to qualify her participation in watching, perhaps in order to protect her reputation and not appear too eager or knowledgeable about sex to others.

An exchange between Ramona, Theresa and Naomi also highlighted the variety of ways in which to find out information about sex:

NZ: How did you learn about sex?

Ramona: Haha!

Naomi: Maybe after high school?

Ramona: --Well we got a little in high school. But I tried in university!

[Laughter]

Naomi: I had a classmate, he sat behind me. And he always told us some stories about sex. He was like our mentor!

[Laughter]

Ramona: Usually the boys in your class, they would talk about it.

Theresa: But it was just talking.

Ramona: But I know they learned from maybe, you know, Japanese movies. Or cartoons.

NZ: Cartoons?

Ramona: Yeah, they have cartoons on this. Like sex cartoons, *manga*--

Naomi: --Porn cartoons. Japanese ones.

Ramona: Yeah, they're also Japanese. They just learn from the Japanese.

(Theresa, 33, Naomi, 30 and Ramona, 27)

Such an exchange reflects not only a dependency upon media to learn, but also the clear impact of the Open Door policy, where foreign material is readily available for young people to consume. It is also evident that young men are freer to actively search for these 'learning' materials. Whereas young women may risk their social and sexual reputation in searching for material to learn about sex, or even discussing the knowledge they have about sex, young men are permitted to openly talk about such matters.

Japanese pornography was also specifically (and repeatedly) mentioned as a common primary source for sexual knowledge. As Joan explained:

Joan: In China, almost ninety-eight per cent of schools don't talk about this.

Seriously, like, most people learn from porn movies.

NZ: Really?

Joan: Like, actual porn movies. That's why the Japanese are so profitable in China!

NZ: So is that how you learned?

Joan: Uh, for me? Yeah, and from reality! [Laughs] I didn't know how to find a porno movie and download it. The men always have the way to do that. But not the girls or me.

(Joan, 26)

Joan emphasized how she used pornography purely for informational and educational

purposes. Yet again her individual pleasure is absent, and the focus is instead on gaining sexual knowledge. Young men are portrayed as being allowed to look for sexual information freely, whereas women are more restricted in their access. The explicit mention of Japanese pornography demonstrates the changing sexual landscape of China as well, where the Open Door policy has allowed for the influx of foreign materials.

Japanese pornography was mentioned again by Corinne, who had tried watching pornography with her most recent boyfriend. She explained:

Corinne: And you know what they say is that men in China learn about sex through Japanese porn.

NZ: Really?

Corinne: Yeah. It's really bad right? It's bad information, it's wrong.

NZ: I have never seen Japanese porn before,

Corinne: I did. I watched with my ex. And it's gross, it's not romantic at all. It didn't turn me on at all, it was gross. And so fake!

(Corinne, 30)

Unlike other participants, Corinne did not watch to learn or 'study' the video for informational purposes. In fact, she was the only person to mention watching pornography for personal pleasure. She was also the only person to emphasize the unrealistic displays of sex in these films. Her use of the phrase "turned on" implies a link to ideas of potential pleasure and personal arousal, quite different from other participants. Perhaps this example suggests a growing importance of the association between romance and sex.

Participants' dependency on media, and in particular pornography, as a main source of sexual knowledge is problematic. Firstly, the accuracy of the information presented must be called into question. The internet cannot be trusted to provide correct information and pornographic content rarely portrays accurate depictions of sex. Knowledge concerning contraceptive use is unlikely to be learned from pornographic materials, which do not

stress the importance or necessity of safe sex. In a time where the risk of contracting STIs and HIV/AIDS is high, and in a society where unmarried pregnancy is very stigmatized, such a reliance on the media and pornography for sexual knowledge is troubling.

Moreover, as feminist debates have long argued, pornography is problematic for the social and cultural environment it promotes (Dwyer, 1995; Longino, 1995). Pornography emphasizes women's passivity, submission and dependency whilst highlighting and eroticizing men's dominance. As MacKinnon (1995) and Dworkin (1981) have argued, pornography perpetuates wider societal violence against women and more broadly, unequal gender roles. The long-term consequences of pornography must therefore be taken into account if young women and men are using this medium as a main source of education. The lasting effects of pornography for women and gender roles, particularly concerning ideas of submission and male dominance, must be considered problematic and harmful to women.

It is evident that despite the limited knowledge provided at school and at home, participants learned about sex in a variety of ways. This active engagement with an assortment of material can be seen as a form of resistance to the cultural norm that places sex as a taboo issue for young women in China. Despite the denial of information and restrictions on discussions of sex in these locales, young women took it upon themselves to become active, knowing subjects. The sources of information consulted by participants, particularly international media, demonstrate the impact of the Open Door policy and increased contact with foreign ideas. Exposure to a variety of media may even contribute to changing perceptions of sexuality and acceptable sexual practices (Altman, 2004). At the same time, the use of media, and in particular, the internet and pornography, may be seen as reliable and accurate sources of information to young people (Allen, 2003; Zhang et al., 2004). The implications of engaging with this material must be underscored as problematic, as accurate information is not always portrayed, especially when considering safe sexual practices. Furthermore, the patriarchal and sexist nature of pornography contributes to (re)producing wider inequitable gender

relations. Relying on such content as a primary source of knowledge is therefore quite worrisome.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF COMPREHENSIVE SEX EDUCATION

The need for better sex education in China was emphasized by several participants. Mostly, this was due to concern about the unintended consequences and risks associated with premarital sex, specifically around the issues of pregnancy and abortion. In Farrer et al.'s (2012) recent study, concerns about HIV/AIDS and STI transmission were noticeably absent in their responses as well, with the focus primarily being on abortion. Unmarried pregnancy and abortion were perceived as “moral shames”, with abortion seen as the worst possible outcome of sex for unmarried women (Farrer et al., 2012: 276).

#### *Consequences*

The risk of pregnancy was frequently mentioned as a reason for sex education. As Cara (22) explained: “But it’s different in China, because Chinese children don’t have enough sex education. So sometimes girls they don’t know how to protect themselves, so if they have sex before marriage, maybe they’ll have a baby. And then the guy leaves her. So, it’s risky for Chinese girls”. Risk to women is explicitly highlighted by Cara. Women are seen as being responsible for the sexual encounter, bringing contraception and ensuring its use. Importantly, the risk here only refers to pregnancy, with no mention of STIs or HIV/AIDS.

The risk facing young women was also highlighted by Bethany:

In China, because parents don’t tell their kids about sex, so when we go to university, we just know that we’ll talk a lot about this. But if we’re in like a social situation, it’s a bit of an embarrassing topic. But because of this, a lot of people don’t know how to protect themselves. Especially girls, girls have to protect themselves in that way. (Bethany, 22)

Bethany clearly made the connection between lack of sex education and the potential impact it has for young women. Sex is seen as a risk for women, with pregnancy as the worst outcome. Women are again viewed as responsible for managing and negotiating the use of contraceptives. Moreover, she suggested that women are also faced with managing their sexual reputation as well. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, young women are clearly positioned as sexual gatekeepers, responsible for carefully negotiating sexual encounters alongside partner and cultural expectations.

Hannah also discussed the importance of proper sex education and the realities young people encounter:

A lot of parents or teachers, they just tell their child just not to do it. But it's not very realistic. So instead of telling them not to do it, you better tell them how to do it safely, how to protect themselves... But it's like you don't encourage them to do it, but it's like, just in case. They need to know how to protect themselves. Like, we're hearing a lot of news, like, girls who are fourteen, or as young as twelve years old, they're getting pregnant. And even like, fourteen-year-old girls, who are getting abortions, like, several times. (Hannah, 30)

The risk young women face is highlighted by Hannah as well. Yet here the concern centres around the appropriate time to fall pregnant, rather than on abortion itself. Unlike the West, where the abortion debate centres around the foetus' right to life, abortion in China is widely available as a result of the Party-State family planning agenda (Zhou, 1989). The shame associated with abortion has more to do with becoming pregnant at the wrong age and time, outside of marriage, than with the morality of abortion itself. Sex is a risk for young women, underscored by the notion that there is a correct time to engage in sex and that time is within marriage (Zhou, 1989; Hoy, 2001).

An exchange between Theresa, Naomi and Ramona also highlighted the importance of providing sex education:

Theresa: I think protection is quite an important lesson for teenagers. In China, we never had this lesson. We have a lot of accidental pregnancies.

Ramona: I've heard that in some toilets at schools, they will sell condoms for the boys.

Naomi: You know, I've read a lot of news about girls who get pregnant when they're only thirteen or fourteen. And they don't have the knowledge of what's happening, like how a baby is made or how to take care of themselves while pregnant. So they keep going to school early in the morning and in the afternoon, they have sports lessons. They just don't have this knowledge.

Theresa: They don't have this education. I think it's really important to have this education in China,--

Ramona:--But now children know these things much earlier. Because they can watch online.

Naomi: Well they know about sex, but they don't know how to protect themselves. They don't know how.

Theresa: Yeah, they don't know how to protect themselves. They just know about abortion.

Ramona: Yeah. Protect both the girls and maybe the babies.

Naomi: If you don't have the lesson, you could get hurt. It's dangerous.

(Theresa, 33, Naomi 30 and Ramona, 27)

Young people spoken of in this exchange are seen as being too young to be sexually active and too immature to be dealing with the possible consequences of sex. Young women in particular are at risk from the undesirable outcomes associated with sex, and also seen as responsible for negotiating the use of contraceptives. Age is stressed by all three participants, demonstrating how this should serve to regulate the timing of (first) sexual encounters. The idea is echoed that an appropriate time exists to become sexually aware and engage in sex.

Anya also stressed the importance of sex education and the risks young women face:

I was curious before, because I have heard that many girls, they've chosen this option [abortion]. So, I was talking on QQ [instant messenger], and I asked a girl, my friend, and she said she was getting married with a boy. They had already lived together when they were at university. And I said, 'Did you have any accidents happen to you?' And she said, 'It's a very, very bad memory'. I felt sorry for her, because she was trying to, like, be happy to tell me, like 'Oh I'm getting married', but I had asked a bad question. And I think I reminded her of this bad memory. But she said, 'Yes, once'. And she said 'We were young and we knew nothing'. So, I think, I couldn't see her face, but from her words, I could tell that she was very sad. But she said after that, they always have used condoms... And the other friend, she's my best friend. And she also had that operation during a summer holiday... So I asked this friend, and she was very honest with me, and said 'Yes, I did'. And she said, she really regretted it, and she said, she's also very sad, because this happened when she was twenty-something. But I think the bad thing is that no one taught them. We could avoid these things happening. But what I mean is, it's very common in China. It's *very* common in China. My friends, they are all very good girls, but it just happens. So it's very, very common. Some girls, they have had that operation, but they didn't let others know. Only close friends, they let know... So, I think I'm lucky I've never had that experience. Because I know I should protect myself. You want to have fun, but the first thing is to not get hurt. (Anya, 27)

Although Anya recognised the importance of safe sex, she was a bit over-enthusiastic on the reliability of condoms, further demonstration of just how limited sexual knowledge is concerning contraceptive measures. Abortion here is viewed as the worst possible outcome of premarital sex. Yet again, it is seen as a moral shame, tainting a woman's reputation permanently. Despite moving on to an acceptable and socially approved stage of marriage, Anya's friend's reputation is permanently tarnished as a result of her abortion. Sex is a risk a young woman faces, and reputational damage is the outcome of that risk. There is an acceptable time to be having sex, and that is when engaged or married. Notably, Anya was one of the few participants to mention why someone might



want to have premarital sex. Whereas ideas of individual pleasure and desire were absent from most responses, Anya hints at the notion that sex might be pleasurable. “Having fun” is therefore seen as a motivation for having premarital sex.

It is clear participants recognised the possible negative outcomes of engaging in premarital sex and the need for sex education. Premarital sex was primarily conceptualized as a risk for young women. Yet noticeably absent from their concerns were STIs and HIV/AIDS transmission. Rather, the focus was on the possibility of unmarried pregnancy and the shame resulting from abortion. STIs and HIV/AIDS are real concerns in present-day China. Although various methods were employed to eradicate STIs under Mao, rates of infection have rapidly risen since reform and continue to increase (Zhang et al., 1999; Chen et al., 2000; Cohen et al., 2000). This is mainly due the consequences of economic reform, including the surge in internal migration, the proliferation of commercial sex work as well as increased foreign contact.

Initially viewed as a foreign import and the result of ‘immoral’ sexual conduct seen in the capitalist West, HIV currently affects approximately 780,000 people (Ministry of Health, 2012).<sup>41</sup> Importantly, studies have shown that in China, HIV/AIDS is spread primarily through heterosexual sex, with over 60 per cent of new HIV infections between people aged fifteen and twenty-nine years old (Wang et al., 2007: 2). The infection rate appears to be steadily increasingly as well, partly due to increases in internal migration (Ministry of Health, 2012). The lack of basic knowledge surrounding HIV/AIDS transmission further contributes to increasing rates of infection and is considered a primary obstacle in prevention efforts (Gao et al., 2001; Ministry of Health, 2012; Zhang et al., 2004). Clearly an enhanced sex education programme could result in a more comprehensive understanding of STIs and HIV/AIDS and help in decreasing rates of infection.

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<sup>41</sup> The idea of HIV/AIDS as a ‘foreign import’ may still be considered quite common. When I moved to Shanghai in 2008, I was required to take an HIV test before being granted residency.

## CONCLUSION

The sexual climate in reform China has undergone significant changes in recent decades. Economic reform has contributed to the reinforcement of biological essentialism and medicalized rhetoric concerning sex and sexuality, which highlights women's passive sexual role. In addition, there has been a shift from the Maoist suppression of sexuality to an apprehensive concern by the Party-State regarding the 'new' social ills of commercial sex work, *bao ernai*, corporate sex cultures and the sale and distribution of pornography. As a result, the Party-State agenda has attempted to combat these 'corrupting foreign influences' through a variety of methods which promote a vision of socialist morality seen as key to enhancing societal stability during this time of change. Yet despite Party-State concern and numerous campaigns, these phenomena continue to expand alongside the new market economy.

As a result of this Party-State stance, discussions around sex and sex education continue to be sensitive and deeply personal topics. As demonstrated by participants, sex education lessons provide a scant overview of puberty, rather than offering information about sexual health. Parents are also reluctant to discuss these issues, with only a handful of participants being given information by a parent. Despite the Party-State position towards sex education and premarital sexual conduct, participants took it upon themselves to gain more information on sex. The resources used for knowledge, however, must be called into question, not only for their accuracy, but also for the harmful gender relations promoted in some sources, such as pornography. Moreover, sex was conceptualized as a physical and reputational risk for young women, demonstrating the ways in which women are seen as responsible for negotiating and managing their sexual knowledge and encounters. Without comprehensive instruction, young women are left more vulnerable to some of the very 'ills' the Party-State is attempting to prevent, unmarried pregnancy, STIs and HIV/AIDS. Consequently, these silences surrounding sex can therefore be seen as completely undermining all efforts made by the Party-State in its quest for morality and stability.

Notably, ideas of pleasure and desire were absent from most participant narratives. Perhaps this "missing discourse of desire" (Fine, 1988) for young women in reform China contributes to the pragmatic approach used to select boyfriends. As will be explored in the following chapter,

participants were quite matter-of-fact in describing their ideal boyfriends, assessing their qualities as potential husbands, rather than through feelings of desire and sexual attraction.

## CHAPTER 5

### “ALL THEY WANT IS A SEXY *AYI*”: DATING AND INTIMATE RELATIONS

Building upon the noticeable absence of desire and the essentialist rhetoric seen in participant responses, in this chapter I will explore their ideas and opinions regarding dating practices, premarital sex and ideal boyfriends and husbands and girlfriends and wives. Dating culture in China has expanded significantly since the onset of economic reform, with a variety of new options now available for courtship. Attitudes towards premarital sex have also changed as well, with perhaps more acceptance of the practice gaining ground. Despite the Party-State rhetoric of equality, essentialist notions of gender, rooted in Confucianism, have re-emerged in conceptualizing life partners. As a result, women are portrayed as natural carers and dependents, whilst men are viewed as the head of household and as financially responsible for the family. Women's role as carer and mother is now seen as central to the definition of modern Chinese womanhood. It is therefore clear that reform China offers young women a series of conflicting messages when it comes to pursuing and choosing a partner.

I will begin by examining the dating culture that has emerged in reform China, including the changes that have occurred since the Mao era, and participant expectations and approaches to dating. Following this, I will discuss their attitudes towards premarital sex, and the ways in which an intellectual tolerance appears to be taking hold in the reform period. I will then examine their opinions regarding ideal boyfriends and husbands, and the high economic and financial expectations participants placed upon a future spouse. Finally, I will explore their views concerning good girlfriends and wives, noting how women's caring capacity and the importance of sacrifice were frequently stressed, further evidence of the essentialist rhetoric that is present in the reform period.

## DATING PRACTICES AND CULTURE

There have been significant changes to dating and dating culture in China in the last three decades.<sup>42</sup> Dating culture throughout the Mao period was virtually non-existent, with barriers to mate choice persisting even after the Marriage Law of 1950 (Farrer et al., 2012; Whyte and Xu, 1990). Although young people under Mao increasingly had more opportunities to interact with the opposite sex through activities like the Communist Youth League, prohibitions against dating remained quite strict until the reform period (Yan, 2009).<sup>43</sup> Since economic reform, overt courtship of a partner has become increasingly popular, open and accepted.

The expansion of dating culture in China can be attributed to several developments. Young people in China now have more choice in activities, more venues for fun and more disposable income than ever before, resulting in a dating scene with new expectations (Yan, 2006; Parish and Farrer, 2000; Hershatter, 2007; Farrer, 1999; Pimentel, 2000). Another change that has enabled the growth of a dating culture has been the loosening of university restrictions concerning dating. Students no longer risk expulsion for dating in university, and boyfriend and girlfriend selection is now seen as more of an individual endeavour rather than requiring the broader support of the community (Moore, 2005; Farrer, 2002). Despite such changes, however, dating in the reform period, remains a “serious, goal-oriented enterprise, not a casual recreational pastime” (Honig and Hershatter, 1988: 110). This sentiment was echoed by my participants as well, where dating was seen as a serious practice and a time for finding a future spouse. Participants frequently echoed essentialist constructions of gendered behaviour, describing cemented guidelines and ‘rules’ that oversaw dating practices.

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<sup>42</sup> By the terms ‘date’ and ‘dating’, I am referring to the idea of courtship, where two people undertake a specific social activity to ascertain each other’s suitability as a partner.

<sup>43</sup> As Mao (2012) found in her study of women of the 1960s generation, participants recalled the ways they met their future husbands, through letter writing and chance encounters. Her interviewees emphasized how romantic these gestures were and repeatedly mentioned feelings of love and romance. Since these activities took place during a much more limited time, they are useful to conceptualize just how much the dating culture has transformed in the reform period.

### *Typical Dates*

I began by asking participants to consider what they would like to do for and expected from an average date. Participants generally described an activity of some sort as a typical date. Popular ideas for a date included going to the cinema, traveling together or going to the park. Going out to eat at a restaurant was also a common preference:

Eleanor (28): Maybe go to the cinema. Go biking. Go for dinner, a romantic dinner [laughs]. And take a walk in the evening, or hang out in a café.

Anna (24): In China, it's very common to go out to a restaurant and go to the movies or the theatre. Maybe travel together. Or maybe just hang out with your boyfriend's friends or something like that.

Activities like going to the movies or to popular restaurants and cafes are clear indications of the significant economic and social changes that have occurred since the beginning of the reform period. Previously unavailable, these pastimes are now possible, as China, and especially Shanghai, has seen an enormous growth in opportunities for leisure, particularly among urban young people. As Beverley Hooper (1991) observed in the late 1980s, new spaces for leisure have emerged which have aided in the development of this dating culture. Moreover, economic reform has resulted in increasing contact with the international sphere. A wider range of choices are now more available than ever before, resulting in the cultural diffusion of not only East Asian cultures, but also Western culture (Bulbeck, 2009). Perhaps this dissemination of Western ideas of dating has contributed to and influenced the changes and development of Chinese dating culture.<sup>44</sup> This circulation of new ideas coupled with increased income and new types of consumer activities have thus allowed leisure consumption to be increasingly linked with romantic activities (Hooper, 1991; Parish and Farrer, 2000;

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<sup>44</sup> Participants frequently referenced American TV programmes, such as *Sex and the City* and *How I Met Your Mother*, when discussing issues like cohabitation and premarital sex. This can perhaps be seen as an indication of an awareness of international, particularly American, dating cultures and trends.

Ferry, 2010). These types of activities were now seen as standard and expected by nearly every participant.

The evolution of dating culture was further highlighted by Phoebe and Maureen in their description of typical date ideas:

Phoebe: Watch a movie.

Maureen: Have a meal. Or, like, walk along the street holding hands.

Phoebe: If you're in university, maybe go to the library?

Maureen: That's what I wanted to do in university but my parents wouldn't let me! [Laughs]

(Phoebe, 28 and Maureen, 25)

This exchange between Phoebe and Maureen illustrates the ways in which attitudes towards dating in China have become increasingly more relaxed in the reform period. Not only did Maureen invoke the romantic image of holding hands, it is clear that dating has changed and now may necessitate parental approval rather than wider community support (Yan, 2006). In addition, the reference to her university sheds light on changes that have occurred concerning institutional attitudes towards dating. It is therefore of note to observe a slight change, at least from the institutional perspective, which suggests a more tolerant attitude towards dating (Yan, 2006; Moore, 2005; Whyte and Xu, 1990).

### *Appropriate Ages*

I then asked participants when was an appropriate time to begin dating. A variety of acceptable ages were suggested by participants to begin this period and have a first date. Some advocated dating at an 'early' age, around fifteen or sixteen years old, whilst still in high school. This age was seen as potentially more romantic and more enjoyable for the people involved, as often concerns of 'adult life' were absent. As Eleanor stated:

In middle school. It's a great age! [Laughs] Maybe then, they have no idea about the true meaning of love, so they won't have too much pressure or too many, like, worries about money and things like that. So it's very, I think, it's very pure and beautiful. (Eleanor, 28)

According to Eleanor, dating at this age results in less external pressure, as the 'true' meanings of love and commitment have not been realised. Hannah (30) echoed Eleanor's sentiments by stating, "I think people at that age [15-16], they are more pure. So they can, like, completely enjoy the relationship. So, after people get older, they will think about other things". Interestingly this idea of purity does not refer to sexual purity; rather, it implies a life that is uncomplicated and simple. Young people at this age were seen as not having the pressures associated with adulthood, particularly financial demands, careers and familial obligations, and therefore fully able to fully enjoy the relationship. As a result, dating in school was not considered as serious as it would be when one was older.

The majority of participants, however, were strongly opposed to the idea of dating in middle school or in high school, feeling that it was completely unacceptable. This was mainly due to the extreme academic pressures felt at that age, specifically from the national university entrance exam, or the *gao kao*. Dating during this period was seen as disruptive to one's studies. As Faye noted:

In China, in traditional thinking, it's early to get a boyfriend, because you're in middle school or in high school. So at that time, you should be focusing on your studies for the entrance examinations for high school and for university. And you cannot change that. So if you want to get a good job, you couldn't do that. No one will really accept it if at that age if you get a boyfriend. (Faye, 30)

For Faye, dating too early had the potential to affect not only academic studies, but possibly ruin one's entire future, including university choice and ultimately one's job



prospects. Such a statement clearly reinforces the message that dating is an important endeavour that needs to be undertaken with a serious attitude.

Eighteen was frequently cited as the minimum age to be allowed to date, as one had become a legal adult.<sup>45</sup> For instance, as Lucy (30) stated, “It should be above eighteen. Because you’re a legal adult! And you can say yes!”. Dating can therefore be seen to represent a serious venture, for people who are of legal age, responsible and more mature. As traditional ideas surrounding marriage suggest that marriage is for adults, with women and men achieving full adulthood status socially once married, dating can be viewed as a primary step in embarking upon the path to adulthood (Kam, 2010). Dating ‘later’ after the age of eighteen also endorses the wider Party-State line of promoting later marriage and subsequently fewer births. With the legal age of marriage being twenty for women and twenty-two for men, young women and men are discouraged from marrying too early and undermining wider Party-State population goals (Greenhalgh, 2003). In undertaking dating, therefore, one is signalling to wider society that they are ready for a serious commitment.

Theresa (33) also believed dating any younger than age eighteen was too young. She stated, “I think if you start dating in high school or younger, mostly it’s like a kind of game. And you don’t know exactly what you want and you just think it’s fun”. For Theresa, dating at an age younger than eighteen is seen as more playful, fun and potentially irresponsible. These sentiments closely echo the recent study by Farrer et al. (2012), whose findings suggest that casual dating among Chinese high school students is viewed as inappropriate, with dating frequently conceptualized as an adult activity. Interestingly, the purpose of dating is seen by Theresa as not a time to discover what characteristics make a suitable partner; rather, one should already know in advance what qualities in a partner are necessary for a successful relationship.

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<sup>45</sup> It must be kept in mind, however, that the endorsement of age eighteen by participants may have been part of wider impression management and a desire to appear to be respectable in the interview scenario.

Overall, participants suggested that university was an acceptable time to begin dating. This was mostly justified due to the fact that the *gao kao* exam was completed and pressure to study had been alleviated. As Samantha noted:

Twenty years old. Because you know, the Chinese *gao kao*? It's really hard for us to do it and date at the same time, so we should spend a lot of time studying. We don't have the time to date. I think when we go to university, we have much more time to date. (Samantha, 24)

University was therefore seen as a time of more freedom, particularly from the pressures of studying. Faye also echoed this sentiment stating:

It's an unspoken rule, we all know that once you're in university, you get much more freedom. So your parents aren't around you, you live in a dormitory, so you can, if you want, you can find a boyfriend. It's just up to you, if you find someone you like. (Faye, 30)

For Faye, university was the optimal time to begin dating, not only due to reduced academic pressure, but also due to the fact that parental surveillance had subsided to some degree.

