Left Behind? Women's Status in Contemporary China

Editors

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Editorial

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Abstract

The status of women in China has deteriorated markedly since 2006 relative to other countries, according to the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index. Taking a longer view, the position of women has greatly improved since the founding of the People's Republic of China but, after the 'opening up' of the economy, the logic of the market and the legacy of patriarchy have worked to the detriment of women. After briefly reviewing trends in China's economic, demographic and social development, this editorial follows the structure of the thematic issue in focusing on the processes which may have caused women to slip behind. Socio-economic and political factors are considered first before focusing on the impact of unprecedently large scale migration. The circumstances and experiences of women 'left outside' mainstream society are explored next before reflecting on the lives of women left behind in poverty.

Keywords

China; economic development; employment; family; gender; marketisation; migration; patriarchy; poverty; women

1. Introduction

Whereas China ranked 63rd in world in 2006 in terms of gender equality, by 2018 it had slipped to 103rd place according to the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index. This issue of *Social Inclusion* is a response to this apparent decline in the relative status of women in China, the intention being to better understand its significance and the extent to which this reflects the lived experience of modern Chinese women.

For many readers, China will be mostly understood through the lenses of the Western media and Western scholarship, lenses that inevitably bring a certain distortion to the image. The mainstream media are prone to seeing China as something of a mystery, a waking giant, being at once exotic, inscrutable, backward and communist, a suppressor of human rights, the source of SARS and now of Coronavirus (Covid-19). Increasingly,

too, China is presented as a threat to Western hegemony: as an economic competitor that does not play by western rules, a political force that challenges western influence, signing countries with the minimum of fuss and obligation into its growing sphere of influence through the Belt and Road Initiative and, potentially, as a military rival, a nuclear power with proven competence in space and missile technology and with the highest annual spending on weaponry after the USA.

In terms of scholarship, China is often viewed as different, the exception or the interesting case (Oya, 2019; Whyte, 2020; Wu & Wilkes, 2018), a position sometimes similarly adopted by Chinese scholarship (Ho, 2014; Callahan, 2014). Arguably the oldest continuing culture, uniquely imbued with Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, it is frequently characterised as a society that is held together by shame rather than by guilt (as in Judeo-Christian cultures) and ruled through deference to

leaders who are expected to be virtuous (Ho, Fu, & Ng, 2004). While Chinese schools recount sacrifices made by patriotic ancient warriors whose heavily restored tombs are centres of tourism, the humiliations of the nineteenth century at the hands of Western powers and the brutal Japanese occupation in the 20th century are nadirs against which the Chinese Communist Party marks the national revival. But the New China, beginning in 1949 with the founding of the People's Republic of China, is effectively two new Chinas: one Marxist-Leninist under Mao Zedong, albeit with the peasantry rather than the proletariat as the nominal revolutionary force; the other, beginning in 1978 under Xiaoping Deng, a socialist market economy with so-called 'Chinese characteristics.' Both phases of New China are typically perceived in opposition to capitalism, individualism and western notions of freedom. The excesses of the first period, the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution, are often contrasted against the seldom questioned benefits of democracy, while the achievements of the second period, the unprecedented rate of economic and technological development, the successful assault on poverty, mass migration and urbanisation are said by China's critics to have come at the price of universal state surveillance and lack of individual freedoms.

In contrast to much of what has gone before, the contributions to this issue do not view China from outside but from within. Moreover, many of the studies presented here begin with, or are reliant on, accounts of ordinary lives, using qualitative methods to get close to the lived experience of women in a range of circumstances and situations. Consequently, we see much similarity between women in China and women elsewhere as they seek to renegotiate their multiple roles in rapidly changing times. We see too: the strong influence of patriarchy; the conflict between labour market expectations and social expectations as to who should nurture children and care for the old; the impact of migration that breaks bonds, offers freedoms but denies security and a sense of place; the impact of modernity that requires the forging of new identities and which can exacerbate tensions between generations; and the strength of traditional expectations that provide the continuity of culture, morphs newness into old and imposes limits on what is possible.

2. Rapid Change

All these tensions and challenges are set against the historically unprecedented rate of social and economic change represented by the two phases of New China—first, Marxist-Leninist, then, a socialist market economy. Still largely feudal in 1949, the basic law implemented by People's Republic of China established that year stated:

> The People's Republic of China shall abolish the feudal system which holds women in bondage. Women shall enjoy equal rights with men in political, economic, cultural, educational and social life. Freedom of mar-

riage for men and women shall be put into effect. (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, 1949, Article 6)

But the policies that followed were far from stable and thus somewhat contradictory for women. Legislation enacting these principles in 1950 triggered high rates of divorce that resulted within a few years in moves to regulate divorce and to promote family life. Likewise, when women entered the labour market in large numbers and the economy could no longer absorb them, they were encouraged to stay at home. Then, with the Great Leap Forward in 1958, they were commandeered to work in the fields vacated by men who had been recruited into new industrial ventures. And so, it remained, with female labour participation at 'saturation levels' until the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1975 and the so-called 'reform and opening-up' (*gaige kaifang*) of the economy in 1978 (Li, 2000). But in that more open economy, female participation had fallen back to 73% by 1990 and by 2019 had dropped to 61%, albeit still much higher than in either South Korea or Japan, countries that share a Confucian heritage.

Since the founding of the New China in 1949, income per capital GDP in real purchasing parity terms has increased by a factor of 21 reflecting the transition from a post-invasion, economically stagnant agricultural society to a post-industrial economy accounting for almost a sixth of the world's annual production and on the cusp of being designated high income status by the World Bank (Visualcapitalist, 2019). Most of this growth occurred after the economic opening-up; whereas per capita incomes merely doubled in real terms from 1949 to 1985, they have increased eight-fold since then. Thus, the transition from the Maoist period to market socialism brought with it profound economic and social change. Labour was shifted from the public to the private sector with the 'opening-up' of the economy; the numbers employed by state-owned enterprises more than halved between 2002 and 2019 from 44% to less than 20% (Guluzade, 2019). People migrated *en masse* from rural China to the towns with the population living in cities tripling from 20% in 1980 to virtually 60% in 2019. A high-speed rail network of some 30,000 kilometres has been built since 2008 and 28% of national energy needs are now met from renewable sources. Poverty, based on the US$1.90/day standard has been cut from about 40% in 2000 to almost nothing today, albeit in 2015, 377 million were still living on less than $5.50/day, the World Bank's target threshold for high middle-income countries like China (Walker, in press).

The population has almost tripled since the founding of the New China in 1949 but, unlike economic growth, much of the rise occurred during the Maoist period. China's population was 542 million in 1949 and had grown to 900 million in 1968 when the birth-rate was 3.95/100. By 1980, almost coincident with the introduction of the uniquely authoritarian One Child Policy popu-

lation control measures, the birth rate had already fallen to 2.20/100 (United Nations, 2020). In 2019, four years after the policy was abolished, with a rapidly aging population of 1.4 billion, the birth rate was only 1.14/100 with official revisions suggesting that it may be as low as 1.05/100 (L. Zhang, 2020). The sex ratio at birth, currently about 115 boys are born for every 100 girls, is the highest in the world, probably an unintended consequence of population control measures and Confucian notions of filial piety (Zhou, 2019). Men exceed women by about 33 million which has profound implications for relationship building and marriage and, given current gender roles, society's capacity to provide care for the elderly and for children (NBSC, 2019). 241 million Chinese (17.3%) are aged over 60 and demographic projections suggest that by 2050 nearly 35% will be aged over 65 (Chi, 2018; United Nations, 2020). Ignoring income forgone, the estimated cost of rearing a child to the age of 17 is 273,200 yuan in the city and 143,400 yuan in rural areas (Ma, 2020). While migrating parents are increasing trying to take their children with them to cities, almost 70 million children are still left behind in villages to be looked after by others, usually by their grandparents (Tong, Yan, & Kawachi, 2019).

It is, therefore, in this context of colossal social and economic change that the authors explore the status of women in contemporary China. The implicit question that they all, to a varying degree, address is to what extent and in what ways have women benefitted from these changes if, indeed, they have. Have they, as implied by China's decline in the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index, been left behind at least in relative terms? While it was the findings of the 2018 World Economic Forum report that provoked this thematic issue, it is worth noting that China has fallen three more places in the 2020 report and is now placed 106 out 153 (WEF, 2020).

In answering these questions, the twelve articles are grouped into four sections each with a more refined take on the question of being left behind: (1) left behind overall, (2) through migration, (3) outside mainstream society and (4) in poverty.

3. Women Left Behind?

The first two commissioned articles directly address the question of whether women in China have been left behind in economic, social and political terms over different time periods. Chen and He (2020) dissect the *Global Gender Gap Report* (GGGR) to determine the reasons for China's downward trajectory between 2006 and 2018. The story is complex but while new countries have been enrolled in the GGGR since it started, many with less gender inequality than China, this was not the major reason. Rather against the set of measures that constitute the GGGR, the status of women has simply not improved as quickly as it has in many other countries including China's East Asian neighbours.

Chen and He (2020) argue that the choice of measures is important. The GGGR indexes the gender gap with respect to economic participation, opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. While the original 112 countries included in the first GGR study in 2006 improved on three of the four dimensions, the exception being health and survival where equality had already been virtually attained, the position of women in China appears to have actually worsened on this dimension and not to have advanced as quickly on the others. However, the authors point out that, since China's imbalanced sex ratio at birth is heavily weighted on the health index and affects the gender balance, it is counted twice. This, they suggest, is the main reason why China ranks much higher (39 out of 189) on the UNDP's alternative Gender Inequality Index which uses the maternal mortality ratio and the adolescent birth rate to measure health inequality rather than the sex ratio at birth.

While these criticisms are valid, such strong sex male selection at birth must point to a profound undervaluing of girl children and women in Chinese society. This is even more notable given the strong ideological endorsement of gender equality at the foundation of the People's Republic of China. Moreover, this commitment is maintained in the rhetoric of the Chinese Communist Party and the aspiration to increase the proportion of women in the national and provincial bureaux is enshrined in election law. However, progress since 2006 is notable for its slowness in terms of representation in political bureaux and is virtually non-existent at ministerial level. Moreover, while the measures of political empowerment used in the GGGR have been criticised as elitist (Lin, 2018), representation of women is even worse at village level, where government most clearly intersects with daily life, something Yang (2020) again notes in her article.

The article by Yang (2020) complements that of Chen and He (2020), taking a longer time perspective and drawing on official statistics and survey data to provide an analysis of women's progress in the labour market and in politics. What we find is a story of two halves. Viewed from the perspective of 70 years, the progress towards gender equality has been substantial but with the arrival of a socialist market economy progress in many respects has stalled. At the birth of the People's Republic of China, the government sought to distinguish itself by ridding China of its 'feudal' legacy of which patriarchy and the virtual subjugation of women were characteristic elements. As Yang here describes, 'during Mao's era women laboured shoulder-to-shoulder with men' and, though this often meant acting like men while also carrying the burden of childrearing and housework, it brought social and economic status. The films of the era, such as Cui Wei's, *Mountain Flower* (*Shanhua*), released in 1976 often present women as workers' and village leaders. Moreover, women's incomes did rise significantly relative to men's reaching 79% in 1978 and 84% in 1988. But

with marketisation, by 2014 this figure had fallen to back to 66% in cities and 55% in the rural areas.

This fall in women's incomes relative to those of men occurred during a period in which rising educational attainment meant that the proportion of women employed in high status jobs doubled. Yang (2020) attributes this apparent contradiction to profit-seeking behaviour in the new era of a market economy. Because of maternity and childcare responsibilities, women have been seen as an expensive resource and have therefore been more prone to being laid off in recessions and less likely to be rewarded with promotion; women, the author concludes, are disadvantaged when resources are scarce. Women were disproportionately affected by closure of state owned industries and by the state's withdrawal from the provision of childcare which both contributed to the fall in female labour market participation since marketisation noted above.

Moreover, the predominantly male voice of profit from industry cannot be effectively answered by women in government. This gives lie to Mao's rhetoric of women holding up half the sky since, while the proportion of women in government positions has increased four-fold since 1978, this was from a very low base. As Chen and He (2020) show, China lags most other countries in women's access to political power. Yang explains this in terms of limited access to political positions and a reluctance to take these up because women feel the need to prioritise their "reproductive roles as dutiful wives" concluding that "gender equality which is now seen to be conditional on the premise of not harming the interests of men" (Yang, 2020, p. 32).

Zhong and Peng (2020), in the third article of this opening section, show how the policies associated with marketisation, notably the abandonment of collectivist notions of childcare, have divided the interests of women. Throughout the era of the socialist market economy Chinese women have been expected to continue in their twin roles of worker and mother. For many women this has proved to be impossible. For rural migrants, it has long been accepted that it is grandmothers, and to a lesser extent, grandfathers back in the villages who have assumed the role of 'mother,' taking on 24-hour childcare for indefinite periods. However, the authors demonstrate, through evidence from a qualitative study conducted in Guangzhou, a city emblematic of the market economy, that grandmothers similarly facilitate the careers of middle-class Chinese women in urban economies. With a weakening of the patrilineal tradition of intergenerational support in urban China, maternal grandmothers are playing an increasingly important role in the adult lives of their daughters as mothers.

The round-the-clock care provided by live-in grandmothers is cheap for parents compared to the cost of employing a nanny or buying private childcare; money seldom changes hands although parents salve consciences by giving presents and paying for holidays. Parents also perceive grandparental care to be safer and more agreeable despite frequent intergenerational disputes over styles of childcare. But, Zhong and Peng (2020) argue, the cost of mothers' economic freedom is borne by grandmothers whose own personal needs are scarcely recognised. Intriguingly, too, the authors argue that, while the success of marketisation has been facilitated by the preparedness of grandmothers to support employment of their daughters and daughters-in-law, their reluctance to continue in this role is likely to limit the success of the current two-child policy.

4. Left behind through Migration

China's economic growth since 'opening-up' has been underpinned by the world's largest ever rural–urban migration: 288 million rural migrants, 35% of them women, comprise more than a third of the working population (CLB, 2019). Such migration was probably never envisaged by Xiaoping Deng and the architects of economic reform. Indeed, in the earlier era, the *hukou* registration system was specifically introduced in 1958 to prevent migration to the towns for China's continuing revolution was to be led by the liberated peasantry. The legacy of the *hukou* system is that it makes most migration nominally temporary since migrants' access to welfare support is restricted to their place of origin. Access to an urban *hukou*, available to a few migrants based on education and employment status, is a highly prized asset.

The four articles in the second section emphasise that migration, although frequently driven by economic necessity, is often itself an expression of freedom and can additionally liberate migrants from the traditional beliefs and social structures that reproduce inequality including those associated with gender. However, these articles also demonstrate the power of culture and social norms to extend beyond geographic boundaries and for patriarchy to continue to constrain the freedoms of women. Particularly important is the persistence of the 'feudal' tradition of patrilocality, the wife moving to and joining the husband's family, a bride price being paid to the wife's parents by way of compensation. Fan and Chen (2020) and Yang and Ren (2020) examine the motivations and consequences for women of internal migration, while the other two articles in this section draw attention to international migration. Tu and Xie (2020) focus on out migration to the UK while Huang (2020) considers inward migration from Vietnam.

It is frequently suggested that China's rural-urban migration has evolved in particular ways over time (Duan, Lv, & Zou, 2013). Initially, it involved migration only the during slack farming seasons, then more long-term migration with children being left behind, then families reuniting in cities, and finally migration being undertaken by parents together with their children. A third of the 103 million children currently affected by migration live with their parents in cities, the other two-thirds are left behind (CLB, 2019). Fan and Chen (2020) both accept and problematise this conceptualisation of the evolution

of migration, showing, through the life experiences of two women from Anhui province, that the sequencing can apply structurally, to first and subsequent generations of migrants, but also occur within extended families. Moreover, because families cope flexibly with changing circumstances, the sequencing is not necessarily linear.

The two women that the authors follow, Yingyue and Shaun, were born respectively in 1962 and 1992 and represent two generations straddling China's economic opening-up. Yingyue was initially left behind looking after two children only migrating to the city when her own daughter left school early. Somewhat resonating with Zhong's study, she now lives in another city caring for her son's two children, her husband having returned to the village home to look after the family farm. Shaun, brought up by her grandfather, left school early, and migrated to join her parents, working in factories in Ningbo. Introduced to a man in her home village, Shaun married at 20 returning with her husband to Ningbo and his parents. She briefly went back to her home village to give birth and then returned to Ningbo providing domestic labour for her in-laws. Having a second child, Shaun moved back in her home village where, albeit longing to return to work, she cares for the children while her husband is away working in a family courier firm. In both cases, migration added to living standards but did not liberate the women from their first obligation, to care for their husbands, children and in-laws.

The in-depth accounts of the experiences of these two women are echoed in the lives of the 124 female villagers in Maple Village in Shanxi province studied by Yang and Ren (2020), 96 of whom had undertaken migrant work. These migrant women also find themselves ultimately confined by patriarchy and often by patrilocality, although their migration initially shifts power relations, first within the matrimonial home and then, more permanently, between generations. Outside the home, however, where women might want to exploit their skills acquired from migration, for example by participating in village governance, they encounter great external resistance often in the form of overt male prejudice. This perhaps helps to explain the underrepresentation of women in government noted by Yang (2020).

Most of the women in Maple village had left the village immediately after finishing school. In the city, they found work hard, often feeling exploited, but they enjoyed hitherto unknown freedoms, not least the opportunity to choose a husband. On marriage, usually with both spouses working in the city, the woman not infrequently earning more than the man, domestic chores were often shared. Moreover, parents found that their sons and daughters-in-law were contributing more than they were to the overall income of the extended family which meant collective decisions favoured the young or, at least, promoted their earning power. With one child, it was often decided that, after a short spell in the village, the woman would re-join their husband in the city. A second child tended to make this option look less at-

tractive but, caring for children back in the husband's village and unsupported as a 'foreigner' by the community, they rapidly lost their autonomy reverting to the role of dutiful daughter-in-law.

From Tu and Xie's (2020) article, it seems that even migration abroad, specifically to the UK in the case of their study, does not free women from the traditional values. Without siblings, daughters of middle-class parents are expected to perform as sons, advancing the status of the family through education and economic success, while also behaving as good daughters. Parents believe that having their daughter study abroad is an investment in the family, exchanging economic for social capital. However, in so doing parents seem to recognise that they are also taking a risk. If their daughter is too high an achiever, this may reduce the chance of her finding a 'suitable' husband, since Chinese men expect to marry beneath themselves, and becoming a good wife means supporting the husband's career rather than their own. While mothers perhaps seemed more supportive of their daughters chosen career paths than fathers, they too held to the notion that it was a good marriage that made a Chinese woman "truly successful." From the three case-studies presented by Tu and Xie (2020), it seems that daughters can do little to resist their families' expectations, "pulled back" by parents "left behind" in China.

A Chinese marriage was also the aspiration of many of the female Vietnamese migrants that Huang (2020) studied in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands defined by the Nanning/the Friendship Port/Hanoi economic corridor. While the desire to escape rural poverty is the underlying motivation to enter the borderlands, where two cultures coalesce around the goal of economic development, the migrant's motives are complex. Not so much running away, as going somewhere, Vietnamese women migrants aspire to a better life, to be enterprising and adventurous and modern. Leaving the village, they also leave pressures to marry young and become a man's chattel, they can choose their own marriage partner and a Chinese marriage perceived to be more egalitarian than in rural Vietnam. Although many rotate between village and town, these women appear, without restrictions equivalent to *hukou*, to be less bound by place. But while wages for equivalent work are higher in China than Vietnam, their limited education and gender make them vulnerable to economic and sexual exploitation and, as female migrants, to stigma and innuendo both in the borderlands and back in their villages. A Chinese husband becomes a legitimation and a defence, symbolic of success and, ironically when set against the life experiences of women migrants in China, a manifestation of personal freedom.

5. Left Outside Mainstream Society

The three articles that concern women who find themselves to be on the edges of modern Chinese society are connected by the theme of intersectionality.

In their article, Wang and Liu (2020) introduce Lydia who, although becoming an outsider, is the embodiment of, and perhaps a metaphor for, China's economic opening-up. A successful voice performance student, Lydia lost her virginity on her first date with a motorbike-riding "prince," nine years older than herself. His mother, rich as the chair of a state-owned enterprise and owning an associated private company, doted on her son, buying him a karaoke club on Lydia's whim. Without entrepreneurial talent or knowledge of the commercial sex industry, Lydia and her boyfriend enjoyed the club's profitability with heroin use being demonstrative of their wealth and success, and multiple abortions easy to pay for. Everything changed when first, her boyfriend's mother was jailed for corruption and secondly, he was imprisoned for sheltering prostitution and carrying a gun. Heroin addiction put her in frequent contact with police, repeated courses of drug-rehabilitation failed, a baby was born and died of neglect, and Lydia contracted HIV/AIDS, a shock that seemed to "save her," allowing her to begin a new life benefiting from China's new treatment system, the 'Four Frees and One Care.'

Lydia, then, was caught in the maelstrom of marketisation, freed from convention and family to play roles as lover, entrepreneur and extravagant consumer, she lacked a social or moral compass and could not escape becoming a victim of a patriarchal society that legitimates male exploitation of women. Taking Lydia's experience as a metaphor for China's socialist market economy, it is notable that she was "saved" by state intervention.

China's sex industry is also the context for Ding's (2020) article in which she argues that women should not be reduced to the label 'sex-worker,' preferring the term *xiaojie*. In ancient China, *xiaojie* was the polite form of address for unmarried daughters of rich families and has become associated with prostitution only in the last decade. It is the term that Ding found was preferred by women engaged in the sex industry in the economically successful Pearl River Delta area of southern China. The author likens what *xiaoxies* do to the self-employment, informal employment and temporary employment that has increasingly replaced formal work in the public (*gongzuo*) and private (*dagong*) sectors. *Xiaojies*, as second or third generation migrants, generally unskilled, poor and stigmatised, seek to avoid the exploitation that they believe factory work to be, and to identify themselves with their portfolio of roles: singer, dancer, girlfriend, confidant, networker, businesswoman and *chulai*. The term *chulai*, literally meaning to 'come out,' seems to connect to the experience of the migrant women in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands: rural woman surviving and seeking to prosper in the modern city.

In the third article in this section, Pei, Zheng, and Gao (2020) explore the intersection of gender and disability, or more strictly of patriarchy and ableism, and the potential of the internet to enhance social capital and earning power. While the five cases discussed cannot meaningfully represent the approximately 8.5 million disabled women of working age in China, most of whom have not completed a full school curriculum, they do illustrate the power of social media to engage. With assistive technology, the internet has the capacity to limit the impact of physical, mobility and sensory disabilities, the five respondents all being able to generate meaningful amounts of income as salespeople and through streaming activities. Pointedly, though, most use the internet to hide their disability rather than to challenge prejudice, in part because they have been harassed on-line and accused of being "internet beggars." While China aspires to promote "high-quality development of employment for disabled people in the new era," much clearly needs to be done the change public attitudes and welcome disabled people into mainstream society (Xinhua News, 2019).

6. Left Behind in Poverty

China is politically committed to eradicating extreme, rural poverty in 2020, the outcome of a concerted campaign pursued particularly rigorously under the personal leadership of Chairman Xi, Jinping since 2015. Currently it is thought that the 14th Five Year Plan will acknowledge the existence of urban poverty for the first time and introduce a measure of relative poverty. In many respects, though, as Li (2020) notes in her article on lone parenthood, poverty alleviation policy is gender blind.

With the population and family planning law imposing fines on women who give birth out of wedlock (called 'social support expenditure'), most lone or single mothers, of whom there are 20 million in China, are divorcees or widows. This was also true of the author's sample of 42 women studied in Zhuhai in the Pearl River Delta. Single mothers are particularly prone to poverty due to China's patriarchal norms and the government's emphasis on familial rather than collective support. The author found that financial hardship was acute in her sample, women's careers were truncated, stress-related physical and mental health disorders were prevalent, and social relationships and social capital were severely constrained. As daughters, their education had been less prioritised by their parents while, as mothers, they were expected to prioritise childcare above career. This meant that, combined with gender inequalities in the labour market and only expensive childcare being available, their earning power was extremely limited. As divorcees, lone mothers could be considered as failed wives, disappointing their parents and rejected by in-laws, they felt required to make amends by devoting their lives to child-rearing. They had little time to socialise and to find a prospective partner and, in addition, their prospects for re-marriage were low as, with children, they presented a double liability. Li (2020) argues persuasively for policies that recognise the negative impact of China's familistic culture and its negative impact on lone mothers.

The final article by G. Zhang (2020) is especially apposite in that, while Li (2020) discusses poverty result-

ing from the loss of a husband, he explores marriage migration as a strategy by which women escape poverty. Transactional marriage, in which a bride is effectively sold to relieve the poverty of her natal family, was prevalent in China in the 1980s and in earlier eras and possibly still exists. However, the author uses the term 'marriage migrant' (*waidi xifu*) to describe an outcome matching the aspirations of the Vietnamese migrants observed by Huang (2020). Young women migrate for work, find husbands and stay with them in more prosperous regions of China. This change from a collective familial to an individual response to poverty might be seen as an aspect of modernity, the personal 'I' taking precedence over the family 'we,' with the natal family gaining little save a mouth less to feed. However, it also reflects traditional values of patrilocality and the wife's expected allegiance to her in-laws.

What the author concludes is that, while marriage migrants may escape absolute poverty, they rarely escape relative poverty, the stigma of being a migrant being enough to deny them the chance of marrying an economically successful local. Instead, the best that they can hope for is to have a son who is able to marry well as a result of the hard work and sacrifice of his mother and father. Moreover, despite trying to socially integrate and to be accepted, the women that the author interviewed were seldom able to overcome the shame of once being a poor migrant looking for a husband. If not left behind, socially they are put aside.

7. Conclusion

The articles in this issue confirm that the status of women was much enhanced following the founding of the Peoples' Republic of China but that since the opening-up of the economy, the logic of the market has worked against women. Profit maximisation does not value non-marketable work and the transfer of child and social care back from state to family has increased the burden on women. While it can be debated whether the indicators used in the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index discriminate against China, and thereby understate the status of women in China, women are undeniably massively underrepresented in senior positions in business and throughout government. Without access to the political decisions that matter, women will continue to be left behind and left outside in China.

In reading and interpreting Chinese scholarship, it is helpful to note some conventions. Much scholarship is normative, interpreting the world from a Marxist-Leninist perspective and increasingly through the thoughts of Chairman Xi Jinping. Empirical work, such as that represented by articles in this issue, is comparatively rare. Chinese culture is to believe that China is the first among equals or, indeed, that China is a model that it is for others to follow. Direct criticism of academic work is unusual; this is to avoid inflicting loss of face and experiencing it by return. Direct criticism of government pol-

icy is even more unusual; academics are expected to be moral and to believe what is politically correct. Critique of policy implementation can be acceptable if it is directed towards lower levels in the administrative hierarchy. If critique is sometimes acceptable, being overtly political never is. Finally, it is an essential interpretive skill to seek and find meaning from the words that are missing.

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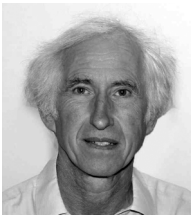
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Part I.

Women Left Behind?

Article

Falling behind the Rest? China and the Gender Gap Index

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Abstract
China's rank falling in the Global Gender Gap Index of the World Economic Forum has aroused the domestic scholar's controversy. Based on the data provided by the Global Gender Gap Report, this article will describe the gender inequality in China by comparing its overall index scores and scores in the fields of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment with other countries, and then examining the reasons for China's falling in rank through the score changes of sub-dimensions and indicators. Analysis of the data suggests that China has not kept up with the rate of improvement in the overall index, and in the four fields, compared to the original 112 countries, the upper-middle income countries, and the Asian and Pacific countries. Over the 13 years covered by the report, China's score experienced a rapid improvement from 2006 to 2009 and a decline after 2013. China's high sex ratio at birth, further expansion of gender inequality in active life expectancy, and an enlarged gender gap in secondary education caused China's lagging overall score and ranking. In addition, the inclusion of measures such as secondary education enrollment, political empowerment, and other indicators also led to the backward ranking of China to some extent.

1. Introduction

Gender inequality is a basic dimension of social inequality, which is related to the development opportunities and well-being of women and men in society. In order to measure the gender gap around the world, the international community has opened up multiple indicator systems, including the Gender Development Index, the Gender Empowerment Measure, the Gender Inequality Index (GII), the UNESCO's Gender Parity Index, and the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR). Among such index systems, the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) from the WEF has had the most significant impact. In order to capture the magnitude of

gender-based disparities and tracking their progress over time, the GGGI comprehensively and systematically evaluates the gender gap in the fields of economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment of participating countries. The GGGR has thus become the main source of information reflecting the gender inequality around the world.

After the release of the GGGR in 2018, China's ranking dropped from 63 in 2006 to 103, which caused great controversy in China. Chinese scholars' arguments on China's ranking mainly include two aspects: First, it was argued that the indicators are unreasonable and some data sources have not been updated in time (Tang, 2019; Yang, 2018; Zheng, 2019). Secondly, it was also suggested

that it is too simple to directly compare the data of 2006 and 2018, because the countries participating in the assessment in 2006 and 2018 are different (Tang, 2019). The GGGR reflects the gender equality of a country through two indicators—the score and ranking. The former reflects the absolute level of gender inequality in a country: The higher the score, which ranges from 0 through 1, the smaller the remaining gender gap. The latter is a relative indicator. In comparison, the ranking is more likely to be influenced by the number of participating countries. This article will focus on the question of why China's ranking on the world's foremost indicator of gender inequality has fallen markedly, from 63 to 103 between 2006 and 2018. How to understand the trend in the overall GGGI for China during this period and which factors directly lead to these changes will be discussed in this article.

In order to take account of the fact that the countries participating in the assessment in 2006 and 2018 are not the same, this study will take the 112 countries (including China) participating in the assessment in both years as a sample to study the relative position of China's gender gap. Accordingly, using the data from the 112 original countries provided in the GGGR 2006 and 2018, this study mainly focuses on descriptive statistics, reviews the changes of China's scores and rankings in overall and each field according to each indicator, and compares them with the world average (the average level of 112 original countries), countries at the same level of development (upper-middle income countries), and Asian and the Pacific countries. Based on the comparison, this article will make a more comprehensive judgment on the situation of gender inequality in China. In this process, the researchers will combine the relevant research and data released by the Chinese government to confirm or question the conclusions based on GGGR data. The data sources of this study mainly include *The Global Gender Gap Report (2006–2018)* published on the website of the WEF. The final part of this article reflects on the selection of the indicators used in the GGGI, in combination with the factors that lead to China's backward ranking.

2. China's Overall Index

China's gender gap index experienced a great change from 2006 to 2018—its overall score increased from 0.656 in 2006 to 0.673 in 2018 with rank falling from 63 to 103. Among the 112 original countries, China ranked 82 in 2018, with a fall of 19 places. The increasing score indicated that China's overall gender inequality has slightly improved, but the falling rank indicated that its speed of improvement was slower than the world average. From 2006 to 2018, the overall score in 112 countries improved by 0.040, an increase of 6.0%; China grew by 0.017, an increase of 2.6%. Over the same period, the index for upper-middle income countries, of which China is one, rose by 0.040, an increase of 6.0%, while that for Asian and the Pacific countries increased by an average of 0.034, an increase of 5.0% (see Table 1). At the same time, China's gender gap index in 2018 was below than 0.677, the average level of the new added 37 countries.

In terms of China's change trajectory (as shown in Figure 1), an initial rapid reduction in the gender gap was followed by a slow increase. During 2006–2009, China's overall score increased rapidly by 0.035 (5.3%), while the average score for the other 112 countries participating in the assessment over the same period rose by 0.017 (2.6%). The year 2013 was an important turning point. From 2013 to 2018, China's score decreased by 0.018 (2.6%) while that for the original countries participating in the assessment increased by 0.023 (3.4%). China's score was basically equal to that of the 112 original countries in 2013 but by 2018 had fallen to just 95.8% of the average level of those original countries.

3. China's Performance on the Four Sub-Indexes

There are four subfields to the index: economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; and political empowerment. In the four fields, the difference in educational attainment and economic participation and opportunity between China and 112 original countries was not significant in 2018, while the difference in health and survival and political empowerment was large. China's score in health and survival was 93.9% of the average level and 74.5% in political empowerment.

During 2006–2018, China's scores for economic participation and opportunity fluctuated rapidly. In general, the index increased by 0.032 (5.2%), which was less than for the 112 countries (0.052), and for upper-middle income countries (0.061; see Table 2). China ranked 53 in 2006, 86 out of 149 countries, and 67 out of the 112 original countries in 2018, with a drop of 14 places. The

Table 1. Comparison of overall scores between China and other countries.

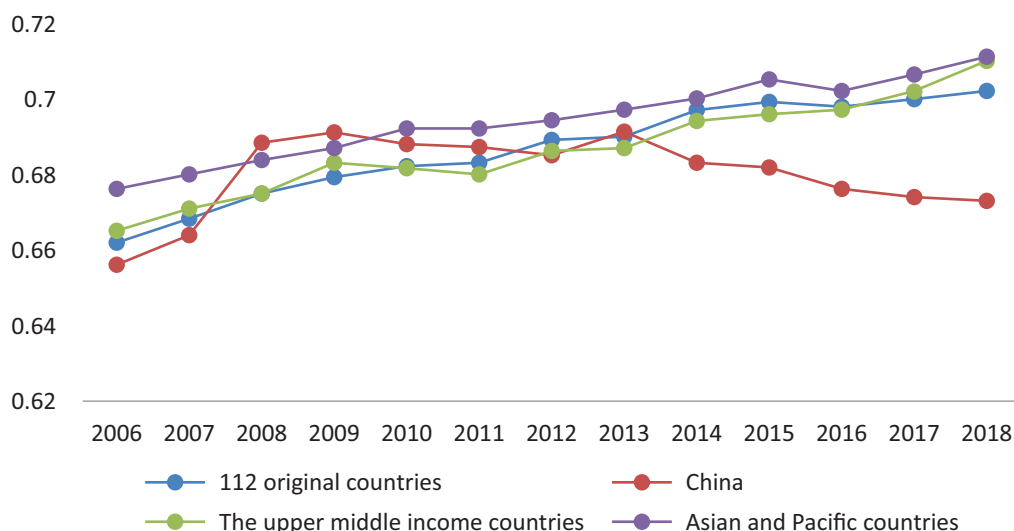|	2006	2018	Change	Rate of change (%)
China	0.656	0.673	0.017	2.6
The 112 original countries	0.662	0.702	0.040	6.0
The upper-middle income countries	0.664	0.704	0.040	6.0
Asian and the Pacific countries	0.674	0.708	0.034	5.0
37 countries added after 2006	—	0.677	—	—

Source: WEF (2006, 2018).