Parental approval over dating behaviours was frequently mentioned by participants. Parents appeared to exercise a substantial amount of influence over their daughter's dating lives, with most parents explicitly prohibiting dating in high school, university or both. As Samantha (24) explained: "For us, our parents will say, 'Don't fall in love with boys', and we're just like soldiers. They say close, we close; they say open, we open". Parental authority can therefore be seen as a deciding and influential factor in participants' attitudes towards dating. Samantha underscored the perceived obedience and unquestioning stance to parental authority, suggesting the continued importance of filial respect.

Maureen lamented her parents' involvement in her romantic life. For Maureen, not only was dating forbidden in high school, but she was also discouraged from dating whilst in university as well. She described the difficulties of her dating life:

*Gao kao* is a huge reason [to not date] too. My parents did the same [prohibiting dating], and my friend's parents too. My parents said, 'When you study in university, focus on your studies'. And then, once I started working, my parents, they wanted me to look for a boyfriend! I thought it was crazy, they changed their minds so fast! (Maureen, 25)

Interestingly, Maureen mentioned the quick change in her parents' attitude, who suddenly wanted her to date after university and begin looking for a potential husband. It is clear her parents felt that Maureen was approaching the correct age to date, after completing her education and finding a full time job. This statement echoes similar findings from the beginning of the reform period, where young people, discouraged from dating too early, are later criticized for their single status and "lack of social skills in dealing with the opposite sex" once reaching the 'correct' age for marriage (Hershatter, 1984: 239).

Some participants felt that after university was the best time to begin dating, as they had finished their education and had found a job. Rose emphasized the importance of stability before dating:

Maybe about twenty. Maybe twenty is too young, twenty-three or twenty-five. Actually, when I was in middle school and high school, you really have a lot of pressure with your studies, so we don't have time to think about this. And when we go to university, we have more leisure time. But I think that, for me, I will find a boyfriend or start to think about it or finding a man to get married, after I have found a stable job. (Rose, 23)

This stress on stability and responsibility further reinforces the notion that dating is a serious endeavour that should not be entered into naively. Although Bethany did have a boyfriend at the time of interviewing, she stated:

For me, I always thought that after twenty-four or twenty-five. Before twenty-two, I would have to depend on my parents. So I could have two or three years where I could be very independent. And then I could have a stable relationship. (Bethany, 22)

For Bethany, personal stability, particularly financial stability, was seen as important before beginning to date. As Bethany was one of the youngest participants, her emphasis on personal independence is perhaps evidence of wider generational change, where individualistic tendencies have been increasingly observed when it comes to dating (Yan, 2006).

Maturity was also cited as another reason to wait until an older age to date. Being young and immature was often seen as an irresponsible time to date, possibly leading to negative consequences. As Emma noted:

In my opinion, I think around eighteen or twenty is ok for a first date. Because when you're in high school or middle school, you're too young! But [laughs], we just don't have this type of education. You don't have any information! So it's just puppy love at this time, around eighteen or twenty is ok. But nowadays, young people are getting really...curious. And mature. Because of movies and TV shows. So they have a lot more information and can find out about everything. They just do what they want to do, right? So it's a negative of dating too early, I think. It's against Confucianism! [Laughs] (Emma, 30)

According to Emma, dating is a serious endeavour, with serious consequences. The “puppy love” of young people is seen by Emma as innocent, with no potential for future stability. Young people are viewed as unable to manage the responsibility of dating as

they are not mature enough. Moreover, Emma touched upon the theme of generational change and China's lack of sex education as well as the increased presence of foreign ideas in the Chinese media. Notably, she hinted that that the younger generation, raised under reform, is perhaps more sexually promiscuous and open than previous generations. As explored in Chapter 4, sex is viewed primarily as an adult activity and high school students are not deemed responsible enough to engage in it (Farrer et al., 2012).

Peggy (26) also suggested that maturity was an important quality to possess before beginning to date: "Um, I guess after you go to college. 'Cause before that, I think you're not very mature. And you can't, maybe, you can't control yourself. Or, like, you don't know what will, like, happen after you date someone or something". Peggy's rationale for delaying dating was therefore due to ideas of immaturity, especially around sex. Peggy mentioned the possible negative consequences of dating too early. She emphasized the importance of "control", hinting at the physical aspects of a romantic relationship and the restraint that young people might need to exercise. Peggy touched upon the possible negative consequences "after you date" as well, possibly alluding to reputational damage young women face for engaging in a sexual relationship before marriage.<sup>46</sup>

Interestingly, only one person suggested that it was more about the person, than about the actual age, when it came to deciding an appropriate time to date. Cara (22) stated, "When you meet the right person, then you can start dating". Since the majority of participants agreed on a specific period or age to date, Cara was clearly in the minority by not suggesting any age. Perhaps her difference in opinion is the result of her younger age and urban upbringing in Shanghai.

Overall participants suggested that dating at a later age was preferable, given the academic pressures faced in high school. Participants frequently underscored that dating was a serious pastime and not to be undertaken thoughtlessly or carelessly. These

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<sup>46</sup> This will be discussed in more detail below.

opinions support the larger Party-State agenda of later marriage and parental expectations of filial obedience. These wider cultural influences were also reflected in their opinions of dating behaviours as well.

### *Dating Etiquette*

I then asked participants to consider the etiquette surrounding the current dating culture in China. For instance, asking for a date was generally viewed as a man's responsibility and a sign of initiating the relationship. In fact, most answered this question with laughter, as men were 'obviously' expected to ask for a date. Frequently, this action was referred to as natural and a tradition. As Eloise (28) stated, "Him. It's tradition and I'm a traditional girl! Because he's the man!". Men were therefore viewed as responsible for the initiation of a date and/or subsequent relationship.

Notably, participants frequently stated that men should ask for a date as they are inherently more assertive than women:

Vivian (24): I think that he asks. Because in China, I think that the man should be more aggressive.

Eleanor (28): The boy [laughs]. Maybe it depends on me. I don't like to be more aggressive.

Megan (25): I think the boy should do it. Well, I think he should be more aggressive, more opportunistic.

In these extracts, natural differences between the sexes are underscored, and "being aggressive" was seen as a key component of masculinity. These sentiments mirror the essentialist rhetoric that has re-emerged in the reform era. Attributes of aggression and initiative are seen as innate masculine qualities, with women being passive recipients of this attention (Evans, 2002).

At the same time, women who asked for a date were viewed as daring and aggressive. Being labelled as aggressive for a woman was, however, viewed negatively, as it was unfeminine and untraditional. As Lily (27) noted, “Usually the boy will ask the girl out. I think it’s just tradition. You know, sometimes girls do ask boys out, maybe they might be thought of as really aggressive. And a little over-eager”. Aggressiveness for a woman was therefore an unwanted quality. According to Lily, a woman who demonstrates initiative in asking for a date risks displaying her enthusiasm and overt interest to a man. She is viewed as demanding, assertive and unusual. By acting outside of this prescribed social role, she is labelled with these undesirable qualities, being simultaneously seen as desperate for and too aggressive to warrant male attention.

A few participants did think that it was ‘ok’ for a woman to ask for date. However, most clarified that although they thought it was acceptable, they themselves would never do it.<sup>47</sup> For instance, Kitty (24) stated: “If she is brave enough [it’s ok]. But for me, I wouldn’t do this. But a lot of students, a lot of my friends, have told me that it’s ok”. Thus although Kitty had heard from a variety of sources about the acceptability of a woman asking for a date, she was unwilling to do so herself.

Rather than ask a man on a date, “giving hints” was seen as a more acceptable approach to express one’s interest in a man. As Vivian (24) stated, “It’s ok, but I would never ask. I would never. I’ve never initiated this, I’ve never chased a boy. I still feel shy, actually. Even though sometimes I really like him. I will give him a hint, but I would never openly do it”. “Chasing the boy” was looked down upon by Vivian, and was seen as distasteful and desperate. For Vivian, there was a fine balance between hinting at romantic interest and openly expressing it. Despite actually having feelings towards a man, Vivian refused to show outright interest at the risk of being labelled aggressive. ‘Giving hints’ was therefore seen as a ‘safer’ way to express interest and to avoid being labelled aggressive and unfeminine. Emma (30) suggested a similar approach, “I’m not an aggressive person, I wait for the guy. If you really like him, I don’t think I would ask

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<sup>47</sup> This is similar to the ‘intellectual tolerance’ expressed in relation to premarital sex that will be discussed in more detail below.

though, I think I would give him some hints, like walk by several times [laughs]”. Emma suggested that by asking, a woman could discourage a potential boyfriend and ruin her chance at a relationship. Being overtly direct was therefore seen as an unappealing tactic; rather, interest in a prospective partner should be conveyed through subtle suggestions.

Anna was also strongly against the idea of asking a man out on a date. She stated:

It’s the kind of thing I can’t accept, you know. I think if the girl always asks the boy first, I don’t think the relationship will last long. But that’s my personal opinion! Because boys’ emotions are very short, they only have a crush on you for a very short time, generally. They sometimes just have very ‘hot’ emotions. But after three or five months, they might cool down and think you’re just ok or just alright. And if something is very difficult to get, they will be interested in you for a longer time, maybe they will stay with you for the long term, because they think it’s important. (Anna, 24)

Interestingly, Anna echoed the biological narrative surrounding men’s innate yet uncontrollable desires and “hot” emotions. Being too emotionally or physically available as a woman was seen as risky and not sustainable in the long term, as a man may lose interest quickly. In fact, a woman who asks for date will ultimately be disappointed and will be risking her reputation as she makes herself (sexually) available too easily or too quickly. For Anna, being a passive recipient of romantic intent was therefore seen as the best strategy to begin (and maintain) a successful relationship.

Paying for the proposed date activity was a subject that generated a lot of interest among participants and was an action that seemed to have set guidelines. Generally, it was expected for the man to pay for any activity, particularly if it was the first date. As Allison (27) stated, “The boy pays. Even if he is not financially well off. It’s a face issue, so he will pay”. According to Allison, a man should pay regardless of income, as it was a matter of showing respect. Cynthia (32) elaborated this point by stating, “I really



don't mind paying the bill. But for a first date, it's really not about the money, it's about the gesture. Like, you can sense whether he likes you or not, right?". Although Cynthia was a successful businesswoman and did not mind paying, for her, the man paying for a date was a way to not only gauge a man's interest but also signified his intent and/or respect for her. Similar to asking for a date, it was also suggested that paying for a date was related to a man's masculinity. Anya (27) and Jill (25) both thought a man would feel like "less of a man" if he was unable to pay. Jenny (23) specifically related the act of paying to a man's status: "A first date? I think for the first date, a gentleman *should* pay! Because it's the first date!". Notably, Jenny used the term "gentleman" to invoke the image of a morally upright, chivalrous, filial man.<sup>48</sup>

Some participants were quite openly opposed to paying the bill themselves. As Angela (28) succinctly stated, "If he didn't pay, I wouldn't go!". Vivian also echoed this sentiment by stating:

I think for the first time, he must pay. In the future, I don't care whether I pay or we 'go Dutch'. But the first time, he should pay. Otherwise, he just told me that he doesn't want to see me again...And he should pay. Because, if you care about 200 or 300 RMB, if you think I'm not worth the cost of dinner, then never talk to me again. (Vivian, 24)

Vivian was clear in making the distinction that for a first date, a man was to pay. The gesture of paying was the ultimate signifier of a man's interest and also of respect. Vivian related the cost of the dinner to her own "worth", which must be earned or proven to her by this gesture. Notably, Vivian placed herself as an object to be won within her own story. This builds upon the notion that as a result of the lack of a discourse of sexual autonomy, women are left unable to describe and claim these experiences for themselves (Wang and Ho, 2011; Liu, 2008).

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<sup>48</sup> It is difficult to decide whether Jenny is referring to the cultural construction of a British gentleman or if she is in fact referencing 君子(jūnzǐ), which also refers to gentlemanly status in Confucianism.

It is clear that the landscape of dating has changed dramatically since economic reform, with more activities and opportunities for leisure than ever before now available. Yet at the same time, dating continues to be a serious endeavour, with the search for a lifelong partner the primary objective. As a result, participants felt dating should wait until the right age and a degree of maturity had been met. Perceptions of dating behaviours, specifically asking for and paying for a date, remain very gendered in nature and grounded in biology, reiterating widely circulated essentialized notions of ‘proper’ femininity and masculinity. These essentialist ideas were further emphasized by participants when discussing premarital sex, where men’s natural and uncontrollable urges were repeatedly highlighted and women were placed in the role of sexual gatekeeper.

#### DEBATING PREMARITAL SEX

Alongside the development of a dating culture, there have also been notable changes when it comes to premarital sex. Despite the limited discussion around sex and the conservative Party line, attitudes towards premarital sex have undergone significant revision in reform China. In the past, and particularly throughout the Mao period, premarital sex was seen as an unacceptable practice and actively discouraged (Evans, 1997). Since the Open Door policy, however, many scholars have observed a gradual change in attitude towards premarital sex, particularly in urban areas (see Zheng et al., 2001; Zha and Geng, 1992; Farrer, 2002). In fact, premarital sex is now more frequently seen as a private, serious and acceptable behaviour when occurring between fiancés (Farrer et al., 2012; Zheng et al., 2001). These changes may be in part due to increased exposure to foreign ideas and international media, offering young people in China different ways of conceptualizing sexual matters (Altman, 2004).

At the same time, attitudes and actual practice may not necessarily coincide (Pan, 2006; Zha and Geng, 1992). Traditional ideas around premarital sex, particularly the importance of female virginity, continue to influence popular opinion. As a result, young women are placed in the role of sexual gatekeeper and must negotiate and manage

individual desires alongside partner, parental and wider societal expectations. Although some participants in my study expressed outright approval of premarital sex, overall an ‘intellectual tolerance’ was articulated by participants, where an understanding (yet personal rejection) of the changing cultural norms was described (Farrer et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2004; Zheng et al., 2011). Despite being aware of the contradictory expectations placed on women’s sexuality, especially for virginity, participants often expressed the notion that a sanctioned age and time for sex exists.

### *Changing China*

Several participants touched upon the changing sexual landscape of China. Generally, sex before marriage was perceived as being increasingly common:

Laura (28): Yeah, I think [premarital sex] is very common here. It’s common. Not living together, but doing this is common.

Eleanor (28): [Premarital sex] is popular now! [Laughs]

NZ: In Shanghai or all of China?

Eleanor: Maybe in all of China! [Laughs]

Although cohabitating with a partner before marriage was seen as unusual, most participants felt that premarital sex was on the rise. Many participants related the change in attitude to an overall generational transformation taking place in China. For instance, Wendy (27) highlighted the changing sexual mores: “Well, the attitude is different from twenty years ago. Maybe now it’s much more popular to do so than before. If it happens, we don’t judge someone who does. But maybe fifteen or twenty years ago, some people would say something”. The popularity of premarital sex was therefore seen as having increased in recent decades, demonstrating noteworthy generational change.

In fact, many participants felt that premarital sex had extended quite rapidly to the younger generation. As Elaine (36) noted, “Yeah, [premarital sex] is common. You know, in China, people say that it’s hard to find a virgin in middle school nowadays”. Clearly intended to shock,

Elaine's remark underscored the idea that an appropriate time and age exists for sex. Evidently for her, middle school was too young to become sexually active. Young people were perceived as being careless and having sex at too young of an age.

Betty also noted the changing sexual climate and its influence on the younger generation:

Yeah, [premarital sex] is very common. Yeah, my cousin, he's just in high school. And I asked him recently if he's had sex with his girlfriend and he told me yes! And he's just in high school! And he told me that his friends, in middle school, they are doing it too. Yeah, I think they're careless. They don't think about this as very important. I think it's a real shame. (Betty, 25)

Betty was clearly astonished at the ways in which sex was treated by the younger generation and was surprised at her cousin's nonchalant attitude. Her reaction of shock supports the notion that a sanctioned time exists for these actions, when one is much older and married or preparing for marriage. Premarital sex is clearly underscored as an important and serious decision to be made.

When considering premarital sex, Anna described the ways in which Shanghai was different from other places:

Anna: [Premarital sex] is common in Shanghai now. But in some other places, maybe in the smaller towns, it isn't... You can't really say it's not important. Human beings need it! [Laughs] But you can't just do this with a lot of people though. So you should treat sex seriously.

NZ: Why do you think you should be serious about it?

Anna: Well, there are a lot of reasons. Moral things? Like if it's a man, he always has sex with a lot of different girls, it's like he is not reliable. He is not a very responsible man. And if a girl, she has a lot of sex with lots of men, especially in China, and if her future husband or boyfriend finds out about this, they will be angry... It is unfair, but that's just how society is.

(Anna, 24)

Anna, as a non-native Shanghainese migrant, felt that there was a clear difference in the acceptability of premarital sex between rural and urban areas, with big cities seen as offering a different, more liberal set of sexual mores. For Anna, engaging in sex was seen a serious decision, to be made at an appropriate time and age. At the same time, Anna underscored the ways in which young men and women are perceived if they engage in premarital sex. In particular, a woman's sexual reputation is seen as being at risk, especially with her future husband, if she does not manage her sexual encounters appropriately and selectively. In contrast, men are seen as being weak and irresponsible, giving in to their biological urges. This opinion clearly builds upon the essentialist rhetoric that has re-emerged in the reform period, where men have uncontrollable impulses and must give into their primal nature.

The biological need for sex was also mentioned by Faye (30): "I can accept [premarital sex]. But I don't think I have a very traditional thinking. Because it's a very natural thing. And for most people, it just happens. And there's no real reason not to do it". Notably, Faye qualified her response by stating she was not an 'ordinary' Chinese girl, considering herself more 'open' than other women her age. Sex is underscored as natural and necessary in a relationship. Importantly, the emphasis is on biological urge, rather than individual desire or pleasure. Sex's biological roots are therefore given as a primary justification for premarital sex.

#### *Attitudes Towards Premarital Sex*

Generally, premarital sex was seen as permissible by participants if the relationship was serious and had the potential for marriage. Farrer et al. also note this trend, with the prerequisite for premarital sex now when "devotion to [a] common future" has been discussed (2012: 272). Serious commitment, which included the intention to marry, was the essential justification for premarital sex. As Samantha (24) noted, "If their relationship is really solid, and they love each other a lot, I think it's ok. If I had a long-term boyfriend, and I think he is the right man, I would. And then we'd get married". For Samantha, then, a stable relationship and "solid" foundation were key in deciding if and when to have premarital sex. Importantly, she was absolute in her thinking that they would definitely marry if they had sex.

Bethany also stressed this opinion:

I don't suggest having sex before marriage, but I have a lot of friends, I know a lot of them have been doing this kind of stuff. Because they think that they love each other a lot. I think if they are in a stable relationship and they are on their way to get married, it's ok for them. But for girls, they have to be careful. (Bethany, 22)

Commitment was again highlighted by Bethany, with being “on their way to get married” a prerequisite for premarital sex. Her emphasis on the aspects of stability and responsibility echoes those responses on ideal boyfriends and husbands, with these qualities seen as essential in a partner for marriage. This idea further supports the notion that there is an appropriate time and age for sex, which involves being ready for marriage. Sex is therefore further underscored as an adult activity. Importantly, Bethany's example also highlights the risk young women face by engaging in premarital sex. Risk here not only entails physical risk, such as unmarried pregnancy, but also reputational risk. As a result, young women are placed in a position of responsibility and sexual gatekeeper. Women are to not only control and manage the sexual interaction, but also the repercussions of that encounter. Consequently, young women are forced to “be careful” in choosing if and when to have sex. A stable relationship is thus seen as preferable to minimize these physical and social risks.

Although participants recognised the increasing prevalence of premarital sex, often they clarified that it was not an acceptable option for them personally. This opinion was frequently justified by citing China's traditional culture and emphasizing the negative consequences premarital sex has for women (Zhang et al., 2004; Higgins et al., 2002; Zheng et al., 2011):

Cara (22): For me, I think it's not ok for me to [have premarital sex]. Because my family is very traditional and they think you should get married first and then you can have sex. But it depends, I think [laughs].

Megan (25): I think [premarital sex] is common. But you know, China is more

traditional, so most Chinese people don't agree with this idea, especially before they are married... I know a few people who have [had sex]. Actually, I'm not friends with them, they are friends of friends. I've just heard about it, but I know some people do.

A tolerance of premarital sex therefore did not necessarily translate into acceptance of the practice (Higgins and Sun, 2007). In particular, Megan's response is contradictory, as she notes how common sex is now, yet claims to not know anyone who does have premarital sex. She is careful to distance herself and her friend group from being perceived as untraditional and possibly sexually promiscuous.

China's traditional culture was therefore frequently given as an overarching reason for this simultaneous tolerance and rejection of the practice, making it difficult for young women to engage in and justify premarital sex. Wang and Ho (2011) also observe the use of blanket terms such as 'traditional' by women to describe their stance towards premarital sex. They note how although young women may not actually reject the idea of premarital sex, frequently these terms can be used to deter unwanted advances from a boyfriend (Wang and Ho, 2011). Clearly, the use of such ambiguous terms like "traditional" is further evidence of the limited language available to young women to discuss sex.

Importantly, the decision to not have premarital sex was based on the negative consequences premarital sex has for women, especially for her sexual reputation. For instance, Rose (23) explained the changing norms concerning premarital sex: "I think now it's more common to have sex. But, I don't want to do this. My mother keeps telling me 'If you do this, you do it after marriage'. But I read a report that says that most boys, they would like to marry a girl that hasn't had sex. I don't know why". Rose clearly expressed an intellectual tolerance of premarital sex, recognising the changing sexual landscape, yet had chosen not to engage in it. For her, a woman's marriageability was in jeopardy if she chose to have sex before marriage.

Individual sexual satisfaction was mentioned by only a few participants. As she was describing her ideal partner, Emily (28) stated: "He doesn't necessarily have to be very handsome, that's

not a priority, but he does have to be physically attractive to me [laughs]. Which means [whispers] great sex! I need that! [Laughter] Seriously, I need it.” Emily was quite frank in her belief that a good sex life was essential in a relationship. In fact, she had broken up with her last boyfriend due to sexual incompatibility, describing it as “a really huge deal-breaker for me”. Clearly, individual pleasure was seen as a key component in a relationship for Emily. Sexual satisfaction was also mentioned by Corinne (30): “You want an orgasm right?! [Laughter] Yeah, you have to have to test this before”. Sexual compatibility and satisfaction were stressed as important elements in a relationship. For Corinne, it was seen as key to a successful relationship and not having experienced sex prior to marriage was seen as naïve.

Significantly, these were the only two mentions of individual pleasure and sex. The silences around sexual satisfaction and desire are noteworthy in that they point to a general privileging of male heterosexuality. Given the sources of information about sex in China, especially pornography, this stance is perhaps unsurprising, as women are used as objects for male sexual pleasure. Moreover, as Fine (1988) has explored in the United States, pleasure and desire were noticeably absent from young women’s narratives about sex in her research as well. Sex was conceptualized in terms of something that men wanted, needed, enjoyed and were entitled to. In contrast, young women were more passive and sex was something had in order to please their partner. Tolman (2005) also notes the lack of sexual subjectivity of young women, and the ways they describe sex as ‘just happening’ with an absence of any personal desire. Participant responses clearly support these findings, where alongside a “missing discourse of desire” (Fine, 1988), a narrative of sexual autonomy is also ‘missing’. This absence of desire and essentialist thought was further evident through participants’ emphasis on the continuing importance of virginity for women prior to marriage.

### *Continuing Value of Virginity*

Importantly, discussions of premarital sex frequently referenced the social value placed on women’s virginity before marriage (Zhang et al., 2004; Zha and Geng, 1992). Participants routinely mentioned virginity for women, whilst young men’s abstinence was not discussed at all. It is clear that while discussions around sex are more tolerated in the reform period, the female body is still used as a way to standardize appropriate



moral and sexual conduct (Pei, 2011; Evans, 2008; Zhang et al., 1999; Higgins and Sun, 2007; Wong and Tang, 2001). As Evans notes, “Talking about sex therefore is far from being synonymous with the emancipatory possibilities of bringing sex into the open; in itself, it does not signify progressive changes in gender practice” (2008: 159). Despite the growing intellectual tolerance of premarital sex, especially in urban areas, virginity for women is an issue that is still stressed in reform China (Zha and Geng, 1992; Wang and Ho, 2011). Participant responses support this notion, with women’s chastity repeatedly mentioned, and there was a general consensus that virginity remained important for women in contemporary China:

Samantha (24): I think [premarital sex] is not ok in China, but that’s only my opinion. Well, of course, it’s hard for a woman. It could lead to many problems.

Lucy (30): I don’t agree with [premarital sex]. In China, we’re a very traditional country. So most people’s opinion, I think, are against this, especially for girls. So it’s not a very common choice.

Significantly in these extracts, the importance of chastity was stressed for women and not men. Traditional Chinese culture is given as the main justification for this reasoning, with women’s future marriageability seen as being at risk for noncompliance. These sentiments echo Zhou’s (1989) findings as well, where women were not so much concerned with the act itself, but rather feared the social repercussions of sex.

Cynthia and Julia discussed the ways this idea is engrained within Chinese culture from a young age:

Cynthia: Yeah, I thought for a long time that I could only have sex for the first time with my husband, when I got married. That thought was with me for more than twenty years, a long time.

Julia: A lot of people think about having sex and it's only with your husband. And you're only allowed to have sex after marriage...But that's very important in married life, why would you only try after marriage?  
(Cynthia, 32 and Julia, 28)

Cynthia and Julia touched upon how the importance of female virginity is emphasized throughout a woman's upbringing, and the ways it is reinforced. Notably, Cynthia and Julia were in the minority who mentioned the importance of sex in a relationship and in quality of life.

Joan also expanded on the importance of a woman's virginity:

Most Chinese girls, they start to date very late. Because, you know, the virgin stuff, they still have that concept about being a virgin. Like all men only want to marry a virgin, and then girls who have lost it, they have some shame if they don't marry the guy. Like, you know, like first time should be with him. It's ridiculous! [Laughs] (Joan, 26)

Joan stressed the importance many young women place on making the decision to have premarital sex. It is a calculated risk, as a woman jeopardizes her marriageability and thus entire future. This potential consequence and associated social stigma clearly acts as a deterrent for young women considering having sex before marriage. Such external pressures associated with loss of virginity also reinforce the notion that dating is a serious endeavour. As a result, a woman is faced with the problem of reconciling her individual desires alongside larger societal sanctions against premarital sex. Moreover, as noted in the previous chapter, sexual coercion may also be present in this scenario, with young men wanting and pressuring their girlfriends to have sex, yet also emphasizing the importance of virginity in a future wife (Wang and Ho, 2011; Song et al., 2014). Young women are therefore faced with calculating the risk of having sex with their boyfriends and possible rejection from their future husband.

Family pressure was also frequently mentioned when discussing premarital sex. As demonstrated above, and as Zheng et al. (2001) have noted, although personal acceptance of premarital sex exists, families continue to disapprove of the idea. Bethany (22) remembered the emphasis her mother placed on chastity: “With my mom, she thinks that sex before marriage is immoral. So, yeah, she just told me to behave morally. And I know that moral means not to have sex”. Although her mother used vague and coded language to discuss sex, Bethany implicitly understood the meaning of behaving morally.<sup>49</sup> She continued, stating: “And in China, it’s sort of like a tradition, to not have sex before marriage. You should be a virgin before marriage. So a lot of girls who are married don’t even know how to protect themselves or about contraception”. Premarital sex, although on the rise, is framed as a moral shame, much like abortion, to deter young women from engaging in it. Women are seen as primarily responsible for maintaining their virginity before marriage. Men’s responsibility for contraception or sexual conduct is not mentioned at all.

A few participants recalled the internal struggle they faced when they considered having premarital sex:

[My mother] always told me that ‘Your first time must be for your husband’. But, I had sex with my ex, my first time was with my ex. And my mom, she knew. Because, you know, my ex and I wanted to go to abroad to travel in Malaysia. And I told him I needed to ask permission from my parents. If you’re going abroad, you know, my mom must know that I’m leaving the country. So we told my parents that I was going. And my mom, she cried. Yeah. I think that is what hurt me most, after I broke up with my ex. Because, you know, I knew that I hurt my mom by doing this. And my ex that he promised her that he would take good care of me. And after breaking up, my mom, she was very upset. My mom was in pain, because she knew that I was hurting. So, I think in my family, my parents are really conservative. A very traditional Chinese family.  
(Betty, 25)

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<sup>49</sup> Several studies have explored the ways in which discussions around sex in China are usually indirect, with vague language often used to discuss sexual matters (see for instance Zheng et al., 2001; Gao et al., 2001).

Betty's narrative demonstrates the generational change that has occurred under reform. Virginity remains underscored by Betty's mother, as an essential component of womanhood, with marriage being the only appropriate time for sex. Her mother's grief at Betty's breakup with her boyfriend is concerned primarily with her daughter's future marriageability. Her mother's insistence on female chastity before marriage also echoes the continuing theme of an appropriate time and age for sex (and by association, marriage). For Betty, her decision to have sex was difficult, as she was forced with reconciling her own individual desires alongside her mother's and wider society's expectations of young women's appropriate sexual conduct.

The difficulty of managing traditional expectations and individual desires was further underscored by Anna:

I think it's a big step. Just, for me, it's very, it's a difficult decision for me to make. Sometimes I just don't know. Like with [my ex] boyfriend, I really loved him. But I thought it was too early to have sex with him. And he was disappointed about this. And I felt sad too, but I just thought it was too early to do it. Maybe after one year I would've done it. And then we could do it. But then, we broke up! [Laughs] (Anna, 24)

Despite loving her boyfriend, premarital sex was a difficult decision for Anna. Anna's story echoes the wider cultural notion that premarital sex is a sacrifice that a woman makes for her partner. She is positioned here in the role of sexual gatekeeper, responsible for negotiating and managing the relationship sexually. As the risks associated with a sexual relationship are quite high, with possible rejection later in life by a potential husband, they are taken seriously by Anna. In some ways, Anna's role as sexual gatekeeper can be seen as a type of power, giving her a form of leverage in the relationship (Zhou, 1989). At the same time, she is at the mercy of her boyfriend, who may choose to end the relationship because of her refusal. Ultimately, Anna's hesitation was confirmed, as the relationship ended.

Allison also faced the conflict of balancing her parents' and boyfriend's expectations of her. She explained:

Maybe I'm not kind of open-minded, especially for making love. Because my parents taught me from a young age that a girl should not give up her first time easily to a boy. And your first time should be preserved until after marriage, for your husband. That's what my parents told me. And because I've only had one kind of dating experience, so I'm still a virgin. That's also what Emily is surprised about! [Laughs] So I think I should keep it until my marriage, that's what I believe. So when my ex said, 'Can we like make love or something?', I just rejected him. And he couldn't understand it. Because now, in China, I would say eighty out of one hundred of girls have already lost their virginity. But I told him that, 'When I want to make love to you, I can break my rule, even before marriage. And that is because I already consider you my husband'. So that's my rule. But if I can't have this confidence in our relationship, you are not ready to be my husband, I would never give this up. (Allison, 27)

Allison touched upon the changing expectations towards premarital sex in the reform period. She noted the growing trend where sex between fiancés, or when marriage has been discussed, is now acceptable. Farrer et al.'s recent study details similar findings where sex and marriage were closely intertwined, and first sex was frequently perceived as a "valuable gift that should be preserved for a beloved partner" (2012: 270). Allison was again placed in the role of sexual gatekeeper, in charge of negotiating and managing sexual encounters. Interestingly, she also used the term "making love", unusual in that in most all descriptions of ideal husbands and wives from participants, love and desire were noticeably absent. Perhaps her use of the term is evidence of the romantic ideal that has spread since reform (Yan, 2003).

Anya further underscored the risk young women take by having sex:

Reputation is very important in China, don't you forget it, even now. Even if the world is more open, but still reputation is really important. If you don't marry a guy you live with, you will never know in the future what you will get from your new boyfriend, like 'Oh your girlfriend was living with another guy for three years'. (Anya, 27)

Anya clearly addressed the main preoccupation with virginity and the ways in which a woman's marriageability and social capital can decline if she has premarital sex (Zha and Geng, 1992; Gao et al., 2001; Higgins and Sun, 2007; Rofel, 2007). A woman risks future rejection from her spouse if she is not careful in making the decision to have sex (Zheng et al., 2001). As a result, despite individual preference, a woman's sexual subjectivity is defined solely in relation to her sexual past with men.

Although participants did recognise the growing incidence of premarital sex, overall premarital sex was seen as a serious decision to be made, with risks to young women's reputation frequently highlighted. This stress on young women's virginity and women's sexual reputation reflects an underlying concern with the ways in which they are perceived by potential boyfriends and future husbands. Holland et al.'s (2004) concept of the "male-in-the-head" is clearly at work, regulating what is acceptable, heterosexual behaviour for young women. In this instance, a woman's decision for premarital sex is subject to control by what a future husband may (or may not) value. Young women's sexuality is defined solely in relation to men's needs and desires for a virgin bride. Importantly, sexual desire was almost completely missing from participant responses, demonstrating not only an absent discourse of female sexual autonomy, but also an overall privileging of male heterosexuality.

These essentialist ideas described by participants concerning men's innate sex drives were taken further in their descriptions of ideal partners. In their portrayals of husbands and wives, women's natural role as mother and caregiver and men's position as household head were repeatedly emphasized. Moreover, individual sexual desire and/or attraction were noticeably absent in their accounts of ideal partners. This limited presence of desire and female sexual autonomy can therefore be seen as significantly contributing to the pragmatic approach advocated by participants in partner selection.

## IDEAL PARTNERS

After discussing the dating culture in contemporary China, I asked participants to consider what qualities they valued in a partner. Frequently a ‘good’ boyfriend and girlfriend was equated with the idea of a husband or wife, thus further supporting the notion that a person dates with the intention of making a serious commitment. Previously in the Mao period, spousal selection involved a close examination of class and familial background; love was viewed as ‘bourgeois’ and a counter-revolutionary quality (Pan, 2006). Now, however, ideas of love and romance are often cited as prerequisites for marriage in reform China and such notions have spread rapidly through the media (Pan, 2006; Honig and Hershatter, 1988; Parish and Farrer, 2000). Yet interestingly, love and desire were noticeably absent in my participants’ responses, and instead a more instrumental approach was described in choosing a partner. Although such an absence could be due to the assumption of a foundation of love on the part of the participant, it is clear that the pragmatic concerns of economic stability and future potential, an inversion of the concerns that dominated the Mao period, were of primary importance (Hershatter, 2007). Moreover, although legally spousal selection has been free since the 1950 Marriage Law, it was evident through participant responses that parental and wider familial networks still held sway over such a decision. In fact, some of the qualities listed for a partner strongly echoed those of arranged marriages of the past. Competing and often contradictory messages appeared to influence their opinions on what encompassed an ideal mate, with the traditional gender expectations of male-as-provider and female-as-caregiver repeatedly referenced. Attané observes similar opinions in her work stating: “Overall, the role of the husband as the economic support of the family, and that of the wife as centred on the home and domestic tasks, remain firmly anchored not only in marital practices but also in the expectations that spouses have of each other” (2012: 10). Notably, heterosexuality was consistently taken for granted in participant responses as well, demonstrating the strong heteronormative undertones of Chinese culture.

### *Ideal Boyfriends*

'Good' boyfriends were described as an individual to whom one would eventually marry. Boyfriend relationships were seen as serious and participants were quite matter-of-fact when describing the qualities of their ideal boyfriend. The key attributes that were mentioned for a boyfriend included: responsibility, capability, similar interests and the potential to become a spouse. These concerns demonstrate quite a pragmatic approach to boyfriend selection, especially when considering the absence of love, affection and physical attraction in responses.

#### Responsibility

Responsibility was frequently listed by participants as an important characteristic for a prospective boyfriend. Yet noticeably, the term itself encompassed a variety of traits. As Kitty (24) stated, "And he must be behave like a man. He must have responsibilities and, yeah, maybe he can make all of the decisions for us. But not all of the decisions for me. He must respect my choices and also he must take care of me". According to Kitty, responsibility involved making decisions that benefit the relationship as a whole as well as herself. A good boyfriend was therefore to be in charge, taking the lead in decision-making. Rose (23) also defined responsibility as an essential part of manhood stating, "I think he should be responsible. I think, in general, a good man should be responsible". A man was therefore defined by his acceptance of and/or bearing of responsibilities.

The notion of responsibility was highlighted further by Corinne (30), who also stressed its importance: "Mature. That's what my ex didn't have. Mature enough. Responsible, responsible for himself and for his career. And then me. And maybe the whole family". In this instance, responsibility took on an element of the future, where a responsible man is one who could look after his future family. Although he may not have this characteristic immediately, the potential to be responsible was underscored as a key quality. Alicia (25) held a similar opinion: "I don't really need a guy that I'm sure will succeed. I just need him to be, like, responsible for what he has and what he's going to do in the future, you know?". From Alicia's point of view, financial success did not



necessarily make a man successful or responsible. She was more concerned with finding a partner who was responsible for not only his current actions, but also future actions as well, regardless of earning capacity. Responsibility once again referenced the future and included being responsible not only in a career, but in a man's overall life choices.

Responsibility also encompassed taking care of one's parents, particularly in old age. This aspect was underscored by Emma (30) and Maureen (25), who commented on how a man should "take care of his parents" (Emma, 30), thereby fulfilling his filial duty. Maureen also mentioned that if she married, the man should be able to "take care of my parents" as well. Such a statement suggests that the filial obligation of taking care of one's parents in old age remains an expectation in reform China. As living costs have dramatically increased since economic reform, the current lack of social safety nets in place for elderly care places extreme pressure on couples, particularly on married men, as they are deemed (financially) responsible for both sets of parents' well-being in old age (Yue and Ng, 1999; Zhang and Montgomery, 2003).

With the one-child policy, this pressure is further intensified as sons and daughters have no additional siblings to share the task of looking after their parents. Notably, care for one's parents remains a gendered task, with men seen as responsible for the economic and financial side, whilst women are often expected to provide physical and emotional care for elders (Whyte, 1997; Evans, 2008). Frequently this is due to the assumption that women are more skilled at such work due to inherent caring capacities (Yu and Chau, 1997; Qi, 2014). Although urban daughters are increasingly seen as able to fulfil their filial obligations (see Fong, 2002), the assumption of a male provider and breadwinner remains strong in reform China. Such expectations may prove quite difficult to fulfil, and may place "unrealistic standards" on men to achieve such stability in a time of economic and social change (Parish and Farrer, 2000: 238).

### Capability

The capability and talent of a prospective partner were also qualities that were consistently highlighted by participants. This emphasis closely relates to the traditional

notion that women should not consider marrying a man who is less qualified than themselves in the areas of education, career prospects and in ability and/or capability. Often, this is seen as a reason why more women are remaining single and for the rise of the *shengnü* phenomenon, as most women are reluctant to give up their own career and lifestyle for an uncertain marriage and potential downward mobility (Leete, 1994; Jankowiak, 1989).<sup>50</sup> As a result, women are expected to be financially dependent on a husband. Conversely, it is generally accepted if a man marries ‘lower’, as education and financial success are not seen as essential qualities in a future wife (Leete, 1994; Parish and Farrer, 2000; Young, 1989). Therefore, it was unsurprising that a man’s capability and talent were among the qualities that were constantly underscored by participants. Such sentiments can be illustrated further through the example of Sarah, who mentioned her ideal boyfriend:

Sarah: Well, the boy must be smarter than the woman [laughs].

NZ: Really? Why?

Sarah: Well, I think the boy must know more than the girl because... Because just sometimes boys are smarter, smarter about certain things. And he needs to be responsible, he needs to be able to look after you. And that’s important.

(Sarah, 25)

Sarah’s emphasis on the man being more intelligent than the woman suggests that a woman’s intellect is not a concern. In fact, she should be looking to date someone ‘above’ her, as such a person will be able to support her in their future life. Phoebe (28) also mentioned that her partner must be smarter than her as well: “First, he should be smart, smarter than me [laughs]. Then, handsome. Maybe a good guy, he should like to play an instrument or some activities or other things, other hobbies. And have similar interests to me”. The first quality Phoebe listed was a man with superior intelligence to her, implying that he will be the main decision-maker and head of household. This opinion echoes the traditional notion of a woman remaining dependent on a partner, with the man taking on the role of primary breadwinner.

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<sup>50</sup> The *shengnü* phenomenon will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Megan also emphasized the importance of a boyfriend's capability, especially in relation to his education and career. She stated:

I just hope that he will be in a similar field as me, and have we'll have similar degrees. Or, if his degree is a little higher, like a Masters, that's ok too. And I hope we'll be at similar stages in our careers. Like while I am developing my career, he will also be working on developing his career. So we'd be at the same stage, with a similar salary. And we should also have a similar family background. I think the family background is very important, especially in a marriage. Otherwise there will be big differences, it could be difficult.  
(Megan, 25)

Not only did Megan hope to have a boyfriend of similar status, career and family background, she also mentioned the possibility of her future partner being more capable than herself. Her justification for this was that too many differences may be difficult in a relationship, particularly in a marriage. Educational difference was not seen as a challenge, however, as long as the man was the one who was better educated.

Capability in the future also proved to be a major consideration when discussing 'good' boyfriends. For instance, as Rose (23) stated: "No, I don't think money and looks are important. But I think the man must have the motivation to work hard and the ambition to have a good career. And I think he should be talented". Talent and motivation were therefore key aspects that were addressed. Moreover, the capability of a man was not only related to his potential economic achievement, it also included his ability to have set goals and a plan for his career. This idea of planning for the future was further echoed in Cynthia's description of her ideal partner:

His content, like, what he does, what's his plan. Probably, I think, most people will say I'm still single because I seem too dominant or too ambitious as a businesswoman. So I give a lot of pressure for most men. So it's more important

whether this man can really also share the same passion and ambitions, and is going somewhere, and confident enough to take you. Right now it's very crucial for me. Because then, like I said, I've already planned for the second half of my life, how and where I'll go, like my five, ten-year plan. And if this man is still in the range of 'Yeah, who cares, whatever', then of course, I'll know he's only interested in playing. Or he just doesn't know yet, he's not on the same page. (Cynthia, 32)

For Cynthia, it was important that a man knew his career path and had a high level of ambition. This was particularly a concern as Cynthia was worried about her single status and older age and was seen as a *shengnü* by many of her peers. Cynthia was therefore looking for a partner who shared her overall direction and aspirations. Interestingly, the man is at the forefront in this example, "taking" her in his direction, with her following him as he leads the way. Although Cynthia was a successful businesswoman, it is of note that she was prepared to sacrifice her interests for her partner and the possibility of marriage. Perhaps such willingness to compromise is evidence of the extreme pressures women face for marriage, and the resulting lengths they are prepared to undergo to marry.<sup>51</sup>

For most, a boyfriend's capability, resulting career prospects and potential income were of utmost importance. Particularly critical was Vivian, who had broken up with her boyfriend due to his lack of perceived talent. She explained:

He can't even speak English. He couldn't pass China's English test. Because everyone in China has to pass this test. But he couldn't! After trying six times! He couldn't! So I just felt really annoyed. I think I couldn't see any hope for him. I could get any guarantee of my future life... Yeah, so even though we had a very good foundation... We had love actually. We had very deep emotions, but we couldn't get to the same goal. (Vivian, 24)

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<sup>51</sup> The extreme pressures women face for marriage will be discussed further in the following chapter.

For Vivian, her annoyance with her ex-boyfriend and his inability to pass the universal English exam in China was the just one of many issues she had with him. He was, according to Vivian, also studying in the “wrong field” of biology, where, in her opinion, there were no “career prospects or opportunities” for advancement. Vivian’s reference to her future life suggests that economic stability and potential income is very important when considering a boyfriend. Notably, Vivian mentioned how much she had, in fact, loved her ex-boyfriend. Yet ultimately, his lack of capability and ambition meant he was not good enough to be considered as a partner in the long-term.

### Similar Interests and Background

Having similarities with one’s partner was also highlighted throughout participants’ responses. As Peggy (26) described: “I think honesty. And, yeah, sense of responsibility. And, like, also another important thing is sharing the same values as me. Like, work ethic, values towards money, values towards life, and stuff. I think that’s really important”. A similar value system and world outlook was seen as important when considering a boyfriend. The qualities mentioned are quite weighty for a boyfriend, further evidence of how relationships are taken seriously, with the end goal of marriage.

Similar background was also seen as important when looking for a partner. For instance, Tracy expressed in detail how she needed to be with a man who was similar to her, in both background and experience:

Tracy: Like a combination of education background and financial status. It’s not just his status. For example, I’m just saying as an example, a countryside boy, he probably didn’t even have a pair of shoes in his childhood. For him to make it today, this guy will not fit. Because he is too different. But if he’s also from the city, studied abroad, and made it to this day, I have a feeling that his parents support him and his success. I’m not saying that ‘Oh just because you’re successful now you will always be attractive’. But with a similar background, comes with extra, you know, things in common, that will be quite attractive.

Alicia: Yeah, the person who experiences more--

Tracy: --Accomplishes more and more, obviously. But not someone who is like, you know, like--

Alicia: --A farmer or something.

(Tracy, 32 and Alicia, 25)

A similar background in this instance is seen to give a relationship a solid foundation. According to Tracy, financial success is just one element that may guarantee compatibility. In her opinion, family background and personal experience aids in developing a lasting relationship. Interestingly, her mention of specific qualities echoes those of the Mao period, where class background was seen as a primary consideration in mate selection. Throughout this era and in particular, the Cultural Revolution, family and class background were especially important when considering marriage. Now, however, a continuing concern with background exists, yet in a very different way. Concerns of economic stability and career success now dominate decisions in choosing a prospective partner. This emphasis is a complete inversion of that found in the Mao period, where 'bourgeois' class enemies were seen as decadent, and one married with the good of supporting the proletariat in mind. Yet since the onset of economic reform, as Honig and Hershatter observed in the 1980s, women now desire to "marry up the social scale, but the scale itself began to change" (1988: 98). People are now more concerned with the pre-1949 preconditions for marriage such as financial success, occupation, housing availability and stability. It is evident that the same pragmatism continues to exist when selecting a partner, with economic considerations now at the forefront.

Moreover, the stress upon shared interests reflects an emphasis on the companionate ideal that has been evolving since the 1980s. Although free choice in marriage was guaranteed in the 1950 Marriage Law, other overriding factors like class background determined eligible mates under Mao. Now, however, mate selection has seen an increase in the importance of personal qualities and morals (Hershatter, 2007; Pimentel, 2000). Yet interestingly, participants rarely mentioned the ideas of love, desire or

attraction. Rather, much more emphasis was placed on a boyfriend's responsibility and future potential than actual love, reflecting very practical attitudes concerning partner choice.

This aspect is perhaps best illustrated by the cases of Allison and Anna. Allison was from a modest background and single at the time of interviewing. She had been promoted quickly in her marketing job and, as her work was so demanding, complained about not having enough time to date. As she told me about her past relationship, she emphasized how similar goals were a necessary requirement between partners. She admitted to me that she gave more priority to her/their economic future, compared to her last boyfriend, who was more concerned with love:

With my ex-boyfriend, we had different kinds of objectives. Because in my life, I think I needed to work hard, I need to work for a better future. And my definition of my future was a little bit higher than his was. He thought we could have a small future, and in this small future, he just thought we should love each other, that love is very, very important. And I think I agree with him, but I think love and your material life are the same, of equal importance. If you don't have this kind of basis, love will suffer. So we had different kind of attitude, that's why we broke up. (Allison, 27)

Thus, although Allison agreed overall with the importance of love, a financial basis and monetary security in the future were also of equal if not greater importance for a relationship. This is a clear demonstration of the pragmatic approach taken by participants when considering relationships.

Anna (24) also recalled how, when she was younger, she used to give priority to a man's appearance, "A boy should be handsome and tall, with wide shoulders [laughs]. And have some muscles, that was the most important thing". Yet as she has grown older, Anna told me she now thinks that, "He should have the ability to earn money and his character, these are the most important things". This possibly suggests that the larger

idea of a man's looks, and by extension, sexual attraction, are not nearly as important as a man's economic conditions and social responsibilities when considering a boyfriend. Rather, a more instrumental approach was seen when discussing partner choice. Perhaps economic change, coupled with the limited discourse of sexual autonomy and desire available to women, has encouraged the development of such a pragmatic attitude towards partner selection.

### *Ideal Husbands*

I then asked participants to consider what qualities were important in a husband. Significantly, most viewed having a boyfriend as a serious relationship, one to be considered as a potential spouse. Given the suggested age to begin dating and the qualities listed, this view is perhaps unsurprising. Hannah (30), Sonja (25) and Eleanor (28) all thought along similar lines, supporting the idea that, "It's pretty much like a good boyfriend" (Hannah, 30). Such sentiments further reinforce the idea that participants viewed dating as a serious endeavour, one that should lead to marriage. As Corinne (30) mentioned, "It's the same as a boyfriend. When I think about a boyfriend, it's like potential husband. It has to be, it's like the goal. If it's not, then what's the point of dating?". Laura also expressed a similar opinion:

Well, every person I've dated, I have always looked at them like my future husband. I don't like to just, you know, play. I'm very serious. So after I graduated from college and when I was working, I took every relationship I was in to be very serious. So every boy I've dated, I've thought I would get married to him. (Laura, 28)

This notion of a boyfriend as a serious candidate for a husband is quite different from Farrer's ethnography of youth in Shanghai, where young people were more open to the idea of 'playing' before looking for a spouse (Farrer, 2002).<sup>52</sup> Marriage was therefore

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<sup>52</sup>At the same time, this difference may be a feature of Farrer's sampling strategy. Farrer conducted ethnographic interviews in Shanghai with men and women from varying social strata who frequented nightclubs, discos and local dance halls. In contrast, my interviews were conducted with university-educated women who were not all Shanghainese. As detailed in Chapter 3, some participants were



the main purpose of dating, and as will be explored further in Chapter 6, participants did not entertain the idea of remaining single.

Kitty believed there were five crucial aspects to consider in a potential husband. She explained:

I think I can list the top five most important things. First is whether you have a flat, that's quite important. And where you work. And if you have a good salary or if you have a car, or something like that. And about your parents. Basically my mom said 'If there is a single parent, it's not good'. My mom thinks it's not a good match [laughs]. And basically about your boyfriend's appearance, whether he's tall or fat or bad looking or something like that. And their education background, it must be matched. For example, I am a Masters student, and my future boyfriend should be a Masters student or higher. So something like that. Quite a lot of criteria for this. (Kitty, 24)

Kitty's description not only demonstrates the matter-of-fact concerns for a prospective partner, but also highlights the increasing instability that has occurred as a result of economic change in China. For instance, the requirement of a flat underscores the increasing costs of living, especially in real estate. Men are often seen as responsible for the purchase of an apartment before marriage, similar to the custom of bride price (Yan, 2006; Hong Fincher, 2014). The financial considerations of a car and salary are also stressed as key, further demonstrating the instability of economic reform.

There are also some eugenic elements hinted at by Kitty, with a man's height and body size seen as issues to consider when choosing a partner and potential father. Although physical attractiveness is mentioned, it is not in a romantic way. Rather, it is more of an expression of concern about her future child rather than any sexual desire. Such a

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recruited through my former professional network as an English language teacher, while others were referred by mutual friends. This variance in attitudes towards dating for 'fun', as my participants' overall life aims and achievements were different as a consequence of inhabiting different social worlds, may possibly be a result of alternative sampling strategies.

statement echoes some of the rhetoric used to support the one-child policy, which emphasizes not only the importance of quantity but also the quality of births (Handwerker, 1998; Greenhalgh, 2003). Moreover, despite free choice in marriage, Kitty underscored the importance of parental approval and general family background, especially familial stability. Divorce is viewed negatively by Kitty, almost as a moral tarnish to a family's reputation. Clearly Kitty is quite pragmatic in her list of requirements for a husband, having emphasized the importance of education level, financial status and family background.

### Responsibility and Capability

Like a good boyfriend, the fundamental requirement for a husband was responsibility. Responsibility was frequently linked to family, and specifically to the financial responsibilities that come with providing for a family. As Phoebe stated, it is important for a husband to have a good job:

Maybe not a boss or manager or something like that, but he should definitely have something stable. Because after marriage, he will have a family to support. And then, if he has a baby, he should also help take care of the baby. He shouldn't let his wife do all of it. (Phoebe, 28)

According to Phoebe, a man needs to be able to financially support his wife and child as the main breadwinner.