Figure 1. Time series comparison of GGGI. Source: WEF (2006, 2008–2018).

change trajectory in this field was similar to the overall score (see Figure 2). From 2006 to 2009, the gender inequality in this field improved rapidly, with a score increase of 0.075 (12.1%), then came to decline after 2009, with a decrease of 0.043 points or 6.2% until 2018. In 2009, China scored 1.11 times the average of the 112 original countries, and in 2015, whereas China's score had fallen to the average level of those original countries.

In 2018, the overall inequality in educational attainment in China was slightly higher than the average. During 2006–2018, the improvement in gender inequality in China's education field was not significant, with an increase of just 0.001 (0.1%). In 2006, in terms of the gender gap of educational attainment, China ranked 78, 111 out of 149 countries in 2018 and 88 out of the 112 original countries, a decline of 10 places. During the same period, the average index scores for educational attainment for the 112 original countries, the upper-middle income countries, and Asian and the Pacific countries increased by 0.025 (2.7%), 0.009 (0.9%), and 0.023 (2.4%) respectively. In contrast, China's improvement was much slower than the world average and the countries with the same development level. In terms of trend, China's index for educational attainment also mirrored its over-

Table 2. Comparison of the scores of China and other countries in four sub-indexes.

|		2006	2018	Change	Rate of change (%)
Economic participation and opportunity	China	0.621	0.653	0.032	5.2
	The 112 original countries	0.598	0.650	0.052	8.7
	The upper-middle income countries	0.593	0.654	0.061	10.3
	Asian and the Pacific countries	0.664	0.699	0.035	5.3
	37 countries added after 2006	—	0.649	—	—
Educational attainment	China	0.957	0.958	0.001	0.1
	The 112 original countries	0.940	0.965	0.025	2.7
	The upper-middle income countries	0.973	0.982	0.009	0.9
	Asian and the Pacific countries	0.961	0.984	0.023	2.4
	The 37 countries added after 2006	—	0.935	—	—
Health and survival	China	0.936	0.915	−0.021	−2.2
	The 112 original countries	0.973	0.973	0	0
	The upper-middle income countries	0.972	0.975	0.003	0.3
	Asian and the Pacific countries	0.971	0.969	−0.002	−0.2
	37 countries added after 2006	—	0.971	—	—
Political empowerment	China	0.111	0.164	0.053	47.7
	The 112 original countries	0.140	0.219	0.079	56.4
	The upper-middle income countries	0.127	0.206	0.079	62.2
	Asian and the Pacific countries	0.116	0.180	0.064	55.2
	37 countries added after 2006	—	0.152	—	—
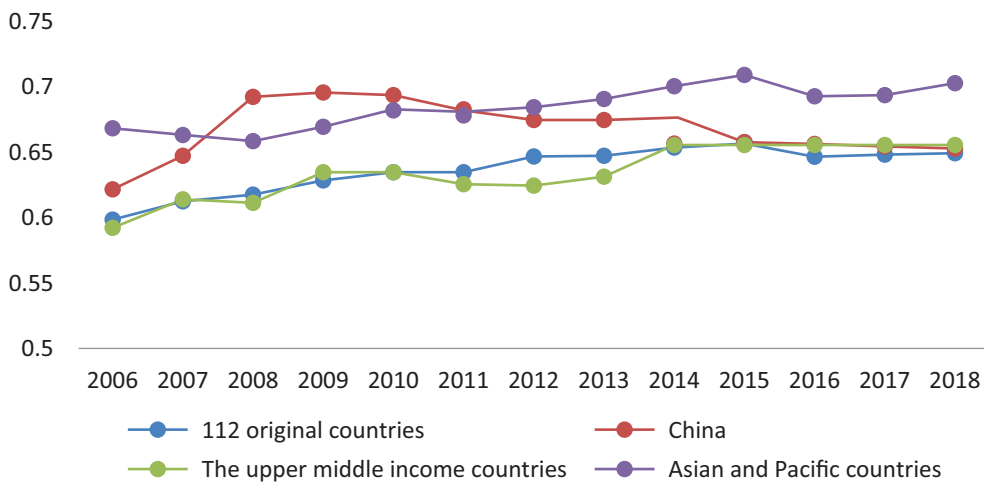
Figure 2. Time series comparison of economic participation and opportunities. Source: WEF (2006, 2008–2018).

all score, with rapid growth of 0.023 (2.4%) from 2006 to 2008, while the average increase for the other 112 countries during the same period was 0.008 (0.9%). From 2009 to 2015, China's score for gender equality in educational attainment was far higher than the average, but it started to decrease markedly from 2016, falling by 0.03 points (3%) by 2018 (as shown in Figure 3).

Health and survival was the only field in which China's gender gap increased almost continuously between 2006 and 2018, with its score correspondingly decreasing by 0.021. Over the same period, the average score of 112 countries and the upper-middle income countries increased but only slightly. Moreover, the score for the Asian and Pacific countries also decreased but less so (0.002), suggesting that this pattern might be partly related to cultural factors. In terms of the change trajectory, China's score fell rapidly between 2009 and 2010 and after 2014. By 2018, it was the last of all countries on this component of the overall index.

In the framework of gender inequality constructed by GGGR, China's gender gap with respect to political empowerment showed the greatest improvement. That said, according to the data provided by GGGR,

gender inequality in political empowerment was higher than the average for all countries and for those at the same income level. During 2006–2018, the index score for China increased by 0.053 (47.7%), while that for the 112 original countries increased by an average of 0.079 (56.7%) and that for the upper-middle income countries increased by 0.079(62.7%); China's improvement was much slower than the world average and the countries with the same development level.

China's gender gap in economic participation, educational attainment, and political empowerment was smaller than the 37 new added countries. However, the gender gap in health and survival was enlarged which led to backward ranking of China.

4. Index of Indicators in the Four Fields

4.1. Economic Participation and Opportunity

Female participation in the labor force in China was much above average in 2006 (see Table 3). However, during the period 2006–2018, China's gender gap relating to labor force participation increased rather than narrow-
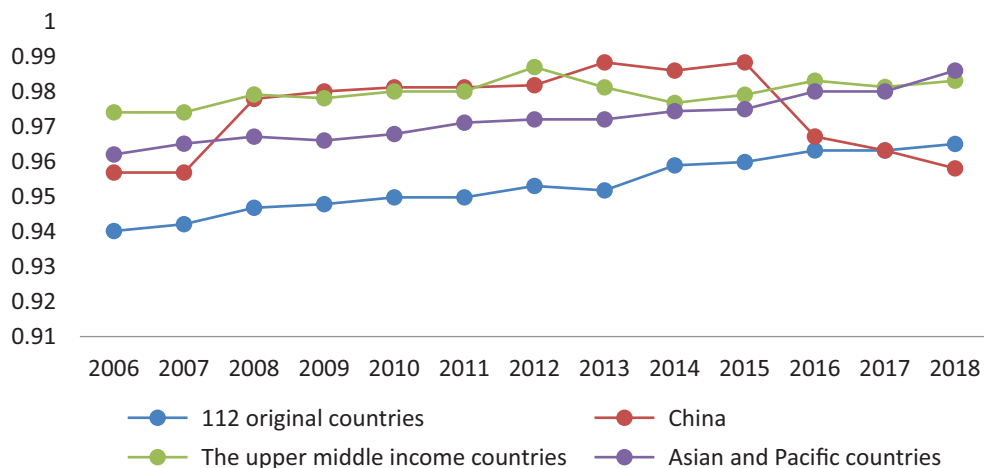

Figure 3. Time series comparison of educational attainment. Source: WEF (2006, 2008–2018).

Table 3. Comparison of the scores of China and other countries in economic participation and opportunity.

Economic participation and opportunity		2006	2018	Change	Rate of change (%)
Labor participation	China	0.84	0.831	−0.009	−1.1
	The 112 original countries	0.685	0.748	0.063	9.2
	The upper-middle income countries	0.670	0.722	0.052	7.8
	Asian and the Pacific countries	0.74	0.791	0.051	6.9
Wage equality for similar work	China	0.61	0.643	0.033	5.4
	The 112 original countries	0.637	0.640	0.003	0.5
	The upper-middle income countries	0.630	0.617	−0.013	−2.1
	Asian and the Pacific countries	0.708	0.709	0.001	0.1
Estimated earned income	China	0.66	0.621	−0.039	−5.9
	The 112 original countries	0.528	0.588	0.060	11.4
	The upper-middle income countries	0.472	0.601	0.129	27.3
	Asian and the Pacific countries	0.593	0.638	0.045	7.6
Legislators, senior officials, and managers	China	0.14	0.201	0.061	43.6
	The 112 original countries	0.359	0.469	0.110	30.6
	The upper-middle income countries	0.366	0.497	0.131	35.8
	Asian and the Pacific countries	0.352	0.466	0.114	32.4
Professional and technical workers	China	0.81	1.00	0.190	23.5
	112 original countries	0.794	0.867	0.073	9.2
	The upper-middle income countries	0.848	0.953	0.105	12.4
	Asian and the Pacific countries	0.834	0.918	0.084	10.1

ing, as indicated by a 1.1% fall in the index, while the two indicators of the remuneration gap take on different trends. The improvement in wage equality for similar work was much greater than elsewhere although even by 2018 China had not caught up with other countries in Asia. However, the gap in estimated earned income in China which in 2006 was much narrower than average subsequently expanded during this period, with the score decreasing by 0.039 (5.9%), while that of other countries rose causing China's ranking to drop from 19 in 2006 to 73 out of 149 countries in 2018. Among the 112 countries, it ranked 58 in 2018. During the same period, the score for the 112 original countries increased by 0.060 (11.4%), that of the upper-middle income countries by 0.129 (27.3%), and Asian and the Pacific countries by 0.045 (7.6%). Although women's participation rate in the labor market remains relatively high, the gap between women and the men's wage in the labor market has widened, a finding confirmed by other research examining the effects of the economic transformation (Li & Li, 2008).

The two indicators intended to capture the advancement gap, the percentage of, first, legislators, senior officials, and managers and, secondly, the percentage of professional and technical workers who are women, have both improved in China. In detail, the greatest improvement occurred with respect to professional and technical workers, with an increase in the index of 0.190 (23.5%), compared to smaller increased for the original 112 countries, the upper-middle income countries, and the Asian and the Pacific countries, namely 0.073 (9.2%), 0.105

(12.4%), and 0.084 (10.1%) respectively. In this regard, China has achieved gender equality, which could be attributed to the rapid expansion of higher education in China. However, in contrast, women in China are likely to face higher barriers than those in other countries in acquiring positions as legislators, senior officials, and managers. In 2018, China scored 0.201 on this criterion and, although the score increased by 0.061 (43.6%) between 2006 and 2018, China still lags behind the world average level and that of countries the same level of development (as shown in Figure 4).

There is a basic contradiction in the gender gap in the economic field, that is, on the one hand, the rapid reduction in gender inequality in the field of education leading to improvement of women's education level provide human capital sufficient for women to enter high-income industries; on the other hand, a rising income gap between different genders for similar work, and women's access to managerial opportunities in the labor market remaining low. The underlying reason may be increased occupational gender segregation in the labor market since the economic transformation (Deng & Ding, 2012; Wu & Wu, 2009). The existing research finds that the higher the degree of marketization, the greater the impact of occupational gender segregation, and the higher the degree of occupational segregation, the greater the gender income gap (He & Wu, 2017). Occupational gender segregation is essentially a kind of structural discrimination against women in the labor market, which can be divided into horizontal occupational segregation and vertical position segregation (Anker, 1997; Tong & Wang,
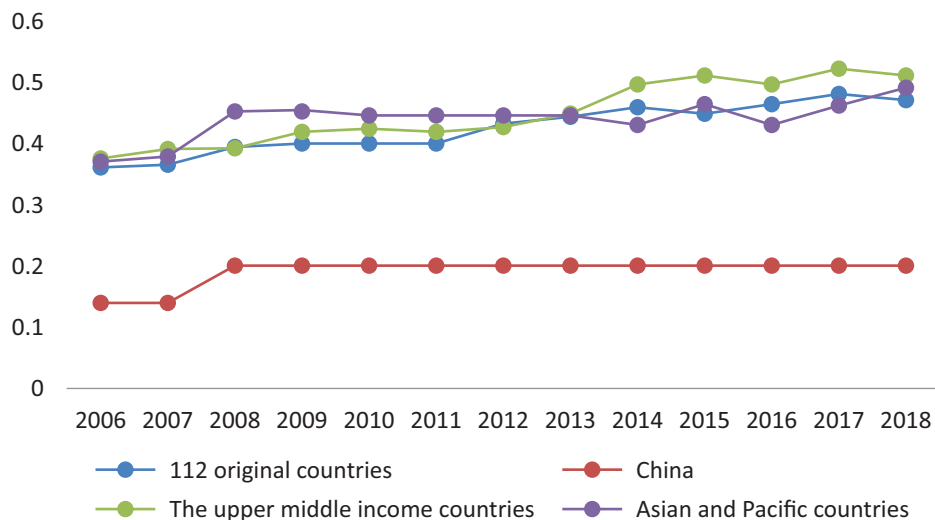
Figure 4. Trend comparison of scores on legislators and senior officials. Source: WEF (2006, 2008–2018).

2013). According to Li and Li (2008), gender discrimination in China's labor market since the economic transformation is likely to have shifted from the form of 'same work with different pay' to a more implicit allocative discrimination and to occupational segregation. Wu & Wu (2009) found that gender segregation of industrial occupations was the main determinant of the gender income gap among urban workers in China. Also, within the same industry, women are heavily concentrated at the bottom of the job 'pyramid' structure such that 41% of the gender income gap is caused by occupation segregation (Qing & Zheng, 2013). Thus, these two forms of segregation explain the widening gender gap in income in China's labor market, phenomena that have also been shown to explain most of the earning disparities between men and women in other countries (Cohen & Huffman, 2003; Petersen & Morgan, 1995).

4.2. Educational Attainment

China's educational gender gap resembles 'spindles,' that is, the gaps in higher education and primary education are relatively small, while those in secondary education are slightly larger. From 2006 to 2018, the biggest improvement in the gender gap was in higher education, with an increase in the index from 0.85 in 2006 to 1.00 in 2018, indicating that, in terms of enrollment rate, China's higher education has achieved gender equality. This is consistent with the education statistics issued by the China's Ministry of Education. From 2006 to 2018, the number of general full-time college students in Higher Education in China increased from 17,388,441 to 28,310,348 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2006a, 2018a), a 2.63 times increase. The proportion of full-time college students who are women increased from 48.1% in 2006 to 52.5% in 2018. Primary education also achieves gender equality with the popularization of universal introduction of compulsory education. Based on the 1% sample survey data

of China in 2005, Fang (2009) found that with universal compulsory education, the gender gap in primary education in China had almost disappeared. The development of economy, the process of industrialization, sub-replacement fertility caused by family planning policy, and the strong promotion of the Chinese government have all contributed to the achievement of primary and tertiary education.

It is the gender gap in secondary education enrollment rate that has led to China's overall score and ranking in the field of education lagging behind that of other countries. It can be seen from GGGR data that during this period, this score fell from 0.97 to 0.941 and the ranking from 81 in 2006 to 130 out of 149 countries (102 among the original 112 countries) in 2018. The corresponding change during the same period was positive in most other countries; for the 112 original countries it was 0.034 (3.6%), for upper-middle income countries it was 0.008 (0.8%), and for Asian and the Pacific countries it was 0.018 (1.9%). Due to lack of data on the secondary education in China from 2013–2015, GGGR reports that the gender gap remained largely stable, gradually increasing after 2016 (as shown in Figure 5). This change was basically in line with the increase in female enrollment in upper secondary education based on the annual education statistics provided by the website of China's Ministry of Education, as shown in Figure 6.

While the ratio of girls to boys enrolled in secondary education fell, the proportion of girls in regular senior high schools increased year by year, from 46.8% in 2006 to 50.8% in 2018 (Figure 6). The gender structure in secondary education reflects the high sex ratio at birth, since there is no strong evidence to suggest that it resulted from a boy preference in terms of the admission to secondary education. On one hand, the admission to high school requires passing a rigorous selective examination, which largely ensures decisions on students' admission to high school are not influenced by gender preference. The continuous proportion of regular senior secondary
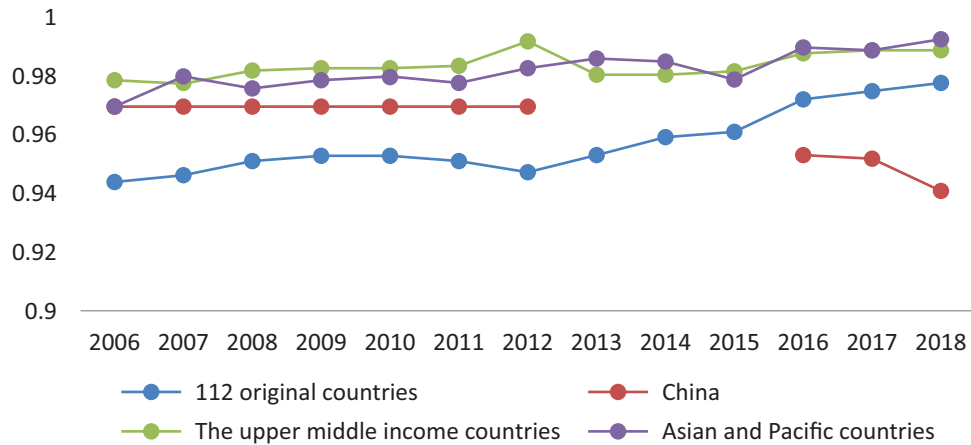
Figure 5. Trend comparison of scores on enrolment in secondary education. Source: WEF (2006, 2008–2018).

school pupils who are girls reflects the improvement in girls' educational performance which has exceeded that of boys since 2015 (Figure 6). Moreover, regular senior secondary schooling is preferred by students and parents as it is the major channel for students to enter higher education. The competition to access to regular senior secondary schooling is therefore more severe than that to enter secondary vocational education. On the other hand, the lower threshold for entry to secondary vocational schools means that there is no obvious obstacle preventing girls from accessing secondary vocational schools, therefore strongly suggesting that girls choose to give up vocational education, preferring senior high schools. Therefore, in the GGGR report, taking the gender gap in enrollment into the whole secondary education as the only indicator to measure the gender inequality in secondary education is inappropriate in the Chinese case.

Finally, the literacy rate reflects the country's long run ability to educate women and men in equal numbers. China's score was higher than the average level in 2018.

Moreover, during the period from 2006 to 2018, this indicator for China rose faster (0.041; 4.5%) than that for the 112 original countries (0.020), the upper-middle income countries (0.020), and the Asian and the Pacific countries (0.024). Even so, China's rank dropped from 81 place in 2006 to 94 out of 149 countries in 2018 (ranking 81 out of 112 original countries).

4.3. Health and Survival

According to the GGGR, China's performance with respect to the health and survival indicators, as shown in Table 4, falls far short of the world average. This is especially so for the sex ratio at birth, which measures the phenomenon of 'missing women' prevalent in many countries with strong son preference. The sex ratio for China was the second lowest in 2006 and the last of 149 countries in 2018.

The sex ratio at birth is a basic indicator reflecting the gender equality at birth. Shi (2013) reports that China's

Figure 6. Female percentage of enrollment in upper secondary education. Source: Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2006b, 2007–2017, 2018b).

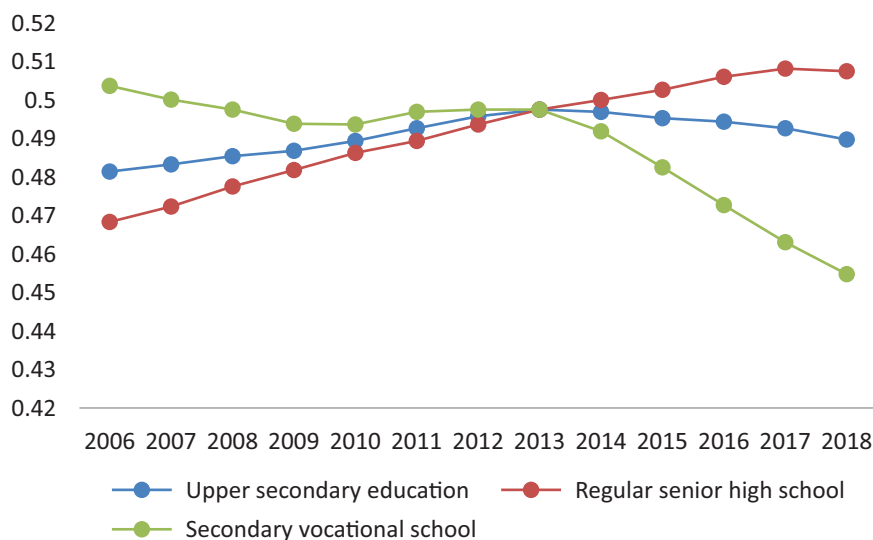**Table 4.** Comparison of the scores on health and survival and political empowerment.

		2006	2018	Change	Rate of change (%)
Sex ratio at birth	China	0.89	0.87	−0.02	−2.2
	The 112 original countries	0.938	0.942	0.004	0.4
	The upper-middle income countries	0.933	0.940	0.007	0.7
	Asian and the Pacific countries	0.933	0.936	0.003	0.3
Healthy life expectancy	China	1.03	1.019	−0.011	−1.1
	The 112 original countries	1.044	1.043	−0.001	−0.0
	The upper-middle income countries	1.051	1.052	0.001	0.1
	Asian and the Pacific countries	1.049	1.046	−0.003	−0.3
Women in parliament	China	0.25	0.332	0.082	32.8
	The 112 original countries	0.217	0.346	0.129	59.4
	The upper-middle income countries	0.229	0.375	0.146	63.8
	Asian and the Pacific countries	0.191	0.276	0.085	44.5
Women in ministerial positions	China	0.07	0.111	0.041	58.6
	The 112 original countries	0.211	0.306	0.095	45.0
	The upper-middle income countries	0.197	0.300	0.103	52.3
	Asian and the Pacific countries	0.133	0.209	0.076	57.1
Years with female head of state (last 50)	China	0.03	0.076	0.046	153
	The 112 original countries	0.044	0.081	0.037	84.1
	The upper-middle income countries	0.009	0.035	0.026	289
	Asian and the Pacific countries	0.053	0.096	0.043	81.1

high sex ratio at birth is prevalent nationwide, and Shi and Liu (2015) found that it increased between the 1990s and 2010. The imbalance of sex ratio at birth is the result of the joint effect of male preference and fertility policy. In response to the trend towards an aging population, the Chinese government, from 2013 to 2015, began to adjust the strict family planning policy and successively introduced a revised 'one-child policy' and 'universal two-child policy.' These policies are likely to reduce the scope for gender selection in urban families, and thus make it possible for China's sex ratio at birth to decrease. However, the GGGR data suggest that, against inspections, the sex ratio at birth worsened after 2014.

The other indicator used by GGGR to measure the difference of the health status by gender is active life expectancy. According to the data from GGGR, the gender gap in China was relatively large, and further expanded between 2006 and 2018. In 2006, China's score was 1.03, lower than the average of the original 112 countries and the upper-middle income countries. China's rank position fell from 87 in 2006 to 132 out of 149 countries in 2018, ranking 100 out of the original 112 countries in 2018, having dropped 12 places. It is clear, therefore, that active life expectancy contributed to China's decline on the overall GGGR Index (Figure 7).

There are limitations to using the healthy life expectancy and the sex ratio at birth as crucial indicators for gender gap index of health and survival. Since women's healthy life expectancy is higher than men's in almost all countries (except Kuwait, Bhutan, and Bahrain), the value of this indicator is questionable, both theoretically

and in practice. Also, since the sex ratio at birth is assigned a weight of 0.693 when calculating the index of health and survival, all countries with high sex ratios at birth are likely to rate low on the health and survival index (such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, India, Vietnam, among others; Zheng, 2019). China therefore rates poorly on the heath and survival index largely because of its score on sex imbalance at birth. It is easily visible that the sex ratio at birth is heavily weighted and plays an pivotal role in the index of the health and survival and so China (and some other countries), which has(have) been at the lowest level in the sex ratio at birth, tend to score poorly in the health and survival index overall.

4.4. Political Empowerment

The GGGR uses three indicators to measure political empowerment gap between men and women in decision-making at the highest level that is women in parliament, women in ministerial positions, and the ratio of women to men in terms of years in executive office (prime minister or president) over the last 50 years. While all three indicators of political empowerment show a certain improvement for China, for two of the three indicators it was less than either. The growth rate of these two indicators in China was lower than the world average or that for upper-middle income countries between 2006 and 2018 (see Table 4). The exception was the index of the female head of state (last 50).

China differs little from other countries in terms of the number of women in Parliament, although between
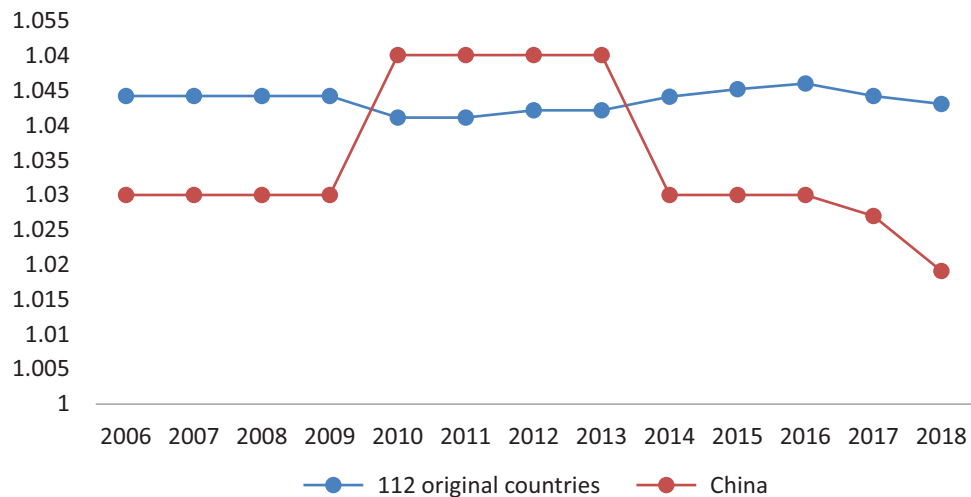
Figure 7. Time series comparison of gender gap index in healthy life expectancy. Source: WEF (2006, 2008–2018).

2006 and 2018 it slipped from above to below average and relative progress has been particularly poor since 2014 (Figure 8). In terms of women in ministerial positions, China is much below average, and behind countries with an equivalent level of development (Figure 9). Even in the best year, 2012, China's score was only 48.9% of the average; in 2018, the corresponding figure was just 36.6%.

It has been argued that the GGGR embodies an elite bias in the selection of female political empowerment indicators (Yang, 2018) and that the indicators are too narrowly focused on the highest level. In China, the ratio of women's participation is higher in local politics than it is at parliamentary and ministerial levels. According to the Seventh and Eighth Periodic Report Reports submitted by China under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women [CEDAW], 2012), women accounted for 11.0% and 13.7% at the provincial and 291 prefecture (director-general) levels. Above the county level, women held 16.4% of positions in 2009.

In the same year, not over a decade ago, 90.3% of provinces, 89.5% of municipalities, and 88.4% of counties had women within their leadership teams (Figure 10; as seen in CEDAW, 2012). It shows an increasing trend of the rate on female participation in local politics.

Article 6 of Election Law of the People's Republic of China for the National People's Congress and Local People's Congresses at All Levels (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2015) states that the National People's Congress and local people's congresses at all levels should have an appropriate number of women's representatives, and should continue to gradually increase the proportion of women's representatives. In the past decade, the Chinese Government has adopted a number of strategies to promote the participation of women in all levels of management and decision-making. The National Human Rights Action Plan for 2009–2010 set a specific target regarding the proportion of women in politics, i.e., "people's congresses, political consultative conferences and local governments at all levels should have at least one female member in their leadership" (Information Office of the
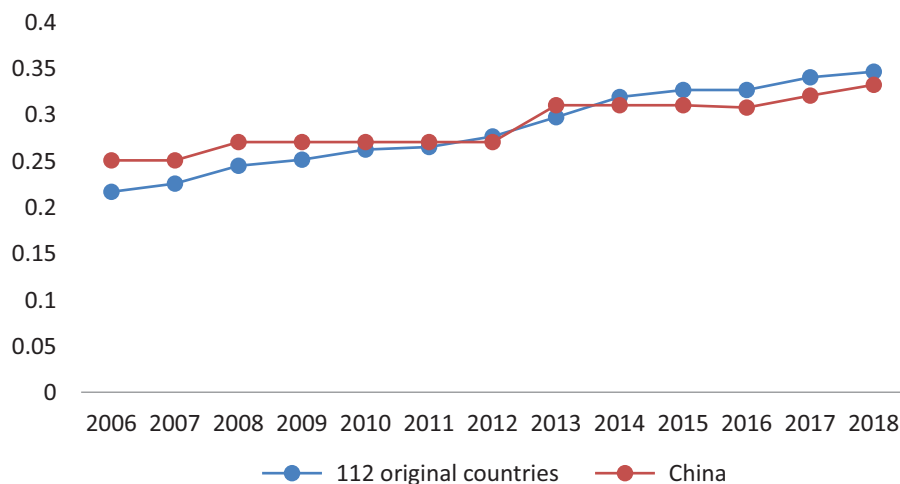

Figure 8. Time series comparison of index in women in parliament. Source: WEF (2006, 2008–2018).
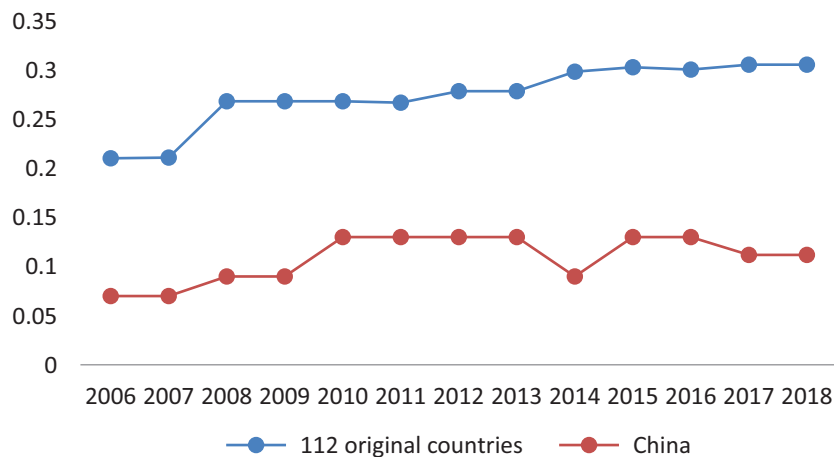
Figure 9. Time series comparison of index in women in in ministerial positions. Source: WEF (2006, 2008–2018).
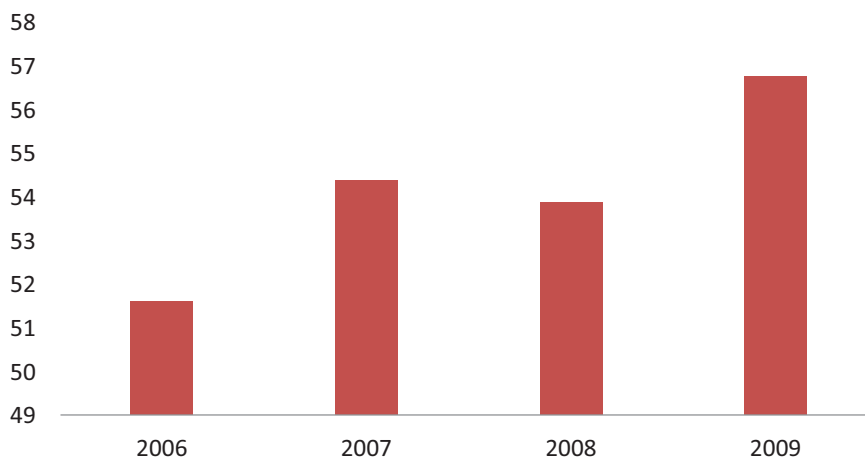
Figure 10. Percentage of leading bodies of government departments at the provincial level that had female cadres. Source: CEDAW (2012).

State Council, 2009). Thereafter, National Human Rights Action Plan for 2016–2020 stated that the proportion of women among the people's congress representatives and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference members at all levels should be gradually increased (Information Office of the State Council, 2016).

However, the extent to which these strategies are being actively pursued and the legislation enforced is open to debate. Considering the proportion of women in the population versus the role they play in China's economy and society, Chinese women's participation in political empowerment remains a challenge. The overall proportion of women in politics is obviously low, and there are more women who are deputies than chiefs, particularly in Party committees and governments at the city and county levels. It is suggested that the civil and political environment for women's participation needs further improvement.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

To conclude, China's fall in rank position is not only related to a slower than average improvement, but also

to the choice of indicators. In addition, there has been an expansion in the sample of countries with the majority of additional countries having higher scores than China. Having witnessed a relative improvement from 2006 to 2013, when China had a score that was 2.9% above the international average (114 countries) which was due largely to a marked increase in score between 2006 and 2009, China has subsequently fallen behind other countries, most notably between 2013 and 2014.

Like other countries, the gender gap was relatively smaller in the fields of education and health, but between 2006 and 2018, China's improvement in these two fields was relatively slow or even stagnant. First, China's high sex ratio at birth and the further expansion of gender gap in active life expectancy caused China's overall score and ranking to slip. It can be expected that with the adjustment of China's family planning policy, the high sex ratio at birth in China will fall. Second, the widening gender gap in secondary education is another important factor influencing the overall score. However, the current indicators are too crude to reflect the actual gender stratification. The distinction between regular high school and vocational education is missed and with it evidence that

girls, who are increasingly performing better than boys, are choosing to attend higher status high school rather than vocational education. Gender gap on the enrollment in secondary education is influenced by the high sex ratio at birth, which amounts to double counting.