Emma saw the relationship with a husband similar to that of an ideal boyfriend. She hoped that her future husband would not only take economic responsibility, but also have a vested interest in their future child:

I think it's quite similar to a good boyfriend. Like, a good husband, I would hope that he plays many roles in your family, father, husband. And I think the most important thing is that he's responsible. He should take care of the family, not only the economic part. But in life, in your life, and he should take care of your

child. And give your child the best education for him. And a husband, he should just be reliable. Just do these things, but it would be even better, if he could be successful in his job. It could be good, but isn't mandatory, but wouldn't be bad. Oh, and when you get ill, he should take care of you [laughs]. (Emma, 30)

For Emma, therefore, economic security as well as reliability were prominent factors when considering a potential spouse.

Echoing the qualities of a good boyfriend, Jill (25) hoped her husband would be more capable than her, "I think he must be smart. Smarter than me. And he should have a good job. What I think is a good job. And he can look after me". Such an expectation clearly endorses the traditional notion that men are to outperform their wives in terms of professional and financial success (Parish and Farrer, 2000). Jill hoped to be taken care of and provided for by her future husband. From Jill's point of view, the man is portrayed as the main breadwinner in the relationship. A husband is seen as an authority figure and ultimately responsible for the subsistence and well-being of the family. Lily (27) also mentioned the importance of family, with a husband's role as husband and father stressed, "A good husband can put the family under his wings. And is a good father". This idea of protection and security further supports the scientific constructions of gender now resurfacing in reform China, where a man is stronger and protective of his weaker dependents, wife and child.

These direct references to the importance of family, generally seen as the "cell of society" in Chinese culture, suggest that family formation remains a prominent feature in reform China (Sigley, 2001: 123). As Bulbeck has noted, a general shift in Party-State policy from "all under heaven is public" to "all under heaven belongs to the family" in economic reform highlights not only the increasing privatization of services in the reform period, but also the continuing importance of the family as an organizational block in Chinese society (2009: 4). As a result, marriage is often viewed as a family-centred endeavour, with one's primary allegiance and responsibility to the family as a whole and not necessarily to the individual spouse. This concept is illustrated further in

Farrer and Sun's (2003) research on adulterous spouses in Shanghai, where husbands and wives forgave their adulterous spouse for the sake of the family. Such a notion reinforces the idea that the needs of the family, regardless of the needs of the individual, remain a primary concern.

### Financial Security

Future economic security was also stressed by several participants when it came to spousal selection. A man's economic responsibility to his wife and child(ren) was frequently mentioned as not only a motivation for marriage, but also as a prerequisite for many participants. Jenny (23) mentioned how many women are now "material" when it comes to choosing a husband, as they would prefer to marry a *fu'er dai* or 'second-generation rich child', a son of a family who has profited since the beginning of the reform period. Eloise (28) also mentioned the (new) obsession with money by stating, "It's a little bit weird now, people's attitude towards marriage and who they think should get married to. Like, the selection standards, it's getting a little weird. Like, sometimes they focus on how much money the men have".

Historically, marriage has involved such financial considerations, often seen as an opportunity to improve one's social and economic status. For instance, improving one's *hukou* is frequently noted as a motivation to marry. Although movement between provinces, and especially to the prosperous coastal region, is now much easier than previously, is still difficult to change *hukou* status permanently without marrying (Hershatter, 1984; Riley, 2012). Some participants did feel that money was an important criterion in their selection of a spouse. As Cara (22) mentioned, "I hope that my husband earns more than me. I hope my husband will be someone who is more capable than me". Such a statement reflects Cara's traditional view of men being presented as more capable, mentally and physically, and the dominant partner in the relationship, with economic security being a result of such 'greater' capacities.

Economic concerns were prominent in Betty's narrative as well. Employed in a State-Owned Enterprise, thanks to her mother's *guanxi* as the "Big Boss", Betty's family emphasized the importance of the "economic conditions" of a potential spouse:

If you just want to have a date, I think it's not necessary. But if you want to think about the future and your life together, it's a main point... And if he doesn't have the financial background, my parents wouldn't allow it, I think. My dad has already told me, 'If you want to get married, he must have a house, without a mortgage'. So, I think it's quite important. Because when you meet some guy, you have to get to know him to know this. But maybe he doesn't have the right financial background as you thought, so how do you choose? (Betty, 25)

In fact, Betty confessed to me that she had broken up with her last boyfriend because of his recent losses in the stock market. Such insight echoes Hershatter's study from the beginning of the reform era, where young people found it increasingly difficult to reconcile conflicting emotional wants and pragmatic needs when considering a spouse (Hershatter, 1984). Allison (27) also mentioned the importance of financial support in her description of a spouse: "He has to support the family financially. This is one thing. And he should love me. And then, he has a very strong sense of responsibility. And he cannot quit easily, if we have some conflicts with each other". Interestingly, this was one of the few mentions of love and affection that was mentioned for a partner. However, what is noteworthy is that Allison ranked financial support of the family higher than mutual love, attraction or desire when describing a good husband.

It is evident that the importance of a man's career and his economic responsibility towards his family were seen as essential when choosing a boyfriend and husband. This stress on financial responsibility not only illustrates continuing gender role expectations, but also indicates the instability of economic reform, where increasing housing and living costs have become a real concern since the collapse of the *danwei* system. With Shanghai being one of the most expensive cities in Mainland China, economic considerations are therefore quite a valid concern when contemplating marriage (CNN,

2011). Clearly, such issues influence the pragmatic approach taken by participants when considering a spouse. At the same time, however, these considerations of monetary wealth and responsibility may also contribute to the unrealistic expectations placed on men (Whyte, 1997; Jankowiak, 2002; Hershatter, 2007). Moreover, these qualities were very gender-specific, and no participants felt that the traits of responsibility, capability and economic stability were important in a girlfriend or wife.

### *Ideal Girlfriends*

A few participants did believe that boyfriends and girlfriends were, in fact, meant to possess the same characteristics. As Maureen (25) stated, a good girlfriend was “the same as a perfect boyfriend, I think”. Yet overall, when describing an ideal girlfriend, the majority of participants described a woman who could provide support to and was understanding of her boyfriend. Sacrifice and caring capacity were frequently highlighted by respondents, with most detailing the ways in which this could be accomplished. As Allison (27) commented, “A girlfriend should be considerate. And she should know when she needs to make a sacrifice. And she needs to spend more time with her boyfriend”. Consideration and sacrifice were explicitly mentioned as primary characteristics for a woman to cultivate. Peggy also detailed the variety of roles she believed a woman should play in a man’s life:

I think for a girlfriend, it asks even more of you, like, there are higher requirements. Like, she should sometimes be, like, playing different roles in the man’s life. Like maybe sometimes she should be, like, his friend that he can talk to and that he can, like, if anything bad happens, and she, like, be a shoulder for him, like, she’s, like, equal towards him. And sometimes she should be, like, sweet and, like, act younger than the guy. And sometimes she should, like, maybe, ‘cause I think men are, like, immature in some aspects, so they are some times acting like a little boy or something... Yeah, like, sometimes you need to act like a mother. So that’s what I think [laughs]. (Peggy, 26)

It is evident that Peggy felt that women had higher expectations to live up to in terms of being a partner. Notably, she highlighted how sometimes a woman might need to act “younger than the guy”, a role which is perhaps more submissive and dependent. On the other hand, she also mentioned playing a mothering role, needing to take care of the man’s overall well-being. Peggy therefore echoed the larger narrative currently in circulation of what is seen as appropriate for women, a role which claims that women have an inherent ability for care work and a natural defencelessness and therefore are in need of protection (Bulbeck, 2009; Evans, 2008).

Naomi (30) also mentioned the specific qualities that a woman must bring to the relationship: “She is kind. Maybe she knows how to cook and she’s not too picky. She is able to understand him... She could also do some work on herself. Then she’d be really great. And beautiful is good too”. Interestingly, the characteristics listed by Naomi for a good girlfriend are in complete contrast to those required of a boyfriend. A woman’s career ambitions, future potential or sense of responsibility are not thought of as priorities. Rather, her understanding and caring attitude, as well as sacrificial nature, are seen as essential to be a girlfriend. A woman’s figure and beauty are also highlighted, whereas this was noticeably absent in participant responses regarding men.

Participant responses concerning good girlfriends are quite similar to the essentialist constructions of femininity that are emphasized in Confucianism and by the current Party-State agenda. Differences between the sexes are stressed and ideas of gender complementarity, rather than equality, have re-emerged in the economic reform period (Bulbeck, 2009; Farris, 2004). Women’s ‘natural’ role as “vulnerable, dependent and inferior” is one that is used to frequently explain and reinforce differences between the sexes (Hershatter, 2007: 46). This emphasis on women’s sacrificial nature and caring capacity can be partly attributed to a reaction against the androgyny of the Mao period, similar to that seen in the former Soviet Union (Johnson and Robinson, 2007). Consequently, the version of femininity that has emerged since economic reform has focused on more essentialized notions of gender and hyper-feminine beauty standards and behaviour. Additionally, the Party-State stress on the advancement and the

importance of science and technology has also influenced this rhetoric, with gender roles being seen as biologically determined and therefore unquestionable. As a result, women's caring capacity and sacrificial nature is perceived as natural and rooted in biology (Evans, 2002; Rofel, 1999; Bulbeck, 2009).

### Caring Capacity

A woman's ability to perform care work and be caring were also highlighted by participants in their description of a good girlfriend. For instance, as Anya (27) remarked, "They want a girl who will listen to them. Chinese boys want that. And they want a girl who is very, like, thoughtful, thoughtful towards them. Taking care of their daily life. Like, cooking for them or something". Although Anya herself did not want to act in this way, she believed that these qualities were what most young Chinese women and men valued in a relationship. Sonja (25) also stressed the importance of women's caring nature, describing a good girlfriend as: "Considerate. Caring. Smart. And can do housework [laughs]. Beautiful. And has a high education". Unlike a boyfriend, a thoughtful and selfless girlfriend was seen as ideal. Her beauty and ability to maintain a household are seen as key to a successful relationship. Furthermore, in contrast to descriptions of boyfriends, there was no mention of a girlfriend's career or future potential.

Megan also expressed a similar idea:

Maybe boys want a girlfriend who is more caring and who takes care of him. And I know some boys care if their girlfriends can cook delicious food. And some boys want to go out with girls who are thin and beautiful. I think most boys do like these things. But I'm not really sure. (Megan, 25)

In this example, Megan restated the larger essentialist narrative of femininity now evident in the reform period. For Megan, a woman's nurturing capacity is inherent and her ability to "take care of him" as well as "cook delicious food" are seen as both natural and necessary. "Thin and beautiful" are also traits that have come to be increasingly



emphasized since the Open Door policy and are now considered essential qualities necessary to achieve the version of ‘modern’ femininity now present in China (Evans, 2002; Hershatter, 2007).

### Improving Oneself

Improving one’s own character was also a noticeable theme that emerged in participant responses concerning girlfriends. Julia (28) explained in detail how continuing to learn something new would help keep her boyfriend interested in their relationship. She stated: “And they’ll be a little charmed, because it’s like ‘Wow, you know so much’, and you guys can attract each other all the time. You can attract each other all the time that way. And your boyfriend will always be amazed, and it’s kind of, um, charming”. Julia saw learning a new skill as not only a way to keep the relationship intriguing for both parties involved, but specifically to keep the man’s interest in her.

The notion of keeping a man’s interest was also related to a girlfriend’s appearance. As Emma (30) mentioned, “Whether you have a boyfriend or not, you should always take care of your appearance”. Similarly, Anna (24) mentioned the importance of one’s appearance, specifically when in front of a boyfriend’s friends or co-workers: “You should be sure that you look good and let him be proud of you. And I think girls should have some interesting skills to add some flavour to their daily life. Like maybe dancing or cooking or [you] can tell some jokes or something”. For Anna, not only was the physical important for a girlfriend, but also the “special skills” that she may bring to the relationship. Such an emphasis on women’s beauty and value of appearance has increased since reform, and femininity is often directly associated with consumption (Pei et al., 2007; Jankowiak, 2002). As Jankowiak found in his study, authentic Chinese womanhood was generally seen to include the qualities of “erotic attractiveness, reproductive success and other related domestic achievements” (2002: 364).

Perhaps this emphasis on female beauty and the constant need to keep improving oneself is part of the larger narrative currently in circulation over proper femininity and infidelity, which warn women their partner will stray unless kept entertained and

satisfied. Most likely due to rising divorce rates in the reform period, public discussions of infidelity have increased, with adultery often cited as a direct cause of divorce in Shanghai (Farrer and Sun, 2003). As noted, the reform period has witnessed the rise of the *xiao san* and *bao ernai* phenomenon, and as Shen (2008b) and Hong Fincher (2014) observe, women are often blamed for their husband's transgressions, with nothing said about men being better husbands. The stress on women's self-improvement by participants may be in part motivation to help deter possible infidelity through active engagement in hyper-feminine behaviours. The version of hyper-femininity that has emerged in reform has enabled women to focus on more essentialized notions of gender, where women are to concentrate on this idea of keeping a husband satisfied and are solely responsible for the successes and/or failures in doing so. Not only does this position women as objects of desire to be consumed by men, but this rhetoric of self-improvement and in particular, emphasis on youth and beauty by participants, are seen as essential for women in reform China. Moreover, although dependability and responsibility were listed as fundamental traits for a boyfriend or a husband, at the same time, fears of and awareness of a man's possible infidelity remained widespread (Shen, 2008b; Evans, 2002; Johnson and Robinson, 2007; Alford and Shen, 2004). These sentiments were further highlighted when considering the qualities of an ideal wife.

### *Ideal Wives*

As Harriet Evans (2002) has explored, new meanings of wifhood have emerged since reform, with women's 'socialist fervour' no longer a main characteristic in mate selection. Rather, women's caring capacity and dedication to family are now prominent and desirable traits. Women continue to be viewed in essentialist terms, where their innate nurturing capacities and natural affinity for housework are stressed. As a result of this essentialist rhetoric, an ideal wife was frequently described as similar to a 'good' girlfriend. Since a girlfriend was meant to be caring and supportive, these ideas were taken further with the addition of more caring responsibilities upon marriage (Wang and Ho, 2007). Participant responses were clearly rooted in the Confucian saying *xianqi liangmu* or, "virtuous wife and good mother", with women's inherent nurturing ability increasingly emphasized once married.

## Sacrifice

Sacrifice was a major theme mentioned by participants in relation to a woman becoming a wife. For instance, Eleanor (28) stated, “Maybe she’ll have to think more about the family than herself. She has to, like, give up things for that”. In Eleanor’s opinion, family will become the new priority upon marriage. Rose also mentioned sacrifice, specifically in relation to her husband:

I think maybe the man might want to have a great career. Maybe the girl can sacrifice her own career. But I don’t know whether I will ever do this. But I think with my children, if it’s necessary to sacrifice my career in order to take care of my children, I will do this for my children...But I will also do the housework, maybe if I have enough time. And my mother keeps telling me that ‘It’s a girl’s job to do the housework’ and ‘You should do as good a job on the housework as your husband does with his work,’ and cook and cleaning and stuff like that.

(Rose, 23)

In this example, Rose clearly viewed taking care of the children as primarily a woman’s responsibility in a marriage, and the possible sacrificing of her career as a result of that commitment. Interestingly, she did not entertain the idea of her future husband sacrificing his career; it was assumed that he will continue to work and that her career is not a priority. Moreover, Rose’s mother appeared to be a strong influence in her life, reinforcing the gendered stereotype of a woman being in charge of the house and caring for her family. Perhaps her mother’s insistence in this role for women is part of a reaction to the Mao period, where Rose’s mother may have been denied these opportunities herself (Bulbeck, 2009). Sacrifice was therefore seen as a gender-specific quality, needed for sustaining a marriage and family.

## Family and Support

A good wife’s responsibilities were also seen to include taking care of the family and being supportive. As Elaine (36) frankly stated, “A good wife is supportive. Doesn’t

take everything too seriously. Is a nice housekeeper”. Emma (30) had a similar view of a good wife, stating: “A good wife takes care of the family, and is just behind her husband and supports him and his job, helps him focus on his job. That’s important. And she’s also his life partner, to be there”. According to Emma, a wife is to be supportive throughout the stages of a man’s life, helping him achieve at work. The husband’s career as primary breadwinner is assumed by Emma, with a wife’s role seen as secondary.

Allison mentioned the importance of housework as well:

As a good wife, you need to take care of the family in terms of doing some housework or cooking very good dishes for your husband. I think it’s normal. And then, you need to understand your husband. And you need to know how to deal with some unhappiness between you and your husband. And then you need to have independent work. (Allison, 28)

Allison’s description of a good wife included cleaning and managing the household as well as being a good cook for her husband, and saw such a caring role as “normal”. Interestingly, a wife’s independent work is ranked last by Allison, perhaps suggesting that a woman’s priority should not be on herself or her own career development. For Allison, independent work appeared not to be valued as anything more than additional income.

Although most participants agreed with women taking on the role of primary caretaker and in charge of household maintenance, almost every single person was uninterested with the idea of becoming a housewife. In fact, most of them laughed at the suggestion and found it impossible to imagine, particularly because of the rising costs of living, especially in Shanghai. Joan and Megan both stressed the importance of remaining in contact with “the outside world” (Megan, 25). As Joan stated further:

I don’t like this idea! Because, you have no security that way. You don’t have the economic security if you are a housewife. You’ll depend on your husband. You

know, everyone can change, like what if one day, he doesn't like you anymore?  
(Joan, 26)

Thus for Joan, there was no economic security in relying fully on one's husband, specifically because his affections may change. Such a statement also reflects an awareness of the instability of marriage in reform China, partly due to the extensive coverage of marital infidelity by the national media (Farrer and Sun, 2003; Shen, 2008b). Vivian also mentioned the idea of dependency by stating:

I don't want to depend on men. Because I think it would be very, very important for me to speak. I have my right to speak. If I depend on you, you gave me a living. And you offer me dinner, you offer me the clothes I wear, I have no right to say anything. (Vivian, 24)

Vivian therefore rejected the idea of being a housewife so she would not be in a dependent position to her husband. Participants were clear that they did not want to depend on men, for fear of losing themselves or for reasons of potential infidelity and subsequent divorce. Yet at the same time, in their descriptions of ideal husbands, economic reliability and dependency upon a male provider were frequently seen as important qualities in a husband. Moreover, by rejecting this notion of a housewife, they were consequently accepting the double burden placed on women when it comes to career and domestic work. Evidently a contradiction exists for young women, with participants not wanting to be placed in a dependent position, yet at the same time, emphasizing the importance of this when conceptualizing marriage.

#### 'All they want is a sexy *ayi*'

Only one person was critical of the idea of being a wife. Anya (27) stated, "I think [men] want an *ayi* [maid]. And they want this *ayi* sexy. That's all. That's what they want". Anya was quite judgmental of what she believed wives were 'meant' to be, as she restated the idea of a subservient and submissive wife. Anya's response rings true to Jankowiak's study as well, where men described their ideal spouse as a woman who was

“beautiful, soft, well-mannered, loyal, virtuous and skilled in domestic arts” (2002: 367). Anya also felt strongly that there was a difference between a girlfriend and a wife:

For most men, they need a wife. And they only want that wife to take care of their daily life. They're not in, like, love with this wife, they are very clear which type of girl should be your wife and what type of girl is just a girlfriend. And if they want to control this girl, like, if you are too independent, if you are too strong, they will never ask you to be their wife... [A girlfriend and a wife] are totally different. And I know what [men] want, it's like an *ayi* and a sexy body. I don't want to be that, that's why I don't want to get married.<sup>53</sup> I would prefer to have more boyfriends and have fun with them. You can have fun one day or two days, when you are alone, when you want that. But if you're a wife, you have to do all the housework and you have to be an *ayi* always. I don't want to be like that. And if you do a bad job on the housework, other people will give you a lot of pressure... I forgot to mention, they want a sexy *ayi*, sexy body and money. If you have money, it's a big plus. Because they don't want to work so hard. If they can get a girl and her family is very rich, then it will be easier for them, to buy an apartment or a car. It's very realistic. (Anya, 27)

Anya therefore summarised the heart of the issue in spousal selection: women are under pressure to be good housekeepers and carers, whilst men are under pressure to provide economically for the family. Evidently a fine balance between independence and dependency exists for women, as being too self-sufficient and aggressive is seen as a negative quality in a wife. In complete contrast to the Maoist imagery of the capable and confident Iron Girl, a girlfriend who is too independent risks being labelled as strong and potentially unmarriageable (Honig, 2003). Young women are therefore faced with trying to find a balance for these two extremes, as the threat of remaining unmarried and being labelled a *shengnü* is quite real.

Good girlfriends and wives were frequently seen by participants as carers for the family.

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<sup>53</sup> Notably, Anya was the only participant who did not want to marry.

Women's sacrificial nature was highlighted, echoing the Confucian and essentialist rhetoric of gender difference and complementarity. Importantly, women were also viewed as primarily responsible for maintaining a successful relationship through consumer activities and feminine beauty practices. Women were expected to maintain a certain standard of beauty, placed as objects for men's sexual consumption. These demands are further exacerbated by the impact of economic reform, with the rise of living costs, increased risk in the job market as well as the lack of government social safety nets, all placing enormous pressure upon a married couple. Young women in the reform period are therefore faced with negotiating and managing the expectations of being carers, nurturers of the family, accepting the double burden and remaining 'sexy' enough to maintain a man's interest.

#### CONCLUSION

As a result of economic reform, a dating culture has arisen in China, with more opportunities and activities available for courtship than ever before. Participants suggested that dating is perceived as a serious affair, with strict guidelines and expectations over certain customs. Such strong opinions on the appropriateness of dating and related behaviours suggest that dating is formulated as an 'adult' activity, with significant consequences and meant to be entered into with a mature outlook. Marriage was considered the goal of dating and, as will be explored in the next chapter, the final rite of passage to adulthood.

The topic of premarital sex also generated a variety of conflicting and contradictory stances. Whilst some participants felt premarital sex was acceptable, others expressed an intellectual tolerance of the practice, rejecting premarital sex personally, yet acknowledging the growth of the activity among their peers. The popular cultural notion regarding the importance of female chastity before marriage was also frequently cited. Participants emphasized the ways in which a woman's sexual reputation may affect her marriage opportunities and as a result, supported the idea that sex between fiancés was acceptable. Importantly, women were placed as sexual gatekeepers in these narratives,

responsible for negotiating the sexual element of their relationships whilst considering the potential negative consequences of premarital sex. Moreover, desire and pleasure were mostly absent in their narratives, demonstrating the limited discourse of sexual autonomy for women in the reform period. Premarital sex was therefore seen as a serious decision, as it was associated with transition into adulthood and only considered appropriate when the conditions of time, age and the stability of the relationship had been met.

Perhaps as a result of this limited discourse of sexual autonomy and desire, participants were quite pragmatic in listing the qualities seen as essential in a partner. Ideal boyfriends and husbands were consistently described as primary wage earners and value was placed on their ability to take financial responsibility for the family. In contrast, women's caring capacity, selflessness as well as beauty were seen as necessary qualities of a good girlfriend and wife. The descriptions of ideal partners from participants clearly indicate an influence from the wider Party-State agenda and Confucian notions of gender difference and complementarity that have re-emerged in the wake of economic reform.

This instrumental approach observed in descriptions of ideal partners was also echoed in the matter-of-fact way they discussed marriage. As will be explored in the following chapter, love and desire continued to be absent in participants' opinions over the decision to marry. Rather, marriage was viewed by most as an unquestioned and taken-for-granted rite of passage for women. The stigma they associated with remaining unmarried further supports this notion that marriage continues to be the only legitimate context for the expression of female sexuality in the reform period.



## CHAPTER 6

### NEEDING A “LONG-TERM DINNER TICKET”: EXPLORING THE CONTINUING EXPECTATION OF MARRIAGE

Building upon the pragmatic approach described by participants in choosing a partner, in this chapter I will examine their views on marriage, pressures to marry and unmarried women. As heterosexual, monogamous marriage remains the normative context for the expression of female sexuality in China, marriage continues to hold social, cultural, economic and political importance. Traditionally, marriage has been seen as marking the achievement of full adult status. Consequently, by not marrying, a person is seen as rejecting their responsibility as an adult and more generally, to society (Kam, 2006, 2010). With the *danwei* system under Mao previously enforcing marriage, since the onset of economic reform, this task has now been transferred to the realm of the family. The influence of the family in reform China remains strong, with the family frequently affecting mate selection and constituting a source of extreme pressure for marriage (Kam, 2010; Lin, 1994; Evans, 2008). Additionally, ideas of filial piety rooted in Confucianism, continue to be primary factors when considering the expectation of and pressure for marriage in China, with the creation of offspring (and subsequent making of ancestors) often seen as a cornerstone of filiality.

Marriage can be seen as an essential regulatory and organizational tool of the Party-State. Citizens are free to choose their mate, as long as it fits within the heterosexual, monogamous couple, adheres to the legal age of marriage limits (put in place to control population) and the one-child policy (Evans, 2008; Sigley, 2001; Davis and Harrell, 1993; Alford and Shen, 2004; Kong, 2011; Yan, 2009). Moreover, this heterosexual, monogamous ideal reinforces the institution of heterosexuality, excluding any alternative sexual expression and significantly contributing to the normative, hidden underlying presence of heteronormativity within Chinese culture. As Huang and Yeoh note, in rapidly changing East Asia, “heterosexuality has been so naturalized as a normative category that it is present only as the invisible norm against which ‘deviant’ sexualities are positioned” (2008: 1). Through Party-State legislation as well as the

cultural emphasis on the practice, marriage remains central to young women's life course and sense of self in reform China. As a result, marriage is expected by young women and pressures to marry are commonplace. Consequently, those women who do not marry are stigmatized to an extreme extent.

I will begin by exploring participants' opinions concerning the timing of marriage and expectations of marriage, again highlighting the absence of desire and love in their responses. I will then examine their attitudes regarding pressures to marry and the ways in which remaining single was not entertained by participants, demonstrating the highly normative presence of marriage in reform China. Building upon the essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity explored in the previous chapters, I will look at the ways they described wifeness and motherhood as ideal and natural states of womanhood. Finally, I will discuss participant opinions on the topic of unmarried women, and the stigma associated with them, including the rise of the *shengnü* phenomenon in popular culture.