The gender gap in China's economic participation and political empowerment continues to narrow, but generally speaking, the improvement is far lower than the world average and for countries of a similar level of development. Although there is a system of equal pay for equal work and a high level of female labor participation, the income gap remains and even further expands. One possible reason is that China is still a patriarchal society with men holding a lot of distributive resource, thereby creating greater obstacles that inhibit women from progressing in high-income industries and serving in high-income occupations.

Investigating the reasons for China's fall in rank position by examining through the score changes of sub-dimensions and indicators, some scholars have queried the rationality of the choice of GGGR indicators. The following issues have been identified: First, there is concern about the selection of indicators and their appropriateness. As stated above, the life expectancy of women is globally higher than that of men in almost all countries, while the ratios of health and survival (91–98%) have been fairly stable since 2006 suggesting a lack the sensitivity (Zheng, 2019). A major difference between the GGGR and the GII which was developed by the United Nations Development Programme (2019), and on which China ranked 39 out of 189 countries in 2018 rather than 113 out of 149, lies in the selection of health indicators. The GII employs the maternal mortality ratio and the adolescent birth rate to measure gender inequality in health, rather than the sex ratio at birth and healthy life expectancy. The GII and the GGGR differ little with respect to indicators of education, labor market participation, and political empowerment, pointing to the importance of the measures of health inequality in explaining the difference in rank order, and Zheng (2019) makes the case that the indicators of health inequality adopted by the GII are to be preferred. It can be argued that other indicators are not well suited to circumstances in China. For instance, the three indicators used by GGGR to measure political empowerment only reflect the highest levels, while measure of enrollment in secondary education confound high school and vocational education. Second, there is concern about the substitution for absent data and out of data lag, which may affect the accuracy of the indicator and its results. For example, the substitute indicator for the enrollment rate of secondary education adopted by GGGR (2018) is the percentage of female students in secondary education: 47.1% girls. Considering that the indicator of the percentage of female students in secondary education reflects the continuing influence of high sex ratio at birth, this formulation may not necessarily measure the gender inequality of accessibility in secondary education.

In summary, despite concerns about the selection of some indicators and data sources, the GGGR of the WEF provides a significant reference for China to analyze and track its gender gap. The slow improvement of China's gender equality only emphasizes the need for a joint effort on behalf of the government and the whole society. Gender inequality is not only deeply embedded in a country's politics, economy, education and health, but also influenced by culture, social norms, patriarchy, and the distribution of power and authority.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Women in China Moving Forward: Progress, Challenges and Reflections

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Abstract
While China's socialist revolution has been credited with improving the status of women, gender inequality remains. Drawing on macro data, this article provides an overview of gender equality in China, focusing on labor force and political participation in the past 70 years, particularly since 1978, the onset of socioeconomic reform. Specifically, the article describes, compares, and examines the progress and challenges that women face in accessing economic opportunities and political resources. We find a more equal relationship between male and female when resources are relatively adequate, but that females are disadvantaged when resources are scarce, for example, including representation in more prestigious occupations, higher income, and political positions. These findings illustrate how inequality is maintained and reproduced, and suggest that despite China's progressive socialist agenda, its gender revolution remains 'stalled.'

Keywords
China; gender inequality; labor force participation; political participation; resources; women

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Left Behind? Women's Status in Contemporary China" edited by Robert Walker (Beijing Normal University, China) and Jane Millar (University of Bath, UK).

1. Introduction

China's socialist revolution has remarkably improved women's socioeconomic status in absolute terms and relative to men—as indexed by women's educational attainment (Li, 2016; Yang & Xie, 2013), life expectancy, labor force participation (Liu, 2018), and political participation (All China Women's Federation [ACWF], 2019)—largely due to legal and institutional support favorable to gender equality. The gap of education between men and women is disappearing and women have a higher rate of college education among the post-1990-born birth cohort. Women on average even live four years longer than men. Over 40% of the total workforce in China consists of women, which is among the highest in the world. They are also encouraged to participate in politics. The proportion of female deputies of the 13th National People's Congress (NPC) reached 24.9% in 2018, 12.9 percentage points higher than that of the first session in 1954, for example.

However, studies have also found that there are still explicit and implicit gaps between men and women in both the public and private arena, particularly so in the labor market (Yang, 2019) and political participation (Shi, 2009; Yan, 2018). Moreover, there are strong voices calling women to return home and leave the workplace to men (Gu, 2013), and discrimination towards women in public arena has become salient with the extensive marketization and urbanization (Ji, Wu, Sun, & Guo, 2017). In a regime with strong commitment to gender equality, we may wonder what the institutional and structural impediments to the promotion of gender equality in the public arena are, and how women can break through the bottleneck and the glass ceiling in access to better employment and political positions.

This article responds to these questions from the perspectives of state power, cultural regulation, and resource redistribution, focusing on gender equality in economic endowment and political representation in China. Rather than taking a snapshot perspective and focusing on a single indicator of gender equality, this article draws attention to various aspects in the labor market and political participation and compares the performance of men and women in the past 70 years, particularly since the onset of the socioeconomic reform in 1978. It first describes the background of gender relationships in China,

and then briefly introduces data and methods used in this analysis; this is followed by a sketch of the achievements of gender equality and the analysis of challenges in the workforce. Finally, reflections are offered on the path and mechanism to break through the bottleneck and glass ceiling in the workplace.

We select these two areas because they are domains directly under the control of government in China, especially political participation. In addition to Chairmen Mao's reiterations of the importance of gender equality, Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, stressed that the "pursuit of gender equality is a great cause….Without women's liberation and progress, the liberation and progress of mankind would not be attainable" (Xi, 2015) in his address at the "Global Leaders' Meeting on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Commitment to Action" in New York in 2015. So, if the government determines to promote gender equality then it has the levers to do so, and we would expect to see the results. This is made more so by the fact that education attainment is largely equal, while the one- or two-child policy means that childcare issues are not as important as they might be in other countries.

Although literature on gender inequality inside and outside China is abundant, this work adds to the current literature in several ways. First and foremost, the approach complements existing studies by examining gender equality in the workplace more comprehensively with historical lenses. Indeed, some empirical studies have already explored gender inequality and women's performance in the workplace (Maurer-Fazio, Rawski, & Zhang, 1999; Yang, 2019), but focused on a short period of time. Other works (Ji et al., 2017; Wu, 2009) have reviewed gender inequality since the founding of New China or market reform, but they focused on the explanation of gender gaps in the public and private arena. Complementing existing studies, this work provides an overview of the evolutionary trajectory of gender dynamics using empirical data covering the past 70 years. Furthermore, it also considers political participation, an important indicator of gender relationships largely ignored in relevant research. As the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2019) report shows, the situation of gender equality in China worsened in 2019, due to women's lower presentation in politics in addition to the high sex ratio at birth.

2. Context of Gender Equality in China

2.1. Reconfiguration of Institutional Norms

China is well known for its long history of gender inequality. Women were dependent on their fathers, husbands and children in different life stages under the traditional patriarch system, which defined the gender relationships and designated different roles for men and women in public and private arenas (Yang, 2010). Within this cultural discourse, there was a clear demarcation between men and women in the division of labor and role expectations.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, however, "times are different, and men and women are equal" ("Chairman Mao and Chairman Liu," 1965). The Communist regime, with its strong commitment to gender equality and state power (Wu, 2009; Zuo, 2005), vigorously advocated gender equality in many ways. The political commitment was bolstered by the Constitution of the PRC, by various laws, public policies (e.g., the 1988 Regulations on Labor Protection of Female Employees, the 1992 Law of the PRC on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women, the 2008 Employment Promotion Law, and the Law on Land Contract in Rural Areas, from 2002–2018), and practices in guaranteeing women's rights in all aspects and providing public childcare service to emancipate women from the household. Article 48 of Constitution of PRC, for example, states that:

> Women in the People's Republic of China enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of life, in political, economic, cultural, social and family life. The state protects the rights and interests of women, applies the principle of equal pay for equal work to men and women alike and trains and selects cadres from among women. (The Central People's Government of the PRC, 2005)

The interplay and interaction of political, legal and cultural shifts have all laid down a foundation, from top-down, for gender equality in the workforce in China.

Consequently, urban and rural women were gradually liberated from traditional patriarchal systems and joined the workforce in the early years of New China. The rise of the service industry in the 1960s further alleviated discrimination against women in employment. Indeed, female labor force participation is one of the most important breakthroughs against thousands of years of traditional division of labor. 'Iron girls' were the representation of the new types of gender division of labor in the 1960s and 1970s. While the new pattern has a negative effect on women because it solidifies, rather than challenges, traditional gender roles (Jiang, 2012; Jin, 2006; Zuo, 2005), the role of a 'social person' definitely helps women break free and to move towards achieving equality with men in rights and obligations (Jiang, 2012).

However, we should also acknowledge that since China's advocacy and practice of gender equality largely results from the communist commitment to emancipate women from feudalist tradition (Li, 1997), the promotion of gender equality may have intrinsic constraints and simply be the political discourse of the ruling party. During the first 30 years of New China, gender equality was supported by both an equal gender ideology and grass-root practice, but in the subsequent 40 years, the dominant position of the government in the gender dis-

course has given way to the market. However, the market, for the purpose of making money, allied with the traditional gendered culture that highlights male superiority, has changed the dominant narratives of gender relationships, deviating from the state will of gender equality (Wu, 2009).

2.2. Transformation of Socioeconomic and Demographic Structure

Structural change of the Chinese society began in the 1950s, but the foundation of industrialization was very weak. Until 1978, China was still an agricultural country. Since then, however, it has experienced a dramatic structural transformation, moving from a closed regime to an open country, from a planned economy to a market economy, from an agricultural society to an industrialized and urbanized society, from high levels of illiteracy, especially among women, to universal education, and from many children to one or two children in each family (Yang & He, 2014). Changes in these structural forces jointly generated a new round of shocks, from bottom-up, to traditional gender norms, both positive and negative.

On the positive side, the most important structural change with respect to gender equality is the enhanced level of education, addressed in another article in this volume. Simply speaking, the implementation of the Compulsory Education Law and the expansion of college education have benefited women more than men. Female illiteracy among those aged 15 and above was over 90% in 1949 but reduced to 7.3% in 2017; with regard to college enrollment, women accounted for less than 20% in 1949, but 52.5% in 2017 (ACWF, 2019). The convergence of education between the two sexes and the higher proportion of college education of women than men among post-1990-born birth cohort will have endowed women with better formal human capital. This enables women to better participate and compete with men in the public arena and has also changed their preferences towards work and family, which in turn allows them to become more independent, autonomous and self-reliant. Consequently, a more equal gender relationship could be cultivated.

Meanwhile, the influx of foreign capital and the development of manufacturing industry since 1978 have speeded the pace of industrialization and urbanization. Geographic mobility has been spurred since the early 1980s by the desire to pursue a better life and by relaxation of the household (hukou) registration system. The number of rural-to-urban migrants increased from 6.57 million in 1982 to 245 million in 2017, contributing greatly to the rapid growth of urbanization, which was 10.6% in the early 1950s, 20% in 1978 and 59.6% in 2018 (The Central People's Government of the PRC, 2019). Large-scale migration and urbanization have also facilitated the shift in economic structure from agriculture to industry, and from industry to service sectors. In 1952, the share of agriculture in GDP was 50.5%, and

agriculture absorbed 83.5% of the employed population. In 2018, however, the share in GDP accounted for by agriculture, industry and service sector was 7.2, 40.7 and 52.2% while the corresponding proportions of employment were 26.1, 27.6 and 46.3% respectively. What these numbers simultaneously hint at and conceal are a growth in opportunities for women to pursue a career outside the home and away from the land.

The implementation of the restrictive fertility policy, initiated in 1980 and ended in 2015, also played a role in reshaping gender relationships. Whereas in 1953, families tended to have six children, this number fell to 2.7 in 1979 (Yang, 2017) and 1.6 in 2018 (UNDP, 2019). While acknowledging the controversy surrounding this policy and the complexity of determining its overall effect, the rapidly decreasing fertility has had profound implications for gender equality. By reducing the number of children and thereby further emancipating women from childbearing and childrearing, it has enabled women to devote more time to work, pay more attention to self-improvement and to pursue their own life goals (Zhu & Li, 1997).

However, since China's process of modernization is compressed and its modernity is incomplete (Chang, 2014), the political efforts at promoting gender equality may also be compromised. During the process of marketization, traditional gender roles have revived and to some extent been further strengthened (Gu, 2013), increasing women's vulnerability in the workplace (Song, 2011). The emphasis on replacing the planned economy by the market economy and the subsequent reform of state-owned enterprises was to maximize productivity, and women were regarded as being less productive and more expensive due to their role of motherhood (Du & Dong, 2013; Yang ,2019; Zhang & Hannum, 2015). As a result, women were laid-off in disproportionate numbers, and almost all public childcare facilities were closed (Yang, 2018). These changes frustrated political and legal efforts to promote gender equality and undermined the benefits of higher human capital and increased economic opportunities, causing China's gender revolution, as in some countries in the West, to stall (England, 2010; Hochschild, 1989).

Simultaneously, the mass media, catering to mass culture and the market economy with reality shows, advertisements and other print media, has served to exaggerate differences between men and women in terms of personality, appearance, capacity, division of labor and family roles. In the name of 'modernity' and 'modern fashion' (Gu, 2013; Liu & Zhang, 2013), the traditional image of women and female roles is praised and male supremacy maintained and highlighted.

Also, there is a 'spillover effect' of the disadvantage of women in public and private spaces. In China, there was historically a clear gender boundary in the division of labor (Stockman, Bonney, & Sheng, 1995). Chinese women do considerably more housework than their husbands (Yang & Li, 2014), indicating that the strong socialist ide-

ology of gender equality in work has not successfully promoted normative ideas regarding equality in the division of housework. The lingering of these traditional gender roles has a direct negative effect on women's wage income (Qing, 2019) which may partly explain why women's strong attachment to the labor force has not correspondingly altered the balance of power in the household.

Given these institutional and structural shifts and prior research, we may expect both progress and stagnancy or even retrogression in gender relationships, more so in the era of market-oriented reform than in the period of a planned economy.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data

To provide an overview of gender equality in China, this article draws on macro data and, when available, survey data to compare men and women's performance in economic and political areas. Macro data mainly include: data from statistics yearbooks issued by the National Statistical Bureau (NSB); aggregated data from the 1982, 1990, 2000 and 2010 population censuses, and the 1995, 2005 and 2015 One Percent Population Survey, also known as the Mini-census, conducted at the midpoint between two censuses; and data issued by international organizations. Existing literature is also drawn on to help interpret the statistical evidence.

Since various sources of data are collected for different purposes, they may be inconsistent and not entirely compatible with each other. However, these inconsistencies should not introduce bias or pose serious problems since, if the data are over—or under-reported, they tend to be so for both males and females and hence not affect the relativities. Moreover, when more than one source is available, we use that which is generally regarded by scholars to be more reliable.

3.2. Analytical Approaches and Strategy

While this article does not employ sophisticated statistic methods, it does employ a comparative and historical perspective in exploring the patterns of gender equality in the workplace. Across various cultures and societies, the potential tensions of gender relationships can be reduced to two factors of demography and social mobility: the level of inequality itself and the processes determining the locations of men and women in the social hierarchy. This article focuses on the former, comparing men and women's access to resources, opportunities and outcomes in the labor market and political arena. Such a comparison serves two purposes: to provide an overall picture of gender equality and to lay down a foundation for a conceptual framework to explain continuing gender equality in China. While it would be desirable to compare gender dynamics between rural and urban areas, or especially to focus on urban areas, given tremendous disparity in rural and urban development in China, this is prevented by lack of data.

Two caveats should be noted. First, this article reports only those indicators of gender equality that are most appropriate in the Chinese context given data availability. Secondly, the definition of gender equality is inevitably somewhat fuzzy since absolute equality may be neither appropriate nor attainable. Therefore, gender inequality is taken to be a relative concept and measured as difference, rather than in terms of discrimination.

4. Labor Force Participation: Progress and Challenges

From a 70-year perspective, prominent improvements are clearly evident in the relative position of women, but since the early 1990s, the onset of marketization, women have faced more challenges in the workplace.

4.1. Labor Force Participation

A comparison of the labor force participation rate for men and women aged 15 to 64 is an important indicator of gender equality. In most societies, women account for over one-third of the total labor force, and there is a positive linkage between gender equality and economic growth (Khayria & Feki, 2015; Lewis, 2011; Pagés & Piras, 2010). In addition, women in the industrialized world contribute an average of about 50% to national production through non-remunerated work while those in the developing world contribute between 60 and 65% (Meleis & Lindgren, 2002). In China, women contribute about 41% to GDP, higher than in most other countries or regions (Statista, 2020), without considering unpaid work.

Women's high contribution to GDP is linked to their high rate of employment, which was just 7.5% in 1949 but rose to 32.9% by 1978, one of the highest in the world. During Mao's era, women labored shoulder-to-shoulder with men, which put many women on the same level as men for the first time ever in China (Vanham, 2018). In the early years of socioeconomic reform, female employment rate kept rising; it was over 70% in 2000, about 10 percentage points higher than that of the world average (Bao, 2004). Whereas only about two hundred thousand women were employed in 1949, by 2017 the absolute size of the female labor force was 340 million (ACWF, 2019). However, female labor participation rate has declined in recent years. Figure 1 depicts the changing trajectory of labor force participation rate for men and women from 1990 to 2017, showing a monotonic decline for both sexes, but faster for women than for men. By 2017 the participation rate for women was 14 percentage points lower than men.

The decline of labor force participation since the early 1990s might be related to longer years of education for the general population who enter the labor market at much older ages, and the reclassification of 'work'—some people may conduct business at home and consequently are not included as 'working' (Liu, 2007).
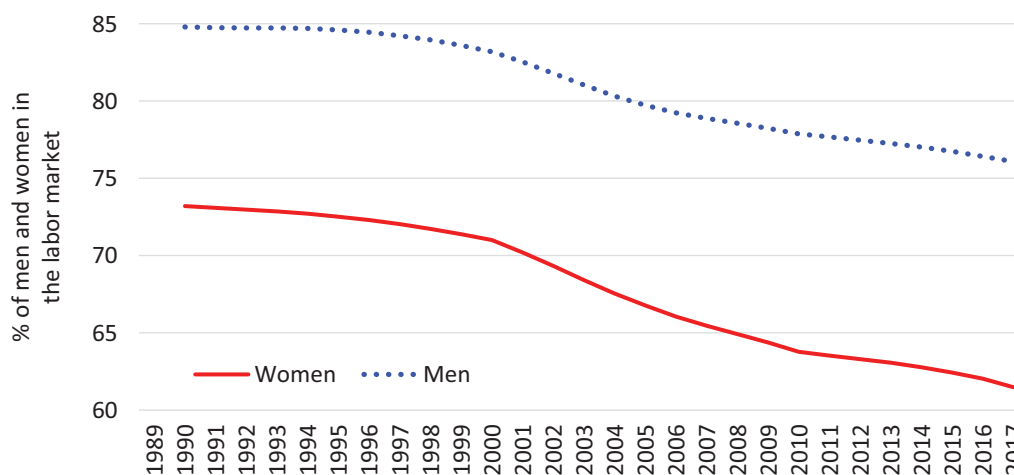
Figure 1. Labor force participation rate by gender: China 1990–2017. Labor force participation rate, male (percentage of male population ages 15+; modeled ILO estimate). Source: The World Bank (n.d.).

More importantly, however, was the differential layoff of women by employers in the market reform (Song, 2011).

4.2. Occupational Prestige

The distribution of occupations between men and women has changed over time with the proportion of

women occupying the highest prestige jobs, as the heads of government, party organizations, state-owned enterprises, and scholastic institutions, increasing by 14 percentage points, from 10.4% to 24.9% between 1982 and 2015 (see Table 1).

Similarly, the proportion of women employed as professionals has increased from 38.3% to 51.6%.

Table 1. Occupations by gender: China 1982–2015 (in percentage).

	Leader of government, party organization, enterprises, and institutions	Professionals	Office workers	Commercial service persons	Agriculture or related persons	Production and transportation equipment operators and related personnel	Other	Total
1982								
F	10.4	38.3	24.5	47.5	46.8	35.4	41.7	43.7
M	89.6	61.7	75.5	48.9	53.2	64.6	58.3	56.3
1990								
F	11.5	45.3	25.7	51.1	47.9	35.7	42.5	45.0
M	88.5	54.7	74.3	50.0	52.1	64.3	57.5	55.0
2000								
F	16.8	51.7	30.3	50.0	48.5	33.4	36.2	45.3
M	83.2	48.3	69.7	50.0	51.5	66.6	63.8	54.7
2005								
F	21.7	49.4	31.8	48.9	49.7	32.5	34.9	45.4
M	78.3	50.6	68.2	51.1	50.3	67.5	65.1	54.6
2010								
F	25.1	51.1	33.0	51.7	49.2	31.6	37.5	44.7
M	74.9	48.9	67.0	48.3	50.8	68.4	62.5	55.3
2015								
F	24.9	51.6	36.2	43.4	48.6	31.0	34.4	42.6
M	75.1	48.4	63.8	56.6	51.4	69.0	65.6	57.4

Note: M stands for Male, F stands for Female. Sources: Data from 1982–2000 from NSB (2003, Table 4–8), data from 2005 from NSB (2007, Table 5–3), data from 2010 from NSB (2012, Table 3–3), data from 2015 from NSB (2016a, Table 5-4).
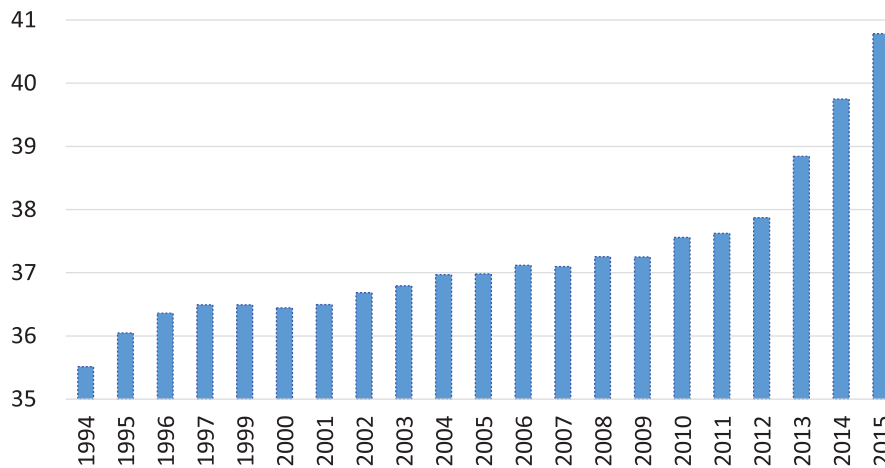
Figure 2. Percentage of women employed in state-owned enterprises: China 1994–2015. Source: Calculated from NSB (2016b, Tables 1–17 and 1–23).

Conversely, the proportion of women in relatively lower status jobs, e.g., commercial service industry, decreased from 47.5% in 1982 to 43.4% in 2015, and the proportion of women as production and transportation equipment operators and related personnel decreased from 35.4% to 31.0% over the same period. State-owned enterprises remain highly privileged and prestigious even after China's economic reform. The proportion of female employees in this sector has increased notably since 1994 (Figure 2), while those employed in the sector as professional and technical personnel increased even more from 39.1% in 1982 to 48.6% in 2017 (ACWF, 2019).

Having acknowledged the substantial progress of gender equality, however, we should also recognize that the gender gap remains salient in higher prestigious occupations. As shown in Table 1, only a quarter of the heads of government, party organizations, state-owned enterprises and scholastic institutions are women. The reasons for the remaining inequality are inevitably complex, a combination of demand and supply side factors both mediated by persistence of traditional gender norms, to be described in other articles in this issue.

4.3. Wage Income

Bases on the analysis of Cotter, DeFiore, Hermsen, Marsteller Kowalewski, and Vanneman (1997), in the USA it would be expected that the improved work opportunity and enhanced occupational prestige for women will have led to an increase in women's wages and a reduction in the gender wage gap. For a long period in the second half of the 20th century, the ratio of women to men's income in China was more favorable than in most other countries (Liu, Meng, & Zhang, 2000), with women in the same positions as men tending to receive equal pay (particularly in state-owned organizations). However, this favorable situation disappeared in the reform era. Data from the China Women Social Status Survey shows that women's income rose substantially from 1086 Yuan in 1990 to 11987 Yuan in 2010 (see Figure 3). However, as Figure 3 also illustrates, while the wage income of the two sexes has grown monotonically over time, the pay gap has widened. Corresponding to relatively low occupational status jobs, women have experienced slower wage income growth than men.

Figure 3. Wage income by gender: China 1990–2010.

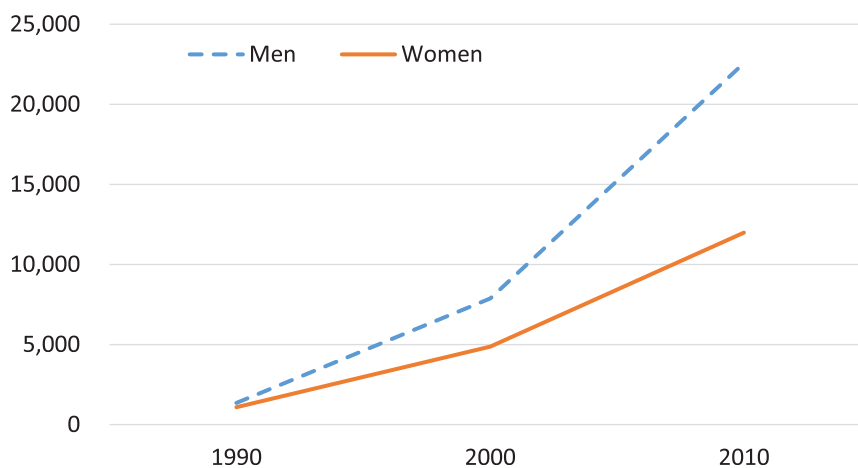The increasing gender wage gap is not unique to China. According to WEF (2019) report, while gender equality has made progress over time, the gender ratio in income has retreated from 58.1% in 2018 to 57.8% in 2019 globally, and it is expected to take 257 years to close the gender gap, longer than estimates in previous WEF reports. In context with more equal gender ideology, the gap is narrower, but even in the most equal and developed countries or regions in the world, women earn only 90% that of men; controlling for the potentially confounding effect of education, work experience and other factors on income does not make the gap go away (Bowlus, 1997).

Figure 4 shows the ratio of female to male monthly income in urban areas between 1978 and 2015. While the ratio fluctuated, women consistently earned less than men throughout the entire period; and while the gap was gradually closing prior to 1988, it subsequently continued to widen until a slight rebound in 2015. In 1978, women's income was 79% that of men, rose to 84% in 1988, dropping thereafter to 63% in 2014. In the transition from a socialist to market economy, the emerging market sectors tended to favor men over women (Shu & Bian, 2003), while the educational enhancement of women does not seem to have translated to a reduced gender wage gap (Ji et al., 2017).

5. Political Presentation: Progress and Stagnancy

Political participation is another, or even a more important, indicator of gender equality, and a channel through which to promote other aspects of gender equality. Since the establishment of New China, great importance has been attached to guaranteeing equal political rights between women and men. Women's rights of suffrage, being elected and the management of state affairs have been legally guaranteed since the early 1950s under the socialist democratic politics with Chinese characteristics.

Women have been provided new opportunities for participating in politics, and the level of their participation in state governance and social affairs at the local level has generally improved but with some exceptions.

As mentioned above, the Constitution of the PRC specifically guarantees women's equal rights with men in political life and protects the rights and interests of women in training and selecting cadres. Under this overarching framework, a number of laws, legislations or regulations related to ensure women's political rights are stipulated, including the Law of the PRC on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women (1992). Currently, the China National Program for Women's Development (2011–2020) covers seven areas, including economic and political participation. Additionally, China has signed many international conventions aimed at addressing gender inequality, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women which China ratified in 1980 (Hearle & Hu, 2019), for example.

In 1990, the National Working Committee on Children and Women under the State Council was founded, which is the key body or political organization mandated to "organise, coordinate, guide, supervise and urge departments concerned in promoting gender equality and women's development" (State Council Information Office, 2015). Also, the ACWF, established in 1949, has long been the major organ that aims to promote women's rights and gender equality at all levels. While it does not have the rights to make policies or regulations, it has the rights to push agendas, and propose changes to existing policies and opposition to policy proposals (Hearle & Hu, 2019).

5.1. Political Participation at the Top Level

Since 1949, China's communist regime has showed great support for gender equality, and women's so-
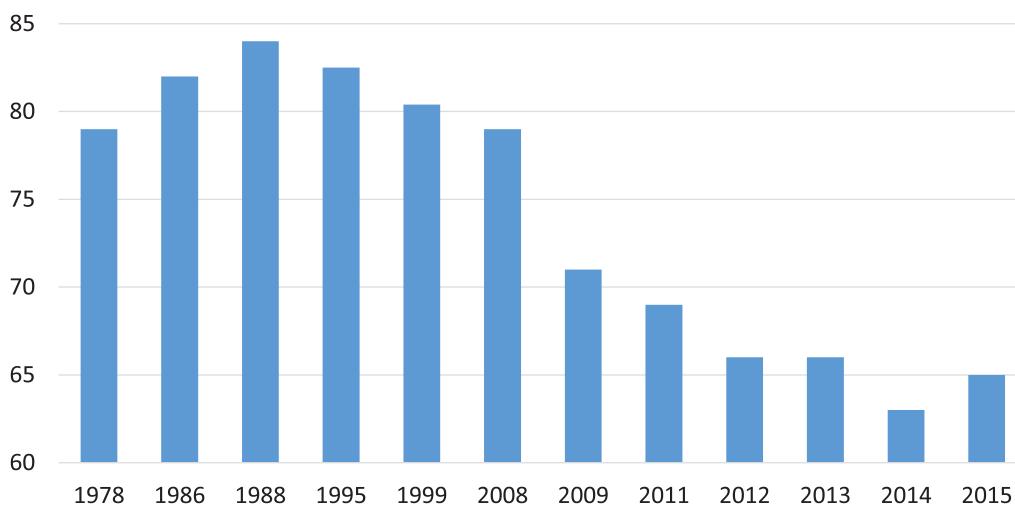

Figure 4. Ratio of women's income to men's income: China 1978–2015. Due to different sources of data, the gender wage gap differs. Sources: Data from 2008–2015 from WEF (2019); other data compiled by the author.

cial and political status has in many aspects improved, although great variation exists. Membership of the Chinese Communist Party is the fundamental form of political participation, and being a member of the ruling party (and other democratic parties) is the first step and prerequisite for getting promoted in the workplace (namely in government agencies and state-owned enterprises), for further political participation, and the most effective way of directly partaking in politics. Hence, women's share in the ruling party is a good indicator of the level and extent of their political involvement, and thus of the degree of gender equality. In 2018, female party members accounted for 27.2% of total members, a 16.7 percentage point increase compared to 1956 (ACWF, 2019). The increase of female party members of the Communist Party of China and other democratic parties has also led to a higher participation rate of women in the NPC, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC), and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the top level and most influential political participation.

The CCCPC is the core power organ or the most powerful political organization of China. It holds a national congress every five years, leads the work of the whole party and decides the appointment and removal of personnel at the national level. The membership in CCCPC is an important means of giving women voice and promoting gender quality. As Figure 5 shows, the absolute number of female members in the CCCPC increased from 170 in 1956 to 378 in 2017; while the proportion fluctuates over time, it increased from 4.7% in 1956 to 7.94% in 2017 albeit with notable fluctuations.

The share of female representatives of the NPC has also grown noticeably. The NPC is an important platform for achieving the goal of sovereignty belonging to the people and being a deputy on it allows women to effectively engage in politics. Deputies gather once a year to discuss and make decisions on important public affairs. At the first NPC in 1954, there were 147 female deputies, accounting for 12% of the total (see Figure 6). By the fourth session held in 1975, the number of female deputies had risen to 653, accounting for 22.6%, a figure that has remained largely unchanged in subsequent sessions. In the 13th NPC held in 2018, there were 551 female deputies, accounting for 24.9% of all deputies, double the percentage in 1954. Figure 6 also shows the proportion of female deputies in CPPCC. While fluctuating, the proportion of women has increased over time, from 6.1% in 1954 to 20.4% in 2018, a 14.3 percentage point increase during this time span. Indeed, many women's political participation is realized through the channel of the CPPCC.

The increase of the absolute number and relative share of female deputies of the CCCPC, the NPC and the CPPCC points to the increasing engagement of women at a national level and, in each province, the proportion of women in these organizations has also increased over time. Of course, we need to first ask where the power lies in the Chinese political system if we want to assess Chinese women's participation in politics. While the NPC might not be the best benchmark to evaluate women's political participation, it offers them exposure to political opportunities and recognition by the general population. It is a symbol of progress compared to the situation 70 years ago. Of course, the progress of gender equality in political area is not as fast as we would expect.