#### TIMING OF MARRIAGE

Often seen as the final rite of passage to adulthood, participants generally expressed a clear idea of the appropriate time to marry. The timing of marriage was frequently linked to ideas of reproduction and the possession of qualities such as maturity and responsibility. With the Party-State enforcing the legal minimum age of marriage (at twenty for women and twenty-two for men), as well as a strict population planning programme, it was clear that these legal measures and the lasting influence of Confucianism shaped their thoughts in relation to the timing of marriage. In fact, with the exception of one person, all of my participants expected to marry at some point in their lives, with most believing the ideal age of marriage for women was between the ages of twenty-five and thirty.

### *Reproductive Interests*

Participants frequently linked the ideal marriage age to reproduction. Interestingly, of those who made this connection, almost all suggested that it was important for a woman to give birth before the age of thirty. As Laura (28) stated, “I think twenty-six. Yeah, twenty-six is a good age. And it’s better for girls to have a baby earlier, I think. Before thirty”. Maureen (25) thought along similar lines stating, “Twenty-eight. Because after two years, you can have a baby when you turn thirty”. Joan (26) held a similar opinion stating, “I think before thirty. Because for a woman to have a baby, the best age to have a baby is like between twenty-six and thirty. Yeah, so I think before thirty”. Thirty was therefore seen as the maximum age at which to have a child.

Eloise (28) elaborated on the connection between marriage and reproduction by stating: “Twenty-six. Around then. I think when you’re twenty-six, you have worked, you have a job, and you’re mature. And all these conditions are right. Money, career, material things, and so on. Biology”. For Eloise, then, the timing of one’s marriage should therefore coincide with appropriate “conditions”, both material and biological. The importance of biology also figured prominently in Allison’s (27) narrative: “I think I think around twenty-seven or twenty-eight. From a biological perspective, I think your body is ready to get married and have a baby or something like this. But for marriage, I think if you cannot find the right person, you don’t need to push to get married”. Thus although Allison admitted that one should not rush into marriage if the right person is not found, she restated the popular notion of having a child before thirty.

Wendy also emphasized the idea of having a baby before the age of thirty. She stated:

Well, one thing is that you should have a baby before thirty. So at twenty-five, you have four years or so to have no children. And then you should have a kid at thirty. So I think twenty-five is the perfect age. Twenty-eight is a little late, because then you won’t have time to enjoy your husband alone, just the two of you. (Wendy, 27)

Notably, Wendy used the word “should” to underscore the necessity of childbearing. Having a child was seen by Wendy as an unquestionable and automatic result of marriage, and an eventuality in a woman’s life course. Clearly, reproduction was a key factor in participants’ concerns in determining the ‘right’ age to marry, and most felt that before thirty was an appropriate time to have a child.

A clear age bracket for marriage was articulated by participants, demonstrating the ways in which both marriage and childbearing are normalized to an extreme extent in Chinese culture. A woman’s body being “ready” for children was evidently a concern, with age thirty seen as some sort of biological limit. However, this is a medical contradiction, as it is possible for women to have children past the age of thirty. Especially when considering Chinese history, in a time of no birth restrictions, women would have just continued to bear children as they aged. Hong Fincher (2014) also observes this trend and the ways Party-State rhetoric promotes births before the age of thirty as a way to ensure the quality of the population. She states: “Rather than focus on the extraordinary degradation of China’s environment, [...] state media reports on birth defects effectively blame women for choosing to delay marriage and child birth” (Hong Fincher, 2014: 33). This direct connection to reproduction is perhaps related to the Confucian tradition that links marriage to the creation of future ancestors and continuing lineage, thereby fulfilling filial responsibility. Children, like marriage, are expected of a woman, and the two are generally seen as occurring simultaneously.

Notably, participants did not entertain the idea of having a child outside of marriage. This is most likely due to Party-State policy, which enforces strict laws not only through the one-child policy, but also explicitly discriminates against births occurring outside of marriage. Children born outside marriage, or “unplanned children”, are ineligible for national services, such as *hukou* registration, public education or state employment (Greenhalgh, 2003). The enforcement of the legal age of marriage as well as the population policy therefore deters the “undesirable acts” of early marriage and childbirth

(Sigley, 2001: 130).<sup>54</sup> The Party-State support of this approach clearly reinforces the idea that sex is an adult activity, to be had in heterosexual marriage.

### *Reaching Adulthood*

Participants also equated marriage with a sign of maturity and adulthood. As explored in the previous chapter, they repeatedly emphasized the importance of stability, responsibility and maturity when choosing a boyfriend or husband. These characteristics were also seen as essential when considering an appropriate time to marry. As Corinne stated:

Um, thirty? Yeah. Because normally when people are thirty, they're kind of stable, they have a job, or at least they know what they are going to do in the future, and they have had some experience, they've dated someone who has experience too. So they know how to get along with each other and be tolerant. I guess that makes the marriage more stable. (Corinne, 30)

For Corinne, having a variety of experiences which allow a person to become more stable was therefore important when considering a time to marry. Corinne also viewed economic stability as well as emotional state as key when deciding to marry.

Sonja (25) also thought along similar lines by stating, "Between twenty-eight and thirty. You're mature enough to get married and to be a wife. To take responsibility. And to have a family and give birth. So, I think around twenty-eight or thirty, that's the best age". Stability and maturity were seen as central elements before embarking upon marriage. Yet this maturity is viewed by Sonja as important for helping a woman maintain a household and family. Sonja's response therefore fits with the essentialist thought currently in circulation, which upholds the notion that a woman's primary role is as wife and mother.

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<sup>54</sup> A close parallel of such state control can be seen when examining postwar Britain and the creation of the welfare state. During this period, the government expressed overwhelming concern over the quantity as well as quality of the population (see Weeks, 2012).

Parental involvement was also mentioned in participants' responses in relation to the timing of marriage. As Cara mentioned:

In China, parents hope their children will get married around twenty-five or twenty-six. But I think before marriage, the girl should be very independent and should have experienced a lot. So after that, I think maybe a suitable age is around twenty-seven or twenty-eight. (Cara, 22)

For Cara, then, a woman should marry after having experienced a variety of situations and being self-sufficient. Perhaps Cara's emphasis on independence is a sign of wider generational change, where personal freedom is a valued quality for young women. Despite this emphasis, however, marriage itself is still unquestioned by Cara and seen as the end goal for a woman.

Hannah, who had recently become engaged at age thirty, also discussed the difficulty of deciding when to marry and negotiating parental pressure. She stated:

Twenty-five or twenty-six, around then...[Laughs] Because like now, I think it's too late for me, it's already quite late, thirty years old. Because, you know, Chinese parents, they want you to have a baby soon after you are married. Or, it's ok if you wait, but you can't be too old, because then they will worry that it'll be a bit dangerous to have a baby for an older woman. So I think people get married at twenty-five or twenty-six, they still have, like, two, three, or four years to enjoy their life, the marriage. But if you just get married and then you get pregnant immediately, you don't have time to enjoy this. Maybe you're not used to marriage yet, and then you have a baby. I think it's too big of a change. (Hannah, 30)

Once again, marriage is closely tied to reproduction in Hannah's example. Parental pressure appears to play a significant role, with a demand for grandchild almost

immediately after marriage. Yet Hannah stressed the importance of waiting to have a child in order to “enjoy” one’s marriage. Such an emphasis could imply that young women are often faced with reconciling their individual desires with perceived familial responsibilities.

Notably, participants who were in their late twenties to mid-thirties seemed to place more value on the importance of finding the right person and their own ‘readiness’ rather than on the existence of a ‘right’ age for marriage. For instance, as Martha (35) noted, “After thirty. You know more people, you know more about your work, and you know what kind of person you want and what kind of person you are. You’re mature”. Maturity, a quality highlighted by participants in choosing a husband, was once again underscored. As an older participant and unmarried, Martha was one of the few who suggested that over age thirty was an acceptable age to marry. Another example was Anya, who also believed that after age thirty was the best age to marry for a woman:

I think from thirty to thirty-five. When you are thirty to thirty-five, you’re quite mature. And also in your career, and also in your character, in your personality. And you’ve seen a lot of things, and you know which is the right thing, and which is the wrong...And I also think at that time, that people, your body, is just ready to have a kid. It’s the best time to have a kid. (Anya, 27)

In addition to reproduction, a woman’s overall maturity in relation to her character and career were emphasized by Anya. Marrying after thirty was seen as not only acceptable, but Anya saw this as preferable. Anya also gave biological justifications for this age, echoing the traditional expectation of having children soon after marriage. Being “ready” for Anya therefore included a stable emotional state, an appropriate financial status and biological need. Significantly, love and/or desire was absent in Anya’s response when discussing marriage.

Theresa and Tracy both thought along similar lines, believing that “when you are ready” (Theresa, 33) was the time to consider marriage. Tracy further elaborated on this point:

Yeah, when you're ready. It doesn't matter what age, it could be eighteen, it could be twenty, it could be thirty-eight...I think marriage is when you're ready, when you see the person and you can picture some future. Like, you couldn't help but want to be part of that, then yes that's the time. (Tracy, 32)

Once again the importance of 'readiness' was highlighted by Tracy. Although she placed emphasis on a shared future, Tracy highlighted the fact that a woman could be 'ready' at any age and at any time.

Through such responses it is clear that 'readiness' encompassed a variety of qualities, including maturity, stability, experience and shared future goals. 'Older' participants valued these characteristics and felt that they themselves and/or their partners had not fulfilled them yet. Perhaps by stressing the importance of 'readiness', these 'older' women were in some ways justifying their current single status. Given the pressure for marriage and the normalized context of marriage in the reform period, this is perhaps unsurprising. At the same time, this emphasis could also be seen as a demonstration of resistance to and/or rejection of the married norm. Growing individualizing tendencies within urban China as a result of reform have led to an increasing number of people pursuing self-interests before marriage (Evans, 2008; Yan, 2009). Perhaps this stress on 'readiness' by 'older' participants is an expression of individuality and a reluctance to end any independence experienced while single. Clearly, contrasting expectations for young women exist, and women are faced with considering desires for independence alongside familial expectations. This balancing act is further made difficult due to parental pressures for marriage and wider Party-State intervention promoting the married ideal. Moreover, these expectations for marriage are heavily gendered in nature, with women's marital status the focus of judgement from wider society.



### *Double Standard*

Although most participants gave a specific age for marriage, there was a general recognition that women were held to a different standard from men when it came to marriage. In fact, they often complained that the age of marriage for men was much more flexible. As Allison (27) noted, “Because boys, in [people’s] minds, are always valuable! No matter if you’re sixty or twenty years old! I think it’s a biological thing. Because women, we have a reproductive period, where you get married and have a baby”. Allison therefore recognised the “value” that was placed on women’s reproductive capacity and the ways in which this hinders mate selection.

Sonja (25) also expressed an awareness of the double standard. She stated: “Most people think that the girl should get married earlier, before thirty. If you are over thirty, it’ll be difficult to find someone [laughs]. Because men will choose a younger woman, they won’t choose women over thirty”. Sonja’s example illustrates the emphasis placed on women’s youth and beauty, and the ways youth is currently valued in the reform marriage market. Sonja touched upon the idea that men not only place value on a woman’s appearance, but also implied that their desires for a younger woman are natural, echoing the essentialist rhetoric that is currently in circulation that emphasizes the importance of a woman’s looks.

Kitty also mentioned men’s innate attraction to younger women. As a Master’s student, she was considering pursuing a PhD, yet had met some resistance from her family. She explained:

Kitty: If you do a PhD in China, it will take you four years. Because a lot of undergraduate universities will be four years, then a Masters will be two or three years, and PhD will be four years. So that’s quite a long time. So after graduating

with a PhD, you will be twenty-seven or twenty-eight. It's quite old for a girl to get married, I think. I think many men in China really like younger girls.<sup>55</sup>

NZ: Why?

Kitty: They think young girls are more beautiful [laughs]. Yes, so there's less chance for girls when they are twenty-seven or twenty-eight to get married in China. Especially when you have a PhD degree. So other men will think that it's quite difficult to communicate with this woman. Or, other men who don't have such a degree, maybe they think 'I'm not better than her'.

(Kitty, 24)

Kitty raised two main points of contention concerning marriage. Her mention of beautiful, younger women is a demonstration of the taken-for-granted assumption that men possess a natural desire for younger women. In fact, for mate choice, a woman's youth and beauty are seen as more important than her education or future career. Additionally, Kitty addressed the fact that a PhD will place a woman in a 'higher' position, and as a result, she will find it difficult to marry due to the cultural idea that men should be the dominant spouse, primary breadwinner and household head. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this notion was also an expectation of most women when selecting a spouse, where women hope to marry someone with a 'superior' skill set (Parish and Farrer, 2000; Rofel, 2007). Over-educated women are therefore seen as a threat to this patriarchal order and are often blamed for the rise of the *shengnü* phenomenon in recent years.<sup>56</sup>

As explored in Chapter 5, notions of maturity and responsibility were generally expressed in participants' descriptions of ideal partners, and were again echoed in ideas of marriage. This suggests the lasting importance of marriage as the final step in achieving adulthood in Chinese culture. Their responses concerning marriage centred around ideas of adulthood, motherhood, maturity, and (parental) obligation. As Kam has noted, marriage is often spoken of through a discourse of "social responsibility", where

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<sup>55</sup> Participants frequently told me a common joke about how there are three types of people in China: men, women and women with PhDs.

<sup>56</sup> This will be discussed in more detail below.

“one cannot be a socially recognised adult until she or he gets married and forms her/his own nuclear family” (2010: 91). As a result, to become an adult requires taking up this responsibility. Marriage is therefore not only a rite of passage, but viewed as part of a natural, unquestioned path in a woman’s life.

#### MOTIVATIONS FOR MARRIAGE

I then asked participants to consider why people marry. With marriage a nearly universal practice in China, most expressed surprise at such a question. They often equated marriage with a general, unquestioned tradition (Sigley, 2001; Bulbeck, 2009; Liu, 2004). This sentiment is further underscored when examining recent statistics on marriage in China. For instance in 2010, 77.4 per cent of women aged between twenty-four and twenty-nine, and 92.6 per cent of women aged between thirty and thirty-four, were married (United Nations, 2013). The most recent statistics in Shanghai reveal that the average age for marriage in 2005 was 24.9 and 26.5 for women and men, respectively. Although studies show that university-educated women do delay marriage, this is only to a small degree, with most women marrying before the age of thirty (Ji and Yeung, 2014: 11).

Often participants had difficulty articulating a specific motivation for marriage, demonstrating the extreme extent to which the practice is normalized in Chinese culture. For example, Joan (26) stated: “I suppose that people think that they should get married. They just follow what everyone else does. It’s like an unspoken rule, a common road, to get married”. As heterosexual, monogamous marriage remains the only sanctioned context for the expression of female sexuality, such an opinion is perhaps unsurprising. Hannah (30) also expressed how expected marriage is: “[People marry] because their parents tell them to! [Laughs]. I don’t know. Just, like, society is telling them to. People think, ‘people should get married’”. Hannah’s example clearly serves to underscore the ways in which marriage is normalized and unquestioned in the reform period (Farrer et al., 2012; Sigley, 2001).

Many participants stressed that there was no real motivation for marriage; rather, marriage was seen as part of a long-standing tradition. As Kam notes, the “heterosexual monogamous marriage remains to be *the* normative model of intimacy” in the reform period, and is underscored as the ideal form of relationship (2010: 90). As a result, marriage was often spoken of as something inevitable and a taken-for-granted rite of passage. When I pressed further, they emphasized the importance of material and legal security, ideas of tradition as well as the notion of completeness for a woman as the main incentives for marriage.

### *Economic and Emotional Security*

Similar to responses regarding boyfriends and husbands, participants rarely mentioned love or desire when discussing marriage. In fact, marriage was primarily spoken of as a form of long-term economic security. Most suggested that the stability and the legality that marriage offered were primary motivations to marry, especially when considering having a child. As Lucy (30) stated, “If you want children, parents should be married. It’s tradition, but it’s also you protecting your child with legal status. So you should be married if you want to have children”. Theresa (33) also mentioned the importance of legality by stating: “Maybe they just want to do everything legally. You get married legally, have a baby legally”. The importance of legal security was therefore stressed by Tracy and Lucy. This emphasis most likely relates to Party-State legislation that discriminates against unmarried births (Greenhalgh, 2003).

The legal implications of marriage were also mentioned by Faye:

I don’t know why [people get married]! I really don’t get it! I haven’t gotten married! [Laughs]. Maybe it’s because it’s necessary, it’s tradition. Parents should get married. Like if you want to live with someone and have children, you should be married legally. Especially if you’re having a baby. If I wanted a baby, I would get married. Marriage is one way to protect the child and you will get the most out of life too. But there’s a risk of divorce if you’re married. So if you’re living together, it’s no big deal. The license part is what’s a big deal. (Faye, 30)

Faye underscored the taken-for-granted sentiment towards marriage in China, using words such as “necessary” and “tradition”. According to Faye, a woman can “get the most out of life” through her marriage. Interestingly, she also mentioned the possibility of divorce. This suggests an awareness of infidelity and relationship breakdown now more commonly seen in reform China. Yet despite such risks, for Faye, marriage is described as a type of tradition and “necessary” for women, and especially a way to protect a child legally. This emphasis on the importance of legality again reflects the wider Party-State management of its citizens, particularly in reference to the one-child policy. At the same time, Faye also endorsed and suggested the possibility of cohabitation. This can be seen as evidence of wider generational change and recognition of foreign dating trends, where marriage is not seen as the only option for a heterosexual relationship.

Several participants highlighted the importance of economic security as a primary motivation for marriage. As Angela explained:

I think it can be because the woman wants to have a more secure environment. Or if they want to have a baby. Because in China, it's not very normal to have a baby without the father there. And it's not normal to have a child without being married. China is still very traditional like this. And another reason I think is maybe about the finance issue. Because many girls marry just because they want to have more money. It's true. In China, there are a lot of girls out there like this. (Angela, 28)

Reproduction and security, particularly financial security, were seen by Angela as primary motivations when considering marriage. Financial security in a time of economic instability and rising living costs is seen as an increasingly common motivation to marry. Importantly her use of the terms “normal” and “not normal” further underscored the point of just how common marriage continues to be in the reform period.

Becoming financially secure also figured prominently in Lily and Corinne's responses. For example, Lily (27) mentioned the pragmatism some women have, "[People marry] for some practical reasons. Sometimes it's a way for a girl to get rich. You can get married to someone who has money, you can benefit from this. That sometimes happens". Corinne mentioned money as well, and held a very negative attitude to women who used marriage to become financially secure. She stated:

For money. I know someone like that, yeah, one of my friends. It doesn't mean they're bad, it just means those girls who are not powerful, not strong enough. They don't trust themselves, they don't think they can afford their life in the future. That's what everyone around them has done, and they just follow the trend. They get married with someone who has a house or a car, who has a stable salary. And maybe for love. And then they will get divorced later. (Corinne, 30)

Notably, Corinne highlighted the contrast between remaining single, where strength and independence are key attributes for a woman, and the transition to a family-focused, more dependent position after marriage. Interestingly, she held a negative opinion of women who openly married for financial security. Yet, as explored in the previous chapter, most participants wanted a spouse who was able to provide financially upon marriage. Despite Maoist rhetoric of gender equality, women in reform are faced with discriminatory hiring policies and employment practices and are seen as primarily responsible for the maintenance of the household (Bulbeck, 2009; Liu, 2007). As a result, women must alleviate this double burden by attempting to find a spouse who can provide financially. In spite of these discriminatory obstacles, however, women who are too open about the financial requirements for a husband are chastised by others for being financially motivated in choosing their partner.

Anya also criticized the importance women placed on finances as a motivation for marriage. She stated:

Before, in old dynasties, people got married because, as we say, they needed a long-term dinner ticket. In China, that's what we say...But *now*, you *don't* need that because you already have dinner! You can make dinner by yourself, you don't need to depend on a man, why do you need to marry him? I mean, now, most people marry, as I said earlier, because of two reasons. Because you're pregnant, because if you don't marry, your kid will have no *hukou* and have no rights for school or things. You have to marry. The other reason is because of this discrimination, this pressure....Not all women really want to marry. They're willing to marry, because they have no choice! They have to. (Anya, 27)

Thus Anya identified two main reasons for marriage in reform China, pregnancy and social pressure. Notably, she used an old phrase “long-term dinner ticket” to suggest that women can provide for themselves without male assistance. Moreover, using this phrase in a new fashion demonstrates the way in which the married norm is possibly becoming more flexible, potentially shifting away from the custom, as Anya clearly does not see marriage as necessary for a woman's financial security. Yet despite this opinion, at the same time, she highlighted how marriage is viewed as compulsory for women by wider society to an extreme extent.

Much like the pragmatic approach described in choosing a partner in Chapter 5, economic and legal security were clearly primary considerations of participants when discussing motivations for marriage. Love and romantic desire were noticeably absent, a further result of the limited discourse of sexual autonomy available to women. Marriage was viewed as a way for women to materially benefit and guarantee a secure future. This emphasis on finances can be seen as part of a response to the growing economic instability and rising living costs of the reform period, which are perhaps prioritized over emotional needs, such as love. At the same time, women who were perceived to be too open about the importance of economic security were chastised for being financially motivated in choosing a partner (Kam, 2010; Yan, 2006). Marriage therefore offers women the position of dependent spouse upon marriage, with women expected to take

on the majority of childcare, housework and emotional labour (Rahman and Jackson, 2010; Honig and Hershatter, 1988; Jackson, 1999).

*Becoming 'Complete'*

Participants also expressed the view that marriage was the ultimate goal for a woman and an essential component of womanhood. Often, marriage was seen as offering a way for a woman to become 'complete'. This opinion was highlighted through an exchange between Alicia and Tracy, who hoped that marriage would offer the comforts of family and stability:

Alicia: I think for me, no matter how successful I am, I will be, professionally be in the future, that means nothing at the end of the day. I think family and children and those values, go beyond everything... For me, it's like, I'm a woman, I want to be an accomplished woman. I just don't want to be one part of a woman. I want to be a mother, I want to be a wife, I want to be everything.

Tracy: It's a common experience, right?

Alicia: Yeah, God created me as a woman.

Tracy: Be a little girl, girl, then girlfriend, [simultaneously with Alicia] wife, mother, grandmother. You know?

Alicia: Great-grandmother,

Tracy: I have always had this theory, since I was a little girl. Even if marriage doesn't work, even though one woman, one man, suits society, it might not suit human nature. But it's good to go through it, even if it doesn't work.

(Alicia, 25 and Tracy, 32)

Tracy and Alicia therefore saw the motivations for marriage not only as a primary expectation from wider society, but also as central to the definition of womanhood. Becoming a wife and mother is underscored and seen by Alicia as "everything" that a makes a woman. Alicia and Tracy discussed the transition to adulthood through a woman's life stages in relation to her marital and reproductive status, and how they are expected and natural. Clearly, for Alicia and Tracy, a feminine sense of self is seen to be



gained by engaging in heterosexual marriage (Rahman and Jackson, 2010). Such an exchange also echoes the Confucian saying ‘good wife and virtuous mother’ currently re-emerging in the reform period, where women are meant to find their “truest expression” (Evans, 2002: 336).

Megan (25) also explained her mother’s opinion of marriage: “Like, my mother, she thinks that a girl needs to become a woman. And a woman is someone who needs a complete life, which means you should get married and have a baby”. Marriage was therefore seen as a way for a woman to experience a ‘complete’ and full life. This notion of completeness in relation to womanhood and adulthood is a clear reflection of the essentialist feminine ideal that is currently being promoted. As Harriet Evans (2002) has explored, the category of ‘woman’ is now centrally defined through the idea of ‘wifehood’, which by association, includes motherhood, as generally both occur together in China. This meaning of wifehood not only includes the role of spouse, but also the expectations and responsibilities of motherhood. Wifehood, and resulting motherhood, are now seen as a woman’s “natural duty” and a defining characteristic of a woman (Evans, 2002: 348).<sup>57</sup>

Moreover, the essentialist notions of femininity and masculinity promoted in the reform period further support this claim of womanhood rooted in biological function (Hershatter, 2007; Pei et al., 2007; Bulbeck, 2009). Whereas manhood is defined in relation to masculine performance or as something achieved, womanhood is underscored through the qualities of beauty, domestic work and motherhood (Jankowiak, 2002: 364). Wifehood and reproductive function are therefore constructed as natural parts of womanhood, contributing to a woman’s ‘completeness’. Women’s role as wife and mother are now viewed as central, with pressures to maintain a happy home life as well as raise the ‘perfect’ only child seen as a woman’s primary obligations (Hershatter, 2007). Marriage is clearly framed as a normal and predictable life stage for women. As a

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<sup>57</sup> This idea is further reinforced when examining childless couples in China. As Handwerker (1998) and Hershatter (2007) have explored, the one-child policy is often seen as the “must have one-child policy” for women, reinforcing women’s ‘innate’ mothering capacity.

result of this strong and widely held view, pressures for women to marry are commonplace.

#### PRESSURES TO MARRY

As is evident from participant responses concerning the ‘correct’ ages to date and marry, marriage was viewed as an unquestioned expectation and inevitable event in a woman’s life course. Due to this normalizing stance regarding marriage, pressure exists for women to conform to the heterosexual, monogamous ideal, especially after a certain age (Kam, 2006; Evans, 2008; Croll, 1995; Liu, 2004). This pressure appears to stem from economic, social, cultural and political spheres, which enforce the married norm from a variety of angles. When I asked participants to consider if they had ever encountered pressure for marriage, almost every single person had experienced some form of pressure to marry. They specifically identified family, extended family, friends and even the media as main sources of such pressure in their immediate lives. In particular, ‘older’ participants noted the pressure they received was common and detailed a variety of responses as well as coping strategies for such demands.

#### *Experiencing Pressure*

Nearly every participant had experienced some form of pressure from their parents or wider society in relation to their single status. Generally, this pressure was viewed as ‘normal’ and expected, particularly after a certain age. As Laura explained:

Laura: Because my family has been pushing, you know.

NZ: So you have pressure to get married?

Laura: Oh god yeah, from the whole family! Of course they say something.

Because at my age, I should be married.

(Laura, 28)

For Laura, it was natural and even expected for her family members to be “pushing” her towards marriage. She even noted herself that she “should” have already been married

by the age of twenty-eight. Moreover, Laura was not upset by the pressure she received, further evidence of just how commonplace these demands are perceived to be.

Hannah, who was recently engaged, discussed her experience with marital pressure, especially during Chinese festivals and holidays. She explained:

Hannah: Oh, when I was twenty-five or twenty-six, I think, like, everyone thinks that is the best age to get married. So my parents always asked, like, every time we talked on the phone, before we finished the conversation they would say, ‘Oh ok, are you thinking about getting married?’ [laughs]. Like, almost every time. And every time I went back home, I would go for Spring Festival, all my relatives, neighbours, they would ask, ‘Are you getting married soon?’ Or ‘When are you getting married?’ Yeah, so that was really stressful... But after that, when I was like twenty-eight, twenty-nine, it got better. Because they already accepted the reality, yeah.

NZ: And you were dating Dennis, right? Did that make them relax?

Hannah: Yeah. But still, they didn’t think it was ‘safe’ enough. Many of my friends say it’s better to get divorced than to not have been married at all.

(Hannah, 30)

Although the pressure for marriage had been slightly alleviated upon meeting her boyfriend, Hannah continued to experience pressure from her parents. For her parents, having a boyfriend was not “safe” enough at this age. In fact, until she had received a firm promise of engagement and marriage, Hannah would still be at ‘risk’. Moreover, Hannah noted how her friends, in order to alleviate this pressure for marriage, would choose to marry and divorce rather than remain single. This idea further reinforces the way marriage is viewed as necessary in reform China and that an extreme amount of pressure that exists for women to conform to the married ideal.

Several participants suggested that people entered into marriage as a reaction to the pressure they had been experiencing to marry. For instance, as Angela (28) described:

“It can be the pressure from parents. Because many people, like my friends, are getting married just because of their family. Just because society is now like this”. With marriage virtually unquestioned in contemporary Chinese culture, to remain unmarried not only appears abnormal, but also suggests that a person has something wrong with their ‘internal essence’ or *suzhi* (Kam, 2010; Ho, 2008).<sup>58</sup> This sentiment was made clearer by Maureen (25): “I want to get married. Because when you get older, and you’re still single, the people around you, they’ll think you’re weird. Just because of the pressure”. As a result of such stigma, remaining unmarried was not seen as a desired option for Maureen.<sup>59</sup> Clearly pressure for marriage functions as a way to help enforce the heterosexual, monogamous ideal.

Ramona (27), who was single at the time of interviewing, suggested that parental pressure for marriage was more of a general worry for the parent than the child: “Usually the parents are more worried than their child. Just like my grandmother, recently she’s been asking me, ‘Why haven’t you gotten married? When can you have a baby?’ And my grandma is almost ninety, so she’s like, ‘I wanna see your babies before I die’”. At the time, Ramona was uninterested in pursuing a relationship for marriage and felt such interference was unnecessary. However, she noted the continuing and on-going concern parents have over their daughters’ single status.

In some ways, the pressure to marry from parental and familial networks can be seen as having replaced the surveilling effect of the *danwei* and the continuing presence of filiality (Whyte, 1997). Despite the transition from arranged to love matches in China, as Riley (1994) has noted, spousal selection continues to be influenced by parental and familial networks. As a result, an extreme amount of pressure is often felt by a daughter or son to find a match. Kam (2010) also notes that pressure for marriage even occurs in ‘modern’ cities like Shanghai, with most women experiencing the greatest pressure to marry a few years before turning thirty. In her study of lesbians in Shanghai, Kam found

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<sup>58</sup> Although the definition of *suzhi* remains contested, it is often linked to a person’s inner qualities and morality (see Ho, 2008).

<sup>59</sup> The stigmatization of unmarried women will be discussed in more detail below.

that the pressure for marriage can be so extreme, some women were forced to live “dual lives” in pretend marriages to satisfy parental and familial demands (Kam, 2010: 88).

The extreme extent to which parents could involve themselves in their daughter’s personal life was continuously highlighted by participants. As Kam (2010) and To (2013) observe, parental and extended family involvement is still quite common when it comes to considering a daughter’s potential match. In fact, parental interference and pressure to marry are often seen as a part of wider parental duty. This notion is connected to the idea that “responsible parents should help their children find a good match and establish a new family” (Kam, 2010: 93). Often parents interfere with spousal selection by examining the economic standing, ethnicity and professional status of a prospective spouse, efforts which become even more extreme depending on the daughter’s age. At the same time, parents may have unintentionally contributed to their daughter’s difficulty in finding a spouse. Having invested in their only child to become educated and economically successful, their daughter may eventually be seen as unmarriageable due to the discriminatory lens by which accomplished women are viewed on the marriage market (To, 2013).

### *Reactions to Pressure*

Matchmaking and going on ‘blind’ dates were viewed by participants as common responses to the pressure that women experienced to marry.<sup>60</sup> With the general absence of love and desire in their responses, these activities can be seen as an extension of the instrumental approach to partner selection in reform China. Parents determined to ‘resolve’ their child’s single status were seen by participants as the primary force in encouraging participation in these events (Riley, 1994; To, 2013). When considering matchmaking or ‘blind’ dates, participants expressed either a reluctance to participate in these options or tolerated their parents and family’s influence in their romantic lives.

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<sup>60</sup> Unsurprising due to the stigma attached to single women, matchmaking and blind dating were described as ways to meet a prospective partner. ‘Matchmaking’ was usually defined by participants as when an extended family member or close family friend arranged a date between two people. ‘Blind dating’ was often described by participants in a similar manner, although a friend or familial connection was not necessarily present beforehand and could include internet dating, mass dating events and speed dating.

For example, Betty (25) described the matchmaking events that were gaining popularity in Shanghai: “I think a lot of my girl friends who are over twenty-five, they are very anxious, because they have no boyfriend. And their parents are starting to worry about them too. They are always going to these events, with other single people, to try and find a match”. Thus due to mounting pressure, many young women felt the need to attend these mass dating events marketed towards singles. Kitty also expressed her feelings about the idea of a meeting an arranged match:

Every week I call my parents. And my mom will always say, ‘I have found a guy for you’, and she says what he does and what he looks like and how old he is and something like that. And then she will ask me, ‘What do you think?’. I think I just don’t have any thoughts! It’s quite awkward. I think it’s quite awkward, someone introducing you to a total stranger... You just say, ‘I’m thinking about dating you for marriage’. It’s quite awkward. (Kitty, 24)

Kitty found matchmaking as a response to pressure unnatural. At the same time, however, this process can be seen as an extension of the pragmatic approach described by participants in choosing a partner, with a list of qualities and specifications for marriage. Joan also felt that matchmaking was a bit forced:

Marriage cannot be arranged like this... It’s not like you just sit together and you take out your list of conditions, like, ‘How old are you?’ and so on, like a résumé! Some people are really traditional and are like ‘This is my résumé, take a look’. And like ‘Look how much I have, I have a car, I have a house’. Everything! (Joan, 26)

Although she saw the benefits of blind dating and matchmaking, especially if one had a busy schedule, Joan felt that the process was similar to a job interview. Matchmaking can therefore be seen as an extension of the pragmatism articulated by participants in choosing a partner. Yet here, Joan rejects the idea of being too explicit in one’s requirements.

Participants frequently referenced the variety of mass matchmaking events held in Shanghai and increasingly gaining popularity on TV.<sup>61</sup> For instance, Shanghai holds a famous matchmaking event in a central park on Sunday mornings. Most, however, felt that attending this weekly event was an act of desperation:

Emily: On Sunday, you go to People's Square, you see so many desperate parents out there, holding an advertisement of their son or daughter.

Angela: Yeah, the profiles of boys and girls,

Emily: And you have to pay 50 RMB to be allowed to bring your profile and get in, as a girl. As guys, you don't have to pay anything!

NZ: Really?

Emily: Yeah, guys are allowed in free. And it's such a desperate thing! Oh my god, I would never ever want my parents to be like that!

(Emily, 28 and Angela, 28)

Emily and Angela's opinion was quite common, with most participants feeling that attending such an event was a last resort. Matchmaking at these events was generally seen as a demonstration of extreme parental influence and concern. The mention of the cost of the event by Emily also further reinforces the idea that it is more detrimental for a woman than a man to be single.

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<sup>61</sup> See for example The Economist, 2012.

IMAGE 1: MATCHMAKING IN PEOPLE'S SQUARE (PHOTO BY AUTHOR, 2012)



IMAGE 2: PERSONAL ADVERTISEMENTS DESCRIBING AGE, HEIGHT, OCCUPATION AND HUKOU STATUS (PHOTO BY AUTHOR, 2012)





Allison's parents had attended the same event:

Allison: Last week, they went to the dating corner in People's Square. And there are a lot of parents there, showing their child's profile. And then they talked with some of the parents, and they found it's very difficult, because the parents there are very picky. One of the people there said, 'If your daughter's eyesight is really high', meaning she wears glasses, 'I don't think she is suitable for my son'. It's ridiculous! It's so picky. But they really talk about the house, the money, and this type of stuff.

NZ: How did you feel about your parents going to People's Square?

Allison: Well, they love me...I think the pressure is very hard for me to digest. In a Chinese family, it really means a lot to a person. Especially me. Because I live with them. And I think my parents worked really hard to raise me. So their comments and their wishes, their hopes, are really important.

(Allison, 27)

Allison, who was eager to be married, saw her parents' interference in her romantic life as appropriate and an extension of their love. As an only child, Allison felt that her parents' expectations and hopes were very important and she wanted to satisfy them. Allison's reaction to this pressure for marriage is one of parental respect and filiality to her parents. Moreover, Allison's mention of the calculating and specific requirements for a spouse is a further demonstration of the pragmatic nature of mate selection in the reform period.

Kitty also felt that her mother's meddling was acceptable in her love life:

I think [my mother's] interference is ok, because I do want to find a boyfriend. I want to find one, because I have never had a boyfriend before. So I want to find one. But I just want to find a boyfriend where we meet each other and we know each other, and then we will fall in love with each other, a normal way. Very naturally. (Kitty, 24)

Kitty hoped to find a boyfriend in a more “natural” way, without parental or outside influence. Despite such an opinion, however, she tolerated her mother’s concern with her personal life, seeing it as a general act of love. Notably, Kitty’s statement is one of the few mentions of love for a future husband, and is seen as an element present in a more natural and normal progression of dating.

A few participants discussed the tactics they used to ignore the pressure placed on them by family members and close friends. Corinne (30) described her conversations with her mother over marriage: “I will listen [to her], and then I’ll say ‘Sure, sure, it’s my top priority, it’s at the top of my list’ [laughs]”. Kitty (24) also mentioned shrugging off her mother’s comments at times by stating, “Every time she talks about these things, I just ignore her”.

Several participants justified not paying attention to this pressure for marriage as a way to avoid future divorce. For example, Alicia stated:

Nowadays, women over thirty, or twenty-nine or thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two, they’re very...and I’m not just talking about my friends, but they’ve become desperate, you know, they are. They actually want to get married, they push him, even if the guy isn’t ready yet. And then they end up divorced and stuff like that. I hope I will never become like that. (Alicia, 25)

Thus pressure for marriage was viewed very negatively by Alicia. In some ways, Alicia’s opinion can be seen as serving to justify her single status. The instability of marriage was again recognised, with wider pressure seen to be forcing women and men to marry too soon.

This theme was expanded on by Corinne, who advised women to ignore any pressure for marriage they felt from others:

You just have to stay pretty [laughs], stay happy. And just get a lot of friends. A lot of healthy hobbies. And there will be someone for you. Sometimes the person is just late. So just wait. You never know, just don't be, you know, too stressed over it, or too desperate over it. When you're desperate, you'll choose the wrong one. (Corinne, 30)

Corinne highlighted the importance of a woman's beauty, an emphasis seen in the rhetoric of essentialism currently in circulation. Moreover, despite when it may occur, Corinne's general message is that marriage remains the ultimate goal for a woman. Therefore despite recognising people can marry at different times in their lives, it is still viewed by Corinne as the main life path to follow.

Desperation as a result of pressure was seen a factor that caused women to act rashly and choose the wrong partner. Naomi (30) explained: "Well, more and more of my friends are getting married. And I've gone to their weddings. But one year later, they're getting divorced! [Laughter]. So I've lost the, you know, confidence in marriage. They're already divorced. I feel like it's so...unstable". Thus although marriage was something Naomi hoped for in the future, she felt that responding to pressure by marrying could possibly increase the chance of divorce. Ramona had also felt some pressure to marry from her family:

Part of the pressure is from my family. Because Chinese people are still traditional, and if a girl is close to thirty, she should get married. But I'm not worried too much, but I know my family does worry a little bit. You know a lot of pressure is...Sometimes, you want to get married, and you always think about it. But it's just like when you see too many friends who get married and then get divorced, then you'll lose confidence. And you don't even know, do you have the confidence to spend your whole life with another person? It's a long time. (Ramona, 27)

In some ways, Ramona and Naomi “losing confidence” in the institution of marriage can be seen as potentially challenging the norm of marriage. Marriage was seen by Ramona as a lifelong commitment, and she wanted to avoid the same mistakes as her friends who had married as a response to end this pressure.

Emily had also been discussing marriage with her parents. She stated:

I have convinced them, like ‘Mom, dad, I’m fine, I’m fine being by myself even though I don’t have a guy’, you know? And it’s a modern society, people have a lot of choices. It’s not like a safety belt, if you get married, you know? I mean, the guy could hurt you so much, you know? So I always joke about that. I say, ‘You want me to get married, and then divorced and then I’ll still be single?’ [laughs]. (Emily, 28)

Emily used the term “modern” to describe herself, seeing herself as a part of a new generation of young women that were perhaps unusual in their independence and self-sufficiency. Moreover, Emily clearly recognised the changing marriage market and the risk of divorce once married. Either as an unmarried woman or a divorcée, Emily believed that she would still continue to face stigmatization from wider society due to her single status.

The threat of divorce therefore was considered a serious consequence of marriage. Participants did not see marriage as stable nor as life-long commitment; rather, the fragility of marriage was frequently referenced. This awareness of the instability of marriage is most likely due to the mounting divorce rate in China, particularly in large cities such as Shanghai. Although divorce is increasingly seen as acceptable in practice, divorcées continue to be highly stigmatized (Parish and Farrer, 2000; Farrer and Sun, 2003). Those participants who ignored the pressure for marriage advocated the importance of finding the right person rather than responding to external pressure for marriage. By ignoring pressure for marriage and emphasizing the importance of the ‘right’ person, participants can perhaps be seen as justifying their single status.

Pressures to marry were clearly encountered by participants at a variety of ages. Although opinions on the acceptability of pressure were varied, they generally expected a degree of parental involvement in their personal lives. A variety of coping strategies were detailed, including tolerating, accepting or even ignoring pressures from family and wider society. However, almost every participant expected to marry in the future. Despite the recognition of the instability of marriage, marriage was still seen as a priority, and a final goal and status to be achieved eventually. Given the universal nature of marriage and the stigmatization of unmarried women, this sentiment and the extent of parental involvement is perhaps unsurprising (Evans, 2008; Bulbeck, 2009; Tang, 1995). Moreover, this norm of marriage and expectation of pressures for marriage can be seen as further sustained through the negative characterization of unmarried women.

#### UNMARRIED WOMEN

With the notion of heterosexual, monogamous marriage so pervasive in Chinese culture, the idea of remaining unmarried, particularly for women, is frequently seen as abnormal and a rejection of civic responsibility (Kam, 2006, 2010; Yau, 2010; Wolf, 1984; Jankowiak, 2002). With marriage normalized to such an extreme extent, women who remain unmarried are often stigmatized due to their single status. More recently, Party-State campaigns concerning unmarried women have dominated the national media, focusing on and to some extent denouncing *shengnü*. As Hong Fincher (2014) notes, these campaigns are used by the Party-State to encourage marriage, which is seen as essential to overall societal stability.

The topic of unmarried women generated a lot of interest from participants, particularly among those who considered themselves of an ‘appropriate’ age to marry. I asked them to consider women at the ages of thirty-five and forty-five who were unmarried as well as the topic of *shengnü*. Given that most believed age thirty was the maximum age to marry for a woman, the majority of participants felt that remaining single at thirty-five, forty-five, or more generally, was not an option. In fact, if a woman remained unmarried over thirty, she was often seen as being ‘different’ and cast in an unfavourable light.

These negative perceptions towards unmarried women, both from participants and by wider society more generally, clearly act as a deterrent to remaining single and serve to enforce the married norm.

As Kam (2006, 2010) has found in her study of lesbians in Shanghai, the expectation of leading a 'normal' life within the heterosexual, monogamous paradigm in Chinese culture is very strong. As a result, women who do not conform to this model are stigmatized and conceived as a social problem, with any alternative sexual relationships seen as illegitimate. In fact, these expectations are even revealed in terminology through the use of words such as 'abnormal' or 'not normal' to describe people who live different lifestyles or do not conform to the heterosexual, monogamous married ideal (Kam, 2010: 92). Liu also recalls how older single women are frequently characterized as "weird" or having "biological problems" (2004: 199). Similar terms were frequently used amongst my participants as well to describe unmarried women and their 'odd' or 'weird' behaviour. Generally, they emphasized the notion that a woman who remained unmarried was eccentric and strange:

[NZ: What do you think about a woman who is unmarried at thirty-five?]

Naomi: Is she divorced? [Laughs] I would be scared, if she was my boss!

[Laughter]

Ramona: Maybe she's weird.

Naomi: Yeah, this kind of woman is weird [laughs].

(Naomi, 30 and Ramona, 27)

Sonja (25): It couldn't be me!

Phoebe (28): Maybe people think, like, 'Does that girl have some problems?'

Most participants therefore reflected commonly held negative perceptions of women who remain single. A few did relate the question to their own personal lives and marital

status. As Betty (25) said, “I think if I’m not married at thirty-five, my mom would go crazy! You know, my mom asked me to get married as early as possible”. Anna (24) also felt that being unmarried at thirty-five was unacceptable for her future life, “I think it’s not ok! [Laughs] It would be a very big problem for me! Especially most people at that age, they should have a very good job and also have a good family at that age. Having a good family by then”. Thus, for Anna, the imperative to be married and have a family as well as stable job were seen as fundamental requirements of a thirty-five year old. Joan (26) also thought that being unmarried at thirty-five was unacceptable: “I don’t want to be like that! I think you won’t have a complete life. Because I know, all marriages, or, a good marriage, will be before thirty-five... It could be just that you don’t meet the right guy. But this life, maybe you’ll be lonelier than most”. Once again, the idea of completeness was emphasized for a woman, with the notion that a woman who remains unmarried is lacking in some way. Interestingly, Joan believed that marrying before thirty-five would ensure a better marriage, a more ‘true’ one.

If participants were reluctant to envisage being unmarried at thirty-five, remaining unmarried at forty-five was seen as unimaginable in most cases:

[NZ: What do you think about a woman who is unmarried at forty-five?]

Betty (25): My mom would kill me! [Laughs]

Theresa: Ah!

Naomi: It’s really weird!

Ramona: It’s so weird!

(Theresa, 33, Ramona, 27 and Naomi, 30)

Vivian (24): It’s much worse. It would get worse and worse.

Although it was “worse” to be unmarried at forty-five, participants did recognise that perhaps some element of choice was involved with a woman who was single at this age:

Betty (25): I think probably a woman like this, she just likes single life. Sometimes I think maybe this kind of person has a shadow or something, that they were hurt before. Or they're just not interested in men.

Audrey (28): Well, she probably doesn't want to be [married] at that age.

Thus, some choice was acknowledged if a woman was unmarried at the age of forty-five. Yet overall, it was generally seen as a rarity in China for this situation to exist. As Samantha (24) noted, "It's an unimaginable picture". Megan (25) explained further: "I think it's not very common in China. Parents by this point will probably have found a husband for their daughter. So usually, by thirty-five, forty, or even maybe thirty, this will be taken care of by the parents". Parental interference therefore seemed to take care of this 'problematic' situation before the age of forty-five. These perceptions by participants are in fact quite accurate when considering the marriage statistics in the country, with only 5.4 per cent of women between the ages of thirty and thirty-four and 1.8 per cent of women still single between the ages of thirty-five and thirty-nine (United Nations, 2013).

In fact, having been married and divorced was seen as better option than never being married at all, particularly if there was a child involved. As Allison illustrated:

If she gets married at forty-five, I think she can totally be relaxed, because she is at that time in her life stage. She will not consider marriage as her priority. Because from thirty-five to forty, you still can get married. But after forty-five, I think she doesn't want to get married, she will live her own life, travel around... But my parents, they don't want me to be like that. Even if I get divorced, I'd still have a baby. A baby can keep you company after forty-five. If I never get married, it will be really sad when I get old. (Allison, 27)

A few participants did feel that it was "ok" for a woman to remain unmarried, regardless of her age. Often, this was seen as due to her choice or lack of options. As Kitty (24)



noted, “It will be very rare [but] I can accept that. It’s her personal choice”. Having been hurt in a previous relationship was also seen as a reason to remain unmarried. Mia (26) explained, “I know a woman, she’s about forty, and she never got married. And I heard my friend told me that she never got married, because she was hurt by someone. So she never wanted to love again”.

Only Bethany had a positive example in relation to women being unmarried. She stated:

My cousin is thirty-three and is unmarried. She’s been alone for years. But actually, I admire her, because she’s got her own car, her own house. And she goes traveling for six months out of the year. Because she’s a lawyer and she earns a lot and is really successful. And my uncle and my auntie have already given up pressuring her. It’s just another lifestyle. But my mom thinks that now it might be very tough to find someone after forty, because you’re living alone, without a partner to be supportive. (Bethany, 22)

Although living alone was considered potentially difficult, Bethany found her cousin’s independent lifestyle and successful career admirable. Importantly, through recognising even the possibility of a life without marriage, Bethany was aware of the feasibility of breaking the married norm. As one of the youngest participants, this example by Bethany could also suggest changing generational expectations in a woman’s life course, where a life without marriage is possible.

#### *Unmarried Women as ‘Different’*

Importantly, the ways in which other people perceived unmarried women seemed to figure prominently in participants’ responses. As Joan (26) noted, “You know, people think that you should get married, because if you don’t, then you’re different”. This notion of difference was further underscored by Faye:

If you haven’t gotten married it’s strange if you’re not. At first I didn’t want it, but now, I see the way they look at you, and the people think you’re strange... I

think people will think she has some problems or something. That's she strange. And that something's wrong. Even if you're a nice person, if you're not married, people will think that there's something wrong. (Faye, 30)

Faye noted that initially, she did not want to marry, but after seeing the ways in which unmarried women are treated, she now feels more incentive to do so. Women who were unmarried were perceived as odd, eccentric and different. With wider society placing so much importance on marital status, individual choice appears to be limited.

Maureen (25) and Anna (24) also elaborated on this aspect of difference. As Maureen noted, "Because when you get older, and you're still single, the people around you, they'll think your weird". Anna further stated, "It's very unusual, very weird in China [to be unmarried]. Everyone will think it is, and think that she is strange. And maybe people will look down on her. Or laugh at her". Wider society was therefore seen to be especially judgemental when it came to unmarried women. Lucy (30) also noted the negative perception of unmarried women: "I think that kind of woman might be seen as a little aggressive or independent, and that's why she is alone". As evidenced in the pervious chapter, qualities listed as ideal for a wife included caring capacity and beauty. Aggressiveness and independence were specifically seen as unfeminine traits and as a result, unwanted. Lucy's remark further supports and reinforces this essentialist rhetoric that continues to circulate in the reform period. These qualities are negative for a woman to have, and therefore it is those women who are unmarried who are thought to possess them.

This aspect of difference was further emphasized by Emma, as she recalled an interesting conversation she had with her unmarried boss:

In my company, it's a state-owned company, I've got a manager, and she's around forty. And she's unmarried. And she said to me, 'You should get married quickly, because people will look at you differently'. So I think the environment there isn't good for a single woman. (Emma, 30)

Emma was one of the few participants who thought being unmarried was an acceptable life choice. She highlighted the ways in which social environment, in this case, a State-Owned Enterprise, can be an obstacle for an unmarried woman. Emma's boss provided a warning to her, advising her to avoid the harsh judgment of others and to marry quickly.

Participants clearly were aware of the negative perceptions held towards unmarried women. Although not all felt remaining unmarried was a bad choice, most of them echoed the cultural notion of unmarried women as odd, strange and different. These ideas of difference and 'otherness' illustrated by participants clearly serve to stigmatize remaining single and sustain the heterosexual ideal. Goffman's (1963) analysis of stigma is useful to conceptualize this process in reform China, where the stigmatization of one group enables the confirmation of another. In this case, heterosexual marriage is reinforced, sustained and legitimized through the 'othering' of unmarried women. Unmarried women were further stigmatized through the perceived emptiness in their personal lives.

#### *Unmarried Women as 'Dragon Ladies'*

Unmarried women were generally seen as successful in their careers by participants, as they were not successful in love. However, a woman's success in her career was not viewed as an achievement; rather, she was seen as not putting enough effort into her personal life. As Samantha (24) noted, "[Unmarried women] probably have a successful career. Maybe it's their excuse". For Samantha, then, it was an "excuse" to be successful and be involved with work, rather than put this effort into maintaining a relationship. Clearly women who appeared to be successful in their careers were seen as filling the gap in their personal lives. By devoting time to their work, these women were viewed as willingly sacrificing a long-term relationship. As Chen observes, whereas career success is seen as essential for men, a woman who prioritizes her career is seen as "bad", "flawed", "frightful", "incomplete" and "unfeminine" (Chen, 2004: 164). These negative character traits assigned to unmarried women with successful careers clearly serve to

frame men as the superior spouse in a relationship, and demonstrate the continuing patriarchal nature of Chinese culture (To, 2013).