5.2. Political Participation at the Local Level

As the ruling party, the Chinese Communist Party attached great importance to the training and selection of female cadres and the development of female party members at the local level, and all reports of party congresses since 1990 have clearly demanded attention to be paid to these issues. The report of the Nineteenth
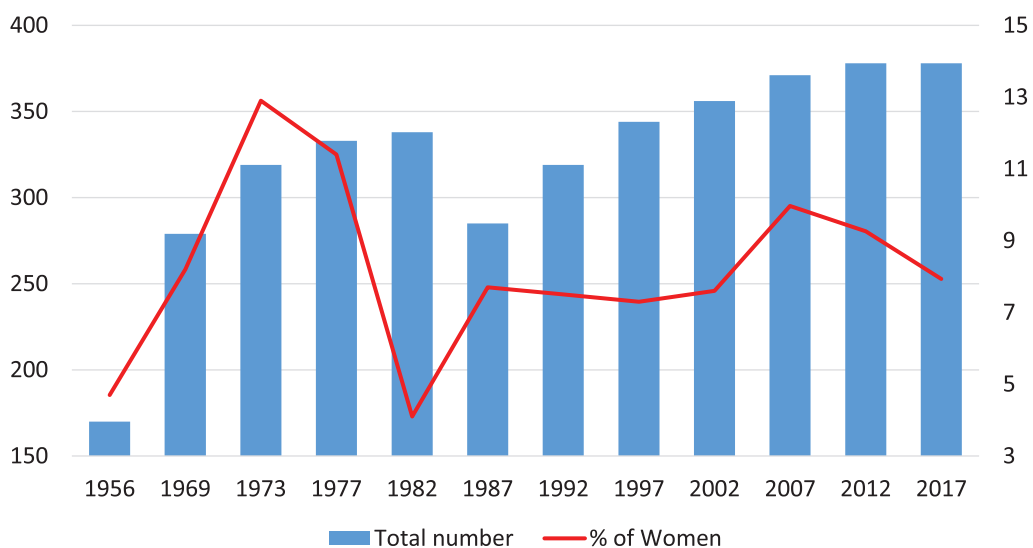

Figure 5. The number and percent of female member in the CCCPC: China 1956–2017. Sources: NSB (2012, Table 7–1) and "List of members of the 19th Central Committee" (2017) for the 2017 data.
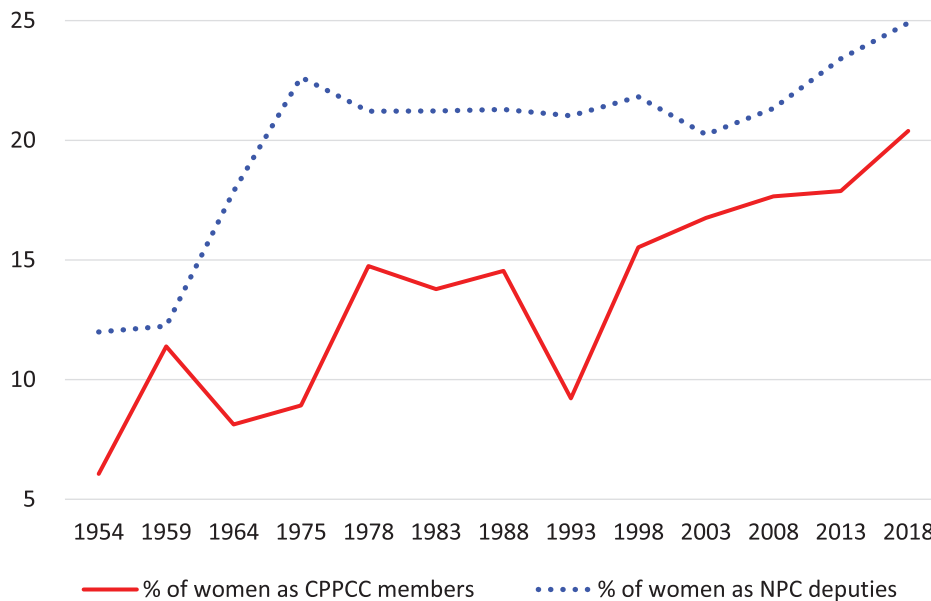
Figure 6. Percentage of female deputy in the NPC and CPPCC: China 1954–2018. Sources: "The proportion of women in CPPCC and NPC has reached a new high" (2018) and NSB (2012, Tables 7–1 and 7–2) for the 2013 and 2018 data.

National Congress of the CCCPC in 2018 emphasized that the work of training and selecting female cadres, ethnic minority cadres and non-Party cadres should be well coordinated.

Consequently, the number of female cadres in Party and government organs increased from 422,000 in 1978 to 1,906,000 in 2017, accounting for 26.5% of the total numbers of cadres today. In 2017, women also constituted 52.4% of new civil servants recruited by the central government and its directly affiliated institutions, and 44% of persons recruited by local governments. In 2018, the proportion of women in leading bodies of public institutions nationwide was 22.2%, 1.6 percentage points higher than that in 2015 (ACWF, 2019).

However, the rising share of women in these top organs of state and local levels should not disguise the underrepresentation of women in the policymaking process. Women comprise less than 30% of members of the ruling party, and the number of female deputies on the CCCPC, the NPC and the CPPCC remains very low. In certain years, the proportion of female deputies and members has actually fallen. In 2003, for example, women accounted for only 20.2% of the 10th NPC membership, 1.57 percentage points lower than that of the 9th congress. More importantly, not only are many fewer women than men appointed to the Political Bureau of the CCCPC, but also none of current seven members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau, the most powerful institution, is female. Although women appear to have equal rights to vote and stand for election, they are still a minority in the formal political system. At the lowest level of government, arguably the level most noticeable in people's lives, women accounted for only 5.8% of village directors (including vice directors) and 5.4% of female village Party secretaries (including vice

secretaries) according to the third China Women Social Status Survey conducted in 2010 (Song & Zhen, 2013).

So, it is clear that there is a disjuncture between policy rhetoric and women's presentation in the political arena. Indeed, the WEF reports in recent years show that China's gender equality has deteriorated, and one of the two most important indicators responsible for the lowering ranking is women's low representation in politics. Political position, arguably the most valuable resource since it generates other kinds of resources, has been historically and, to a less extent, currently, controlled and possessed by men. Women used to be taught not to access it and had no access to it. While all parties in China today allegedly welcome female members, women continue to have limited access and opportunity to both higher and lower levels of political positions. Even when opportunities present, women may not be willing or able to take them due to the 'spillover effect' of heavy domestic duties that continue to be borne by women since gender stereotypes prioritizing women's reproductive roles as dutiful wives over their productive role (Hearle & Hu, 2019) remains pervasive in China.

6. Summary, Discussion and Reflection

Both macro and micro data paint a picture of progress and challenges in gender relationships. Generally speaking, Chinese women have moved forward over the last 70 years, making salient progress in the public domain with the gender relationship becoming more equal economically and politically. This is apparent in the relatively high rate of female labor force participation, in the influx of women into more prestigious occupations, in substantially increased wage income, and in the growth in political representation in the institutions of

government, if we examine gender relationship from a 70-year perspective.

However, significant gender gaps have also occurred in the workplace in the past 70 years, and further widened in the reform era. While both men and women have experienced a reduction in employment rate, women's decline is more pronounced than for men. The varieties of occupations open to women is limited, particularly those with higher prestige. While women's wage income has risen over time, men's income has increased much faster. Their share in top political positions is only one-fifth to one-fourth that of men, and less than one-third in lower level of political positions. Consequently, the gender gap in the workplace is persisting, and in some indicators, widening. In other words, although most of the indicators examined here have been going in the right direction, marketization has had an adverse impact, especially regarding employment. We have witnessed progress in the political arena, but it is not a very good picture overall—not only are women missing at the 'top,' but they are also missing at the 'bottom' (in the villages).

The falling employment rates, the rise of wage income, and the fluctuating rate of political participation may mirror period effects resulting from industrialization, modernization and marketization, while the existing and enlarged gender gap found in this article may reflect the continuation of traditional sex roles rooted in the patriarchal system resurrected and strengthened by marketization. It is clear that women substantially enhanced human capital, available time and personal space due to the lower birth rate, and improved capacity in various ways neither bring them corresponding occupational prestige or income, nor political positions. The general pattern is that a more equal gender relationship is found between men and women when resources (e.g., education and health) are relatively adequate, particularly when the resources can be effectively controlled or distributed by government, but that a female disadvantage emerges when resources are scarce, e.g., more prestigious occupations, higher wage and political positions.

Indeed, although during the past 70 years China has consistently advocated and practiced gender equality in a top-down pattern by means of legislation and public policies, these regulations have tended to be guidelines. During the period with a planned economy it proved possible to realize the political desire for greater gender equality through the exercise of authoritarian state power. Since such norms were not internalized by the general population in Mao's era, the ideology of gender equality has given way to profit-seeking behaviors during the era of marketization. Moreover, when facing employment pressure in the early stage of market reform, scholars, social activists and even government officials repeatedly proposed that women should go home to take care of the family and leave market jobs to men. This points to a departure from, indeed even a corruption of, the ideology of gender equality which is now seen to be conditional on the premise of not harming the interests of men. The outside world must still belong to men, and it could also belong to women today, depending on the acceptance of men. This male-centered conditionality has rendered the so-called 'equal division' between the two sexes to be more of a slogan or simply a politically correct discourse than a reality.

Limited supply of publicly funded childcare service for children under the age of three is also a major deterrent to women's performance in the labor market. With market-oriented reform, this service has almost totally disappeared (Yang, 2018). While private 'childcare' services have flourished in recent decades, it is either too expensive to be affordable to working class families, or does not provide daily-based childcare service—they mostly only provide early child education or development courses on weekends and holidays. Women have to work a "second shift" (Hochschild, 1989), and shoulder the double burden of paid and unpaid domestic work. This renders women's daily total work hours much longer than men's, creating greater tension between work and family responsibilities. Consequently, they may either have to exit the labor market for reason of family responsibilities or be unable to devote as much time to work as men, which negatively affects their job performance. Moreover, given the universal two-child policy regime, employers may fear that women will take maternity leave twice, exacerbating discrimination toward women in the workplace (Kang & Lv, 2016).

Hence, further improvements of gender equality cannot simply rely on women's subjective initiatives; efforts at all levels and by all stakeholders are important in promoting gender equality in the workplace in China. For example, the government should take more concrete steps to change traditional gender roles in both the private and public arenas and promote equally paid paternity and maternity leave. Also, more concerted efforts should be made to encourage enterprises to adopt family-friendly work arrangements, and reduce discrimination towards women in terms of recruitment, promotion, and in other aspects of employment practice. Moreover, safe public childcare services for children under the age of three should be revived in order to alleviate childrearing penalties and work-family conflicts, especially for the mother, in addition to encouraging the market to provide childcare services to meet the diverse needs of families. Through these efforts, more equal gender norms and practices in the workplace could be realized, which in turn would stimulate women's work potential and generate a 'gender-equality dividend.' This will not only be a powerful engine for a new round of economic growth, but also a driving force for an inclusive and sustainable development, when the current 'demographic dividend' disappears.

Acknowledgments

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Article

The Grandmothers' Farewell to Childcare Provision under China's Two-Child Policy: Evidence from Guangzhou Middle-Class Families

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Abstract

As China's one-child policy is replaced by the two-child policy, young Chinese women and their spouses are increasingly concerned about who will take care of the 'second child.' Due to the absence of public childcare services and the rising cost of privatised care services in China, childcare provision mainly relies on families, such that working women's choices of childbirth, childcare and employment are heavily constrained. To deal with structural barriers, young urban mothers mobilise grandmothers as joint caregivers. Based on interviews with Guangzhou middle-class families, this study examines the impact of childcare policy reform since 1978 on childbirth and childcare choices of women. It illustrates the longstanding contributions and struggles of women, particularly grandmothers, engaged in childcare. It also shows that intergenerational parenting involves a set of practices of intergenerational intimacy embedded in material conditions, practical acts of care, moral values and power dynamics. We argue that the liberation, to some extent, of young Chinese mothers from childcare is at the expense of considerable unpaid care work from grandmothers rather than being driven by increased public care services and improved gender equality in domestic labour. Given the significant stress and seriously constrained choices in later life that childcare imposes, grandmothers now become reluctant to help rear a second grandchild. This situation calls for changes in family policies to increase the supply of affordable and good-quality childcare services, enhance job security in the labour market, provide supportive services to grandmothers and, most importantly, prioritise the wellbeing of women and families over national goals.

1. Introduction

1.1. Shifting from Childbirth to Childcare under the Two-Child Policy

To increase the birth rate, which has declined to 1.047 in 2015 (Guo, Gietel-Basten, & Gu, 2018), China's birth-control policies have shifted away from the one-child policy to the two-child policy. Since 2016, all Chinese couples are allowed to have two children regardless of family background. However, four years after implementation, data issued by the National Bureau of Statistics of China (NBSC) shows that both birth number and the birth rate have continued to fall over the past three years (NBSC, 2019). Given that the new two-child policy has not achieved a satisfactory policy outcome, it suggests little association between reduced birth rate and strict birth-control policies. Researchers have recently

explored other barriers to young Chinese couples' decisions to have children. Both case studies as well as regional and national surveys have suggested that more than half of young Chinese couples who already have one child do not intend to have a second one, and regard childcare capacity as their major concern (Shi & Yang, 2014). This means that how families understand their childcare capacity and the childbirth choices they make in the given socioeconomic and cultural environment also play a significant role in the effectiveness of policy. Therefore, issues of Chinese families' childcare arrangements and the impact on the choices whether to have children or not under the new policy have attracted growing interest from policy researchers. More importantly, the shift of focus from macro-level factors, such as urbanisation and birth-control policies, to micro-level family practices opens up a wider space for the academia to reflect upon the relationships between the state, family and Chinese women.

Studies have emphasised young Chinese women's harsh choices between childcare responsibilities and competitive labour market in the context of Chinese childcare reform (Cook & Dong, 2011). Family or childcare policies in China since 1949 have changed from a defamilialism model to currently, a familialism one (Ngok & Fan, 2018). During the socialist period (1949–1978), in order to rebuild post-war national economy and encourage women to work, the state minimised the caring role of the family and put up the slogan "women hold up half of the sky." Urban Chinese women were provided with free childcare services through *danwei* (work unit). By the end of 1956, there were about 26,700 different kinds of childcare facilities in urban areas, 260 times more than what existed before 1949 (Zuo & Jiang, 2009). Such defamilialised policies highly liberated married women from care duties, and urban women's labour participation rate increased up to 75% by 1988 (Meng, 2012).

During the economic transition period (1978–1990s), the state shifted its emphasis towards economic development and focused social expenditure on policy areas which cultivated an active labour force, such as higher education and health. As many state-owned enterprises which used to provide social services were shut down or reformed, publicly-funded childcare facilities shrunk rapidly. Meanwhile, the state loosened its regulations and encouraged the development of the private childcare market, leading to the rapid growth of private childcare centres from the mid-1990s onwards (Zhang & Maclean, 2012). The decline of public childcare facilities and the rising cost of private childcare services have implicitly redefined the family as the primary care provider.

With the advent of the new century, the state expanded social policies to enhance social harmony and political stability. A residual social security system has been established, but it only protects the most vulnerable and at-risk social groups, which includes orphans, disabled children, and those affected by poverty. For the rest of the population, the lack of affordable childcare has meant that the majority of childcare work still falls on the family alone. The decline in public childcare services has thus heightened tensions between work and caring duties for working mothers, particularly those who cannot afford to use private or commercialised care services (Du & Dong, 2013). This also contributes in part to the sharp decline of urban women's labour force participation rate, which had already fallen to 57% by 2009 (Hare, 2016).

Meanwhile, gender equality in private life has also not progressed substantially, with women continuing to shoulder more caring responsibilities than men. In fact, the birth control policy has resulted in each child becoming even more precious as they become the only hope of continuing the family line (Fong, 2002). While previous generations would worship their ancestors and place primacy over the needs of the elderly, today, the happiness and success of the youngest generation have become Chinese families' primary aim (Yan, 2018). To fulfil this goal, particularly with regards to fierce educational competition, Chinese families make unlimited investments for the benefit of their priceless only child. For Chinese mothers, it requires wholehearted devotion to childcare and child education (Yang, 2018).

It is true that some Chinese women are sceptical of the prevailing model trajectory of life and are eager to escape such a plight by remaining unmarried, practicing late marriage or delaying having children (Davis & Friedman, 2014). However, these are harsh choices afforded to women under the patriarchal structure and values of filial piety. Women in these circumstances are often discriminated, seen as being an "unfilial daughter" or "leftover woman" by their parents and partners (To, 2013). What's worse, those socioeconomically disadvantageous women are forced to leave the formal labour market, and some become housewives, leading to greater economic risk (Wu, 2014). The state also stresses the virtues of women who strive to build a greater nation through both labour participation and family building. This means that Chinese women should simultaneously be successful at work while also managing family duties (Tao, 2016). The state now places a higher demand on women than it did during the socialist period. Given these institutional constraints, married women are in a difficult position, reconciling tensions between work and childcare. To deal with these structural difficulties, then, grandmothers are often enlisted as joint child caregivers in both urban and rural areas.

As the state has retreated from providing childcare services, grandparents have gradually become secondary or even primary caregiver (Chen, Short, & Entwisle, 2000). A survey conducted by the China Research Centre on Aging in 2014 showed that 60–70% of Chinese children nation-wide between zero and two years of age were mainly taken care of by their grandparents, and among them, around 30% of children were cared for exclusively by their grandparents. Based on 2008 data by the China Health and Retirement Longitudinal Study, up

to 58% of the elderly have once helped with grandchild caring for their adult children (Ko & Hank, 2013).

An intergenerational parenting arrangement, whereby grandparents and parents jointly take care of the child, is regarded as a family strategy that maximises resources for fulfilling the needs of both parents and children in contemporary China (Goh & Kuczynski, 2010; Zhang et al., 2019). Nevertheless, researchers have largely adopted a parental perspective, focussing on young mothers' struggles in the current socioeconomic and cultural context. Little attention has been paid to the lived care experiences of grandmothers, and whether such care arrangements are sustainable under the two-child policy and the reasons behind this. Thus, our work examines how grandmothers understand care provision, their responses to the demands of caring for a second grandchild, and the impact this response has on young couple's childbirth decisions.

While we do not deny that there are other factors that affect childbirth decisions, this article focuses on the variety of challenges experienced by grandmothers specifically and explores their emerging impact on the effectiveness of the two-child policy. Through the lens of grandparental involvement in childcare, we unveil structural constraints that have limited the choices and futures of Chinese women, both young and old. More broadly, our research questions relate to the greater role that grandparents are assuming in rearing the next generation worldwide in the era of increasing longevity, reduced fertility, and radical economic and family changes (Arber & Timonen, 2012; Buchanan & Rotkirch, 2018). In what ways can the case of China advance the understanding of grandparental involvement in childcare? What are the implications of China's family policies which currently, are highly familialised and gendered on meeting the needs of women and on enhancing their wellbeing?

1.2. Grandmothers in an Intergenerational Parenting Arrangement

A growing number of studies on grandparenting have explored grandmothers' care roles and their impact on life in old age, both in China and globally (Arber & Timonen, 2012; Chen, Liu, & Mair, 2011; Hayslip, Fruhauf, & Dolbin-MacNab, 2017). A study on the intergenerational parenting arrangement in the non-local families of Beijing shows that young mothers play a dominant role in childcare and make decisions in children's social and education activities, while the grandmothers mainly assist mothers with care work and household chores (Xiao, 2014). In this respect, the care role played by Chinese grandmothers are to some extent consistent with their Australian and Hong Kong counterparts (Kirby & Sanders, 2012; Leung & Fung, 2014). However, the division of care work and the power structure in the case of China are seen to result from the prevalence of modern parenting practices, and the decline of parental authority in the private sphere (Xiao, 2014). Moreover, studies have shown that variations in grandmothers' involvement in terms of time and care services have a clear association with family policies (Silverstein & Zhang, 2013), the availability of part-time jobs for women (Bordone, Arpino, & Aassve, 2016), and cultural values (Lee & Bauer, 2010; Low & Goh, 2015). Geographical proximity and a closer bond between two generations also increase grandparents' involvement in childcare, particularly maternal grandmothers (Zhang et al., 2019; Zhang, 2014).

Other studies have explored the impact of care responsibilities on grandmothers' retired lives. Regular care provision by grandmothers has been found to result in less leisure, less personal care, and less sleeping time (Li, Ju, & Huo, 2016). Full-time and long-hour caregivers also suffer higher subjective time stress, less life satisfaction, and worse health. Grandparenting also causes financial difficulties because extra expenses are incurred alongside less paid work participation due to caregiving (Bowers & Myers, 1999). Therefore, grandparenting generally results in mixed feelings of joy and exhaustion, but those who undertake a major care role feel significantly stressed (Goodfellow & Laverty, 2003; Leung & Fung, 2014). This is particularly the case for co-residential and maternal grandparents in low-income families and in places with a familial culture and limited childcare services (Burnette & Sun, 2013; Low & Goh, 2015).

Grandparenting can also cause family conflict between grandparents and parents in East Asia when grandparents play a teaching or disciplinary role rather than the non-interference supportive role expected by parents (Goh, 2013; Leung & Fung, 2014). Tensions are particularly intensified between in-laws in three-generation co-residential families (Thang, Mehta, Usui, & Tsuruwaka, 2011). However, studies suggest that the intergenerational bond remains strong in China (Shi, 2017). In rural China, the adult children (both daughters and sons) who migrate to cities for work reciprocate through emotional and financial support for their parents' involvement in grandchild care. Such exchange enhances intergenerational intimacy in China (Zhang & Silverstein, 2012).

Additionally, grandmothers' social participation is negatively affected due to their involvement in demanding and lengthy childcare responsibility. Chinese grandparents tend to have reduced participation in social activities and retire earlier to provide childcare for their adult children (He & Wang, 2015; Li et al., 2016). This not only weakens grandmothers' financial abilities, but also threatens their well-being as they feel isolated from peers and communities, particularly in areas where social services are limited (Ludwig, Hattjar, Russell, & Winston, 2007).

Existing studies have informed our study in three ways and, consequently, we aim to address three main questions. First, the caring experiences of Chinese grandmothers have to be understood in the specific socioeconomic and cultural contexts governing Chinese women across time and place. Given China's current familialised childcare policies and moral values, marketised child-

care services, urban Chinese grandparents may undertake heavy care work. Therefore, how do Chinese grandmothers engage in care provision and how do they make sense of care provision to the lives of their daughters' and their own?

Second, whether an intergenerational parenting arrangement is likely to be formed or sustained is bounded by certain material conditions and financial capacities. Thus, in what ways the childcare provided by urban grandmothers is precious for Chinese young women? Do women of the families which have more socioeconomic resources have better options?

Third, an intergenerational parenting arrangement involves a set of practices of intergenerational intimacy that is embedded in a given emotional and power relations between two generations. It means that the exchange of caregiving might be in various forms and go beyond monetary exchange. Thus, to what extent are young couples' decisions regarding childbirth affected by the response of grandmothers? If grandmothers hesitate or even resist requests to help rearing a second grandchild, under what circumstances do grandmothers actually agree to look after a second grandchild?

2. Method

To address these questions, we conducted in-depth interviews with grandparents and their adult children from ten middle-class dual-earner families in the city of Guangzhou during 2016 and 2017. Families who owned at least two flats in the city were identified as middle-class. In this main sample, the grandmothers acted as joint caregivers who had once helped or were now helping to raise at least one grandchild.

Middle-class families were recruited for two reasons. First, compared with low-income groups, urban mothers in these middle-class families are better able to use marketised care services (e.g., hiring a caregiver or sending their children to private childcare centres). Instead, they choose to seek help from grandmothers. Thus, it helps us further demonstrate women's struggles as well as the unique role of grandmothers in childcare when the affordability and availability of childcare is increasingly become a concern to Chinese women. Second, middle-class grandmothers who provide childcare may expect more non-material forms of return from their adult children. It thus helps us better understand how Chinese grandmothers make sense of the caregiving to maintaining their intergenerational relationship.

To maximise the diversity of the sample, we considered important variables that would affect a grandmother's carer role, such as living arrangements, lineage (maternal or paternal), number of adult children and grandchildren, gender of adult children/grandchildren, and places of origin (local or non-local) (Ikels, 1998; Zhang et al., 2019). To better demonstrate the complexity of family dynamics and diverse caring experiences, we also interviewed a small number of fathers

and grandfathers in some families. To better investigate the impact of grandparenting on childbirth decisions, we also recruited two other middle-class families in which the grandmothers did not provide caregiving as deviant cases for this study.

Of the twelve families interviewed, most grandparents were in their 60s, although one was in their 70s (F9) and another in their 50s (F11). Most adult children were in their 30s. Seven families had one child, one mother was already pregnant with her second child, and four families had two children. Most children were under school-age.

3. Findings

3.1. Precious Informal Care Resources

Our findings reveal that the grandmothers provided considerable childcare regarding time and services for the working mothers, particularly when the grandchildren were pre-schoolers. Grandmothers' timetables closely matched their grandchildren's care needs and the demands of the mothers' employment. Grandmothers from all ten families who provided care did so at some point daily for ten hours, or full time, when the grandchildren were aged under three. They started care work when the parents went to work and finished when they returned home. When the grandchildren went to kindergarten, the grandmothers provided half-day/weekend part-time care. It is obvious that, given the unequal division of family responsibilities between men and women, working mothers mobilised a large amount of resources, such as time and care services, from grandmothers to meet the needs of labour participation.

The gender pattern continues in all ten families as the mothers and grandmothers were disproportionately involved in childrearing activities and household chores compared to fathers and grandfathers. In their own words: "Mothers educate, grandmothers care, fathers finance, and grandfathers stand by and watch." The mothers, particularly those in rural-urban migrant families, held greater decision-making power regarding important childcare and educational matters. This implies a challenge to traditional intergenerational power relationships and a decline in parental authority. The mothers clearly expressed that they made decisions about activities such as seeing a doctor, seeking a nanny, choosing a kindergarten/school, teaching with school assignments, etc. In contrast, the grandmothers engaged mainly in more physical work such as picking up/sending children to school, preparing meals, food shopping, cleaning, and washing, thus enabling mothers to focus both on educating a competitive child and attempting to ensure job opportunities.

The maternal grandmothers were more heavily involved in childcare than paternal grandmothers, given the changing family relations and intimate practices. The parents stressed that maternal grandmothers were their

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Table 1. Families' basic demographics.

Family case	Grandparental gender		Lineage care		Adult children's gender		Adult children's age		Grand children (No.)	Grandchildren's age	
	GF	GM	Maternal	Paternal	Female	Male	1	2		1	2
1	X	X	X		X		37		2	6	< 1
2		X		X		X	38		1	7	
3		X	X	X	X		37		1	2	
4		X	X			X	37		1	2.5	
5		X	X		X		37		2 (twins)	3	3
6	X	X	X	X		X	37		2	5	< 1
7		X	X			X	34		1	< 1	
8		X		X	X	**X**	37	33	1	< 1	
9	X	X	X		X		36		2	6	2
10		X		X	X		33		1	3	
11		*			**X**	X	32	29	1	3	P
12	X			X		X	35		1	5	

Notes: GF: Grandfather; GM: Grandmother; P: Pregnant. In Case 8 and Case 11: X in bold font is for interviewed adult children. ***** The maternal grandmother did not provide childcare for the first grandchild, but promised to help rear the second one. Data source: Authors' interviews.

first choice for childcare because they were considered to be more reliable. The fathers further pointed out fewer family conflicts occurred or would be easier to handle when maternal grandmothers were involved. Instead of being married out, daughters now maintain a close bond with their natal families and practice filial piety after getting married (Shi, 2017). This has led to the redefinition of filial obligations and change in intimate practices in grandparenting. Maternal grandmothers showed more dedication to childcare in order to enhance emotional bonds and secure their daughter's employment and economic future. They acted more flexibly and were willing to compromise when conflicts occurred. In reality, however, our findings show that childcare choices were influenced by a range of factors, including the maternal grandmother's health condition (F12), post-retirement employment opportunities (F10), the maternal grandmother's relationship with her daughter (F8/11), and intergenerational living conditions, i.e., proximity and space (F2). Further, the intergenerational parenting relation sometimes involves two sets of grandparents. While one set provided care, the other provided financial support, for example hiring a nanny, or paying for grandchildren's commercial insurance or extra-curricular classes.

We also found that practices of intergenerational intimacy in childcare are bounded by material conditions and families' financial capacity, e.g., the affordability to buy flats in the cities. Young couples were clearly aware of the significance of geographical proximity in achieving an efficient and sustainable intergenerational parenting arrangement. All young couples received financial support from their elderly parents to buy flats in the city. Five of the ten spouses lived together with the grandparents, and two families had shifted from co-living to nearby-living as the children grew up; the remaining three families lived nearby with the grandparents.

Compared to those living in a nearby-residence situation, grandmothers in the co-living condition provided more hours of care.

We also noted that with the decrease of public childcare services, access to available, affordable, and good-quality care and education for pre-school-aged children has become an imperative issue for all families interviewed. Only four out of the twelve families had hired or planned to hire a nanny as an alternative childcare choice. In Guangzhou, the current cost of a hired domestic caregiver for children is 5,000 to 6,000 RMB per month, accounting for half of the average monthly salary of employees in Guangzhou. None of the couples had chosen to send their children to private day-care centres before their children were able to attend public kindergarten at three years of age. As the mother in F1 said: "I wanted to put my child in the nearby kindergarten at first, as it offered very good services and they had native English teachers. But I gave up after I found out that it cost 8,000 RMB per month."

The rising expense of childcare in the private sector constitutes a burden even for urban middle-class families, and the lack of access to affordable and good-quality childcare and education limits options of urban Chinese women so that they realise they have to rely on grandmothers for free childcare. We found that none of young couples paid the grandmothers specifically for childcare provision, though the couples that cohabited with the grandparents did pay for food and other living expenses related to childrearing. Moreover, compared with marketised childcare services, the parents considered the childcare provided by grandparents to be "safer" and "more reliable." The parents we interviewed complained that it was very difficult to find a reliable nanny, and that even if nannies were hired, grandmothers had to oversee their care work. In fact, the parents repeatedly mentioned

news reports linking nannies and private care institutions to child abuse, child abduction, and child injuries.

Childcare choices are even fewer for those women who cannot rely on informal care, however. In the case of F11, neither maternal nor paternal grandmothers were available to provide childcare, as both sets of grandparents were already busy helping rear the grandchildren of their sons. To better care for her child, the mother chose to engage in flexible employment as a freelancer. This unfortunately meant that she had to stop doing interpretation work and now only took translation work. She expressed worries about her future job opportunities and income security during the interview, and voiced deep concern that current pension and health insurance programmes were unable to provide sufficient security for people like her who are self-employed or in other forms of precarious employment. This lack of social security for those in precarious employment makes women even more vulnerable.

3.2. Working Around the Clock

The theme of hard work, duties, and stress emerged often in the grandmothers' narratives. They often used phrases such as "working on duty" or "going to work" to describe caregiving. In contrast, fun-related words such as "enjoyment" and "fulfilment" were more used by parents when they described how the grandparents felt about caring experiences. The differences in emphasis between the two generations suggests that there are complex feelings surrounding childcare, but all interviewees agreed that caregiving has increasingly become hard work rather than being the leisure activity that they recalled from their past experiences. One father said:

> When I was a child, my parents didn't pay me too much attention…they just made sure I had enough food and nutrition, and paid my education fee….When they were busy, my grandmother occasionally looked after me, and sometimes I just stayed at home with my cousin. But now each child is cared for in detail. (F7, hairstylist)

Long hours of service and intensive physical work were frequently mentioned by the grandmothers. Phrases like "I'm just like a non-stop spinning top," "I don't even have a second to sit down and take a rest," and "I won't have time to see a doctor until I die" vividly demonstrated their stress and the intensity of child care work. Although a few grandmothers felt their physical health condition was deteriorating, they were more concerned about losing the autonomy and freedom to arrange their old-age life. They even felt mental stress in relation to ensuring their grandchild's safety. As one grandmother said:

> I did wish to learn singing and drawing and to travel like my friends, but I didn't have time….We later hired a nanny to do the household chores and I took care of

my grandson only….I had to keep an eye on the little boy, if he fell down, or the nanny might not be careful enough….I couldn't bear the responsibility. I couldn't sleep at night as I kept thinking what things I have to do tomorrow, and things went on and on in my head. (F2, retired employee of a state-owned enterprise)

We also found serious intergenerational conflicts between the mothers and grandmothers, particularly between in-law relations and in co-residential families. Differences of living habits and childrearing methods caused conflicts which were intensified by the crowded space. One father commented:

> We have been living with my parents all these years and the fights between my mother and my wife never stop. Quarrels start in the kitchen about what to eat tonight, in the living room about which TV show to watch, and in childrearing about whether it is OK to use diapers after a child is two years old. (F6, private company manager)

Intergenerational conflicts in childcare demonstrate the tensions that exist between two different types of parenting knowledge. Young urban women feel empowered as their mothers increased investments since their grade school and higher education expanded during the reform era (Fong, 2002). Young mothers absorb parenting knowledge from peers and friends, on-line communities, and parenting guidebooks and experts. The past experiences of their parents do not constitute the sources of knowledge. However, they must rely on the grandmother's help with childcare to fulfil their needs. Thus, the conflicts in childcare emerge in knowledge-based forms and can be hard to reconcile.

Meanwhile, we found that when parents recognised the grandmothers' sacrifices and were willing to reciprocate in some ways, intergenerational conflicts could be reduced. Most mothers acknowledged that it was not the grandmothers' responsibilities to take care of the grandchildren. They were also aware that it was a tremendous sacrifice for the grandmothers to provide childcare. Most mothers increased material and emotional support to show their gratefulness to the grandmothers, particularly the maternal ones, such as buying gifts, paying for travelling expenses and arrange family activities. One mother said:

> During the school holidays I put my daughter with my in-law's side. And I ordered the tourist group for my parents and we paid for the fee, too. You have to give them some rest, just like recharging. (F9, university project officer)

3.3. The Grandmothers' Farewell

Most grandmothers actively helped their adult children with childcare under the one-child policy and the de-

sire for childcare provision was initially both reciprocal and altruistic. Some grandmothers sought to strengthen the emotional bond and to secure more old-age support from their adult children in return. Additionally, some grandmothers confessed that they had to help, "otherwise they would be subject to gossip" (F8). This was particularly the case amongst the paternal and rural-urban migrant grandmothers. However, none of the grandmothers who had experienced socialist life and work questioned the legitimacy of women's labour participation. State discourses about women's liberation between 1949 and 1990 criticised housewives as being "unworking parasites" and praised working mothers (Jin, 2013), and this still exerts a profound impact today. The grandmothers also acknowledged young mothers' difficulties in taking good care of their children while managing their jobs. Thus, we see the interplay of childcare policy reform, the competitive labour market, and both traditional and modern cultural values in shaping the grandmothers' choices to provide childcare support in urban China.

Nonetheless, most grandmothers who had once provided childcare did not want to help rear a second grandchild. Except for F5 (who had twin granddaughters) and F4 (who thought little about this matter), the grandmothers from the other eight families explicitly or implicitly told their adult children that they were unwilling to help with childcare again at first. One grandmother said she told her daughter: "You are free to give birth, but I will not take care of the child again" (F1, retired kindergarten teacher).

This stance was common among the grandmothers who had provided substantial childcare support, whereas those who had provided much less or no childcare agreed to help their adult children with a second child. A similar situation was found among the grandfathers, who even looked forward to another grandchild. The one exception was F12. As the grandmother was in poor health, the grandfather (a retired manager of a state-owned enterprise) had taken care of the first grandchild. He refused to help a second time around, saying: "One time is totally enough! I cannot stand a second time."