As noted above, being married was viewed by participants as something that made a woman's life 'complete'. Building on this notion, when describing unmarried women, they often suggested that these women were missing a key component of themselves, and as a result, placed more emphasis on their careers. For example, Vivian elaborated on single, working women:

I think it's a little bit of a tragedy...I don't think it's a comprehensive life for a woman. I think that a woman is like a flower, she must be watered. And family is just like the source of water, to keep her nourished, for her to blossom...Most of our bosses, in our company, are single women. They're very tough in work, and they're very, very aggressive. But somehow, they just pretend to be like that. Actually, their heart is, you know, is a little bit dry, because of no water. I'm afraid of being like that. I don't care whether or not I'm a marketing manager or marketing director in the future, but I do care if I can have a happy life. So, I hope I won't be like that in the future. I really like when some of our managers will talk about their kids, and it's really a nice picture, and a really happy moment, to share your happy moments together with your kids. But for the rest of the single women who are working, they just talk about their pets or something or their traveling. Maybe you are happy about that, but it wouldn't make me happy. I don't want to do that. (Vivian, 24)

Unmarried women were portrayed by Vivian as being incomplete and concerned with trivial matters, like their pets. The quality of aggressiveness is specifically mentioned as an undesirable and unfeminine characteristic. Vivian portrayed these women as if they had nothing to look forward to, were personally unfulfilled and had superficial lives. Clearly such an opinion builds upon the essentialist and the Party-State rhetoric perpetuated in the reform period, where women are meant to find fulfilment through wifedom and resulting motherhood.

Allison, who worked in a demanding position at a marketing firm, also suggested that single women in her field found their lives difficult:

A lot of marketing women, especially if they work in high levels, the directors, they are all alone. And two of them are around forty years old. And one of my colleagues is thirty-five. And at their age, it's very difficult to find a husband. So they are just trying to find a life partner... they are very lonely... So some of them just use working to have a life. So their work is one hundred per cent of their life. And some of their habits will influence the other colleagues. Like, since I'm a subordinate of her, she will keep me very late after work, because she is lonely. So she needs someone to keep her company...And some of them will adopt some children. I think that's another way, or at least raise some puppies, I think it's another way to make them feel less lonely...I've seen a lot of cases like this and I don't want to be like them. Family is very important. (Allison, 27)

Allison felt that unmarried women put all of their effort into their professional careers, with little regard for others. As a result of personal loneliness, these women were highly demanding and unsympathetic to other people's lives. Despite enjoying her job, Allison did not even question the fact that women in her field might possibly enjoy and want to prioritize their careers over a family life. An unmarried life was seen as lacking and "lonely" for a woman, reinforcing the importance of marriage as a rite of passage for a 'complete' life.

Unmarried women were therefore seen by participants as investing too much in their careers. However, this was not viewed as an achievement; rather, career dedication was seen as unfeminine and contributing to a lonely life. Kam (2010) and To (2013) have both noted that reform China is in need of positive role models for single women. As To states, the patriarchal nature of Chinese culture "lacks any positive concepts for describing independent women who do not fit into traditional domestic roles" (2013: 2). As a result, marriage continues to be seen as an essential component of womanhood. These negative perceptions of unmarried women, particularly as career-oriented and too

demanding, clearly work to uphold the heterosexual married ideal in reform China and mark the ‘other’ alternative as an unattractive option. By casting unmarried women in such a negative light, the norm of marriage is sustained (Goffman, 1963). This stigma is taken further when considering popular references to unmarried women and the topic of *shengnü*.

### *Shengnü*

The subject of unmarried women generated a lot of animated discussion amongst participants, especially when considering the topic of *shengnü* or “leftover women”. Increasingly reported as a national ‘crisis’ in the Chinese state media, the term is generally used to describe women of a certain age who are unmarried.<sup>62</sup> Participants were eager to discuss the term and the root of the phenomenon, especially those who were considered to be ‘older’ and of marrying age. Interestingly, the definition of *shengnü* varied between participants, although several features remained similar.<sup>63</sup> Generally *shengnü* were seen as women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five and unmarried. As Goffman (1963) notes, the use of a specific term to codify and enforce stigma is commonplace, and this concept is useful when examining the use of the expression. The term *shengnü* is clearly a way to enforce marriage for women and censure unwanted and ‘transgressive’ behaviour.

Participants held varied opinions on the ‘cause’ and the rise of the *shengnü* phenomenon. The majority of participants felt that *shengnü* were women who held very high standards and personal qualifications. As a result, these women were unable to find a partner due to the commonly held opinion that women should marry a man who holds a superior position, qualifications and a higher salary than themselves. As Betty explained:

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<sup>62</sup> See for example the All China Women’s Federation Report (2010) on the *shengnü* phenomenon.

<sup>63</sup> Perhaps this variation is the result of numerous Party-State campaigns which claim there are several classifications of *shengnü*, categorized by age, employment status and psychological state (Hong Fincher, 2014: 16, 42).

Maybe they just can't find right person. And I think maybe a lot of girls, their standards are too high, right? And because of their salaries are too high, very high, and the people that they meet, the men around them, they will be of a lower status. And these women, they just want to get someone better. So she's always waiting and waiting...A lot of people are like this. A lot of women think this way. (Betty, 25)

Thus it was seen as common for a woman to delay marriage as a result of being unable to find a successful enough man.

Maureen (25) also emphasized the idea of personal success. She stated, "Most of *shengnü*, they're very successful at work. So they've put a lot of effort into their work. But because they are so successful, there's pressure on the boys, because her salary is much higher". Thus such monetary "pressure" on men was seen as detrimental to a future relationship. Julia and Cynthia also elaborated on this point:

Julia: You know, we actually have a definition for 'leftover women', or 'leftover girls', there's a definition. They defined it in 2007. They said these girls have very high education, high income--

Cynthia: --High class,

Julia: And because they have very high, demanding requirements for their future husband,

Cynthia: That's why they don't settle so easily.

(Julia, 28 and Cynthia 32)

Therefore high requirements for a future partner were seen as hindering mate selection. Sonja also echoed similar thoughts by stating:

*Shengnü*, they usually have a very nice job, high education and sometimes they are really good looking. So then sometimes, their requirements for a boyfriend are higher. They think they can't find their perfect 'Mr Right', so they want to

keep looking... They'll continue to look for their 'Mr Right', who is rich, handsome [laughs]. Yeah, so, it's difficult. (Sonja, 25)

Interestingly, participants suggested that the rise of the *shengnü* phenomenon was partly due to men's responses to successful women. Just as women were reluctant to have a partner who was less qualified, men were also seen as unwilling to accept successful women. As Vivian (24) noted, "I think in China most men could never stand a woman who works hard and can achieve a higher level of salary than him. He could never bear being inferior to his wife". "Being inferior" to a woman was therefore seen as an unimaginable position for a man.

Elaine also elaborated on men's opinions of successful women and the rise of the *shengnü* phenomenon:

Actually, in China, there are many more men than girls. But why are there a lot of *shengnü*? I've read an article about this recently. And it said most *shengnü*, they have really good jobs and they are educated. I think they don't want to find just any man to get married. They're picky, I think. Also, there's another reason. Girls always want to find a man who is better than them. So, when you are very rich as a woman, I think it's not very easy to find a man who is richer than you. Especially in China. It's very traditional. And a man, if he is not richer than you, he probably would not be able to accept you. Because, when a woman is successful, I think she will be quite powerful, very independent. So, I think a man, not all men, but I think most men don't like that kind of woman. Also, she might be obsessive about her work. So I don't know. Maybe that's the reason. (Elaine, 36)

*Shengnü* were therefore seen as too successful and career-oriented, which, as a consequence, worked against them when searching for a partner. This idea is echoed further by To (2013), who notes that highly educated and successful women are frequently discriminated against in the marriage market, as men prefer to marry less



educated and less career-oriented women. In a period of economic reform, where economic and career success is necessary, women who have high earning capacity and career potential are still considered failures socially if they remain unmarried. As discussed in Chapter 5, the traditional notion that men must be the primary breadwinner was prominent in participant descriptions of ideal husbands, demonstrating the larger essentialist views concerning ‘proper’ femininity and masculinity. Women who cross this unspoken boundary are therefore viewed as unfeminine and consequently unmarriageable (Parish and Farrer, 2000).

The second ‘cause’ of the *shengnü* phenomenon identified by participants was the result of women being ‘too picky’ with their choice of a partner. In particular, these women were seen as unwilling to compromise on the qualities of a husband. As Maureen (25) noted: “They’re just looking for their ‘Mr Right’. Like my boss, she’s thirty years old. She goes on a lot of blind dates with guys, but maybe her requirements are too high, she just can’t find someone”. This woman was therefore seen as too demanding by Maureen, with too many requirements for a future partner.

Eloise expanded on this idea as well:

Well, I think women make this situation by themselves. Like, they have a lot of standards. Maybe the reason they’ve become *shengnü* is because they are too picky. I have a friend, the same age as me, and she has no boyfriend at all. But I feel that my friend is too picky sometimes. It’s not because she has bad conditions or something, just that her standards are too high. I think that it’s not because they’re lacking in boyfriends. There are plenty of women who don’t care, they are always looking for the best one, they don’t realise the good ones are around. So maybe they lose the best one. Have you heard this fable, where there’s this bear, that he’s picking up ears of corn in a field, and he picks up too many, and in the end, he only has one left. It’s just the last one, not the best one. That’s the lesson, the only one left, but it’s not necessarily the best one. You finally get one, everybody gets one person in the end. But you don’t really have a choice anymore, you’ve lost the best one. (Eloise, 28)

This example from Eloise clearly underscores the popular opinion that women are now too selective when it comes to choosing a husband. In particular, she suggested that women are being unreasonable in their partner selection, always searching for someone more qualified than themselves. Eloise's advice was to 'settle' and marry anyone, as marriage still remains the final goal. In fact, being single is viewed as lonely and not a viable option.

Laura also elaborated on women's perceived lack of compromise when it comes to choosing a partner:

Yeah, just some girls don't want to, like, compromise, to accept someone. Like, 'I have passed the age that I'm supposed to get married, but I have to accept a guy that I don't love that much'. Like, I know some girls, they are physically really pretty and well educated with a high salary. But no boyfriend. They just don't want to compromise. (Laura, 28)

One of the few mentions of love, Laura highlighted women's lack of compromise when it comes to choosing a spouse and saw it as detrimental and contributing to their single status. Similar to the qualities desired in an ideal partner in Chapter 5, the traditional idea of marrying a man of higher status, income and ability are all seen as essential (Leete, 1994; Salaff, 1976).

An exchange between Anya and Jill also highlighted the difficulty *shengnü* might face when it comes to searching for a spouse:

Anya: Most of *shengnü* they have very high education, yeah. And they are very independent and they have very good jobs. They did everything good, better than men. And they can't find a guy who matches them, that's the big reason why they're left.

Jill: Many of them are beautiful girls, they have many requirements.

Anya: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jill: Many, many requirements. And they want to have a prince. But the time passes too quickly, and today you're twenty, twenty-five, then thirty.

Anya: Yeah, time flies.

Jill: And you know, in China, boys, they don't like girls who are older than him. Yeah, so age is very important. But also, I wouldn't like it, if my boyfriend was younger than me. I think in China, many girls don't like it when their boyfriend is younger than them.

Anya: I think also, now, ladies they want to achieve their worth, their value. That's the biggest reason, I think.

(Anya, 27 and Jill, 26)

Thus, *shengnü* were seen as uncompromising, too demanding and waiting for a “prince”. Their monetary and/or career success was unrecognised, as these women are not married. Marital status is seen as primary, and the only thing that counts to a woman's ‘value’ and social status. Moreover, the qualities listed in a prospective husband, such as responsibility and economic support, is further evidence that the idea of ‘marrying up’ remains cemented in choosing a spouse.

*Shengnü* were therefore portrayed as either too picky or too successful in their careers. These interrelated qualities serve to demonstrate the ways in which single women are stigmatized in popular Chinese culture. The condemning of personal success and standards encourages the construction of wife and mother as the ideal state of Chinese womanhood. This discriminatory lens further supports the married norm, dividing women into the categories of ‘normal’ and ‘not normal’ based on their marital status.

### *The Label of Shengnü*

The use of the word *shengnü* was also a point of contention among participants, with some accepting or completely rejecting the expression. Several people felt that the use of *shengnü* as a term was unproblematic. For instance, as Audrey explained:

A *shengnü* is a woman who hasn't had the chance to get married yet. Most people think that it's a negative thing. I don't think it's so bad, considering how much divorce there is at the moment. Maybe she is just taking her time, looking for the right person. Maybe at this age, a woman is feeling a lot of pressure from her parents, who are pushing her to get married. Many of my female friends, they are not married, they don't have boyfriends. They are comfortable with their single status. I think now, in society, it's changing, so there are more and more single girls of this age out there. I don't think it's a problem, because some of my friends have gotten married and then get divorced. It can be hard. So before getting hurt like this, maybe you should wait, maybe you should look around. (Audrey, 28)

Thus *shengnü* were seen by Audrey as strategic and avoiding future divorce by not rushing to marry. Furthermore, her opinion demonstrates yet again an awareness of the instability of marriage and as a result, can be seen as disrupting the married ideal. In some ways, the positive acceptance of the term can possibly be seen as increasing tolerance and perhaps even approval of remaining single, a type of resistance to the married norm.

Joan also emphasized the point that *shengnü* were often quite capable women and did not require a man:

I think for *shengnü*, I think it's ok, it's just one name. Just one label. I have many girl friends and they are very nice, they're single, but they're very happy. And they can afford what they want to buy. As long as you are economically independent, women won't want to settle for anything. I can buy whatever I'd like to buy, I can watch a movie, it's ok, I don't care. If something's broken, I can call the repairman [laughs]. And why do they need to even have a boyfriend? So, I don't like the way people say *shengnü*. But the point is, it depends how you look at it. If you're really happy, then it's ok to be a *shengnü*. But if you meet a guy that's right, then you should go for it...So, when you're a *shengnü*, I can understand. (Joan, 26)

For Joan, then, overall freedom, particularly in life choices and economic independence, were seen as the main benefits of *shengnü* life. Joan was one of the more direct participants in her approval of choosing to remain single. She did not see relying on a husband as necessary or a guarantee of a secure future.

Tracy also echoed similar ideas about *shengnü* and their independent lifestyle. She felt strongly about the term *shengnü*, perhaps because she was of considered ‘older’ by her peers. She stated:

I think only the best women are these women. The ones who are capable, who have a mind of their own, not the ones who are insecure, not knowing how to make it in society, and get themselves settled earlier, you see this in China. But honestly the ones who are very, very qualified, in terms of career and everything, skill set. They have the balls, they are daring enough, to wait it out. (Tracy, 32)

Thus, *shengnü* were described as very skilled and competent. Importantly, such women were seen by Tracy as brave enough to “wait it out” for eventual marriage. For Tracy, remaining single was not seen as a long-term option or possibility. Marriage remained the ultimate goal in a woman’s life course.

The happiness of *shengnü* was frequently brought up, as they were seen as ‘free’ to engage in more enjoyable activities. As Laura (28) said, “Some *shengnü* are very, very, like, very happy! It’s like my friend, she said, ‘If you’re lucky enough, you meet a guy. And if you’re lucky enough you can enjoy it’. And if not, just live your life fully”. Hannah also elaborated on this point, and suggested that remaining single could be seen as a preference:

Ok, if my family or my parents, if they didn’t care about me getting married or not, I would prefer to be a *shengnü*. Because they say that women, like, these leftover girls, mean that men don’t want you. But I think, at least in Shanghai, most women, they’ve chosen to be left, because they don’t think the men are

good enough, or they're not reliable. So they would prefer to be single. But, like, if you can make enough money to afford your life, and your parents and the people who care about you, they're not worried about you, then couldn't that be a better way? (Hannah, 30)

Hannah suggested that *shengnü* in Shanghai were of a different 'type', and choosing to remain single could possibly be unproblematic. Importantly, she implied that perhaps *shengnü* were wanting to be 'left', rather than depend on men. *Shengnü* are seen by Hannah as openly choosing and asserting equality, instead of taking on a dependent status of wife. Hannah also admitted that if she had had more of a choice, and had not experienced pressure to marry from her family, she would have preferred to be a *shengnü*.

Defiance against the term *shengnü* was also raised and cited as a positive development for single women. As Eloise (28) explained, a recent movement has advocated for the reclaiming of the term: "I don't know if you know this, but there's been a change. The 'leftover' part in the word has been changed to *shèng*, similar sounding in Chinese. So the accent has changed, but you have the same Chinese pronunciation, which means 'victory'". This example demonstrates the malleability of terminology, and with single women reclaiming the term for themselves, this can potentially be seen as a sign of open resistance (Tatlow, 2013; Hong Fincher, 2014). With alternative meanings being suggested, ideas concerning unmarried women are perhaps more likely to change and challenge the married norm.

At the same time, some participants were strongly against the use of the term *shengnü* in popular culture, believing it to have a very negative connotation. As Samantha (24) illustrated, "I think it's a new word, but I think it means, like, something that's undesirable, unattractive, unwanted. Something not good. But most urban, single women in Shanghai are not as pathetic as they are saying, I think". Thus although she did not necessarily agree, Samantha felt the implication of the term itself was quite negative. Lily (27) further echoed this idea by stating, "It's a negative word and a bit mean. Sometimes it's used to make fun of those women who haven't gotten married yet".

Anya and Sonja were also against the use of the term. As Anya (27) stated, “[Women] don’t want to be *shengnü*. *Shengnü* is a discriminatory word”. Sonja (25) echoed this sentiment by stating, “Well it’s not a good one. It’s not a good word. I wouldn’t want someone to call me this [laughs]”. Cynthia (32) also expressed similar feelings, “[*Shengnü*] It’s sad and true. I hate this word. It’s *mean!*”. Emma (30) also was highly against the use of the term, stating: “I don’t think it’s a good word to call a woman. It’s not polite. And it’s a little disrespectful. Because we have the choice, we just haven’t made a decision yet”. Emma therefore saw it as wrong to use such a word to describe women who had not married yet. She felt that it was difficult for women to even decide about marriage, let alone choose an actual partner.

*Shengnü* as a term was therefore not completely rejected or accepted. Some positive qualities were discussed in relation to these women, particularly personal happiness and bravery. However, only a few participants suggested that this single life was a choice. Generally, it was assumed that *shengnü* wanted to and would eventually marry.

#### *Recognition of Double Standard*

Despite differing opinions on the root cause of the *shengnü* phenomenon, participants did express an awareness of the double standard placed on women and the pressure to marry. For instance, as Anna (24) queried, “I think it’s, like, because Shanghai is a modern city. It’s like sometimes I think it’s unfair, you know, why would they call girls *shengnü*? How come they don’t call boys *shengnán* [left-behind men]?”. Anna, who had moved to Shanghai as a university student, did not understand why this pressure for marriage was placed on women, especially in a city that she considered to be “modern”.

Vivian also felt that the pressure placed on women was unfair. She explained the ways in which men were valued differently than women:

Men can always find a woman. Because, like, if a man is forty-five years old, he can still find a twenty-five-year-old woman. But vice versa, can that still happen? No, probably not. So men will never be leftover. And did you know that the

value of women, I'm now twenty-four, and I could say that I am more valuable than Allison [aged 28]. Because you know men, they always like women who are twenty-four or twenty-five. After you get older and older, your problem will get bigger and bigger. Because at that time, you're earning more and more. And you become more outstanding, you see more and more people. And men will think that you are more and more outstanding. And they will get more and more afraid to get involved with you. But *they have* a big scope of choices, to get with younger and younger women. Because there are always younger women, right? (Vivian, 24)

Men were viewed by Vivian as always having the option to marry, as their 'value' does not decrease over time. For women, however, age was viewed as a commodity, with younger women seen as more desirable on the marriage market. As a result, Vivian was highly aware of the ways in which her age could potentially affect her ability to marry. Yet at the same time, Vivian's opinion is not necessarily accurate, as some men are viewed as unmarriageable due to their low income, poor education and lower social status (Gilmartin and Tan, 2002).<sup>64</sup>

Eleanor elaborated further on the point of age by stating:

It's very interesting in China. If a man is thirty-five and unmarried, he's very popular. And what he wants is a girl who's like twenty years old. They won't take a thirty-five year old woman. And if he's like, fifty-eight, maybe he doesn't want to get married. So it's very hard for like a thirty-five year old woman to get married. It's really unfair. (Eleanor, 28)

Eleanor thus emphasized how age is an important factor in men's decision-making in finding a spouse. Younger women are seen as preferable to men, and as a result, 'older' women remain leftover.

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<sup>64</sup> Generally speaking, most men marry in China as well, with only 12.6 per cent between ages thirty and thirty-four and 6.4 per cent thirty-four and thirty-five and thirty-nine having never married (United Nations, 2013). Yet, the discrimination is much more overt for women than it is for men.



Such an awareness of the double standard placed on women suggests that there is some resistance to the married norm. By making comparisons to men as well as knowing and/or being aware of single women, participants make possible the disruption of the married ideal. Although most could not imagine themselves remaining single, the recognition of others doing so clearly serves to illuminate wider possibilities available for women's subjectivity and potential acceptance of those outside the married norm.

It is evident that unmarried women and *shengnü* are cast in a negative light in reform China. Participants were aware of the stigma attached to unmarried woman, using phrases like odd, weird and eccentric to describe them. Moreover, the idea that a woman might choose to remain single was not seriously entertained; rather, most participants assumed that every woman should and did want to marry eventually. *Shengnü* were seen as too picky, demanding and even happy, yet ultimately wanting marriage. This idea further demonstrates the extent to which marriage is normalized in the reform period and seen as offering a woman a complete life. Although recognition of the double standard placed on women may demonstrate some resistance to the married norm, the negative attributes assigned to unmarried women generally serve to motivate young women to marry. By not conforming to the heterosexual, monogamous ideal as promulgated by the Party-State and enforced by the family, unmarried women can be seen as a threat to disrupting the wider moral and patriarchal order (Sigley, 2006).

## CONCLUSION

It is evident that marriage in reform China remains a central rite of passage for women in the reform period. Often spoken of as an unquestioned obligation and eventuality, participants expressed clear ideas over the ideal marital age. Marriage was frequently understood as an inevitable and natural path to 'complete' womanhood. Such an opinion unmistakably echoes the essentialist thought of the reform period, which claims that women are natural carers, mothers and wives. Notably, pragmatic concerns of finances and material security were at the forefront of their concerns with marriage, with love and sexual desire generally absent.

As a result of the normative status of marriage, pressures to marry were experienced by nearly every participant. This pressure was generally explained as an expression of parental and familial concern, and even expected by them at a certain age. Although they had different coping strategies to handle these pressures, by ignoring it or emphasizing the quality of ‘readiness’, participants conveyed the notion that marriage was an expected stage in their future life. This pressure was therefore seen as understandable and tolerated, due to the extent of marriage as well as wanting to avoid the stigma associated with remaining unwed.

Further supporting the norm of marriage is the extreme extent to which unmarried women and *shengnü* are stigmatized. Generally perceived as strange, unusual and as oddities, this characterization of unmarried women can clearly be seen as a way to sustain the married ideal and as a result, contributing to the larger pressure participants experienced for marriage. At the same time, recognition of the double standard placed on women for marriage was noted, suggesting some possible resistance to this married norm. Yet overall, individual choice to remain single was rarely acknowledged by participants, a further demonstration of the expectation of marriage for women in the reform period. As a result of this negative characterization of unmarried women, young women in China can be seen as being forced to reconcile and negotiate competing, and at times conflicting, individual desires alongside the heterosexual, monogamous ideal promoted by the family, wider social networks and Party-State policies.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have examined young Chinese women's accounts of sex, sexuality and intimate relationships in the reform period. With the use of a qualitative feminist approach, I gathered the opinions of forty-three young women on their expectations and experiences of their romantic and sexual lives. Notably, despite living in arguably the most 'modern' and cosmopolitan city in Mainland China, participants were quite conservative in their views. Several themes emerged and reoccurred throughout their narratives and have been highlighted in this thesis. These have included: a rhetoric of biological essentialism, a missing or limited discourse of desire and sexual autonomy and a continuing expectation of marriage for women. Through the exploration of these themes, it is evident that a tension between change and continuity exists in reform China. As a result, competing and at times conflicting individual desires are present and occur alongside the heterosexual, monogamous ideal promoted by the family, wider society and the Party-State agenda.

The reinforcement and re-emergence of essentialist rhetoric was a motif that characterized participant responses. Despite the discourse of gender equality promoted by the Party-State, it was evident from participant narratives that their perceptions of masculinity and femininity were framed in terms of biological difference. Men were frequently described as the more aggressive partner, possessing natural and innate sex drives and responsible for initiating the relationship. What appeared to influence a man's suitability as a husband was his monetary standing, capability, responsibility and future potential in his career. Since economic reform has contributed to a general increase in living costs and financial instability, these are perhaps reasonable demands. Yet at the same time, these expectations may also contribute to unrealistic pressures placed on men for success. Importantly, although none of my participants wanted to be a housewife and all expected to work after marriage, men were still seen as primary breadwinners. Given China's high rate of female labour force participation, these constructions of masculinity

with men as the main earner are clear evidence of the continuing rhetoric of gender difference and complementarity in the reform period.

In complete contrast, ideal womanhood was seen to encompass a caring attitude, an inherent nurturing ability as well as physical beauty. Women were portrayed as mothers and wives and their education, career and earning potential were not as valued. Keeping a man ‘interested’ in the relationship was frequently referenced by participants, demonstrating not only the recognition of the instability of marriage, but also the ways in which feminine beauty standards are viewed as important in the reform period. With wifehood and motherhood seen as key to the definition of womanhood, unmarried women were perceived as lacking in some way. Generally characterized as aggressive, uncaring and unfeminine, unmarried women or *shengnü* were described as incomplete and filling the gap in their lives through their careers.

These opinions on women and men not only serve to reinforce the married norm but also indicate the far-reaching rhetoric of essentialism and the ways it has influenced wider constructions of gender. Gender roles were perceived by participants as being rooted in biological difference and therefore unchangeable. Additionally, ideas of gender complementarity were also evident throughout responses, demonstrating the lasting influence of Confucianism. These remnants of Confucianism combined with the scientific modernization agenda of the Party-State can clearly be seen as contributing to the essentialist rhetoric currently in circulation and present in participant narratives.