The grandmothers in multiple-children families also wanted to retreat, but this depended on which adult child they had previously helped with childcare. One father said:

> Before my mother came over to help, she had helped my elder sister take care of her child until she was nine years old, hoping that my sister would take care of her when she got older. But now my sister wants to have a second child. My mother worries that my sister will ask her to help again....She is very tangled. I don't want her to do so either....Three grandchildren one by one. Too terrible. (F8, newspaper editor)

Shifting from active involvement to retreat suggests that these grandmothers are no longer willing to sacrifice themselves for their adult children. Most grandmothers

confessed that as they approach 70 years of age, they are physically and mentally incapable of caring for a second grandchild. Meticulous childcare with its intensive workload and long duration was far beyond the grandmothers' limits.

Despite financial and other material support received from their adult children, the grandmothers expected more recognition and emotional support. Some complained that the adult children did not show adequate understanding and respect of their personal needs. When the grandmothers wanted to attend social activities (e.g., square dancing) to relax and "take a breath," the adult children sometimes worried about the childcare being affected. The grandmothers had to compromise and prioritise the needs of their grandchildren and adult children over their own. One grandmother said:

> While I am still able to walk around with my legs, I want to enjoy a free life in my later years. If I did it again, it would be another three to five years. How many five years do I have? (F10, retired clerk)

The young couples stressed that it was their own decision whether or not to have a second child, and that it had nothing to do with their elderly parents. However, we found that the decisions were dependent on whether an intergenerational parenting relation could be sustained. Out of the ten families, there are three couples (F1, F6, and F9) who have had a second child since the state policy was relaxed. All three couples had successfully negotiated with the grandparents for a new intergenerational parenting arrangement before deciding to have the second child. In the case of F1, the mother had hired a nanny to share the care work with the maternal grandmother. In F6, the mother had bought a small flat with her husband and moved out of her parents-in-law's home so that her parents could come to Guangzhou and help with the second child. Thus, childcare work shifted from the paternal grandparents to the maternal grandparents. In F9, the couple successfully persuaded both sets of grandparents to help together and divided childcare work equally between them. Two of the couples interviewed (F10 and F11) are currently in the process of building up intergenerational parenting coalitions. In F10, both sets of grandparents were standing firm and refusing to help. The mother, a state-owned enterprise employee, said: "I have no choice but to have a baby first and then find a way to get their help."

In F11, we observed how the grandmother's choice had changed a mother's childbirth decision. The mother, a freelance translator, was pregnant with a second child during the interview. It was an unplanned pregnancy, however, and she had first gone to the hospital for an abortion when she realised:

> I really couldn't do it. I called my mother from the hospital and asked her for opinion. She said, don't get the abortion, that she will find a way to help. I was

relieved and I decided to keep the baby.

Thus, when young couples successfully rebuild an intergenerational parenting arrangement by enlisting grandmothers from both sides and/or supplementing that help with marketised means, they feel supported to have a second child. However, although a new intergenerational parenting arrangement can be built, extra expenses are often incurred due to new intergenerational living arrangements, and this also increases the uncertainties around having a second child. If an arrangement cannot be made, under current circumstances the young couples have to either seek marketised means, or the mothers may withdraw from the formal labour market. In these cases, the couples are very likely to give up their plans to have a second child.

4. Limitations

This article examines the role of grandparenting in childcare provision as well as in young Chinese couples' decisions around childbirth under the new two-child policy. We must acknowledge that there were a few limitations to our study. First, it does not explore the role of fathers in childcare, or how marriage dynamics affect decision-making regarding childbirth. We did observe that the fathers who were well educated or who brought in less income than their wives were more engaged in childcare work, and that men's participation also effectively decreased the grandmothers' workload. This suggests that childcare capacities and childbirth decisions may be bounded by even more complex family dynamics in childcare.

Second, other than grandparenting, our study does not consider other micro-level factors that may also influence young couples' childbirth decisions. Four couples had decided not to have a second child (F2, F3, F7, and F8). These couples, particularly the mothers, expressed great concern about the negative impact a second child would have on their personal career development, the effects on life quality of their first child, and the grandparents' old-age quality of life. Thus, future studies need to identify the micro-level mechanisms that explain the process of childbirth decision-making.

Third, we didn't examine the role of grandparenting in socioeconomically vulnerable families. For example, single mothers are often more in need of grandparental childcare in order to participate in the labour market (Posadas & Vidal-Fernandez, 2013). In these families, women spanning two generations might struggle more than the middle-class ones illustrated in our study, and they deserve more attention in future research.

Finally, change in birth rate is a dynamic and complex process. A longer observational period and more rigorous research are required to address the relationships between family behaviours and the birth rate trend in order to better inform policies that meet the needs of Chinese women and their family members.

5. Conclusion

Our study first and foremost illustrates Chinese grandmothers' considerable contribution to childcare provision to meet the needs of young mothers faced with institutional constraints such as a lack of public childcare, insufficient social security attached to flexible employment, persistent familialistic values and underregulated marketisation of childcare and education. The rising role of grandmothers in childcare has kept pace with the state retrenchment from childcare services since China's reform and opening-up in 1978. Without grandmothers' longstanding efforts, the labour force participation of young mothers—which is significant to China's economic growth—would probably decrease even more sharply given today's current circumstances. Thus, beyond the contribution to wellbeing of their daughters and families, those elderly Chinese women deserve social recognition from the state and Chinese society as a whole.

Our study also shows that intergenerational parenting involves a set of practices of intergenerational intimacy that are embedded in material conditions, practical acts of care and moral values. Though the young couples seldom give grandmothers a monetary payment explicitly for providing childcare, they reciprocate in the forms of emotional support (e.g., companionship, arrangements for family leisure activities), practical care and other implicit material means (e.g., buying gifts). However, little recognition of grandmothers' personal needs (e.g., live with a free retirement life) has made urban grandmothers reluctant to rear a second grandchild. It well notes the maternal grandmothers are increasingly involved in young women's decisions over childcare and childbirth. Redefined filial piety practiced by singleton daughters has enabled maternal grandmothers to contribute more in childcare, and act more flexible when family conflicts occur.

Furthermore, our study questions the rising status of Chinese women under the achievements described in the White Paper *Equality, Development, and Sharing: Progress of Women's Causes in the 70 Years since the Founding of the PRC* (State Council Information Office, 2019). The state has constantly instrumentally used the family—in particularly women—as an unpaid childcare workforce to serve its social and economic goals. We observed how grandmothers who jointly provide intensive childcare suffer from physical and mental stress as well as a lack of freedom in their retirement lives. Consequently, some of them are now beginning to withdraw from providing childcare under the two-child policy, and their reluctance is discouraging young mothers from having a second child. It is not until Chinese women collectively make decisions that conflict with the state's interests that the government will start to respond. The Chinese central government has recently issued instructions on developing childcare services, and initiated tax reductions for child education (CCP Central Committee, 2016). Some local governments, such as Shanghai, have

initiated pilot programmes to develop early childhood care institutions. However, it remains uncertain whether these new measures indicate a new overall policy approach in China.

Second, intergenerational parenting reproduces gender inequality within families. To deal with structural disadvantages, young mothers enlist grandmothers to share tremendous amounts of care work required to raise children. The liberation, to some extent, of young women from care work occurs not because of a progress in gender equality in both the public and the private domains, but it takes place at the expense of older women by engaging them into unpaid housework. Although the caring experiences are mixed with joy, fulfilment, stress, and hard work, both mothers' and grandmothers' choices are still greatly limited by institutional barriers compared with their male partners.

Finally, the farewell of Chinese grandmothers to childcare with the introduction of the two-child policy shows that the persistent neglect of women's wellbeing by the state can by no means sustain families' childcare capacities. In fact, it has exerted negative influences on policy efforts to increase the nation's birth rate. The birth rate may continue to drop if the state insists with the current familialism model. Although some measures have been initiated, the state's policy stance is ambiguous and keeps swinging between a defamilialism model and a familialism model. Alternatively, since the late-1990s, most Western societies have chosen a supported-familialism model (Bordone et al., 2016; Daly & Lewis, 2000) that supports families with resources from public and private sectors, and employs various types of policy tools such as cash benefits, services, and parental leave. However, these caring policies often aim to relieve the pressures of young women as caregivers in nuclear families. As China has a high incentive to reduce social expenditure under the current economic slowdown, and as it faces strong public pressure and concerns about political stability, it is highly possible that the state may also embark on a supported-familialism model, but in a different way. It may enhance the caring role of families by providing more support to grandmothers in the extended families. Some time is required to see which policy model China adopts and they adapt it to Chinese conditions. It depends on how the Chinese government understands the values of the family—a policy means or a policy end— and to what extent it recognises the equal rights that women should be entitled to.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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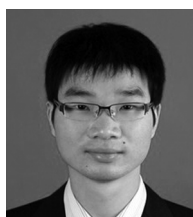
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Part II.

Women Left Behind in Migration

Article

Left Behind? Migration Stories of Two Women in Rural China

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Abstract

Women being left behind in the countryside by husbands who migrate to work has been a common phenomenon in China. On the other hand, over time, rural women's participation in migration has increased precipitously, many doing so after their children are older, and those of a younger generation tend to start migrant work soon after finishing school. Although these women may no longer be left behind physically, their work, mobility, circularity, and frequency of return continue to be governed by deep-rooted gender ideology that defines their role primarily as caregivers. Through the biographical stories of two rural women in Anhui, this article shows that traditional gender norms persist across generations. Yingyue is of an older generation and provided care to her husband, children, and later grandchildren when she was left behind, when she participated in migration, and when she returned to her village. Shuang is 30 years younger and aspires to urban lifestyle such as living in apartments and using daycare for her young children. Yet, like Yingyue, Shuang's priority is caregiving. Her decisions, which are in tandem with her parents-in-law, highlight how Chinese families stick together as a safety net. Her desire to earn wages, an activity much constrained by her caregiving responsibility to two young children, illustrates a strong connection between income-generation ability and identity among women of the younger generation. These two stories underscore the importance of examining how women are left behind not only physically but in their access to opportunities such as education and income-generating activity.

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Left Behind? Women's Status in Contemporary China" edited by Robert Walker (Beijing Normal University, China) and Jane Millar (University of Bath, UK).

1. Introduction

A well-known phenomenon accompanying the voluminous rural–urban migration in China over the past four decades is migrants leaving behind other family members in their villages and places of origin. Left-behind women, left-behind children, and left-behind elderly are seen across China, particularly in the countryside, with unofficial and widely accepted estimates of 61 million, 47 million, and 50 million respectively (Ye, 2019). Nonetheless, rural women's participation in migration has increased precipitously and is now almost as high as that of men. Indeed, demographer Duan Chengrong and his colleagues (Duan, Chen, & Qin, 2017) found that the number of left-behind wives in China's countryside had declined by 20% between 2010 and 2015. If women are no longer left behind physically, or at least not as much as before, do their roles in the family also change and if so, how? This article aims at deepening our understanding of how rural women in China are left behind by their male family members not only physically but in terms of opportunities and choices.

In this article, we argue that women who have opportunities to participate in migration, by for example joining other male migrants of the family, particularly their husbands, continue to be constrained by their traditional roles as wives and caregivers. In other words, not being left behind does not necessarily signal fundamental

changes in gender norms, roles, and decision-making regarding women's access to opportunities such as education and income-generation activities. We illustrate the deep-rooted gender ideology that governs left-behind and migrant women alike and that persists across generations by telling the stories of two women in Anhui, as part of a longitudinal study of rural households consisting of a series of interviews throughout the period 1995 to 2019.

The next section outlines the origins of Chinese women's prescribed roles and the impacts of gender norms on the division of labor within marriage and on migration. After that, we review the phenomenon of voluminous rural–urban migration in China, focusing on the split-household strategy. Migrant households' flexibility and frequent changes call for the use of longitudinal information such as household biographies, which the following section describes. Then, we tell the stories of two women, through tables that document whether they are 'inside' or 'outside,' with respect to the home village, by year, and narratives on decision-making about location, work, and activity for them and their family members. The article's conclusion calls for attention to not only women left behind in location but women left behind in access to opportunities.

2. Gender, Marriage, and Migration in China

To understand the persistence of women's subordinate and caregiving roles in Chinese families, one must start with the Confucian prescriptions of social positions, that is, each person's role in society is defined by his/her position relative to others. The Chinese woman is defined in relation to, and subordinate to, other males in the family: a daughter in relation to her father; a wife in relation to her husband; and a mother in relation to her son(s). What's more, historically the labor, fertility, and person of Chinese women have been considered a property exchanged through marriage, a social and transactional institution, to the husbands' family (Croll, 1984). Under the patrilocal tradition, a married woman would leave her natal family and move to and become a member of the husband's family. The transfer of a woman's responsibility and obligation to the in-laws not only helps continue the husband's family line, but also adds pragmatic and economic values in terms of augmenting labor resources, the formation of networks, and provision of old-age security (Fan & Huang, 1998). To this day, the patrilocal tradition remains, especially in rural areas. This tradition is key to explaining women's persistently low status because the eventual loss of daughters discourages the natal family from investing in their education relative to sons, as illustrated by the age-old saying that having a daughter is like 'water spilled out.' The bride price is both symbolically and materially a compensation by the husband's family to the natal family for raising a daughter and losing her eventually, but it further institutionalizes the transactional nature of marriage as well as the notion of women as property.

Based on deep-rooted ideology that governs gender roles and fosters gender inequality, the division of labor between women and men in the household has become cemented over thousands of years. This is aptly summarized by the inside–outside dichotomy: 'The woman's place is inside the family and the man's sphere is outside the family' (*Nv zhu nei nan zhu wai*; Mann, 2000), meaning women are responsible for domestic duties and caregiving while men are responsible for earning income and activities outside the family.

Despite the notion that 'women hold up half the sky' as well as policies that increased women's labor force participation, popularized and implemented during Mao's regime, and despite the rise in women's educational attainment over the past decades, traditional gender norms have stubbornly prevailed (Hannum, 2005; Ji, Wu, Sun, & He, 2017). The phenomenon of 'leftover women' (*shengnv*), women who are highly educated and/or highly accomplished and who have difficulties finding husbands, exemplifies the persistent gendered expectation for women in marriage to be inferior and subordinate to men (Ji, 2017). The prevalence of 'marriage corners' or 'marriage markets' in Chinese cities is further testament that the marriage matching game, whose rules uphold male superiority and female subordination, continues to undermine women's identity as independent actors and achievers (Gui, 2017). While the above examples tend to be found in cities more than in the countryside, in rural China, women's status is no better. While under Mao the collectives were responsible for rural production, since the market reforms that began in the 1980s, the peasant household has once again become the basic production and consumption unit. Left with only farmland—and in many cases grossly insufficient farmland—rural Chinese are deprived of a social safety net and support from the state. In the household, women's subordinate status is reinforced, while men cement their positions as household heads socially and economically (Park, 1992). What's more, the state's failure to ensure sustainable livelihoods for the rural Chinese leaves them no options but to leave for migrant work. Millions of women are physically 'left behind' by husbands who are in the cities doing migrant work, leaving all farming, house chores, and caregiving responsibilities to the wives. In addition to responsibilities within the home, wives now take up farming, animal husbandry, and other non-farm work in the home village. Jacka (2006) describes this phenomenon as a shift in the boundary between women's 'inside' realm and men's 'outside' sphere, namely; inside now includes all village responsibilities and outside now includes migrant work.

Since the 1990s, an increasing number of women, including married women, have joined the migrant labor force. This is mainly because migrant work has become an extremely important source of income and a way of life for rural Chinese. When both the husband and wife undertake migrant work, child-rearing and farming duties may be carried out by their left-behind parents

(Chang, Dong, & MacPhail, 2011). But even if wives do participate in migrant work, and are not physically left behind, their primary duties may continue to be defined by caregiving for the old, the young, and the spouse. As we seek to show in this article, wherever rural women are, they tend to play a supporting role, with caregiving as their priority and primary expectation, dominating and determining other life and mobility decisions that they make or that are made for them.

3. Migration in China

Rural–urban migration, which provides cheap labor for industrialization, has been a key driver of the spectacular economic performance in China since the 1980s, marked by two-digit annual economic growth until recent years. At the same time, the level of urbanization skyrocketed at an unprecedented rate, increasing from only 18% in 1978 to 56% in 2015 (Wu, 2016). From a largely immobile society prior to the 1980s, China has quickly become a nation where approximately one-sixth of the population, or nearly 250 million in 2015, are on the move, mostly to seek work (National Bureau of Statistics of China [NBSC], 2016a).

Instead of settling down in urban areas, Chinese rural migrants have pursued a split-household strategy, by circulating between the workplace and home village and leaving behind some family members. This strategy is well explained by the new economics of labor migration theory, noting that circular migrants can continue to make full use of family resources such as land and housing in the origin, and at the same time access employment opportunities at the destination, thus maximizing income and minimizing risk (Hugo, 1982). In addition, the *hukou* system, which was formally implemented in the late 1950s and entitled urban Chinese to state benefits and subsidies while allocating farmland to rural Chinese as their livelihood, in essence, separated the population into an urban segment and a rural segment. It is also a persistent barrier to rural migrants' permanent settlement in cities. The *hukou* system and its impacts are well documented in the literature and therefore will not be detailed here (e.g., Cheng, Guo, Hugo, & Yuan, 2013; Fu & Ren, 2010; Wu, 2004), but in short, without urban *hukou*, rural migrants continue to have difficulties accessing housing, good jobs, education, and other services in cities. Not surprisingly, therefore, migrants may prefer to hold on to their rural resources such as farmland, in the event that they return to the countryside for good in the future (Chen & Fan, 2016).

In terms of who moves in a migrant household and who stays behind, Duan and his colleagues have identified four conceptual stages of household arrangement (Duan, Lv, & Zou, 2013). The first stage involves migrants who leave during the farming off-season to work in the city, mostly migrating alone and returning home during the farming season. During the second stage, couple migrants pursue work in cities, leaving behind children to

be taken care of by grandparents or other relatives. The reunification of the nuclear family constitutes the third stage when migrant parents arrange for their children to join them in the host city. Finally, the fourth stage involves the migration of the extended family.

The first three stages of Duan's conceptual framework have been supported by empirical research. During the 1980s, migrant work was regarded as a new means to increase income for rural households, and most migrants were singles (single migration) or married men (sole migration), the latter typically leaving behind wives to shoulder farming and childcare responsibilities (Fan, Sun, & Zheng, 2011). By the 1990s, migrant work had become even more prevalent, such that 'couple migration' where both the husband and wife leave for urban work became increasingly common. According to China's censuses, the percentage of both the household head and the spouse being migrants increased from 7.44% in 1990 to 46.06% in 2000 (Duan, Yang, Zhang, & Lu, 2008). Since the 2000s, the nuclear-family arrangement, where both the spouse and children join migrants in urban areas, has fast gained prominence (Fan & Li, 2019).

Yet, what the above cross-sectional data and observations fail to reveal is the flexibility with which migrants change their household arrangement in terms of who leaves and who stays, where they work, what kind of jobs they have, how long they stay in the location of migrant work, and how long before they return to the village, if they do. Due to these frequent changes, longitudinal and biographical information is much more powerful in illustrating the extent to which individuals in the household participate in migration, their roles in enabling others to engage in migrant work, and the intra-household, inter-generational, and gendered divisions of labor that facilitate increase of household income while at the same time meeting household needs such as caregiving. For example, by analyzing longitudinal histories of rural migrants, Chen and Fan (2018a) find that the timing of a woman's initial migration is sensitive to her caregiving responsibility to dependent children and the elderly in the countryside, while that of men is not sensitive to either. Along the same vein, the number of left-behind children influences the frequency with which a female migrant returns to the village but has no effect on the return of male migrants (Chen & Fan, 2018b). Based on household biographies, Fan and Wang (2008) highlight migrants' frequent changes in location, activities, and household arrangement in order to access urban job opportunities, guard rural resources, and meet caregiving needs. Observations like the above would not have been possible without longitudinal stories told by the migrants and their family members.

4. Data and Household Biographies

The collection of longitudinal and biographical information of migrants is painstaking, and such data is rare. We are fortunate to have participated in a longitudinal

survey of 300 rural households in 12 villages in Anhui and Sichuan provinces, comprising in-depth interviews on members of the household, their demographic characteristics and migration histories, important household events such as marriage, birth, and death, and interviewees' feedback about and assessment of migration. The survey was first launched in 1995 by the Research Center for Rural Economy of China's Ministry of Agriculture, in partnership with Renmin University. Anhui and Sichuan have been major sending provinces of rural migrant workers. All the villages selected for the survey have little per capita farmland and have sent out a large number of migrant workers. Interviews with the same households in 1995 and 2005, supplemented by further interviews in 2009, 2014, and 2019, allowed us to create longitudinal biographies for most of the households. Notably, each interview includes retrospective information, thus enabling a longitudinal record of both individuals and households.

One limitation of the data is that the completeness of the household biographies varies among households, which is due to three reasons. First, though the interviews followed structured guidelines, they were conducted in a conversational manner, an approach that migrants and villagers much prefer to a questionnaire. Second, different interviewees from the same household might be interviewed in different years, sometimes contributing to inconsistencies regarding information such as the exact year a household event occurred. Third, over time, more villagers have left for migrant work, to the extent that our contacts with some households have become difficult. Despite these limitations, our many visits to the field sites have allowed us to verify and correct information, and most importantly have pointed us to certain trends and consistencies in migrant and household practices.

In the following, we describe two household biographies, each focusing on a rural woman who has both participated in migrant work and been left behind. We selected these two women because their stories—in particular how their roles are shaped by their husbands' migrant work activities and the households' caregiving needs—are seen repeated among other households that we have interviewed, because their biographic information is quite complete and includes more recent information than most other households, and because our relationships with the two households enabled us to probe deeper during the respective conversations. Both households are from one county, in the northwestern and poorer parts of Anhui province—itself also among the poorest provinces in China—where limited job opportunities and scarcity of farmland have encouraged villagers to pursue migrant work.

For each woman, we construct a biographical table that begins a little before she got married, codes her and her husband's locations each year as 'inside' or 'outside,' and notes their location and type of work as well as other notable household events. 'Inside' and 'out-side' are marked by 'I' and 'O' respectively, depending on whether they stay within the boundary of the home 'town' (*zhen*), which may include incorporated villages, for more than six months continuously within a calendar year. Even if they work in the town and not the home village, they very likely live in the village or commute to the village frequently. On the other hand, if they stay in a different town within the same county, they are considered 'outside.' This is consistent with how rural Chinese typically speak in terms of "being inside [at home] this year" or "being outside that year" (Chen & Fan, 2018b). This inside–outside binary represents the dichotomy between rural and urban locations and by extension rural and urban work, whether rural workers are physically residing in the home village or living elsewhere, as well as gender divisions of labor in migrant households as discussed earlier. By using a six-month criterion, we exclude short-term moves. Being away for six months is also the standard definition of migrants used by the NBSC and by many researchers who study migration in China (Knight, Deng, & Li, 2011; NBSC, 2016b).

5. Thirty-Five Years of Caregiving: The Story of Yingyue

Table 1 summarizes Yingyue's story. She was born in 1962 and went to primary school for five years before permanently dropping out of school. She was introduced by family members to Wanming, a fellow villager, and got married at 22 years old, in 1984. Wanming, a year older than Yingyue, had a junior high level of education and began doing migrant work at 19 years old. After he got married, he stayed in the village for several years, from 1984 to 1991, farming and helping to build houses for villagers. During that time, the couple built a house, and Yingyue gave birth to a son and a daughter. But in 1992, Wanming decided to do migrant work again:

> We were so poor. There were no options but to go out.

From 1992 to 2001, Wanming worked as a construction worker in Ningbo, and Yingyue stayed in the village, farming and taking care of their young children and Wanming's parents. Yingyue's own parents, though living in the same village, were mainly taken care of by the wives of her two brothers. As discussed earlier, marriage signifies the transfer of a woman's membership to the husband's family, along with the shift of responsibility from the natal family. Accordingly, Yingyue visited her parents only occasionally and only when they needed help, but they rarely asked her to help, except during the time before her mother died.

Every year, Wanming would return home for the Spring Festival (Chinese New Year), leave afterward, return around October for harvest, and leave again until the next Spring Festival. The only exception was during 1994 when he was injured at work, which had him stay home for about six months before returning to Ningbo to

work again. The remittances that he brought back helped the family to expand their house.

In 2002, the household arrangement changed. For the first time, Yingyue joined the migrant workforce:

> The reason I went out was because my daughter dropped out of school and took over my role to care for family members, particularly her brother. And, there is no money to be made at home [the village].

She followed her husband to Ningbo and worked as a construction helper. They lived on construction sites, and she cooked and did laundry for her husband. The couple changed work locations many times, going to places where new construction work could be found. Between 2002 and 2010, they worked in Ningbo (Zhejiang), Hefei (Anhui), Wuhu (Anhui), Shanghai, and Taizhou (Jiangsu). Wanming even attempted to become a contractor in 2006, though he was not successful and eventually went back to being a construction worker.

When Yingyue first did migrant work in 2002, she was 40 years old. Her commencing migrant work was related to her daughter's quitting school:

> My daughter Lingling was born in 1988. When she was about 13 or 14 years old in grade 5, she was about to graduate from elementary school and start middle school. Who would have thought that the system would change that very year, from 5 years to 6 years of elementary school? So, she would need one more year to finish elementary school. The school fee was expensive! It was 200 Yuan per term, very expensive! So she decided to quit school.

How much was 200 Yuan at that time? In 2005, Wanming earned 10 Yuan a day as a construction worker. Assuming that his daily wage was 8 Yuan a day in 2002, Lingling's school fee per term would have cost the father 25 days of earnings. Perhaps, there was a more important reason for Lingling to quit school:

> Coincidentally, both my husband and I were outside doing migrant work. So Lingling just stayed home to take care of her older brother who was in school. She cooked and washed clothes for him.

At 13 or 14 years of age, Lingling was already providing caregiving to a brother older than she. Her quitting school facilitated both of her parents to engage in migrant work and enabled her brother to focus on schooling because she took care of all household chores. In 2004, when Lingling's brother went to a boarding high school, she started migrant work in a factory in Ningbo, at the tender age of 15 or 16. On the contrary, her brother eventually not only finished high school but went to university.

Although Yingyue did not explain why her son was given the opportunity to continue schooling through uni-

versity while her daughter did not even finish elementary school, other than the cost of schooling, it is possible that gender played a key role. If Lingling were a boy, or if her brother were a girl, then the arrangement might have been different. Yingyue and Wanming's decisions for Lingling underscored persistent gender ideology and inequity in China, especially rural China, which prescribes women's and girls' roles in the family. First, women's and girls' main responsibility is caregiving, which shapes their destiny from very early in life and through the rest of their lives. They are expected to care for not only the husband, the children, and the elderly, but also male siblings. Second, women's and girls' physical labor should be intended to support and enable other family members, especially male family members, to pursue opportunities such as education and work. Finally, and given the above, education for girls is given a very low priority, whereas male family members have much easier and well-supported access to education.

In our 300-household survey, the average educational level of men and women above 18 years of age is respectively junior high and elementary school, and the percentage of university-level education is respectively 7.6% and 3.3%. Among the cohort born after 1990, including Lingling, the gender gap in educational attainment is still wide. The average education level of men and women in this cohort is respectively senior high and junior high, and the percentage of university-level education is respectively 27.3% and 4.0%.

In 2008, one of Yingyue's relatives introduced Lingling to a migrant worker who was four years older than she and had junior high education. The next year, Lingling got married, at the age of 21, and moved to her husband's village. She gave birth to a daughter two years later and a second daughter four years later. Throughout this time, the parents of Lingling—Yingyue and Wanming—continued their migrant work. Since getting married and until 2019, Lingling did not participate in migrant work because she was busy taking care of her two children and her parents-in-law, two elderlies who needed care. Her husband was the only breadwinner of Lingling's household. In 2019, although her older daughter was only 8 and her youngest daughter was only 4, Lingling was obligated to go out to work and bring home earnings because her husband was staying in the village to supervise the construction of their house and could not go out. Occasionally, Lingling's two daughters would stay with grandmother Yingyue, who stopped doing migrant work in 2012.

Yingyue and her husband decided to end their migrant worker's tenure and move back to the home village in 2012, as around the time Yingyue's son had graduated from university. Yingyue was 50 and Wanming was 51 then. Half-jokingly, Yingyue explained why they stopped migrant work:

> My son no longer asked us for money, so there was no need to [do migrant] work anymore.

Table 1. Yingyue's household biography.

Year	Inside (I)–Outside (O)	Wife (Yingyue)		Husband (Wanming)		Other
		Age	Work	Age	Work	
1980–1983		18–21	Farming	19–22	Building cave dwellings (打窑; Shaanxi)	The future husband finished junior high. Followed friend to work, left after Spring Festival, returned for harvest.
1984–1986	II	22–24	Same	23–25	Farming; building houses	In 1984, got married, built a house.
1987	II	25	Same	26	Same	Birth of son.
1988	II	26	Same	27	Same	Birth of daughter.
1989–1991	II	27–29	Same	28–30	Same	
1992–1993	IO	30–31	Same	31–32	Construction worker (Ningbo)	
1994–2001	IO	32–39	Same	33–40	Same	In 1994, Wanming was injured at work, returned home for about 6 months. The couple expanded the house.
2002	OO	40	Construction helper (Ningbo)	41	Construction worker (Ningbo)	Daughter quit school (age 14; grade 5), helped to watch house, cared for brother. Yingyue followed the husband to go out.
2003	OO	41	Same	42	Same	
2004–2005	OO	42–43	Construction helper (Hefei)	43–44	Construction worker (Hefei)	In 2004, the son started boarding (high) school and the daughter went out the first time to work in a factory in Ningbo.
2006	OO	44	Construction helper (Wuhu)	45	Construction contractor (Wuhu)	Wanming lost money due to compensation for a worker's death.
2007–2008	OO	45–46	Construction helper (Shanghai)	46–47	Construction worker (Shanghai)	In 2008, the daughter moved to work in a factory in Shanghai; the son started university in Huangshan.
2009–2010	OO	47–48	Construction helper (Taizhou, Jiangsu)	48	Construction worker (Taizhou, Jiangsu)	In 2009, the daughter returned, got married.
2011	OO	49	Same	49–50	Same	The daughter gave birth to a daughter.
2012	II	50	Farming; caregiving	51	Farming; building houses	Built a new house. Son graduated from university, worked in Fujian.
2013	OO	51	Construction helper (Fujian)	52	Construction worker (Fujian)	Son got married, worked in Suzhou, Anhui.
2014	II	52	Farming; caregiving	53	Farming; building houses	Daughter-in-law gave birth to a son in the village.
2015–2016	II	53–54	Same	54–55	Same	In 2015, the daughter gave birth to her second daughter.
2017	II	55	Same	56	Same	Son bought an apartment in Suzhou, Anhui.
2018	OI	56	Caregiving (Suzhou)	57	Same	Grandson went to kindergarten in Suzhou.
2019	OI	57	Same	58	Same	The daughter went out to work in a factory in Ningbo. Son worked in Funan, Anhui.

In 2013, Yingyue's son got married, and found work in Suzhou (Anhui) in an environmental company. Her daughter-in-law also worked in the same city. In 2014, her daughter-in-law returned to the village to give birth and stayed there for six months before returning to Suzhou, leaving the baby boy to be taken care of by Yingyue and Wanming. Yingyue would care for the grandson and cook, while Wanming helped other villagers build houses. In 2017, Yingyue's son and daughter-in-law bought an apartment in Suzhou, and the next year brought their son, then three years old, to live with them and start pre-school. Yingyue then moved to Suzhou to care for the grandson. She paid for her own food even though she lived with her son and daughter-in-law:

I have only one son. Everything belongs to him.

When Yingyue's daughter and son had their own children, the attention given to them by Yingyue was very different. Yingyue continued migrant work when her daughter had the two children, but she returned when her daughter-in-law gave birth and she took care of the grandson so that her son and daughter-in-law could return to work. What's more, Yingyue left the village to stay with her son when he moved to a different city and needed caregiving help for his own son. Clearly, after the daughter got married, she was considered a member of her husband's family, whereas the son would always be considered part of Yingyue and Wanming's family. This clear delineation underscores the persistence of patriarchal and male-centric modus operandi in Chinese rural families. In Yingyue's case, it is difficult to tell if the gender of her grandchildren is a factor (she mostly cared for the grandson, the only boy among her three grandchildren), but the gender of her children certainly is. Notwithstanding, Yingyue is indeed willing to occasionally care for her daughter's two girls when needed. When asked why he did not join Yingyue and his son's family in Suzhou, Wanming explained:

We have a big house here. The [son's] apartment in Suzhou is so small; I can't even spread out my arms and legs.

In 2019, Yingyue was 57 years old and continued to provide caregiving to her grandchildren. The caregiving responsibility did not stop when her children were grown. She has come full circle and is now a caregiver again for the third generation, mainly for her son's son and occasionally for her daughter's children. After the age of 40, she joined migrant work and was not physically left behind by the migrant husband, but her primary role in the family has continued to be caregiving. As for her daughter, she too had left the village for migrant work, but she was left behind by her brother in terms of educational opportunities, and her role in marriage appeared to repeat her mother's, namely caregiving and supporting the husband and other family members.

With four *mu* of farmland (approximately 15 *mu* make up a hectare and 6 *mu* make up an acre), Yingyue and Wanming continued to farm, growing corn and wheat while they were doing migrant work. What's more, since 2017, they have started to farm the land that was left barren by relatives and friends who had left the village for migrant work. Yingyue and Wanming's stories highlight how rural Chinese and migrants are adept at engaging in different kinds of activities simultaneously—farming, migrant work, building houses, and caregiving—with flexibility in location and duration. They have never ceased to be farmers, unlike the new-generation migrants—referring to those born after 1980—many of whom have skipped farming altogether and jumped to migrant work after finishing or quitting school (Fan & Chen, 2013).

6. New-Generation Non-Farmer: The Story of Shuang

Table 2 summarizes the household biography of Shuang, a woman 30 years younger than Yingyue. Shuang was born in 1992, the third of four daughters in her family. As a teenager, she lived with her grandfather in the village, while her parents worked as migrant workers in Ningbo and brought all three other daughters there. Shuang was a good student at school, but she wanted to be reunited with her parents and sisters, and so she decided to quit school in grade 8 and moved to Ningbo in 2008 when she was 16 years old. She then became a new-generation (also second-generation) migrant worker, working first in a factory producing stationaries and later moving on to a textile factory:

We worked from 7 in the morning, to sometimes 9 or 10 in the evening. The whole day we were standing while working….It was hard to take in the beginning. My feet sored badly. After a while, I got used to it.

Between 2008 and 2012, Shuang worked in Ningbo and returned to her home village only during the Spring Festival. In 2012, when Shuang was 20, she was introduced to Kai, a fellow villager a year older than her and who began migrant work in 2009. They were engaged and got married in the village the same year. After the wedding, both Shuang and Kai returned to Ningbo, joining Kai's parents to do interior finishing work.

The next year, Shuang returned to the village to give birth. She was accompanied by her mother-in-law. Two months after giving birth, Shuang returned to Ningbo with her mother-in-law, taking the baby boy with them. In Ningbo, Shuang took care of the young child and cooked for the husband's family.

Shuang's own parents continued to work in Ningbo until 2018 when they decided to move to Yingshang, a small city near her home village. At Yingshang, their youngest daughter would attend senior high school and prepare for the college entrance examination.

In 2016, Shuang's parents-in-law returned to the village because their father, Kai's grandfather, became se-

riously ill and subsequently bedridden. They decided to find work in a nearby city, Fuyang, in order to both generate income and be close to the father. Shuang decided to return as well, with Kai and their three-year-old, to help the parents-in-law care for the sick elderly. Kai joined the courier company that his sister and brother-in-law started in Funan, another city close by, and rented an apartment there. He was later joined by Shuang and her mother-in-law, who opened a small restaurant to serve breakfast, for several months. Later that year, Kai's grandfather passed away. In early 2017, Shuang gave birth to her second child, a daughter. Since then, her main responsibility has been to take care of the two young chil-

dren in the home village, and she has not engaged in any income-generating work. That said, she decided to grow vegetables in the yard of the family's village house, and she was eager to show us the tomatoes that she grew:

> I have had no farming experience. These [vegetables] are all from what I learned online. It's not that difficult. The vegetables that we grow ourselves taste better!

As a rural woman, raised in a village where farming was practically the only source of livelihood other than the pursuit of migrant work elsewhere, Shuang's success in growing vegetables is due to online information rather

Table 2. Shuang's household biography.

| Year | Inside (I)–Outside (O) | Wife (Shuang) | | Husband (Kai) | | Other |
		Age	Work	Age	Work	
2007		15	Student	16		Grade 7. Shuang's parents and 3 sisters all in Ningbo. Stayed with grandfather in village. Kai, the future husband and a fellow villager, was in grade 8.
2008		16	Stationary and textile factories (Ningbo)	17		Quit school in grade 8. Moved to Ningbo to join parents and sisters. Returned home during Spring Festival.
2009–2011		17–19	Same	18–20	Electronics factory (Suzhou)	In 2009, the future husband graduated from junior high and started to work in an electronics factory in Suzhou.
2012	OO	20	Garment factory (Ningbo); interior finishing (Ningbo)	21	Garment factory (Ningbo); interior finishing (Ningbo)	Returned home during Spring Festival and got engaged. Back to Ningbo. Fiancé moved to Ningbo. Returned home in October to get married. Joined husband and parents-in-law in interior finishing work.
2013	OO	21	Interior finishing (Ningbo)	22	Interior finishing (Ningbo)	Returned home with mother-in-law to give birth. Back to Ningbo when the son was 2 months old.
2014–2015	OO	22–23	Caregiving (Ningbo)	23–24	Same	Took care of the young child, cooked for the family.
2016	IO	24	Caregiving (village)	25	Courier business (Funan)	Returned home with mother-in-law to help care for elderly (grandfather of husband), who later passed. The husband joined sister in courier business in Funan. Shuang ran a small breakfast restaurant with mother-in-law in Funan for several months.
2017	IO	25	Same	26	Same	Birth of daughter.
2018	IO	26	Same	27	Same	Bought commodity apartment in a nearby town, for son's schooling, with financial help from parents-in-law.
2019	IO	27	Same	28	Same	Considering selling commodity apartment and buying a home in Funan. Wanted to move to Funan, where pre-school childcare is available (two and a half years up), and help husband's work to earn income.

than direct experience. This may be ironic, but it is a testament to how young generations of rural Chinese are increasingly similar to urban Chinese in terms of their sources of information, and unlike the older generation, they did not grow up as farmers.

In 2018, Kai and Shuang bought a three-bedroom apartment in a nearby town, with financial help from Kai's parents:

> We bought the apartment for more than 400,000 Yuan. But I am not sure if that was the right decision. We bought it because my son [who turned 5] would start going to school….Someone has already offered us 500,000 yuan for the apartment….Maybe we should go to Funan instead. My son can go to school there. The pre-schools there accept children from two and a half years up. Once my daughter is old enough to go to a pre-school there, I can help Kai and make some money….I feel more comfortable bringing home some income, instead of always asking him for money, even though he has not said anything.

Kai returns to the village about once a week. Shuang remains the main person caring for the children, even though she does want to work and make money.

> It's better to take care of your children yourself. That is still our priority. We have only one chance to educate our children.

Unlike Yingyue, Shuang's biography resembles that of new-generation migrants who have little or no farming experience, and who start migrant work early in life, soon after finishing school and before getting married. Like Yingyue's daughter Lingling (four years older than Shuang), Shuang quit school early and before finishing junior high, though for living with her parents and sisters and not due to caregiving responsibility. Within marriage, Shuang's story highlights a high degree of flexibility in terms of location, type of work, and household arrangement. It also shows how a family of several generations operates and makes mobility decisions as if it is one unit, involving inter-generational collaboration and division of labor. This seems to support the notion that Chinese families today tend to stick together as a safety net since state support and welfare are lacking (Ji, 2017).

But this safety net refers only to the husband's family and not to the natal family, from which a daughter's responsibility shifts after she gets married. Nevertheless, Shuang seems quite close to her natal family. By 2019, her parents were still quite young and were still working while taking care of their youngest daughter (Shuang's youngest sister) who was in high school. When Shuang's parents stayed in the village, she visited them every day. When they stayed in a nearby town, Shuang visited them once a week.

Compared with Yingyue's life story, Shuang's so far shows a higher degree of location choice, greater capacity to purchase homes outside the village, greater entrepreneurial spirit, and in general a higher standard of living. Similar to Yingyue and her generation, however, she continues to be a follower of her husband both in terms of location and work, except when caregiving needs arise that require her to change location in order to provide caregiving. To women, even young women of Shuang's generation, caregiving continues to take precedence, which may entail migration (physical mobility) and job change (work mobility). While Shuang places great importance on taking care of her own children, she is actively seeking out future locations that will allow her to resume income-generation work, suggesting that making money is an important component of her identity, one that is not being achieved via fulfilling caregiving responsibility alone. Perhaps, more active than the older generation of women, she is keenly exploring possible options to not being left behind, while believing in and honoring her expected caregiving responsibility.

7. Conclusion

Through Yingyue and Shuang's stories, this article has shown how two rural women from two generations made mobility and work decisions given their expected and gender roles in the family, especially in relation to caregiving responsibilities. The first story is about Yingyue, who is now in her late 50s. She was a left-behind wife until her daughter quit school, when she first migrated to the city to cook and do laundry for her husband at a construction site, as well as worked as a construction helper. Yingyue left behind two children, a teenage daughter who stopped schooling to take care of the village home and the older brother who eventually went to university. After Yingyue and her husband finished migrant work, she continued to circulate between the rural home to care for her husband and the city to care for her grandson as her son and daughter-in-law were busy with work. To Yingyue, caregiving is her primary role in the family, whether as a left-behind wife, a migrant wife, or a grandmother. Her daughter, too, was raised in the tradition that women's and girls' primary role is to support other males in the family.

The second story is about Shuang, who is in her late 20s and belongs to a generation that commenced migrant work soon after or even before finishing junior high, with no farming experience under their belt. Her migration and return decisions are made in tandem with her husband and parents-in-law, illustrating how family members are coordinated in order to maintain a safety net and meet each other's needs. Like the older generation of rural women, Shuang chose to stay behind to care for her young children while her husband works in the city. Unlike the older generation, she aspires to buy an apartment in a nearby city, where she can access daycare and undertake income-generating work again. Being able to earn income herself seems to be an important component of her identity, a sentiment that appears to be

stronger among the younger generation of women than the older generation.

While these two women both have had migration experiences, and despite the fact that they are of different generations and are at different points in their life cycle, they are alike in the sense that their expected caregiving roles and responsibilities as women dictate their decisions with regards to mobility, location, and work. These decisions are made possible by flexibility in geography and activity, including being left-behind, pursuing migrant work, returning to the village, circulating between the village and towns or cities, and engaging in both rural and urban work as well as caregiving often at the same time. In short, when one asks how and whether Chinese rural women are left behind, it is extremely insufficient to just pay attention to their location. Instead, it is important to focus on the sustained and persistent gender ideology that leaves women behind in terms of their access to education as well as economic opportunities that are constrained due to their prescribed and expected caregiving roles.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Transitions and Conflicts: Reexamining Impacts of Migration on Young Women's Status and Gender Practice in Rural Shanxi

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Abstract

This article explores impacts of migration on young women's status and gender practice in rural northern China. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a village in Shanxi Province, it suggests that rural-urban migration has served partially to reconstruct the traditional gender-based roles and norms in migration families. This reconstructive force arises mainly from the changes of the patrilocal residence pattern and rural women's acquisition of subjectivity during the course of migration. However, after migrant women return to their home villages, they usually reassume their roles as care providers and homemakers, which is vividly expressed by a phrase referring to one's wife as 'the person inside my home' (*wo jiali de*). Meanwhile, although migrant women's capacity and confidence have greatly increased consequent upon working out of the countryside, their participation in village governance and in the public sphere has been decreasing. Further examination suggests that the reinforcement of gender inequality and the transformation of gender relations result from the continuous interplay of local power relations, market dominance, and unchallenged patrilocal institutions. Through adopting a life course perspective, it challenges too strict a differentiation between migrant and left behind women in existing literature.

1. Introduction

During the last three decades, continuous large-scale rural–urban migration has brought about a separation of families with 169 million people leaving their villages, 68% of them men (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2016). For most of the migrant workforce, migration means dispersing the family. According to estimates by Zhang (2006), 47 million families have been separated as a result of the husband leaving in search of work and the wife staying behind. Even so, more than 50 million rural women work as mi-

grant workers in urban areas, which accounts for 40% of the migrant population (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2009). Most female migrant workers are young women who take up low-skilled, gender-specific jobs in light manufacturing factories, restaurants and hotels, or as domestic service providers (Jacka, 2006; Zhang, 2013). However, research shows that the opportunities for upward social mobility of young migrant women are very limited (Zhang, 2006). The majority chooses to marry their migrant peers whom they have met at work and return to their husbands' villages for child rearing, and many of these fe-

male returnees become left-behind women while their husbands continue to work in the cities. Nevertheless, it is important to ask: Why is it usually the wife rather than the husband who stays behind? The typical response is economic rationality having taken into consideration the different market returns for men and women and differential costs of living. However, the reality is that it is often possible for women to get jobs more easily than men and to earn more money.

This conundrum has recently been expanded through two bodies of feminist scholarship: The first draws on traditional gender norms and practices. It shows that the decision to have the wife stay behind to cultivate the land and take care of the home is often dictated by traditional sex role conventions: 'The man dominates outside and the woman dominates inside' (*nanzhuwai, nüzhunei*; see, e.g., Chen, 2004; Jacka, 2008; Pu & Chen, 2018; Shek, 2006). It also implies that marriage has completely different meanings for a man and a woman: It is considered right and proper for a married woman to take care of the house and for a married man to go out to earn a living. The second body of feminist scholarship draws on migrant women's experiences of hardship in cities. A national survey indicates that female migrant workers are paid only 80% of their male colleagues in the same work position. 60% of female migrants work without employment contracts, 76% of them do not have medical insurance, 85% cannot access pension schemes, and 92% are not covered by unemployment insurance (Chinese Women and Children's Rights Coordination Group, 2007). During the 2010s, the proportion of women migrants who were married increased markedly but, on average, they earned 15.6% less than other women (An, Broadbent, & Yuan, 2018). In addition to hardships at work, both single and married migrant women receive less social support from home and social networks and consequently are in worse situations compared to their male counterparts (Li, Yang, Yue, & Jin, 2007; Liu, Yin, Huang, Lin, & Zhang, 2010). Some scholars therefore argue that rural migrant women are the most oppressed social groups in contemporary China (Au & Nan, 2007; Jacka, 2006; Murphy, 2002; Zhang, 2013). For all the reasons explained, unless both husbands and wives return to home villages, husbands taking migrant jobs while wives staying behind at home become dominant gender division of labor in rural households.

Studies have revealed that left-behind women shoulder heavy workloads (e.g., Jacka, 2012) but equally that some of them have attained increasing authority and decision-making power (e.g., Judd, 1994, pp. 189–191). However, the label 'left behind women' confounds different kinds of migration trajectory and experience which can be understood more clearly through adopting a life course perspective as below. The impact of different migration experiences on the status of young women and on their gendered power relations within households and the wider community is explored through ethnographic research conducted in Shanxi.

2. Review of Rural Women's Status and Gender Relations

Economic reforms have brought new forms of gender inequality and discrimination against rural women. In the reform era since the opening up of the Chinese economy in the 1980s, rural women's political participation has declined and rural girls have continued to enjoy fewer educational opportunities than boys (Zeng, Pang, Zhang, Medina, & Rozelle, 2014). Before the reforms, rural women were bound to the land. The household registration system restricted their mobility, except through marriage and a few other means (Xiang, 2015). China's moves toward a market economy have loosened the hold of the household registration system and encouraged young rural women and men to work away from home (Yan, 2003). Millions of young, rural women have migrated to cities and more economically developed regions, working as waitresses, domestic workers, and factory production line workers, or transporting and selling goods from one place to another. They have undertaken the dirtiest work with the lowest wages and been marginalized by urban residents because of their rural identity. As Zhang (2014) has indicated, after more than 25 years of economic reform, a small number of rural migrant women have settled in cities and become integrated into urban life, but the majority of others are still working at the bottom of the urban social hierarchy.

At present, young men and women have little choice but to separate from their families and migrate in search of paid work because of low incomes to be derived from agricultural activities and the increasing costs of education, health service, and marriage. However, land is still regarded as peasants' final guarantee, given the fact that they have no pension or easily accessible health insurance. Therefore, to 'guard the land' (*shou tu*) is as important as to 'leave the land' (*li xiang*) for paid work (Li, 2016). In rural areas, therefore, with most men and young single women away working, middle-aged women have increasingly been taking on the heavy work burden and responsibility for farming. More than 60% of farm work is currently being undertaken by middle-aged and older women (Zhang, 2014), work that is in addition to reproductive activities which sustains the development of the Chinese rural sector while freeing male labor for urban development. Almost all the women will be married, frequently with their own husbands working away from home. Importantly though, increasing numbers of these women will themselves have experienced migrant work, returning from the city when childcare responsibilities can no longer be discharged by other relatives. Left-behind women have often been categorized by feminist scholars as a marginalized group, distinct from migrant women on account to the multiple practical challenges they face as a consequence of families being split (Chen & He, 2015; Smyth, Swendener, & Kazyak, 2018; Zhu, 2018). However, it is important to recognize that many migrant women become left behind women, left

behind in villages that were not their own due to adherence to the social norm of patrilocal residence.

The unprecedentedly large-scale rural-urban migration since the 1990s has not only broken down the geographical boundaries of everyday life (Liu, Lin, Zhang, & Li, 2019), but also dissembled the older, locally-based organizations and the relationships based on them (Chen, 2019; Du, 2019). For most of the migrant workforce, migration means geographically separating family members. In the course of this process, a change in family dynamics has inevitably occurred. Migration has destroyed the basic family form associated with traditional agricultural society in which the whole clan lived together, thereby sundering the kinship networks established on this basis. De-localization resulting from population movement has eroded and undermined the patriarchal family system, with its high degree of overlap between kin-based and place-based ties (Jin, 2010; Sargeson, 2018). Nevertheless, despite the spatial separation, family members manage to maintain marital ties and basic family functions. They have no choice but to construct a flexible mode of production and life that spans urban and rural areas (Jin, 2009).

At the individual level, continuous large-scale migration has brought about atomization and individualization. Even a temporary move away from the old family and community order can free individuals from the control of the male head of the household and the coercive norms of traditional customs. With their adult children away from home, parents cannot organize their offspring's lives nor make decisions for them. Delocalization resulting from migration has therefore reduced the ability of the older generation to control individual family members, especially young people. Moreover, the huge gap between income obtainable from temporary jobs in the cities and that from farming has shifted economic power within the family from the older to the younger generation. This redistribution of intergenerational power has been accelerated by the more individualistic value orientation engendered among young migrant workers who have not only shown their superiority within the economic sphere field but also in other areas of social activity (Jin, 2010).

Migration, therefore, has shattered pre-existing hierarchies and structures of family life, reshaped generational and gender relationships, and promoted the growth of individualization among rural-urban migrants. In considering its impact of women, the experiences of migrant women have tended to be positively contrasted with those of women left behind. But the reality is that these two groups are increasingly comprised of the same women as family responsibilities and reverse migration following the post global financial crisis has brought large numbers of both women and men migrant workers back to rural villages and nearby towns. This realization provokes several questions that are the focus of the ethnographic fieldwork in northern Shanxi reported below. What has happened to individualized women migrants when they are re-embedded in the family and family relations through marriage? Have they gained more power in everyday gender practice at family and community levels than older generations? What are the impacts of the returned migrants on gender dynamics?

3. Research Methods

The article draws on findings from qualitative fieldwork in Maple Administrative Village comprising of five natural villages (or village groups) in Wood County, itself nested within Forest Township in northern Shanxi Province: Pseudonyms for all informants and the Village are used to ensure anonymity. Situated on the northern slopes of the Taihang Mountains, opposite a rather broad and fertile plain, forests, streams, grasslands, and farming lands belonging to the Village have been contracted to individual households since the mid-1980s. The population has nevertheless declined from about 2100 in 2000 to some 1200 in 2017. A little over a third of married women are non-local, having met their husbands during their time as migrant workers, moving to their husbands' village according to patrilocal norms.

The ethnographic fieldwork took place between 2013 and 2017 and included participant observation in the Village and 200 interviews with villagers living in all 150 households containing women aged 20–45, hereafter referred to as 'young women.' All told, 200 in-depth interviews were conducted with 26 unmarried and 124 married young women and their family members including 30 young men and 20 older villagers. All the transcripts fieldnotes were open-coded by a team of 20 and subjected to a thematic analysis coding most aspects of lifestyle. Themes appertaining to status and gender relations are reported below, illustrated through the words and experiences of eight young women and their families.

The remainder of the article draws on the ethnographic research findings to explore the transformation of young women's role and gender practice against a background of rural-urban migration and return migration. It suggests that women's experience of migrant work has promoted cross-regional marriages, which weakens the bond between individual women and their natal families as well as breaks local customs and norms both in their natal and marriage villages. After returning to their husbands' village, young women can escape cultural practices which infringe on their rights and beliefs that they picked up from urban lives. Meanwhile, the practice of patrilocal arrangement makes these women a vulnerable target for exploitation, abuse, and discrimination. As both outsider and 'the person inside my home,' women are political under-represented in community governance. In most cases, the rights and freedom of women who have migrated are infringed after they return to their home villages. The final section draws a brief conclusion.

4. Transformation of Young Women's Role and Gender Practice in Maple Village

In Maple Village, the majority of younger villagers had experience of migrating for work to nearby cities, counties, and townships in non-agricultural sectors. Most men had been engaged in construction work and women had worked in service sector. Among all married interviewees, 96 of 124 women (77%) had themselves experienced working away from the Village; 71 of the 96 women (74%) got to know their husbands during their time as migrant workers; and 34 of the 71 (48%) did not live in Maple Village before they married although the majority came from other places within Shanxi or other nearby provinces (Table 1). Only two women are from other remote provinces; one is from Hubei, the other one is from Guangxi. Most daughters-in-laws who originally came from remote regions were unwilling to live in Maple Village if their husbands worked away from home. Instead, they sought to stay in Maple Village for only one to three years as necessitated by pregnancy and child-rearing, then leaving their children with their parents-in-law to join their husbands in migrant cities to avoid being left behind in the Village. Nevertheless, the proportion of young women who moved to Maple Village on marriage increased dramatically between 1990 and 2016.

Among the local women who had migrant experiences, 90% had worked within Shanxi Province while 73% had worked elsewhere (Table 2). Near half of women who had worked outside Shanxi Province married and moved out of Maple Village to join in their husbands. Among the 96 migrant women engaged in this research, 67 had experience of working both within and outside Shanxi Province.

5. Delocalization, Individualization, and Breaking Away from the Old Order

Traditionally, the daily life of Chinese peasants was highly localized with families living in the same locality generation after generation, but women's cross-regional movement has resulted in the dissolution of regional identity and the sense of local belonging, a process termed 'delocalization.'

The impact of delocalization on women's roles and status can be exemplified by Chen Juan's case, albeit she, as a distant migrant, is unusual in remaining in Maple Village while her husband continued with migrant work. Chen Juan is a 34-year-old woman with two sons. In the early 2000s, Chen left her natal home in Hubei Province and worked as a waitress in a small restaurant in Beijing. She fell in love with Li Yi, a coworker who came from Maple Village. Despite objections by her parents mainly because of the long distance between the couple's hometowns, Chen Juan married Li Yi in 2004 and they continued working as migrants in Beijing. In 2005, Chen Juan went back to Maple Village after she became pregnant and thereafter lived in Maple Village while her husband worked away from home. When talking about her localization in Maple Village, Chen Juan said:

Table 1. Married young women's premarital residence in Maple Village in 1990 and 2016.

Married Young women's premarital residence	Percentage in 1990 (%)	Percentage in 2016 (%)
Local residence	92	63
Residence in Maple Village	45	15
Residence in T County or nearby counties	47	48
Nonlocal residence	8	37
Residence in remote parts of Shanxi Province	2	5
Residence in nearby provinces	0	23
Residence in other remote provinces	6	9

Notes: There were 753 married women documented in 1990 and 351 in 2016. Data in 1990 was from Maple Village Demographic Record in 1990.

Table 2. Young women's experience as migrant workers in Maple Village, 2016.

Young women's experience as migrant workers	Percentage (%)
Work within Shanxi Province	90
Work at T County or nearby D City	76
Work at the capital city of the Province	8
Work at the other places of the Province	6
Work outside Shanxi Province	73
Work in first-tier/coastal cities	15
Work at other nearby provinces	42
Work in remote provinces	16

Notes: These two groups overlapped. Only premarital residents of Maple Village, 100 young women, were recorded in this table. Data retrieved from Village documents.

Local customs in Maple Village is so different from us [in my hometown in Hubei]….To celebrate Chinese New Year and other major festivals, they [people in Maple Village] kneeled and kowtowed to the older people, especially the older males of the same clan in the Village….I feel it is hard for me to kowtow to strangers. So, I never appear in these occasions, [although] I know my parents-in-law expect me to do that. But in general people are so kind and they don't blame me because they understand that I am a southerner and I am not used to do this in my natal village….But nor do I do what I did in my natal home. [For example], I never go to temples to pray which everybody does during festivals in my hometown, even my mother called and urged me to go….I feel I am neither from Hubei nor Shanxi. Sometimes I am confused but for most of the time, I feel I am free from these customs, which is good.

Chen Juan's case illustrates how cross-regional marriage weakens the binding force of place-based traditional customs, embodying clan seniority, age, and gender together with associated normative knowledge. Therefore, delocalization will lead to a breaking away from the older order. In the course of migration, women are likely to have not only improved their marital autonomy but also acquired the consciousness and courage to contend with gender discrimination. Even a temporary and partial deviation from the older order may have a significant effect in individuals from the control of the male head of the household and the coercive norms of traditional customs. As Chen Juan further put it:

My parents-in-law were not happy when they saw my husband cleaning the kitchen after dinner. They said that 'a man should not stay in the kitchen.' I try to avoid any conflicts with them, but I still think that I cook so he ought to do the cleaning. When we worked together in the city, it was always me cooking and my husband did the cleaning, as all the other couples did in urban areas. My parents-in-law don't come to our house that often now, maybe they have realized that they cannot change our lives in our house.

As illustrated in the above quotation, couples with migration experiences typically adopted a new gendered division of labor within their household. These new arrangements freed younger generations from parental control and undermined the traditional gender norms within their extended family. This deconstructive force is mainly a product of rural women's acquisition of subjectivity during the course of migration and from the break with the old order resulting from delocalization.

Migration serves both as a process whereby the younger generation of women is stripped away from traditional customs and a process of restructuring family power relations. On one hand, the huge gap between the income obtainable from temporary jobs in the cities and subsistence income from farming has accelerated the shift of economic power within the family from the older to the younger generation. On the other, the individualistic value orientation of young migrant workers has exacerbated the decline of the older generation's familial power.

Interviews with older family members who were usually parents-in-law of married young women revealed that older generation has gradually lost their ability to control individual family members, including their daughters-in-law. For example, Zhang Li, a woman in her mid-20s who returned to Maple Village in late pregnancy in 2016, recognized parents-in-law were "not in a position to decide for them." Her mother-in-law explained that the majority of family income was generated by the younger people, therefore, she sighed:

The status of younger people, especially the daughters-in-law, is so different from us in the old times. They, rather than older people, dominate family affairs….My son has to [make money and] maintain his small family and daughter-in-law is in the position to budget expenditures….Nowadays all money comes from young people's income from migrant work, therefore we older people have no power to command them.

New living conditions provide another important precondition for the young generation to free themselves of parental control. Alongside the general economic development in rural China, most young couples were able to afford to have their own houses detached from the elderly. Over 90% of the young women we interviewed in Maple Village did not live together with their parents-in-law.

Young married women were not alone in finding in the experience of migration the courage to challenge patriarchy; unmarried young women were able to do so too. Interviews indicated that leaving home to work serves as an important option, enabling young women to gain greater economic and marital autonomy in the future. For example, Mingjuan, a 19-year-old, stayed at home for two years after her middle school. She negotiated with her parents about going to the adjacent D city for work, but as the only daughter of her parents, she was not initially allowed to leave home. Mingjuan said:

Parents encouraged my brothers to work in D city, but they didn't want me to go. Maybe they were scared of me marrying far away from home. But I need to prove my worth too.

6. Patrilocal Residence and Women's Subordination within the Household

Despite the reconstruction of inter-generational power relations within the extended family, field observations show that the traditional pattern of male domination

and female subordination persists within the nuclear family, even among younger generations with experience of migration. While migration promotes a focus on individual achievement, albeit in the interests of the family, and stimulates greater gender equality within conjugal relationships because of both partners earning, the ideology of the patriarchal family continues to shape attitudes and behavior especially after returning from the city.

Within the nuclear family, even if female family members earn more than their male counterparts, the boss of a family remains the husband and the gender division of labor in these migrant families also follows the old practice: The man goes out to work while the women takes care of the house. To illustrate, Cai Ying, a woman in her early 40s, met her husband during migration work in H city and moved to Maple Village on pregnancy. She looked after household as well as ran a shop while her husband worked away in the construction industry as a carpenter. She complained about gender-based division of labor in her family:

> Since we came back to his village, he has become increasingly unhappy to share housework at home because most other women in the village manage everything at home while husbands pick up paid jobs. He feels his face is put down on the ground if he does it….We both make money for the family. But we cannot go back to the old days when we worked away from home in H city and both shared the household chores.

In her husband's view, however, when asked about his wife's contribution to the family, he explained:

> I bring money home every month and the shop is always there no matter who looks after it. With or without my wife, our family income is a fixed number. My life is just easier and more comfortable with her around.

As illustrated by the above quotations, it remains the prevailing view that it is appropriate for a married woman to take care of the house and for a married man to earn. This is mainly because of different social expectations for gender roles rather than the superior market returns that can sometimes be achieved by men. In the patriarchal family system, the household chores and services performed by women are unpaid and therefore not included in cost accounting. Accordingly, it is a 'natural' choice for the migrant family to use women's unpaid work to minimize the apparent costs of providing necessary care for children and elders.

Fieldwork in Maple Village shows that 80% of migrant women who return to the Village do so because of family reasons including the need for support from gaining extended family during pregnancy and child rearing. But such decisions are also driven by husbands' conscious-ness of their rural roots. As indicated in Cai Ying's case, younger women gain more power in the process of migrant working, however, the existence of patrilocal residence reinforces male dominance and unequal gender relations. Her contribution to family income was greatly undervalued. The underlying reasons are two-fold: First, for thousands of years, Chinese peasants have retained close links with their plots of land. Conscious of their rural roots, migrant workers rarely uproot themselves from their home villages although most villagers have invested little in agricultural work. Even if young peasants obtain jobs and marry in the city, they will have their new house built on the site of the old one in the countryside, and/or buy a commercial apartment in a small city, county, or town near their home village, they will hold the wedding ceremony in their native village, and usually also send back their pregnant wives to their native village for care that they seek from the older generation.

Secondly, migrants are denied the possibility of becoming urban citizens for reasons of policy. To acknowledge the special difficulties faced by labour migrants in China, it is necessary to understand its unique household registration (*hukou*) system, which was established in 1958. Under the *hukou* system, people were classified as either rural and urban residents and before the 1980s rural–urban migration was strictly prohibited. Even in recent decades with migration effectively encouraged, the type of household registration (rural or urban) can be changed only in exceptional circumstances. Therefore, the vast majority of rural Chinese is tied to their village by their agricultural *hukou* and the benefits attached to it, for example, the minimum living allowance (social assistance), cooperative medical insurance, and education for children.

Rural lineage, land rights, and the *hukou* system tie migrant workers to their homeland as a thread pulls a kite. And in a patrilocal culture, young married women have little choice but to go to their husbands' native village and live/neighbour with their in-laws while the husbands work away from home. As with Cai Ying, although they gain knowledge and capability to become independent wage-earners through their experience of being migrant workers, marriage embeds or entraps them back in a patriarchal system. Cai Ying reverted from an individual to a family-oriented housewife, and subsequently from independence to being husband-centered.

A similar fate would appear to await the younger women in Maple Village, albeit they are hoping for something different. Traditionally, young women got betrothed between the ages of about 20 and 22 and married at around 24. In marked distinction, all the unmarried women in Maple Village had left the Village by the age of 19, some as early as 16. Obtaining work was not their only goal as illustrated by unmarried 19-year-old Chen Yu:

> I want to meet more people before I find my marriage partner. It would be impossible for me to go out to

see the outside world after I'm 22 years old. Parents will find someone for me to marry in the Village or in neighboring villages.

When asked about her future plans, Chen Yu was uncertain about where the future would take her because she still had not find a marriage partner. She reflected:

I will wait and see. I prefer to live in the city if I can find someone there. But most likely I will be soon going back to the marriage partner's village wherever it is. All women will get married after all, then go home and let his family support me.

While as already noted, migration can lead to young women having a different world view, and the norm of patrilocality remains a dominant factor. A survey in 2019 of the status of Chinese women indicates that as many as 70% of peasant women still adopt patrilocal residence and only about a quarter living away from their husbands' villages (Liu, Liu, & Jin, 2019). Until a fundamental change takes place in the three pillars of the rural household—patrilocal residence, patrilineal descent, and patriarchal authority—being married means that these women will once again be embedded in family power relations of domination and subordination and will thereafter be subject to the norms and constraints of patriarchal ideology. They drift away from the old family relations and become atomic individuals, only then to become re-embedded into a reconstruction of patriarchal family relations. While not a simple reproduction of the original system, it largely maintains the gender hierarchy and sexual role norms of the traditional family.

7. Patriarchy and Women's Under-Representation in Village Decision-Making

While young women 'left-behind' in Maple Village are both better educated and more world experienced than in the past, they were no more able to participate in Village governance and public affairs. In Maple Village, between 2006 and 2016, no women were engaged in the Village management committee and none of 28 members of the village Party branch were women in 2016. The Village head of Maple Village explained:

Young women are more capable than the older generations. But it is a rule for women to stay inside to look after the family and men work outside to deal with big issues. It also works in Village governance.

Other male members in the Village committee confirmed and amplified this traditional, discriminatory perspective:

Women usually don't care about village politics; rather, they are more interested in gossiping about more trivial things….Women are usually narrow-

minded, they are born to be homemakers. (Personal communication, Chen, 2016)

Women are still incapable of managing the Village. An intelligent woman is at most a good adviser for her husband. But can you imagine that the whole Village is all led by a woman? I have never heard about it. (Personal communication, Wang, 2015)

However, these views were not in accord with the facts as revealed in an attitude survey conducted as part of the fieldwork. This indicated that 40% of young women in Maple Village, including five female Party members, were keen to be involved in Village governance, particularly in resource allocation decisions such as land rotation and *dibao* (minimum living standard allowance) management. However, in China's patriarchal society, unmarried young women are not considered to be family members or village members and consequently have no property rights or political rights. Married women, although considered as family and community members, often encounter practical constrains in political participation as explained by Peng, a Party member in her mid-30s who moved to Maple Village from Hunan:

I have lots of ideas of how to improve our Village. Some are good practices that I have experienced in my natal village. But it is unlikely for me to be elected as Village head by villagers. I have only lived in this Village for a few years. People know me as an outsider, especially as I come from a distant place and still cannot speak the local dialect….People would never let a woman with southern accent decide for them. I cannot even speak to the Village cadres about my ideas. I can imagine that if I go to talk to them, not only myself, but my husband and the whole family would be teased for it.

The political aspirations of women in Maple Village firmly held in check by patriarchal system of Village governance that, in 2016, meant that even the position of women's representative on Maple Village committee was taken by a man. Male Village cadres prioritized the masculine nature of Village governance and women were consequently excluded from Village decision-making. In 2016, even the Patrilocal institution further deprived women's social capital and it further prevented them from make allies in politics.

As such, Maple Village is not exceptional (e.g., Jacka, 2018; Jacka & Sargeson, 2015; Yu & Cui, 2019). According to the third national survey of women's status conducted in 2010, women accounted for only 5.8% Village directors (including vice directors) and 5.4% of female Village Party secretaries (including vice secretaries; Song & Zhen, 2013, p. 286). While young women may have gained considerable experience of independent decision-making during migration, their autonomy is heavily constrained on their return to Village both within the family and es-

pecially in political life. Denied the opportunity to exploit their experience and to build political and social capital, women are likely to remain left behind not just geographically in the Village, but in all spheres of social and political life (Luo & Chui, 2019).