Ideas of individual desire and pleasure were largely absent in participant responses when discussing sex, partner choice and marriage. Although these sentiments may have had a hidden or assumed presence, it is my contention that this lack of desire was part of the general privileging of male heterosexuality and the limited sexual autonomy available to women in the reform period. According to participants, sex continues to be a sensitive and personal topic. Their opinions on premarital sex varied from an outright rejection to a tolerance and at times acceptance of the practice. Generally, however, premarital sex was conceived as a physical and reputational risk for young women. Female virginity

appeared to be important and decisions concerning premarital sex were discussed in relation to what a future husband may or may not value. As a result, women were placed in the position of sexual gatekeeper, responsible for the negotiation of sexual encounters. This role clearly reflects Holland et al.'s (2004) conceptualization of the “male-in-the-head”, which governs and controls young women’s sexual behaviours.

Throughout participant narratives there was a clear privileging of the male sexual experience as well, a notion further supported when considering how individual desires and pleasures were generally absent when discussing sex and mate choice. For example, the importance of a woman’s appearance in holding a man’s affection can be seen as a demonstration of the prioritizing of the male experience, with women placing themselves as objects for male sexual consumption. Moreover, when examining the sources of sexual knowledge, specifically pornography, the favouring of the male sexual experience becomes even more evident. This silencing of women’s individual desire and overall limited sexual subjectivity may contribute to the instrumental approach advocated in partner selection, with material and financial security repeatedly emphasized for a husband.

An additional theme present in participant narratives was the importance of marriage, seen as an inevitability and an obligation in a woman’s life course. Expected by nearly every participant, marriage was viewed as offering a woman a ‘complete’ and ‘normal’ life. Since culturally this rite of passage is seen as attaining adult status, married women were portrayed as achieving some sort of personal fulfilment. As a result of the widespread heteronormative environment and expectations of marriage, pressures to marry were commonplace and participants detailed a variety of tactics to handle this. Adding to the imperative for marriage was the negative characterization and stigmatization of unmarried women as *shengnü*. Participants were rather vocal about the perception of these women, and most echoed the common viewpoint of unmarried women as strange, odd and eccentric. Clearly these descriptions of unmarried women serve to enforce the married norm and work to encourage young women to marry.

Overall, the tension between continuity and change in China was evident in participant responses, with the ideals promoted by the family, wider society and the Party-State sometimes conflicting with individual desires. As explored in Chapter 4, Party-State and parental attitudes to sex were very conservative. With few participants receiving any comprehensive sex education at school or with a parent, it is clear through these silences that sex remains a taboo and personal subject in China. The importance of virginity for women was repeatedly referenced as well, demonstrating how women continue to be held primarily responsible for handling sexual engagements.

Participants also held quite traditional views when it came to dating behaviours and partner selection. It was considered both natural and ‘normal’ for men to initiate dates as well as be the more assertive partner. In contrast, women were to ‘give hints’ rather than express overt interest and few suggested asking a man directly for a date. Moreover, they described ideal girlfriends and wives as caring and supportive, whilst men were seen as primary breadwinners and responsible for the well-being and maintenance of the family. These portrayals are evidence of the influence of the essentialist rhetoric, the Confucian emphasis on gender complementarity and also echo the sentiments of arranged marriages of the past. Furthermore, marriage was continuously described as the ultimate goal and outcome of dating, demonstrating not only the seriousness the practice, but also the continued expectation of marriage and the overall underlying assumptions of heteronormativity. With marriage viewed as essential in the expression of ideal womanhood, pressures to marry were experienced by every participant. Marriage can therefore be seen as the only legitimate context for the expression of female sexuality in the reform period.

Despite these continuing cultural expectations, elements of change were also evident throughout participant responses. Generational changes in the reform era have been well documented (see for instance Yan, 2006; Fong, 2004b; Farrer, 2002), but can also be observed in my participants’ opinions on the topic of sex. Although sex was generally viewed as a personal and private subject, new ways of learning about sex, including through the use of the internet and pornography, were referenced and can be seen as a

demonstration of the changing sexual climate in China and the limits of Party-State control. Moreover, changes in attitudes towards premarital sex were also noted by participants, with an acceptance or tolerance of the practice stated by some, particularly if the relationship was considered serious or when occurring between fiancés. Although virginity is still often viewed as a prerequisite for marriage, these opinions are clearly a distinct shift from earlier periods.

The dating scene in China has also significantly transformed, with more opportunities for leisure and activities for dates than ever before. Although still a serious endeavour, when compared to the Mao era dating is now seen as an expected and normal activity involving entertainment consumption. Participants showed an awareness of Western dating trends and etiquette, demonstrating the increase in international contact and flow of ideas as a result of the Open Door policy. Unlike the Mao period where matters of class background dominated, the qualities for a potential husband primarily centred around the importance of a partner's economic stability, prospective career and role as primary breadwinner. Thus although the pragmatic nature of partner selection remains from the past, it is now expressed in a new way with new criteria.

Even though marriage remains the only fully legitimate context for the expression of sexuality for women in China, it can be seen as slightly challenged through the growing recognition of the 'phenomenon' of single women. Although generally negatively perceived, *shengnü* and unmarried women were at times viewed as independent and personally successful. The double standard in relation to marriage was recognised by several participants and some even acknowledged that an element of choice might be present in a woman's single status later in life. A few participants also felt that single life was not only acceptable but even preferable. Despite being in the minority, to some extent these opinions can be seen as challenging the married norm and a sign of generational change.

Evidently, a mixture of continuity and change is present in the reform period. When considering the topics of sex, partners and marriage, participants echoed traditional assumptions but also articulated new expectations when it came to their personal lives.

At the same time, the family, wider society and Party-State agenda can be seen as limiting and perhaps curbing individual desires for young women, with the disapproval of premarital sex, pressures for marriage and the stigma of remaining unmarried commonplace. As a result, young women are perhaps faced with reconciling their individual wants with wider societal and cultural expectations.

It must be kept in mind, however, that this study is not without limitations. Firstly, the time and resource restrictions to pursue this qualification were considerations in the carrying out of this research. Three years is a short amount of time to undertake an in-depth qualitative study whilst being self-funded. Notably, my sample of urban, educated young women is rather specific and, although not exclusive to Shanghai, this type of young woman inhabits a social world different from the rest of China. My participants are particular in that they represent a very privileged section of society, with a university education and professional careers, the ability to speak English and frequent exposure to international influences. In addition, my sample was relatively conservative as well, especially when compared to other qualitative studies in Shanghai, such as Farrer's (2002) ethnography. This specificity can partly be attributed to my snowball sampling technique and as a result, my sample cannot be considered as representative of all Chinese women or even all urban women. In fact, it would have been expected that my participants would have been less traditional, given that Shanghai provides far more exposure to and contact with international and Western lifestyles than other places in China. With geographical variations so vast in China, priorities for future research may include sampling rural women on the same topics to gain greater perspective on differences between urban and rural locations. Another possibility may be to interview young urban men and their opinions concerning the same issues.

My outsider status and the use of English as the primary language in the interviews must also be taken into account. It is possible that certain ideas were unsaid or said differently by participants as a result of the language. However, as mentioned in Chapter 3, offers for interpreters were repeatedly declined and most participants insisted on using English with me. For some, this was to demonstrate their more 'modern' viewpoints, while others, as my former students, colleagues and friends, wanted to only speak in English.



In fact, using *Putonghua* via a translator with former co-workers and students would have been strange in an already “unnatural situation” (Ribbens, 1989) and likely decreased rapport. I was also unable to read Chinese well enough for academic publications and I may have missed some potentially useful sources. Yet, this shortcoming may not have been too great, as Pei et al. (2007) observe there is a limited amount of material on women’s sexuality in Chinese, and the studies that do exist are generally more medical in nature.

In spite of these limitations, I feel that this unique methodology positively influenced my study. My outsider status definitely played a role in the carrying out of this project, and overall I believe it was advantageous. Ideas and concepts were explained to me in comprehensive and full detail, with nuances illustrated in a way which probably would not have happened with a Chinese insider. My position as outsider also contributed to rapport, as most participants were interested in my own experiences of these issues, as an unmarried woman of similar age. Comparisons and contrasts between Western and Chinese cultures were frequently made, which further served to underscore the details as well as the importance of certain ideas and practices.

Despite any methodological limitations, this thesis uses a feminist qualitative methodology that gives voice to women rather than through the use of survey methods. My research offers an original and fresh perspective on women in China and adds to the growing body of qualitative research on China. Attitudinal surveys and quantitative methods appear to be common when asking about sex and sex education in China (see for example Li et al., 2004; Zhang et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2007; Chen et al., 2008). Unlike these studies, my methods have allowed for women’s views on the meanings of sex, ideal partners and marriage to be voiced in a different and perhaps more clear and detailed way. In addition, given that China is experiencing such rapid social and economic change, the timing and location of this study also provides more knowledge to the degree of that transformation and gives insight into what practices are or are not currently valued. With Shanghai frequently viewed as the standard of modernity in

China, conducting my research in this city can be seen as a useful indicator of the trends that are taking hold and the extent of the change that has occurred.

Most research on gender in reform China has tended to focus on discrimination in the workplace, internal and external migration and changing family dynamics (see for example Yan, 2009; Pun, 2005; Rofel, 2007). Although these studies may touch upon issues of sex, sexuality and relationships, mine is the first to combine and examine these elements as a whole. My analysis builds upon the work of key scholars of gender in China, including Farrer (2002; Farrer et al., 2012), Evans (2008), To (2013), Liu (2008) and Pan (2006). These studies all examine certain changes in gender practice and the continuing patriarchal influence in the reform period and my research expands on some of their key findings.

Firstly, my analysis complements and at times contests Farrer's (2002) ethnographic study in Shanghai. As noted, his sample was far more liberal than mine, with my participants expressing fairly traditional opinions. This difference is significant in that both he and I were examining the same city, but our studies were conducted a decade apart. With Farrer's findings suggesting notable transformations in sexual practice and culture in Shanghai, one would expect a continuation and even perhaps a substantial amount of change to have occurred by 2012. Yet, my sample articulated much more conservative attitudes, and this can be seen as a demonstration of the continuing pull of tradition in spite of economic reform. Thus my analysis questions his portrayal of the sexual climate in Shanghai and offers a different view of the city. I have also found evidence of Farrer et al.'s (2012) more recent findings of an "intellectual tolerance" of premarital sex. Whilst some of my participants confirmed and endorsed this notion, others completely rejected the idea of premarital sex, another example of the continuing influence of tradition in the reform period. As a result, I refined this category and illustrated the competing views on the topic, making the distinction between tolerance, acceptance and rejection of the practice.

Another related study is Evans' (2008) research on mothers and daughters in the reform period. Evans primarily focuses on the personal changes specific to the mother-daughter

relationship, and only touches upon the topic of sexuality in the context of filiality and changing generational expectations. In spite of my specific focus on sex, sexuality and intimate relations, several of my findings resonate with hers. For instance, Evans notes how marriage was a central issue to the daughters in her sample, and was closely tied to ideas of children, the family and filial obligation. Despite endorsing ideas of gender equality, the younger women in her study appeared to hold naturalized views of gender difference between men and women. My participants similarly held expectations of marriage, continuously tying marriage to reproduction and family obligations. Moreover, they also consistently spoke in terms of gender difference between the sexes, highlighting women and men's differing 'natural' abilities.

To's (2013) recent work on *shengnü* also closely relates to mine. Not only do I confirm her findings concerning the stigmatization of unmarried women, I also explore the connection between this negative characterization of single women and marriage. Whereas To discusses the wider perception of unmarried women, I have made the link between this stigmatization, pressures for and expectations of marriage and the resulting pragmatic approach my participants advocated in choosing a spouse. I have further related this instrumentalism to an absence of desire and sexual subjectivity available to young women and China's larger sexual culture. The lack of sexual subjectivity for women has also been noted by Liu (2008). Whereas Liu's work primarily concentrates on sexualized gender discrimination in the workplace, I have focused on the limited sexual subjectivity available to women in sex, sexuality and intimate relationships. As a result, I have taken this concept further and demonstrated its validity in a different arena of women's lives.

My analysis also significantly departs from Pan's (2006) research on the changes that have taken place in China's sexual culture in the reform period. Through the use of survey methods, Pan claims that an overall transition from sex for reproduction to sex for pleasure has occurred. My findings suggest, however, that sexual desire and/or individual pleasure were not primary concerns in young women's intimate lives. Personal desire and sexual attraction were not listed as priorities in a potential partner;

rather, future boyfriends and husbands were almost always spoken about in terms of economic and financial achievement. Perhaps this discrepancy is partly a result of different research methods, as a qualitative approach allows for more nuanced and detailed explanations.

Pan also claims that a ‘sexual revolution’ has occurred since the beginning of economic reform. Although the sexual culture in China has indeed changed since the end of the Mao era, Pan may overstate the case, especially when it comes to the current sexual climate and women. China’s sexual culture has transformed, yet it has provided more opportunities for men than women. With commercial sex work prevalent and accessible, as well as the *bao ernai* phenomenon increasingly common, men are clearly able to take part in these practices more easily. However, young women, as my findings suggest, are more constrained when it comes to their own sexual lives and choices. Women are still held to the Mao era standards of premarital chastity and expected to marry by age thirty.

These opportunities for men can be seen as limiting women even further when considering the fragility of marriage in the reform period. Women are frequently blamed for men’s transgressions, and their lack of wifely conduct and unfeminine appearance are seen as a main reason for marital breakdown. As a result, these beliefs work to encourage women to conform in order to avoid being ‘left’ and reinforce the ‘good/bad’ woman binary. Furthermore, given the recent changes to the Marriage Law in 2011, women are now more financially vulnerable in terms of property rights in the event of divorce (Hong Fincher, 2014). Thus even despite the transformation in China’s sexual culture, when compared to men, women are without question more constrained when it comes to their sexual lives and choices.

This thesis provides insight into the relationship between the traditional and the modern in China. In the last three decades, economic reform has resulted in a fast-paced development agenda, increased contact with international markets and some relaxing of Party-State control in the everyday lives of citizens. With the loosening of *hukou* restrictions and the dismantling of the *danwei*, young women are currently faced with

more choices and opportunities than any previous generation. Yet despite any rhetoric of gender equality, through its scientifically-driven modernization agenda, the Party-State continues to heavily shape and intervene in the socio-economic lives of women. From mandated population legislation to a discriminatory market economy, women have been encouraged to find fulfilment through wifehood and motherhood. The revival of Confucianism and the influence of filial piety also reinforce this version of womanhood and continue to play a significant role in everyday life. This form of state-managed individualism combined with remnants of Confucianism therefore affects the everyday lives of young women in a variety of ways and offers them a series of contradictory possibilities.

Given its historical past and current version of socialism 'with Chinese characteristics', China offers a peculiar landscape to examine sex, sexuality and intimate relations. My focus on the post-reform generation of young women highlights the continuities that remain and changes that have occurred concerning these issues. When it comes to their personal lives, young women are faced with conflicting demands, simultaneously expected to adhere to traditional definitions of womanhood whilst attempting to succeed in a new, unpredictable market economy. To understand what it means to be a woman in contemporary China is to therefore recognise the continuing presence of traditional patriarchal thought within an environment of socio-economic change.

## APPENDIX A: INFORMATION LETTER

Nicole Zarafonetis  
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YO10 5DD

Tel: 07774264899  
[ncz500@york.ac.uk](mailto:ncz500@york.ac.uk)

### Information Letter

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

Thank you very much for expressing interest in my research project.

As you know, I am doing a research project for my PhD thesis on young women in China at the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York. My research aims to explore the experiences shaping young women's lives in contemporary China. In particular, I am interested in exploring issues around relationships, intimacy, dating and marriage. I am traveling to Shanghai, China to speak with young women about their own thoughts and opinions in these areas.

The research will involve a face-to-face interview with me, the researcher, for approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. Depending on English language ability, a third person may be present to help interpret from Mandarin into English. These interviews will be conducted between June 2012 and July 2012.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. If you are happy to participate in my research, please read and fill in the attached Ethics and Consent form and return it to me via email.

I am looking forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely yours,

Nicole Zarafonetis

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### 活动信息

亲爱的 \_\_\_\_\_,

感谢您对我的研究给予关注。

目前我正在英国的约克大学攻读博士学位，研究议题是中国的年轻女性。我的研究目的是探索造成中国年轻女性当前生存现状的因素。我尤其对恋爱状况、亲密程度、约会和婚姻这些议题的展开感兴趣。我将赴中国上海与年轻女性对话，记录她们对以上话题的思想和主张。

整个研究活动以访谈形式进行，需要被访者与我面对面对话，时长大约 1 至 1.5 小时。考虑到被访者的英文水平，可以有第三个人参与，帮助把普通话翻译成英文。这些访谈从 2012 年 6 月持续到 7 月。

如果您有任何问题，请直接与我联系。如果您愿意参与我的研究，请阅读并填写《**伦理和同意表格**》并将填好后的表格通过电邮的方式回馈给我。

期待您的回复。

此致,

Nicole Zarafonetis

## APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

Nicole Zarafonetis  
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Tel: 07774264899  
[ncz500@york.ac.uk](mailto:ncz500@york.ac.uk)

### Ethics and Consent Form

Participant Number:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

In this consent form I explain how the information you provide will be used in and for my PhD research and I outline your rights with regards to your information throughout the duration of this research.

You will remain anonymous throughout the research process. In the research you will only be referred to by your research number or pseudonym, making sure that none of the information you provide can be traced back to you.

The interview will be audio recorded. The recording resulting from your interview will be kept in a secure location at all times. Upon final submission of my PhD thesis, the audio recording will be destroyed.

Everything you say will be kept confidential. If a translator or interpreter is used during the interview process and/or during transcription, they will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement in order to ensure your privacy.

The PhD dissertation will not be published publicly, but I may wish to use some of the findings for future public presentations and publications.

You have the right to remove yourself from the research process at any stage, without giving an explanation.

Please tick the correct box below whether you consent or not.



Statement	Yes	No
My information can be used in this research with the understanding that the information I provide will be kept anonymous and secure at all times.		
I agree to the interview being audio recorded.		
If necessary, I agree to have an interpreter, who has signed a confidentiality agreement, present.		
If necessary, I agree to have a translator, who has signed a confidentiality agreement, aid in the transcription process.		
I am happy for my information to be used in the PhD dissertation.		
I am happy to have my information used in other publications and presentations, on the understanding that it will be kept anonymous and treated with respect.		
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.		
I understand the aim of this research and my rights as a participant.		

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## 伦理和同意表格

参与者编号：

亲爱的 \_\_\_\_\_,

在这份同意表格里，我会解释您提供的信息将以何种方式被我的研究所采用，我也会列举出您在我整个研究过程中享有的权利。

您将在整个研究过程中匿名。您在研究中被提到的时候，会使用您的参与者编号或者假名，可以保证您所提供的信息不会被使用来追踪到您。

整个访谈会被录音。访谈录音会被严密保存直到我递交博士论文之际，之后会被销毁。

您所说的一切将被保密。如果在访谈或者翻译稿的生成中采用了翻译者，他们将被要求签订一份保密协议，以保护您的隐私。

我的博士论文将不会被公开发表，但我也许会在今后的演讲和公开出版物中采用其中一些结论。

您有权在研究的任意阶段无理由地退出访谈。

请在下面您认同的地方打勾。

声明	是	否
我的信息可以被应用于此次研究，只要保证匿名和信息保密。		
我同意谈话被录音。		
如有需要，我同意采用一名已签订保密协议的翻译来协助访谈。		
如有需要，我同意采用一名已签订保密协议的翻译来协助整理翻译谈话稿。		
我同意将我的信息应用在博士论文中。		
我同意将我的信息应用在其他出版物和演讲中，只要保证匿名并被小心对待。		
我认识到我的参与是义务的，且我有权在研究的任何阶段无理由退出。		
我认识到这次研究的目的和我作为一名参与者的权利。		

签名 ( 手写体 ) : \_\_\_\_\_

签名 ( 打印体 ) : \_\_\_\_\_

日期 : \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C: TRANSLATOR CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Nicole Zarafonetis  
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Tel: 07774264899  
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### Confidentiality Agreement for Translation and Interpretation

Project Title: Young Women's Perceptions of Sexuality, Sexual Conduct, Norms and Behaviours

Researcher: Nicole Zarafonetis

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

In this form, I outline the regulations regarding your involvement as interpreter and/or translator in the above research project. After reading the following statements, please indicate if you agree or not by ticking the appropriate box.

Statement	Yes	No
I understand that all the information I will be asked to interpret and/or transcribe is confidential.		
I understand that the contents of the interview discussion, interview sound files, interview notes and transcripts can only be discussed with the Researcher.		
I will not keep any copies of the interview discussion, interview sound files and interview transcript nor share them with anyone other than the Researcher.		
I will keep all research information secure while it is in my possession.		
I will return all information of any form or format to the Researcher when I have completed interpretation and/or translation. If transcribing, I will		

destroy or delete all interview and relevant files in any form or format from my computer.		
--	--	--

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

### Interview Schedule

#### *Family*

1. Tell me about your family. How would you describe your relationship with your family members?
2. How have your parents influenced you?
3. What kinds of expectations do you think your family has for you? How does this make you feel?
4. In what ways do you get along with your parents? What do you and your family argue about?
5. In what ways are you similar or different from your mother?
6. How do you think your life will be different from your mother's?

#### *Career and Work*

1. Tell me about your career ambitions. What type of career do you think you want? Why? (Or if employed) What type of job are you working in now? Do you like it? What is your ideal job?
2. What qualities do you think the average young woman needs to have in order to be successful in her career?
3. What kinds of obstacles do you think women face in the workforce today?
4. How do you think women should balance having a job and a family? Is this something you worry about for your future?
5. How do you feel men react to the idea of a working mother? What would your husband or your family say?

*Sexuality, Intimacy, Marriage and Relationships*

1. When do you think is the appropriate time to start thinking about dating? Why? What makes it appropriate?
2. How would you describe a typical date?
3. What would you say are the dating 'rules' or common customs for young women in Shanghai? Is this the same in your hometown or in the rest of China?
4. What do you think about women who show initiative in dating?
5. What qualities make a good boyfriend or girlfriend? What makes a good husband or wife?
6. How common is it for a boyfriend and girlfriend to have sex before marriage? When, if at all, should a girl think about having sex with her boyfriend? What do you and your friends think about it? What if he's not your boyfriend?
7. How were you taught about sex? Did anyone talk to you about it? Your parents? Your friends? Did you receive any education about it in school? If so, what was it like? From where do/did you get most of your information about sex?
8. What are your thoughts on marriage? Is it something that you want? Why or why not? What is the ideal age to get married?
9. Do/Did you experience family pressure to get married? How does/did it make you feel?
10. Why do people get married nowadays? (If you want to be married) What expectations do you have of married life?
11. What about women who are unmarried? What do people think of them? What do you think about women who are unmarried? How would you feel if you remained unmarried at thirty-five? At forty-five?

## *Future*

1. Where do you see yourself in five years? What about in ten years?
2. What do you hope to accomplish? What is your main ambition in life? What would be a failure? What don't you want to have happen?



## APPENDIX E: SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

**Table 1: Participant Profiles**

Participant #	Name	Age	Shanghainese?	Relationship Status	Occupation/Industry
1	Jenny	23	No	In a relationship	MA Student
2	Rose	23	No	Single	MA Student
3	Kitty	24	No	Single	MA Student
4	Faye	30	Yes	Single	Lawyer
5	Lucy	30	Yes	Single	IT Industry
6	Ruby	22	No	Single	Undergraduate Student
7	Audrey	28	Yes	Single	Sales
8	Sarah	25	Yes	Single	IT Industry
9	Wendy	27	No	Married	MA Student
10	Anna	24	No	Single	PR Assistant
11	Megan	25	Yes	Single	Accountant
12	Elaine	36	Yes	Divorced	Finance
13	Emily	28	Yes	Single	Blogger
14	Angela	28	Yes	In a relationship	IT Industry
15	Joan	26	No	Single	Teacher
16	Betty	25	Yes	Single	SOE Employee
17	Julia	28	Yes	Single	Blogger
18	Cynthia	32	No	Single	Event Planner
19	Peggy	26	No	Single	Teacher
20	Allison	27	Yes	Single	Marketing
21	Maureen	25	Yes	In a relationship	Finance
22	Phoebe	28	Yes	Single	Advertising
23	Samantha	24	Yes	Single	MA Student
24	Alicia	25	No	In a relationship	Headhunter
25	Tracy	32	Yes	Single	Headhunter
26	Vivian	24	Yes	Single	Marketing
27	Eloise	28	Yes	Single	Screenwriter
28	Laura	28	Yes	In a relationship	Fashion Industry
29	Ramona	27	Yes	Single	Sales
30	Naomi	30	Yes	In a relationship	Paralegal
31	Theresa	33	No	Single	Marketing
32	Bethany	22	Yes	In a relationship	Accountant
33	Cara	22	Yes	Single	MA Student
34	Martha	35	No	Single	Interior Decorator
35	Hannah	30	No	Newly married	Real Estate
36	Emma	30	No	Single	SOE Employee
37	Anya	27	No	Single	Executive Assistant
38	Jill	25	No	In a relationship	Sales
39	Mia	26	No	In a relationship	Sales
40	Lily	27	Yes	Single	Sales
41	Sonja	25	Yes	Single	Fashion Industry
42	Corinne	30	No	Single	Education Industry
43	Eleanor	28	No	Engaged	Real Estate

## GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS AND PHRASES

āyí	阿姨	aunt; can sometimes be used as slang for maid
bāo èr nǚ	包二奶	‘keeping a second wife’
dān wèi	单位	work unit
dàng’àn	档案	personal file or record
fù’èrdài	富二代	‘second generation rich son’
gāo kǎo	高考	national university entrance exam
guān xì	关系	networks of influence
hù kǒu	户口	household residency permit; commonly used to refer to the national residency system, the hùjí system (户籍).
jūn zǐ	君子	a noble or gentleman
pǔ tōng huà	普通话	common speech of Chinese language; Mandarin
shèng nǚ	剩女	"leftover woman"
sù zhì	素质	internal essence or quality
xiǎo jiě	小姐	young lady, miss; slang for prostitute
xiǎo sān	小三	‘third person party’ in a relationship
xiánqī liángmǔ	賢妻良母	‘virtuous wife and good mother’

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