8. Conclusion

The research suggests that an important consequence of sustained large-scale migration has been an erosion of regional identity and the dissolution of a sense of local belonging for many young women who have migrated. While women acquire experience and knowledge as a consequence of migration that might be thought likely to empower them (Jacka, 2006; Jin, 2010; Seeberg & Luo, 2017; Shen, 2016; Sun, 2016), their role in their patrilocal village, being excluded from active participation in village governance, regresses to that of 'the person inside my home.'

Through acknowledging migration as a short-term experience in women's life course, this article problematizes contemporary discourse on the dichotomy of migrant and left-behind women. While 'husbands work as migrant labors and wives left-behind' has become a new gendered division of labor, this should not be construed as meaning that women have been passively left behind as 'victims' as may have been true for first generation migrants. Rather, women themselves have been migrating in ever larger numbers and, with a focus on young women's life stories after temporarily or permanently returning to their home villages from migrant work, the article reveals that continuous large-scale migration has been an important structural force enabling change in rural families. As Shen (2016) has also demonstrated, large-scale migration has transformed the traditional patriarchal orders in Chinese rural society by increasing non-patrilocal residence. This research further shows that women's agency is conditioned by various forces playing in both enabling and constraining ways. Paying attention to the comprehensiveness of social, cultural, and geographic contexts also enables us better to understand women's status and gender practices. For migrant returnees, increasing numbers of cross-provincial marriages have broken local customs, while both men and women's exposure to more equal gender practice in urban settings have helped reconstruct gender relations within rural households. The implications of younger generations becoming the main bread earners for the extended family are particularly profound, weakening the intergenerational transmission of beliefs and values.

However, despite the active engagement of women in migration, gaining new life-skills during the process and the increasing freedom to choose life partners for themselves (Sun, 2019; Zhang, 2013), family power relations, and gender norms have only partially altered. The essential characteristics of the patriarchal institution, including the paternal lineage system and male dominance in decision-making, have remained largely unchallenged. When migrant women leave the city on pregnancy to live in the husband's village, they re-enter a world framed by patriarchy. The traditional convention that 'the man dominates outside and the woman dominates inside' and that the destiny of a woman is to be 'the person inside my home' continues to hold back women's progress.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Privileged Daughters? Gendered Mobility among Highly Educated Chinese Female Migrants in the UK

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Abstract

The one-child generation daughters born to middle-class Chinese parents enjoy the privilege of concentrated family resources and the opportunity for education overseas. We focus on the "privileged daughters" who have studied abroad and remained overseas as professionals. Using three cases of post-student female migrants who were of different ages and at different life stages, we situate their socioeconomic mobility in the context of intergenerational relationships and transnational social space. Drawing on further interview data from the same project we argue that, although the "privileged daughters" have achieved geographical mobility and upward social mobility, through education and a career in a Western country, their life choices remain heavily influenced by their parents in China. Such findings highlight the transnationally transferred gendered burden among the relatively "elite" cohort, thus revealing a more nuanced gendered interpretation of transnational socioeconomic mobility.

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Left Behind? Women's Status in Contemporary China" edited by Robert Walker (Beijing Normal University, China) and Jane Millar (University of Bath, UK).

1. Introduction

China's economic reform and one-child policy in the late 1970s have given rise to a large number of one-child middle-class families who have invested heavily in the education of their only child. Meanwhile, China finds itself at the top among international student-sending countries to the Global Northwest (Cebolla-Boado, Hu, & Soysal, 2017). The numbers of female students travelling from China to study in the most popular Western education destinations are consistently higher than for those of their male counterparts. In 2014, 63% of Chinese international students in British universities were female (Wang & Miao, 2015). A survey conducted in the UK showed that 94% of Chinese female students received funding for their studies from their parents; for the male students the figure was 88% (Kajanus, 2015). Urban middle-class parents have invested heavily in their daughters' education. These well-educated women echo what Xie (2019) described in her research as "privileged daughters" growing up during China's rapid economic development: an unintended consequence of the one-child policy.

However, "privileged daughters" face a complex social landscape beyond education. Between 2010 and 2020, China's ranking in *The Global Gender Gap Report* dropped from 61 (out of 134 countries) to 106 (out of 153 countries), with the most significant drop in the sub-index "economic participation and opportunity" (from 46 to 86; Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2010;

World Economic Forum, 2020). Recent research increasingly points to the contradictory social expectations for highly educated woman in the competitive employment market and in the Chinese patriarchal marriage market. The former demands "modern" characteristics such as independence, while the latter values "traditional" virtues such as obedience (Liu, 2017). Yingchun Ji's (2015, pp. 8–15) "modern-traditional mosaic" phrase captures 'this strange mix of traditional family values fused with a Western modern belief' (Ji, 2015, p. 15) which unmarried career women must adopt in order to create individual solutions to 'make sense of the unfair world and their continued need to make sacrifices within it' (Ji, 2015, p. 15). The social and cultural capital accumulated by "privileged daughters" through their higher education is heavily circumscribed by the "traditional" gender expectations of their natal family and Chinese society at large (Hong-Fincher, 2014; Xie, 2019). However, little is known about how these women navigate their mobility in a Western context. In order to explore the relationship between physical distance and gender expectations, as mediated through ongoing ties with "left behind" parents, this article draws on data from in-depth interviews with professional Chinese women who completed their postgraduate education in the UK and continued to work and live in the UK.

2. "Privileged Daughters": Embodied Tensions under Rapid Social Transformation

Because of the lack of competition from siblings, especially brothers, the vast majority of urban girls born under the one-child policy enjoy unprecedented educational investment from their parents (Tsui & Rich, 2002). Only-daughters born into Chinese urban households are often treated by their parents as their "only hope" to carry family expectations (Fong, 2004). Against this backdrop, parental investment in higher education generated China's emerging "silver-lined" middle-class in the one-child generation.

These developments enabled women to become autonomous, self-authoring subjects as demanded by a competitive global market. Such individual traits have been observed among the young-adult only-children that Liu (2006) interviewed during their university years, as well as in Xie's (2017) study of middle-class only-daughters who are trained to live up to the capitalist ideal: self-realisation through competitiveness. Meanwhile, only-children and their parents are found to have demonstrated much closer relationships and emotional attachment to each other compared to previous generations (Evans, 2010; Yan, 2015). Within the family and employment market nexus, obtaining success that is accepted by Chinese society is not only these only children's personal objectives, but also crucial in becoming a morally filial child to their parents. Therefore, to some extent, these women's embodied experience reflects the tore and tensions of living under modern transformations of Chinese society with a persistent traditional cultural influence.

Liu (2006, p. 501) reveals that only-daughters are expected by their parents to 'integrate both masculine and feminine characteristics, combine both inner and outer beauty, and perform both expressive and instrumental functions,' while their male counterparts are still assessed mainly by their talent, as tradition requires. In contrast to the traditional belief that "ignorance is a woman's virtue" (*nü zi wu cai bian shi de*), being a well-educated professional woman does not necessarily exempt her from fulfilling marriage and childbirth expectations (Xie, 2019). The rest of the article will explore whether, or how, these daughters' education, employment, and home-making overseas provide resources to renegotiate the gender expectations in transnational social space.

3. Education and Migration to the West as a Family Mobility Strategy

Previous research shows that the decision of East Asian parents to send their children to study in the developed "West" has been interpreted as a family capital accumulation strategy where (middle-class) parents invest economic capital in their children in exchange for cultural capital (notably an overseas degree; Waters, 2005). Study abroad from China was initiated by the Chinese state in 1978; largely state-funded period in the 1980s. Self-funded study abroad in the 1990s was followed by a rapid increase during the first decade of the 21st century, and has continued to grow (Tu, 2018). In recent years, the vast majority of Chinese students has become self-funded (88.97%; Ministry of Education, 2018). Because of the spatial difference in the global distribution of education resources and employment opportunities, parents hope that children with a "Western" degree will gain advantage over locally educated graduates in the Chinese employment market. Like their East Asian counterparts, Chinese families also expect their returnee children to contribute to class solidification of the family as a whole (Fong, 2011; Kajanus, 2015; Ong, 1999; Tu, 2018; Waters, 2005).

However, longitudinal research reveals that such a family strategy may not develop as planned: Waters' study (2011) on underage students from Hong Kong to Canada showed the breaking down of parent–child, husband–wife relations over time due to the long-distance separation. Apart from being a family strategy, individuals, especially among female participants, also placed much emphasis on cultivating a cosmopolitan personhood during their time abroad (Kajanus, 2015; Martin, 2014; Tu, 2018). Following the career trajectory of British-educated graduates' who remained in the UK and those who returned to China, Tu and Nehring (2019) discovered a constantly changing meaning of mobility: Post-study migrants continuously make comparisons between themselves and their peers in China, reflecting an ongoing influence of their home society.

Table 1. Marital status and income level of participants.

	Number of participants	
Marital status	(female)	(male)
Single	5	8
In a relationship	3	3
Married	4	1
Married with children	8	1
Income level (per year)	(female)	(male)
£15,000–25,000	5	3
£25,000–35,000	6	4
£35,000–55,000	5	4
£22,100	Median income of UK taxpayers aged 25–35 in 2014 (HM Revenue and Customs, 2019)	

Note: One participant did not wish to reveal her income level.

The above literature points to the multi-layered meanings of study abroad for both the individual student and their family, as well as the uncertainty attached to the post-study migration trajectory. In the UK, more than half of the Chinese students came to study on a Master's taught degree course (Bolton, 2019), reflecting a highly educated profile. Finding a job after graduation is the most common way for Chinese students to remain in the UK (Tu, 2018). However, the difficulty in doing so increased after the 2008 financial crisis; it triggered an inward-looking employment market, followed by a more restrictive work visa regime. In spite of the difficulties, the majority of women in the 2014 study found employment in the UK after 2008. Those who started working before 2008 have obtained permanent residency. Success in the selective nature of the British job market identifies these women as the most "privileged" category of Chinese daughters. However, we argue that despite their transnational mobility, their life trajectories are still heavily shaped by the traditional gender roles embedded in Chinese society.

4. Data and Method

This article draws its data from an interview-based research project involving mainland Chinese highly skilled migrants working in the UK in 2014. Their professions include accountancy, lecturing, and advertising management, with income profiles placing them mostly in middle and upper middle range in the UK (see Table 1). Of the interviewees 18 are female and 10 are male professionals; they came to the UK as students; and five postgraduate students and seven sets of parents of the participants were also interviewed to provide supplementary material. Participants were recruited via various channels, apart from initial snowball sampling, advertisements on online forums and social network service groups were also used to expand the geographical coverage and the diversity (in terms of professions, place of residence in the UK, hometown in China) of the sample. Although efforts were made to recruit a more gender-balanced sample, the larger number of female participants reflects the female-dominated population of international students from mainland China in the UK (People.cn, 2013). For the purpose of this article, we focus on the female participants' accounts.

We have selected three transnationally mobile daughters as focal points of our discussion (see Table 2). They are in different life stages: Dahong is single; Beiyao is just married and has a new-born baby; and Meilin has been married for more than ten years and has a school-age son. Their different life stages reveal the continuities and changes of the significant social factors that shape their life decisions. Each life stage from before, during

Table 2. Background of the three case study participants.

Name	Age	Length of stay	Education level	Hometown in China	Occupation	Marital status	Visa type
Meilin	37	10	Master	Shanghai	Accountant (part-time)	Married, has a son	Permanent residency
Beiyao	30	8	PhD	Northern city	Process engineer	Married, has a son	Work
Dahong	27	6	Master	Southern town	Marketing analyst	Single	Work

Note: Beiyao's mother was also interviewed.

and after their overseas education, illustrates the shifting gender expectation they experienced, particularly the parental influence throughout the whole process. It is important to note the self-selective nature of women recruited in the study: The parents who sent their daughters to study in the UK tend to be more amicable to Western culture, which does not necessarily mean that the parents of our participants are bound to be opposing traditional Chinese culture; there is no way, in this study, to testify such a feature.

5. Three Cases: Meilin, Beiyao, and Dahong

All three women are from middle-class families: Both Dahong's parents are senior civil servants; both Beiyao's parents are university-educated teachers; and Meilin's parents belong to an older generation and did not have a chance to go to university. Meilin's parents initially worked full time in the public sector but, as the private sector started to grow in the 1990s, Meilin's mother's success in her business venture helped increase the family's affluence. All of their parents (together with most of other participants' parents in the original research) experienced hardship in China in the 1960s and 1970s during the planned economy period and the Cultural Revolution; they also benefited from China's post 1970s economic development. The parents' cohort obtained upward social mobility during the rapid wealth redistribution and class stratification between 1980 and 2000 (Xiang & Shen, 2009).

5.1. Dahong, the Entrepreneurial Spirit and the Pressure to Marry

Dahong's parents were strict about their daughter's studies. Because some of their relatives were settled overseas, the study abroad plan for Dahong seemed a routine matter: 'But my dad is very traditional, he doesn't like a girl going abroad alone at a young age.' Dahong's overseas education did not begin until she finished high school and when her Paris-based uncle promised to look after her in France.

Dahong arrived in France for a pre-university language course in 2007 and soon realised that it would take her at least three years to learn French well enough to study in a university. Without telling her parents, Dahong applied to a university in London and was accepted. Her parents later supported her change of study location given that the UK course took less time. Dahong completed her undergraduate degree and Master's degree in London in design and management. She spent her summer holidays doing an internship with a fashion company in London and became its full-time employee upon her graduation in 2014.

Compared to many other Chinese graduates who had to return home because of the tightened UK visa policy and the increasingly competitive UK job market, Dahong was successful. However, when talking about her career

and future in the UK, Dahong expressed doubt and uncertainty. She saw this job as 'temporary' and wanted to start her own business, but her entrepreneurial ambition was challenged by her parents, especially her father: being a business woman was 'unconventional,' and as such it would be difficult to find a spouse:

> He said that I should get married as soon as possible. A girl should not run a company. Even if you succeeded in having a business and have a high income, your status in the marriage market would be lower than a girl working as a clerk in a bank. Working in a bank sounds decent, but a businesswoman sounds [pause]. My dad doesn't like girls to be too strong. He said if I really want to start a company, I may do it after I get married, not before.

When asked for her own timing of starting a family, Dahong, then 27 years old, gave herself a 'deadline of 35': 'As long as I have kids by 35 it will be ok, so that means I should get married when I'm 31 or 32.' Therefore, although appearing to be resistant to her father's opinion, Dahong does not fundamentally challenge the socially expected female life course of marriage and motherhood.

5.2. Beiyao, the Pride of Her Mother

Beiyao's real Chinese name literally means "better than men." Her mother, a high school English teacher, gave her the name as a gesture of rebellion against Beiyao's grandparents, who would have preferred a grandson. Since Beiyao was a child, her mother had devoted herself to Beiyao's education and career success. In 2003, Beiyao completed her Master's degree in China and started her second Master's degree in the UK: 'My parents designed the study abroad route for me, they've been telling me how advanced overseas education and technologies are, so it seemed natural that I came to study in the UK.' When Beiyao finished her British Master's degree, her parents encouraged her to continue to do a PhD and were willing to fund it. Beiyao finished her PhD in a reputable British university and found a job as process engineer in a chemical company. When interviewed in 2014, she had just married a fellow Chinese migrant who was working as a lecturer and given birth to her son a month previously.

Beiyao's mother travelled frequently between China and the UK to support Beiyao during significant stages in her daughter's overseas life journey: the completion of the PhD; job-hunting; and childbirth. In the interview with Beiyao's mother, she explained that her motivation to support her daughter's upward mobility was largely due to the gender inequality she had herself experienced:

> To be honest, my generation didn't live for ourselves, we were always thinking about others' needs. Look, we obey our parents and parents-in-law. As for our

husbands, we have to support our husbands, let him advance in his career without worrying about managing the household. We women have our own job, too, and we must do equally well in our career, that's a lot of hard work. Also, we need to look after our child, and hope our child will be successful. Women's life is really, really hard.

Beiyao's husband, Demin (33, a lecturer living in the UK for 11 years) mentioned career-planning and family reunification in the near future and claimed that he 'should be the centre of family relocation, my wife is working too far away, she should think about how to move nearer to me.' At the point of interview, Beiyao and her husband were working in different parts of England and it was likely to pose problems for the couple in raising a family. Since Beiyao indicated frequently how much she enjoyed her current job, whether the future relocation will be a dilemma for her remains to be seen. What is clear so far is that in these Chinese female migrants' marriages to fellow Chinese male migrants, they also need to face negotiation with their husbands who are likely to expect their wives to become trailing spouses.

5.3. Meilin, the Compromised Career Woman

Meilin graduated from a top university in Shanghai and came to study for a Master's degree in the UK in 2001. At that time, study abroad was uncommon and was regarded as very privileged, but her wish to study in the UK was opposed by her father and boyfriend because they believed Meilin could find a good job in China, and that an overseas degree seemed unnecessary. Meilin's mother supported her and funded her Master's degree in the UK: 'At that time the exchange rate was 14 yuan to one pound, it was a large sum of money for us, almost enough to buy a small flat. But I was strong-minded and ready to go.'

During her studies, she met a fellow Chinese student who later became her husband. Upon the completion of their courses they both returned to China in 2003. Meilin immediately secured a high-income, high-status job in a top international accounting firm. With the birth of her son in 2007, Meilin thought she 'had the life she always dreamed of.' However, at the same year, Meilin's husband decided to pursue his career in the UK. Meilin thought about getting a divorce, but her parents advised against it: 'They are very traditional about marriage. They think divorce is bad for the woman and the child. They proposed to look after my son in China so that I could follow my husband to the UK.'

Meilin compromised, left China, and tried to establish an 'equally high-level career' in London. However, her job-hunting coincided with the 2008 financial crisis. Even with an impressive résumé, Meilin could not find a job in the finance sector. The later compromise, together with Meilin's child's joining her in the UK, led to a shift in Meilin's life focus from career to family. In our interview

in 2014, Meilin had made peace with the loss of her career in China:

> In 2008 I thought my life was ruined, but the longer I lived in the UK, the more peaceful I became. My kid's progress now matters to me more than a glamorous job. Now I have time to do painting, gardening and discover other hobbies.

Nevertheless, Meilin insisted on not becoming a full-time housewife; she worked as a part-time accountant for a small company: 'It's my personality, I am an independent woman, I cannot accept not working at all.'

6. The Intergenerational Continuity of Gender Norms

As we see from all the three case studies, the parents of these women are supportive of their daughters' higher education, which is a widely observed phenomenon under the one-child policy in the absence of a son. It was common to hear remarks such as 'I raised my daughter like a son,' or 'I was raised like a son' in interviews with only-daughter's parents and with female migrants. Examples such as keeping the daughter out of the traditionally female territory (like the kitchen) or discouraging teenage daughters from using make-up were mentioned in interviews as ways to ensuring daughters concentration on their academic progress during school years. However, this rise of education expectation on girls does not exempt them from fulfilling gendered success that is required by their privileged class position as part of their natal family. In particular, when adult daughters step into employment and marriage, the gendered twist of family expectation became clear in all three cases, which illustrates that, for these daughters, the meaning of "success" took a sharp shift from academic attainment to the incorporation of a successful marriage and family life. Without it, it is hard to be seen as "truly successful" as a middle-class Chinese woman. It can be argued that such a 'gender contradiction' (Martin, 2014, p. 24) placed among the "privileged daughters" reflects a popular denunciation of Maoist feminism since the 1970s reform, which is believed to have 'emasculated men, masculinized women, and mistakenly equates the genders' (Rofel, 1999, p. 117) without removing women's domestic burden. A "successful" daughter in such context needs to fulfil education achievement, as well as having a suitable job that does not jeopardize her marriage. In this sense, women and their family in three case studies have demonstrated different levels of cooperation and negotiations in their responses to such requests.

As we see in the account of Beiyao's mother, while she behaved according to what is required of a good wife in supporting her husband, child, and in-laws, she expressed a strong sense of unfairness towards a woman's role as both the breadwinner and family carer: 'Women's life is really, really hard.' As someone who experienced gender discrimination herself because of failing to pro-

duce a son, she was committed to providing both financial and practical support to ensure Beiyao's academic achievement: a second Master's degree and PhD in the UK. As the choice of Beiyao's name—"better than man"—indicates, her life path carries her mother's dreams and hope to prove to others that it is not a misfortune to give birth to a daughter. This could be interpreted as a coping strategy to regain both the family and individual woman's dignity in a society that continuously values sons over daughters.

Meilin's mother achieved her own economic upward mobility by venturing into the private sector. When Meilin experience opposition to her wish to study abroad from the male members of her domestic circle (i.e., father and boyfriend), similar to Beiyao's mother, Meilin's mother supported her daughter's academic mobility with significant financial sacrifice. The mothers' generation had lived and worked during China's socialist period, when women were said to 'uphold half the sky' (Evans, 2007). This has normalised Chinese women's participation in the paid labour force, and symbolically inscribed a modern female subjectivity with financial independence. This period of history has a significant impact on younger women's perception of a modern successful self: 'It's my personality, I am an independent woman, I cannot accept not working at all' (Meilin). Nevertheless, in current Chinese society, career achievements are significantly overshadowed by not having (a successful) marriage for women. In this cultural context, the seemingly contradictory response from Meilin's parents in offering childcare support and encouraging Meilin to give up her successful career in China to follow her husband, when their daughter was considering a divorce, can be understood.

Similarly, Dadong's father, on the one hand, supported his daughter's overseas education to Master's degree level; on the other hand, he 'doesn't like girls to be too strong.' Such seeming contradictions appear in Dadong's father's expectations, we argue, are in fact consistent in parents' wish to support his daughter to achieve "life success" that matches her class and gender position: having a "happy and complete family." Suggesting that his daughter marry before starting a company could be understood as a strategic move to secure success in both public and domestic spheres, considering China's wide-spread belief in "female hypergamy" and male superiority (Xie, in press). If Dahong becomes financially more successful than her potential male suitors that could intimidate them, thus restricting her chances of finding a good match, whereas a "decent" white collar job such as "clerk in a bank" ticks the box of being "stable": hence being a modern woman without risking her marriage prospects.

In these daughters' narratives about such crucial life decisions, the role of parents is significant. Parents are not only actively involved in their children's decision making, but also provide critically practical support to facilitate their daughter's transnational mobility. In securing their transnational upward social mobility, part of our

female participants' gendered burden is transferred to their parents, especially mothers. For instance, Meilin's mother intervened in her daughter's decision to divorce, but offered childcare support to enable Meilin to follow her husband to the UK; Beiyao's mother continued her role as family carer as she travelled between China and the UK by herself to provide childcare to her daughter.

These cases demonstrate that the lives of both mothers and daughters are intricately intertwined, both emotionally and practically. The role of fathers varies in each case, but in the wider sample mothers of the one-child generation migrants tend to shoulder more childcare duties. Such a family effort involving three generations are not unusual in Asian societies caught between the modern and the traditional. For example, Ji (2013) argues that an extended family's willingness to help with childcare is a key contextual factor that can help women's efforts to combine the modern role and traditional mother-and-wife role. However, in (most) mothers' help in sharing daughter's childcare duty, the gendered burden is transferred back to the older generation, which arguably reinforces the "privileged daughters'" perception of gendered expectations in marriage and motherhood. In the cases we see, the close nexus between mother and their only daughters constitutes a "maternal care unit" where gender expectations are preserved and passed down along the generational line.

7. Navigating Gender Expectation in a Transnational Social Space

'Migrants are often embedded in multi-layered, multi-sited transnational social fields, encompassing those who move and those who stay behind' (Levitt & Schiller, 2006, p. 1003). These multi-layered transnational social fields could afford women some flexibility while negotiating gender expectations from home. We are not claiming that gender norms are more equal in the UK than in China, but geographical distance from their close family members avoids immediate social pressure of marriage and childbirth at a "correct" time, thus their migration status serve as important resources for these women to resist fixed gender norms expected from them at home.

In the transnational social space between China and the UK, migrants constantly readjust themselves to the expectations they perceive from home and abroad. Finding a middle ground in the 'contradictory class mobility' (Leung, 2017, p. 10) becomes a way for migrant women to make sense of their transnational experiences. For Meilin, it means discovering hobbies such as painting and gardening that she had never had chance to develop in her hectic career life, while working as a part-time accountant to avoid becoming a full-time housewife. A similar middle ground is seen when facing marriage pressure: Dahong articulates a deadline for herself to have children by the age of 35; it seemed to her an acceptable age for marriage and motherhood in London, thus leaving some time to fulfil her entrepreneurial ambition.

On the other hand, living in a different culture could make an individual long for cultural similarities in a partner for better compatibility. Despite the marriage pressure, Dahong insisted that she would not consider a non-Chinese man for marriage because of her concern about cultural misunderstandings towards sharing responsibilities in married life. Most female participants did not express a clear preference with respect to nationality or ethnicity when choosing a spouse. In fact, seven out of the 12 married women in the 2014 research project have a non-Chinese spouse. We appreciate that such preference can only be read as indicative considering the small sample, but the women's relatively open attitude towards marrying a non-Chinese person could be read as a way to bypass unwanted gender expectations on women from Chinese partners, as well as a strategy to secure their social position within the host country. As seen in Beiyao's and Meilin's cases, the clash between the women's career aspiration and their husband's expectation posed obstacles to furthering their socioeconomic mobility.

These women's life choices are significantly shaped by their gendered and class positions. Their transnational mobility renders them a certain degree of freedom to pursue their modern female objectivities that is less rigidly defined by their home context. However, despite physically moving away from Chinese society, their close ties with their parents ensures their fulfilment of certain gendered expectations from China's patriarchal family value system: what remains in the process of constructing a sense of modern self is the constant negotiation with the traditional forms of family relations.

8. Conclusion

'Gender is a powerful ideological device, which produces, reproduces and legitimates the choices and limits that are predicated on sex category' (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 147). The gender impact of transnational mobility is often side-lined in research to do with students and high skill migrants (Leung, 2017). By exploring the lives of these "privileged daughters," gender inequality is thrown into sharp relief. In this article, we reveal women's gains in attaining bargaining chips in gender negotiations through occupying these transnational spaces. On the other hand, despite their achieved upward international mobility, the daughters remain restricted by their gendered position through the close ties with their parents.

The three cases discussed provide clear evidence of heavy parental involvement in the daughters' life decisions from education and transnational mobility to marital choices. Living and working in the UK constitutes an important part of their "privileged" status together with their overseas education. However, as we saw in all three cases, despite being at different marital stages, a successful marriage remains a crucial criterion in establishing their class position as a successful woman.

The close emotional and economic connection with their natal parents effectively ties the daughters to the defined gendered expectations of the successful woman in Chinese society.

Therefore, we argue that, for these women, gendered mobility has two dimensions: on the one hand the intergenerational continuity of gender norms; on the other hand, the ways in which individuals navigate gender expectations in transnational social space. Although the "privileged daughters" have achieved geographical mobility and upward social mobility through educational success and a professional career in a Western country, they are still being "pulled back" by their parents who are "left behind" in China.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

The Making of a Modern Self: Vietnamese Women Experiencing Transnational Mobility at the China–Vietnam Border

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Abstract
China–Vietnam marriages attract increasing public attention in China and trigger many discussions on the phenomenon of 'Vietnamese brides.' The discussions are often linked to the rapid modernization of the border areas since the 1990s, caused by the re-opening of the border, the prosperity of the transnational economy and the increase of cross-border mobility between the two countries. Guided by the qualitative research paradigm, 30 Vietnamese women in cross-border intimate relationships with Chinese men were interviewed to examine their motivation and their experience of transnational mobility at the China–Vietnam border. By challenging the popular image of Vietnamese women as pitiable and ignorant country bumpkins in public discourse, this study acknowledges that these women, like other modern women, have the capacity to imagine and desire, to make decisions and to act, caring a lot about self-development and expression. Comparably, these women may not be able to enjoy the relatively rich resources and capital like the economic elites, but they have strategically manipulated multifaceted and contradictory realities at the specific context of the China–Vietnam border to better their economic circumstances, and to reshape their personal, familial, and social relationships.

1. Introduction

Beginning the research on Vietnamese brides, I was often asked if I thought Vietnamese women were 'modern women,' in what ways can they be defined as modern women, and how are their experiences of modernity different from modern women in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Paris, and New York, for example.

At the time, most literature I read about Vietnamese brides considered them as 'traditional' and 'lagging behind' women who seemed to be incompatible with modern societies. Particularly, in Chinese mainstream media, there was never a lack of negative news and reports about Vietnamese brides. In terms of these pitiable and ignorant images in public discourses, there was an ambivalence in imagining these Vietnamese brides as modern women. However, with the development of my fieldwork, I began to discover answers to above-mentioned questions.

The Vietnamese women I have met and interviewed are modern women, but they experience their modernity through different ways and means. We cannot use one standard to measure all 'modern' women. For urban and educated women in cosmopolitan cities, transnational travelling is an ordinary practice. Whereas for many Vietnamese women from poor and remote mountainous villages, border crossing can be a very modern and challenging endeavour. Therefore, how my research informants experience modernity differently and make themselves modern women through cross-border mobility becomes the main theme of this article.

2. Women on the Move

With the growing mobility in Asia over the last decade, transnational migration for marriage and employment has become a major social phenomenon. According to

Wang and Hsiao (2009, p. 2), "the global economic restructuring in this region contributed to the influxes of migrant workers. Increasing contacts between local citizens and foreign nationals were also to result in cross-border marriage." However, as Constable (2006, p. 3) argues:

> Of course poor women will want to move from a poor or 'backwards' country to work for or marry a richer person in a more 'modern' country. The structural inequality of such a situation provides a common and readily accepted logic for the growing pattern for female labor and marriage migration. This logic is not necessarily wrong, but it is not the only way to tell and understand the story.

In global marriage markets, both China and Vietnam as bride-sending countries are quite noticeable (Constable, 2005; Freeman, 2005; Wang, 2007). However, academia has shown a lack of concern about the emergence of cross-border mobility and marriage between China and Vietnam (Grillot, 2012; Huang & Ho, 2016a, 2016b). This mobility and these marriages, in many ways, have challenged the idea of a linear and one-way migration from less developed to more developed countries. There is therefore an urgent need for scholars to take note of this new development and contribute to the existing literature on labour and marriage migration.

The reconfiguration of gendered identities associated with mobility is particularly significant, yet often overlooked (Kim, 2011; Martin, 2013). In post-reform China, the capacity to be geographically mobile is represented as a value connected with both national modernization and personal success (Lyttleton, Deng, & Zhang, 2011). Thus, individuals' conscious awareness and valuation of their own mobility can have significant consequences for their (re)configuration of identity (Martin, 2013). The geographic proximity, relatively low cost and risk in crossing the border, and the rapid development of trade and tourism have made mutual and circular mobility between China and Vietnam familiar to many Vietnamese women. The topic of how cross-border mobility has informed new ways of self-making and how the Vietnamese women's mobility is gendered deserves more research attention.

Giddens's optimism with regard to the increased choices available to women is well illustrated in his book *The Transformation of Intimacy* within which women are portrayed as the "emotional revolutionaries of modernity" (Giddens, 1992, p. 130). However, in reality, not only Giddens' de-traditionalization thesis but also his observation that women can enjoy more 'choices' and 'freedoms' in late modernity are problematic. In late modernity, the construction of ideals of femininity and women's agency in forging a sense of modern selfhood is associated with women's social positioning within a particular locale (Jackson, Liu, & Woo, 2008; Rofel, 2007).

At present, even the previously remote and underdeveloped regions show certain characteristics of a globalized neoliberal ethos (Lyttleton et al., 2011), and the China–Vietnam border is no exception. The increase of movement in the borderlands is driven by the desire to access the concrete fruits of modernization. Over time, sustained mobility and rapid expansion in border trade have resulted in stronger networks and more work choices at the China–Vietnam border. The movement at the China–Vietnam border is bidirectional with some differences: More Vietnamese people come to China for work whereas Chinese people go to Vietnam especially for tourism. Since the mid-2000s, the original trafficking discourses have mostly been replaced by growth in free movement of labour and marriage (Chan, 2013). In the borderlands, "what were once tales of deprivation and subjugation of the border have been refigured as compelling narratives of personal gain" (Lyttleton et al., 2011, p. 325).

Mobility plays a central role in shaping the kind of subjectivities migrant women desire and work toward. With the rise of women's transnational mobility, patterns of gendered social life are shifting in Asian societies (Constable, 2014; Kim, 2011; Martin, 2013). Under the new circumstances, it requires a different understanding of the ways that migrant women construct their identities and the "cultural representation and alternative space which may be less dominant and less visible in the mainstream popular imagination" (Kim, 2011, p. 37). The purpose of the article hence arises: to present how the Vietnamese women experience modernity and their transnational ventures. In particular, this article offers a discussion of how Vietnamese women's extended experiences of mobility at the China–Vietnam border may shape available opportunities and limit their choices and freedoms, and how these women's self-making journey is a gendered and reflexive process fraught with new possibilities and constraints.

3. Research Background

The main fieldwork was carried out in the year of 2011 and 2012. Altogether, I interviewed 30 Vietnamese women (pseudonyms have been used throughout the article in order to protect informants' privacy) in different types of cross-border intimate relationships, all of whom had met or married their Chinese partners after the re-opening of the border in 1991. The majority lived and worked in China and most had moved towards their husband. Although many of these women kept moving back and forth over the border before and after their marriages, about three quarters of the informants spent more time in China during the interview period. Some women who first migrated for job opportunities and then married Chinese men, and others migrated for marriage. Some registered their marriages, but others did not; some lived in cities while others lived in villages; and some resided on the Chinese side of the bor-

der and others on the Vietnamese side. The situation of Vietnamese women even varied from case to case for those who lived in the same community.

The research site of this article is located at Nanning/the Friendship Port/Hanoi economic corridor, one of the economic corridors between China and Vietnam. Along this economic corridor, Nanning is the capital city of Guangxi Province, and Hanoi is the capital of Vietnam and also the central city of Northern Vietnam. This economic corridor is the most convenient way to travel between the two countries. There is an expressway to connect Nanning and Hanoi and it takes only about four to five hours by bus between the two cities. Many special policies for cross-border trade and businesses, tourism and communications have been implemented along the economic corridor. Border Trade Zones and Tax-Reservation Zones have been built along the border. The situations of 'in-between-ness' (Bao, 2005; Lyons & Ford, 2008) or *liangguo yicheng* (two countries, one city) are quite apparent in these areas. Within the border zones, traders and businessmen from both countries are able to invest and carry out economic activities directly, and cross-border mobility—such as for work, tourism, education, marriage, and family visiting—is common.

Along the economic corridor, Nanning and Hanoi were the main locations where I collected data on cross-border migration and intimacy. Another important research site comprised several Border Trade Zones and neighbouring villages around the Friendship Port. The Border Trade Zones were once villages along the border that were developed into special economic areas. Many local people worked returning but others more for only going.

The research design went beyond the narrow focus on unregistered cross-border marriages and the 'mono-site' ethnography conducted by many Chinese researchers. The development of the borderlands is proceeding in an unsystematic manner and the administrations there are very disorganized. While the existing geographic/reginal divisions have been set up for the purpose of official administration, increasing national and transnational mobility has blurred the boundaries such that cross-border mobility and intimate encounters occur at various 'contact zones.' Although location is influential, it does not tell the whole story. Therefore, I travelled to different border cities, towns, trade zones, and villages to meet Vietnamese women and tried to identify varied cross-border intimacies.

I took note of any possible sources of information concerning the research topic and the travelling was often triggered by the new information acquired during the interview process; I found that many Vietnamese women repeatedly moved backwards and forwards across the border, adopting diverse strategies to adjust to or resist border control policy. Unlike the single-direction migration described by many Chinese scholars, frequent border crossing was not only a life reality but also a survival and development strategy for many Vietnamese women.

4. Findings and Analyses

4.1. The Making of 'Enterprising Self'

4.1.1. The Lures of Mobility to the Borderland

Now the border is much more open than before, and there are also many money-earning opportunities. As the old saying goes, *kaoshan chishan, kaoshui chishui* [living upon mountain when being near to the mountain; living upon water when being near to the water]. So we border residents will also take advantage of the border for living. In the past, lives of border residents here were similar to each other. With the development of the border, some people earn big money through doing cross-border business. No one can resist the temptation of being rich and people rush to the border for their dreams. If you look around, you'll see that the borderland is filled with people who come here from everywhere. I don't dare to say I am cleverer than others, but at least I am not a stupid woman. I did not expect to *yiye baofu* [get rich overnight] and would be satisfied with some money. What I need is chances and I always believe that my chances are the borderland here. (Simei, 34, family business)

Life is too hard and too poor to be a farmer, so many rural people have preferred to *dagong* [become migrant workers]. Of course, I was able to search for jobs in the cities like other migrant workers in Vietnam. However, people like us coming from the countryside without much education and skills cannot find a good job in the cities. People all want to earn big money, but to achieve this end needs *guanxi* [certain kinds of relational capital carrying particular cultural and social importance], capital and *benshi* [personal capability]. I don't have all these, and I can only depend on my hard work. I can earn a better price for my hard work in China; the income on the Chinese side almost doubles what I can make in Vietnam. In addition, due to the price differences and geographic proximity at the borderland, I am able to earn a higher income in China and then consume in Vietnam so as to save money. (Liuyi, 47, manual work)

Now the China–Vietnam border is in a golden development time, and there are so many opportunities here and also the need for a large labour force. I came to the border not just because it is easier to find a job here, but I also wanted to learn and improve my Mandarin. The potential of cross-border trade is huge; however, if you want to grasp the *shangji* [business opportunities], you must be familiar with both markets. The borderland is like an experimental base for testing opportunities. To *hundehao* [make a good life] here, you need to master bilingual fluency. If you are bilingual speaker, you will be quite popular in the labour market and can easily access more profitable

jobs and acquire more income sources. (Ayong, 23, family business)

In those narratives, there is a key link between the 'enterprising subject' (Lyttleton et al., 2011) and the strong desire for development. At the periphery of the China–Vietnam border, Vietnamese women also join in these modernization projects and share local discourses in terms of what constitutes personal success based on a number of facilitating factors. First, the rapid development of the border ("the potential of cross-border trade is huge") and the relatively low cost and risk in crossing the border ("take advantage of the border for living") provides greater autonomy for them. Second, the influx of population from both China and Vietnam ("the borderland is filled with people who come here from everywhere") provides an abundance of information on finding work, organizing transport, transferring money, and forming alliances. Third, women increasingly decide, sometimes independently, to choose to be migrant workers in China ("earn a better price for my hard work in China") rather than working on the farm ("life is too hard and too poor to be a farmer"). Lastly, achieving material success is prominent ("to earn a higher income," "to make a good life") in Vietnamese brides' perception of the 'enterprising self.' Underpinning these women's narratives is the manner through which liberalizing economic structures permit the development of an 'enterprising subject,' to use Lyttleton et al.'s term (2011).

Anni is 36 years old and works as a translator in Nonghuai, a border trade zone established in 1989 on the Chinese side. She came to China in 2010. Before that, she had worked in Hong Kong for five years as a waitress in a small restaurant. Anni reflects: "Work is hard there and I cannot see any future to get promotion. Although the salary here is not very high, but the job [as translator] is much more decent and I also have more freedom." Anni has learnt to speak Mandarin and Cantonese by herself, so she is able to find job opportunities with relatively little effort. Besides, the place where she works is close to her hometown and she goes home to Vietnam very often, whereas, while working in Hong Kong, she only visited home once or twice a year. In Anni's eyes, the borderland, which used to be a remote and backward region, has now become a new land for development. "As long as people can find money and opportunities near their homes, no one wants to travel so far away from home to make a living," Anni comments.

Promoting the capacity to aspire is central to state modernization programs around the world. Particularly in many developing countries like China and Vietnam, these seeds find fertile ground as economic reforms filter throughout the rural sector. When talking about the political economy of the China–Vietnam borderlands, Chan (2013, p. 7) has written:

China, not the West, acts as the major source of external influence for the development of the Vietnamese

borderland communities, and will continue to be relevant to the borderland people in their desire for economic development and modern life. This implies a different path for modernization studies.

4.1.2. Evolving Dynamics of Exploitation and Stigma

Of course the bosses like to hire us Vietnamese since they can pay lower salaries. In the labour market, Vietnamese workers' salary is one-half or one-third less than the Chinese workers'.…Seldom will the Chinese bosses sign any contract with their Vietnamese employees. By doing so, they [the bosses] save the money to pay *wuxian yijin* [five insurances and one security payment; according to Labour Protection Law in China, the employers must sign formal contracts with employees and pay five different types of insurance and one security payment for the employees] and also get rid of the trouble of applying for working visas for the foreign workers.…Sometimes it feels so unfair since you do the same work as other Chinese workers but earn less than them. (Dingxuan, 35, manual work)

Single women are easily harassed when working outside. Some very terrible Chinese men always want to *zhanpianyi* [physically harass you] when they hear that you are from Vietnam. I don't mean every Chinese man is bad; however, at the borderland there are so many stories about Vietnamese girls tricked by Chinese men.…I have to behave myself more so as not to be considered as a *buzhengjing de nüren* [immoral woman].…Usually a stable relationship or marriage with Chinese men will be a good protection. (Xiaomei, 23, housewife)

Everyone coming here wants to be rich and become bosses. However, not everyone knows how to do business and become the boss. It is not even easy to get a good job for women like us. Although there are many chances in the borderland, the bosses only want to hire those young and beautiful girls. Since I am old and plain, there are certainly limited chances for me.…I speak mostly *tuhua* [a local Chinese dialect, different from both Mandarin and Vietnamese, mostly spoken by Zhuang people] and it also leaves me at a disadvantage in the labour market since the bosses want to hire those who can speak Mandarin and Vietnamese. It is too late for me to learn a new language well. (Lushi, 47, farmer)

Today, there are growing numbers of women making a living through moving. However, being migrant workers is considered to render the women's working self ("salary is one-half or one-third less") and sexual life vulnerable ("single women are easily harassed"). Sexual dangers are central to horror stories told about women concerning cheating (Vietnamese girls tricked by Chinese men") and

stigma ("considered as an immoral woman"). Hayami (2003) also notes in her study that migrant girls from rural areas to the cities in Thailand are always strongly associated with the degeneration of morals. Due to their lack of resources to negotiate, many women have to make compromises though they aware of the inequalities ("do the same work but earn less"). Men would justify sexual harassment as these are women from a poorer country, so they can be easily accessed ("when they hear that you are from Vietnam"). To be rid of harassment thus becomes women's own responsibility ("behave myself more"). At the same time, older and not-good-looking women are excluded from the labour market ("the bosses only want to hire those young and beautiful girls"), which in another way indicates the tendency of sexualizing women' bodies. Although mobility brings new opportunities to women, it can generate new pressures to defend their capability and reputation.

4.2. More Than Just Marriage

4.2.1. Marriage Migration as an Empowering Strategy

In my village, girls usually get married at a young age. Some did it as young as fifteen or sixteen years old. Getting married at the age of eighteen or nineteen was more common. After my graduation from high school, my grandmother began to push me to get married. For her, the biggest thing in a woman's life is to get marriage and to have children. She worried that I would go wild if going to work outside....I did not want to get married that early like my mother who got married under the arrangement of family and stayed in the village for her whole life as a farmer. I also did not like those men in the village who are loitering around all day long but doing nothing to support the families....When I worked in China, my parents arranged several matchmakings for me in the village, but I did not agree to come back. I met my current husband at work, and we are quite compatible. (Ayong, 23, family business)

My [Vietnamese] ex-husband had an affair and later divorced me and left the daughter with me. In my village, divorce is still a very disgraceful thing, particularly for women. The bad news goes very quickly and people around nearby villages would easily know that you were a divorced woman. It was nearly impossible for me to remarry. I always felt that others were gossiping about me whenever I walked in the community. It seemed like a shame I could never get rid of....Marrying in China was a favourable choice for me since I was not only more marriageable but also, here, fewer people would track me down. (Axian, 55, farmer)

I was over thirty when I married my Chinese husband. I was not good-looking, thin with darker skin.

In Vietnam, women who could not marry like me are called 'a time bomb' and are also considered a big burden and shame for the parents. I was very worried and stressed, crying often at night. I thought my life would end up like those poor single women in the village. Luckily, when knowing my situation, a distant relative who also married in China helped arranging my marriage. (Lushi, age 47, farmer)

Some Vietnamese women migrate to free themselves from the cultural expectations that constrain their life choices back in the village. Yunyun's background is very different but migration nevertheless offers personal freedom that she is denied back home. She is 25 years old and comes from an ordinary family near Hanoi. Her family had to borrow money from relatives to send her to study in China. After graduating from university, Yunyun chooses to stay in China and considers there are more opportunities and higher incomes here. Marrying a Chinese man is also her target. Yunyun seems a mystery to her friends and no one knows what exactly she is doing. Although she needs to send money home very month to pay back her parents, she is free with money, renting a big apartment alone and buying many luxury clothes and bags. Yunyun never talks about her job with me and she makes it clear that she does not want to share anything about this topic. One time she mentioned that some of her friends kept asking about her job and she replied angrily: "I am a *ji* [chick, but it also implies prostitute in Chinese], are you satisfied?"

Yunyun does not care too much about the gossip since she is away from home. "If I feel unhappy with the current situation, I can move to other places," she says. She has dated several men at the same time but only later introduces the one she would most probably marry to some of her friends. She admits that it is less possible for her to do that in Vietnam since there are so many acquaintances and friends around. In addition, it is also easy for potential boyfriends/husbands to track her down in Vietnam. While in China, Yunyun feels less disturbed by some unfavourable news about her since she is able to make up a decent image in marriage market whenever necessary.

Compared with other types of labour migration, women's marriage migration is 'moral' and 'less risky' sexually, mentally, and physically (Suzuki, 2005, p. 128). Marriage can also be used to achieve different kinds of purpose and autonomy as noted above, such as to avoid the pressure to get married at an early age and to free oneself from parental control (e.g., Ayong), to get rid of the stigma of being a divorced woman or single woman (e.g., Lushi and Axian), or to escape gender constraints and supervisions at home (e.g., Yunyun). "Gender relationships and women's social and cultural role are often products of socio-economic relations and the exercising of different power," as Chan (2013, p. 117) argues, and "in the borderland, with the open border and the availability of Chinese men, women have had a differ-

ent choice of husbands. Getting married across the border has been part of women's attempt to pursue personal happiness.''

4.2.2. Marriage Migration as Stigma

I think many migrant [Vietnamese] women choose to marry Chinese men not only out of convenience but also to avoid suspicions and rumours….When you work in China, you cannot go home often. It is quite natural to date and marry a Chinese man. However, in my village there are always very bad words about migrant girls, and we are thought of as money-loving, immoral, or even as prostitutes. Men in the village also do not want to marry girls who have worked in China.…I think these men are feudal and useless because they cannot accept a wife better than them and worry that they are not able to control their wives. (Aling, 28, office work)

Just because we are from Vietnam, we are always looked down upon as cheap-price brides. When Chinese women get married, they also ask for *pinjin* [dowry]. When we do the same, we are depicted as 'sold brides' or 'money seekers.' (Shixiang, 48, farmer)

In the community, I can often sense the discrimination against Vietnamese, although they don't speak out.…I don't like people talking about those 'runaway Vietnamese bride' stories in front of me as if I am a very untrustworthy woman.…Why cannot these brides run away? Many were promised to have a great husband and a good life in China before their coming. I think they ran away just because they felt cheated. If the promises were true, who would want to leave? (Shilan, 44, housewife)

I can speak both Vietnamese and Chinese very well. People cannot notice from my accent that I am from Vietnam. Although I have been married in China many years, only people in the village and some close friends know I am a Vietnamese. When I am outside, I tell others that I am a *huaqiao* [overseas Chinese] from Vietnam in order to avoid unnecessary trouble. (Ahua, 20, manual work)

In Le Bach, Bélanger, and Khuat's (2007) study on female returnees from China to Vietnam, they point out that in Vietnam, women's marriage to foreigners is viewed negatively: "'Having been to China' is a phrase that can immediately bring negative meanings such as prostitution, or money loving (which is culturally negative), and marriage to an 'outsider' (also culturally negative)" (Le Bach et at., 2007, p. 419). Chan (2005) also gives the example of a Vietnamese girl who worked as a tourist guide at the border and was dumped by her boyfriend since she did not accept her boyfriend's mother's advice to quit her job. Moreover, as Le Bach et al. (2007) find,

it is difficult for returned Vietnamese brides and their children to reintegrate in their family and community in Vietnam. Again, they choose to migrate to China, and this choice becomes their major solution to deal with unfavourable realties. Though many Vietnamese brides consider their marriages and lives in China are happy, they are today still subject to stereotypical labelling and prejudices ('cheap-price brides,' 'sold brides,' or 'money seekers'). Thus, some just choose to distance themselves from people around ("I don't like people talking about 'runaway Vietnamese bride'") or to cover their identity ("I tell others that I am a *Huaqiao*").

5. Discussion

5.1. Migrant Women as Labouring Subjects

In seeking job opportunities in China, Vietnamese women embody their dreams and plans. They are encouraged to become enterprising subjects through self-actualizing and cross-border mobility. In the process, an individual becomes "an entrepreneur of oneself, maximizing himself or herself as 'human capital'" (Lazzarato, 2009, p. 111). Among different migrant Vietnamese women, *kaozhe bianjing chi bianjing* (depending on/taking advantage of the border) has been both a life reality and a development strategy. Although they come from different family backgrounds and hold different types of social capitals, the women are more or less integrated into, or take actively part in, the project of modernization.

Compared with 'elite subjects' in Ong's (2006) study, most Vietnamese women in this study can be defined as part of the 'uneducated rural masses.' However, from their narratives, we can observe similar desires to become enterprising subjects. As Rofel (2007) argues, everyone's modernity is different. Thus, experience of modernity is not a privilege only available to the social elites. The Vietnamese women's experiments with mobility in the newly developed borderland illustrate how they perceive the social changes happening around and remake a new self in a changing environment.

5.2. Migrant Women as Sexual/Intimate Subjects

The opening border provides the availability of Chinese men, increasing migrant women's mate selection prospects. This is particularly true for those women who find it very difficult to marry due to poverty, old age, low education, or divorce. They want to reclaim their femininities and increase their marriageability through migration. Feeling one's value as women or desired subjects enables these 'unwanted' Vietnamese women to rediscovery their femininities and redefine their gendered subjectivities.

Studies on women's migration have shown the intersection of labour relations with intimate engagements (Cheng, 2010; Lan, 2008; Lapanun, 2010). As Chan (2013,

p. 105) writes, "intensified cross-border contacts between men and women on the two sides of the border also facilitated increasing cross-border romance, wooing games and marriage." Intimate imaginations and encounters are important in women's self-making process. Contrary to the descriptions of Vietnamese migrant women as 'trafficking victims,' 'illegal brides' or 'prostitutes' in some dominant discourses in China and Vietnam, they have taken much control of their migration and their relationships with Chinese men.

5.3. The Making of the Modern Self and the New Gender Predicament

The cross-border mobility of Vietnamese brides is driven by the strong desire for a better life and the wish to seize the opportunity to earn a livelihood and accumulate wealth. It echoes certain characteristics of a globalized neoliberal ethos promoted by capitalism (Ong, 2006). However, these Vietnamese women's migratory stories exemplify how their mobility is gendered. For instance, they encounter certain gender discriminations and exploitations at work, and sexual harassment or rumours of prostitution are always associated with single migrant woman. The gendered expectations of women as *xianqi liangmu* (virtuous wife and wise mother) serve to contain them within the domestic sphere.

While mobility creates new chances for women to challenge existing gendered norms, they still face constant criticisms and suspicion of not being a 'good woman.' Thus, to use Xiaomei's terms, they have to "behave themselves more" so as to get rid of the stigma. Although they are away from home and engage in productive activities, it does not mean that they have been freed from traditional gendered constraints. Identified by Fouron and Schiller (2001), the hierarchies based on male power can extend beyond national borders and affect migrant women in a transnational context. Thinking about the relation between gender and modernity, on the one hand, women gain new opportunities and new identities in changing contexts; on the other hand, the new selves are made through many struggles and compromises. The Vietnamese women's experiences of mobility at the China–Vietnam border reveal much more complicated pictures of modernity in terms of the new possibilities and limitations that they have encountered in their self-making projects.

6. Conclusion

Research on Vietnamese women is not new but academic have only recently become to focus on the experiences of Vietnamese women in China. Since I developed my research interest on this topic, there have been many substantial changes in the China–Vietnam border areas that have further complicated the lives of Vietnamese women. However, these changes have been overlooked in previous scholarship. Most discussions still

focus on Vietnamese women's unregistered marriages with Chinese men. Undeniably, early in the opening of the border in the 1990s, many Vietnamese women came to China mainly for the purpose of marriages and their coming attracted public interests at a time when immigration into China was negligible.

Both China and Vietnam are emigration than immigration countries, and they also are not ready for taking more immigrants due to huge population in respective countries. Although there is more and more cross-border mobility at the border areas, it is noticeable that most people who cross border are sojourners rather than settlers, and that at present marriage immigrants only make a very small percentage of total cross-border population. Neither the government has implemented new polices to ease cross-border marriage registration (such as citizenship or *hukou* application processes) for marriage immigrants. This fact has affected Vietnamese women differently according to their aspirations and circumstances in China.

For those Vietnamese women who develop stable relationships with Chinese men and want to settle down in China, most of them have to accept an unregistered marriage. However, for those who do not plan to settle down, job opportunity plays a more important role than marriage. Now in the border areas, being an independent passport holder and applying for temporary work visa has been much easier than being an officially registered marriage settler. This situation means that Vietnamese women no longer need to resort to marriage as their main strategy. The prosperity of the borderland provides more and more job opportunities, thus Vietnamese women can take advantage of *jingji xina* (economic absorption) to circumvent the current policy of *shenfen juru* (identity refusal).

In the border frontier areas, geographic proximity, as well as sharing the same language, ritual, habits, and ethnicity, becomes convenient factors facilitating transnational mobility (Tran, 2017; Zhou, 2017). Vietnamese women's transnational mobility differs from that of other immigrant women in that living in the borderland enable them to move back and forth across the border for survival and development, acquiring certain mobility capitals and rights in the process. However, it does not mean that their involvements in modern development are "experiments with freedom" (Ong, 2006). Their transnational mobility is derived from the desire to access concrete fruits of modernization at the China–Vietnam border. During the process, gender norms and ideologies can also be modernized within the changing socio-economic environments. The experience of Vietnamese women demonstrates that although mobility has brought them new opportunities to try different lives and to form new subjectivities, their project of self-making through migration is heavily constrained by prevailing and influential gender discourses.

When examining public debate concerning Vietnamese women in China, we can easily identify sev-

eral themes, such as trafficking (Stöckl, Kiss, Koehler, Dung, & Zimmerman, 2017), unregistered marriage (Ji & Ren, 2016), commercial matching making (Wu & Chen, 2017), and runaway bride (Wu, 2015). The public discourse indicates a rather unfriendly environment for Vietnamese women. Yet, more and more Vietnamese women choose to come to China in search of opportunities. These Vietnamese women are not blind or ignorant of obvious unfriendliness; rather, the contradicted reality is a good example revealing the benefits and struggles encountered by Vietnamese women when moving to China (Huang, 2017). On the one hand, they face harsh realities in terms of their identity as women and immigrants; on the other hand, they acquire new freedom and opportunities when crossing the border and joining in development. So far, studies on Vietnamese women in China are still very rear with little known about their transitional mobility and the reality of their daily lives. Women's new immigration patterns and their gendered experiences of mobility are in need of further explorations.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Part III.

Women Left outside Mainstream Society

Article

Sex, Drug, and HIV/AIDS: The Drug Career of an Urban Chinese Woman

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Abstract
This case study is based on the life history of an urban Chinese woman, Lydia, who has become an AIDS patient through injecting heroin use. Adopting theories of drug career and biopolitics, this study depicts Lydia's drug-centered life. From the perspective of a drug career, this article vividly illustrates her experience of drug initiation, escalation, maintenance, and finally achievement of abstinence. In addition, this study also shows how drug use has penetrated all dimensions of Lydia's life including intimate relationships, financial arrangements, and compulsory drug treatment; in the end, contracting HIV was when she finally hit rock bottom and worked to get rid of her heroin dependence. From the perspective of biopolitics, this article focuses on the institutional and social structure transformation that is reflected by Lydia's personal experience, especially the social service, treatment, and intervention programs provided for her during an era of increasingly growing drug use and HIV-infected population.

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Left Behind? Women's Status in Contemporary China" edited by Robert Walker (Beijing Normal University, China) and Jane Millar (University of Bath, UK).

1. Introduction: Lydia's Story

In the end of 2012 to early 2013, the first author had the privilege to work with a local NGO in Beijing, China, for HIV/AIDS carriers' rights and provided a 12-week support group for 11 women living with HIV/AIDS. The support group met once a week on Saturday afternoons for three hours, discussing different kinds of experiences and feelings in these women's lives, including illness and health-seeking behaviors, families and marriages, love and dating, and sexuality and reproduction. Afterwards, the first author interviewed each of the group participants for 2–8 hours, and Lydia was one of them. Her case stands out because of its complexity, which involves not only drug consumption and HIV/AIDS infection, but also various aspects of an urban woman's life in rapidly developing China.

Lydia was born in 1978, the year of economic reform and opening up. She grew up in a Beijing *hutong* (ally) and enjoyed the privilege of being a "pure and proper" Beijinger. Lydia has a nice voice, and her parents invested in her talent and sent her to learn singing and piano when she was a child. Lydia did well in school and her talent of singing secured her an early admission to the most prestigious music institute in China at the age of 17. It seemed that a bright future of being a musician was awaiting this young, talented girl. However, after 20 years, Lydia is now single, job-less, overweight, living with her parents, a recovered drug-dependent and AIDS patient. What happened? How did Lydia become a drug user and later became infected with HIV/AIDS?

This study tries to analyze the path Lydia's life took. It is invaluable since it reveals an urban Chinese woman's subjective experience that connects sex, drug,

and HIV/AIDS. A life history approach was adopted since it allows Lydia to present her story in her own voice. This story is what "a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived, told as completely and honestly as possible" (Atkinson, 1998, p. 8), which allows a degree of insight into lived experiences in the past and present along the course of life. Having a support group for 12 weeks as a solid foundation of mutual trust, Lydia poured out her heart to the first author during the interview. Besides the interview transcript, we also have field notes from the support group as our data. All the original transcripts and coding were in Chinese, and the extractions in this article were translated into English by the authors. "Lydia" is a pseudonym chosen by the participant herself in order to protect her privacy and for confidentiality.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Research on HIV/AIDS Infection and Drug Use in China

Although there has been a significant reduction in the number of new HIV infections globally, the number of people infected with HIV in China remains high, with an annual rate of increase of about 179.68% from 2011 to 2017 (China CDC, 2017). By the end of September 2018, the reported number of people living with HIV/AIDS in China was around 850,000; and the reported accumulated number of deaths caused by HIV/AIDS was around 262,000 (China CDC, 2019). Among annually reported new HIV infections, the ratio of men to women decreased from 5:1 in the 1990s to 2.8:1 in 2012 and then increased to 3.4:1 in 2017 (China CDC, 2017). Although more men than women are getting infected with HIV/AIDS, the trend towards the feminization of the illness makes the understanding of women's related experience extremely valuable (Wang, Zhang, Xu, & Zhang, 2010).

Drug use and the HIV/AIDS epidemic are twinned crises. Official statistics show that the number of registered drug users, those who have been identified by the police due to their drug use, exceeded 2.4 million by the end of 2018, among whom more than half were younger than 35 (National Narcotics Control Commission of China, 2019). Although the vast majority of drug users are men (National Narcotics Control Commission of China, 2016), the number of female drug users has grown considerably in the past few years, especially among women in their adolescence and young adulthood (Liu & Hsiao, 2018). Studies focusing on the drug use experiences of Chinese female drug users are rare in academia (Liu & Hsiao, 2018), and hardly any mention women who become infected with HIV/AIDS due to drug use.

Most existing studies regard drug use as a risk factor for HIV infection (Chen et al., 2016), but there are few attempts to adopt an anthropological approach to link the individuals' personal experience with drug use and HIV/AIDS infection together. In general, there is limited information about women infected by HIV/AIDS through drug use while at the same time, we also know very little about the drug using experience among Chinese female AIDS patients. Researching female drug users and women living with HIV/AIDS requires meticulously assessing gender as a crucial factor in understanding how personal experience are related to the persistence of gender inequality and patriarchy in China. A comprehensive literature review by Lin, McElmurry, and Christiansen (2007) found that women were more vulnerable than men to HIV infection, according to eight determinants: biology; society and culture; violence against women; laws; education, knowledge, and skills; poverty; migration; and stigma and discrimination. The existing limited qualitative studies of women living with HIV/AIDS mostly focus on rural women living in the former commercial blood/plasma donation villages which were relatively easier to identify (Wang et al., 2010, 2011; Zhou, 2008). In urban China, particularly in metropolitan cites like Beijing, women living with HIV/AIDS are more scattered geographically and more difficult to find because of stigma, discrimination, and confidentiality. The story of Chinese urban women who are infected by HIV/AIDS through drug use remains consequently largely unknown.

2.2. Drug Career and Biopolitics: Shifting Research Model

Drug use is seen as both a public health and social problem globally (South, 2015). Drug users are generally regarded as a vulnerable group who need continuous medical and non-medical treatment to minimize harms inflicted by drug use and eventually achieve abstinence (Bull, Denham, Trevaskes, & Coomber, 2016; Liu & Hsiao, 2018). However, both researchers and drug treatment practitioners traditionally hold a negative view towards drug users and regard them as unmotivated individuals who fail to achieve success in both legal and illegal ways (Coombs, 1981).

Starting from the late 1960s, some scholars tried to view drug users' lives from an alternative perspective. For example, after spending considerable time with drug users in New York, Preble and Cassey (1969) concluded that the individuals were neither immature nor maladjusted, but actively involved in social activities and living meaningful and challenging lives which were similar to the pursuit of a career. Later, Coombs (1981) regarded drug use as a "career" in his research to describe the drug lifestyle, as he thought the drug users' lives, in the social form, is very similar to that of professionals (Liu, Hsiao, & Kaplan, 2016); therefore, drug use is assumed to express itself in four developmental stages—initiation, escalation, maintenance, discontinuation and renewal (Coombs, 1981). The adoption of the term "drug career" helps us to view Lydia's drug use experiences from a non-discriminative perspective, and it is a good way to highlight her complexity and agency rather than

viewing the female drug user as a victim or a bearer of social stigmatization, gender inequality, and patriarchy.

The concept of a drug career echoes Foucault's (1980) ideas of biopolitics, which "operates at two inter connected poles, the regulation of the population as a whole and the disciplines of the individual body," with the purpose of "administration and optimization of the process of life" (Greenhalgh, 2008, p. 6). In the past ten years, especially in the field of medical anthropology, there have been many studies that adopt the theory of biopolitics to examine different social phenomena in China, including the one child policy (Greenhalgh, 2008), dementia (Zhang, 2018), tobacco control (Kohrman, 2007), HIV/AIDS (Hyde, 2007), drug use (Hyde, 2011, 2019) and others. Hyde (2011, 2019) conducted ethnographic research in a community drug treatment center to document how therapy was adopted to turn drug users into good bio-citizens. Hyde (2011, p. 185) argues that "the Chinese addiction case allows for a different framing of therapeutic regimes as forms of biological citizenship and the non-Western ways of pastoral power." Focusing on Lydia's lived experience, at the individual level, this article depicts the process of drug initiation, escalation, maintenance, and finally achieving abstinence; and at the macro level, this article focuses on the institutional and social structure transformation reflected by Lydia's personal experience, especially the social service, treatment, and intervention programs provided in an era of fast growing drug use and increasing population infected with HIV.

Therefore, through diving into Lydia's life history, this case study aims to fill the aforementioned notable gap by exploring an urban Chinese woman's experience with drug use, sex, and HIV infection. Specifically, this study plans to uncover answers to the following questions: (1) How does Lydia develop her body politics in her drug career in the reform era? (2) How is Lydia's drug career related to her social background, intimate relationships, and the experience of living with HIV/AIDS? (3) How does Lydia's story shed light on the flourishing sex industry and the biopolitics of drug and HIV/AIDS management in the reform era in China? Moreover, an analysis of Lydia's profound story would present ideas for building institutions for best practices of gender-specific prevention and intervention programs for other female drug users and women living with HIV/AIDS.

3. Findings

3.1. 1995–1999: Heroin Initiation

Lydia's intimate narrative provides valuable insight into the socio-economic dimension of drug initiation. Lydia's life started spinning at the moment when she fell in love with her first boyfriend at the age of 17. However, her relationship was filled with unbalanced power, in which so called liberal sexual behaviors and traditional gender roles were deeply intertwined with each other. Born with

a silver spoon in his mouth and nine years older than Lydia, the boyfriend was "charming and rebellious," and had been recently fired from the police service because he was fighting with his colleague:

> It was special with him, even magical. On the second day after we met, he rode a motorcycle and took me to his home, had sex. Afterwards I cried. He was a bit annoyed, "why are you crying?! You are not even bleeding!" Two days later, we did it again, this time I was bleeding. I cried again, I would not [have done] it if I knew that my hymen was intact.

The boyfriend, nicknamed "the earth," in the eyes of Lydia, "rode a motorcycle" like a "white-horse prince." The match fits with the dating culture description "women date up and men date down," which means women often look to date older, wealthier, and taller men (Wang & Nehring, 2014). Research on virginity loss found that, because of the gender inequality deeply embedded within romantic relationships, many urban Chinese women presented their first experience of sex as containing some element of sexual coercion, but they did not have an opportunity to voice their ambivalent and unpleasant sexual experience (Wang, 2017). This is exactly the case with Lydia. On the one hand, Lydia still treasured her virginity due to the patriarchal tradition; however, on the other hand, she was also enjoying romantic love and yearning for freedom in sexual activities. Lydia cried twice over losing her virginity while her boyfriend mocked her reaction as if she was faking being a virgin. However, she chose to use words like "special" and "magical" to cover the unpleasant emotion and add polish to her first romantic love. It never occurred to her to consider whether the sexual activity was consensual or question her boyfriend's behavior as disrespectful. Lydia had many unsafe sex practices with her boyfriend, as they did not use contraceptives at all and she had to constantly endure his cheating of all kinds. She had five pregnancies and abortions in the next two years. Lydia's family was against pre-marital sex and tried to stop her from seeing her boyfriend. "Leave me alone and I will be responsible for the path I choose," Lydia told her parents. She was determined to stay with him.

The mother of the boyfriend was a chairperson of a state-owned enterprise. In the 1990s, along with the reform of state-owned enterprises, the chairperson's annual income could be dozens or even up to hundreds of times the salary of ordinary citizens in the country. The boyfriend's family was one of the first groups of people grasping at the chance to profit from China's economic development and, with no doubt, belonged to the privileged class. The mother also made use of their governmental connections to "dive into the sea" to set up her own private business alongside the state-owned enterprise, and accumulated a great deal of wealth in a short period of time with all types of legal and illegal (corrupt) methods. Because of her wealth and power, the mother

was capable of many things including doting on her son with the phrase "living for 'the earth'":

> At the moment my boyfriend was fired [from the police station], his mother asked us what we wanted to do. I was a singer, without thinking, I said casually, maybe running a karaoke club. Then within one week, we had one!

If a karaoke club is a dream for a small businessman, fulfilling this dream was too easy for Lydia and her boyfriend. It seems that money was so easy to make, combined with the club scene and sex workers and wealthy clients that rushed in, heroin was just around the corner:

> My boyfriend and I were just kids. What did we know about running a business? We just wanted to have fun. When the club opened, *xiaojie* [sex workers] came along. My boyfriend's mom often told me, "do not chit-chat with those *xiaojies* and do not wear heavy make-up and mini-skirts; when customers come, they do not know whether you are the boss lady or a *xiaojie*."

Commercial sex is still illegal in China, but the laws were changed in 1999 so that sex workers and clients could only be arrested "at the scene" (Hong, Zhang, Li, Zhou, & Guo, 2014). There have been many grey areas that allowed for the flourishing of the underground sex industry ever since the reform era. A karaoke club, at that time, was considered to be one of the places that could have underground commercial sex, or at least, the place where sex workers met and negotiated with their guests (Zheng, 2004). Though sex workers "came along" as "self-employed without invitation," as Lydia described it, it put her, the boss lady, into the position of a gatekeeper. Gatekeepers are described to be not only intermediaries of the sex trade, but also protectors of female sex workers (Hong et al., 2014). They are supposed to help sex workers avoid legal troubles, gangsters and abusive clients, promote condom use, and prevent substance use. Both Lydia and her boyfriend were too young to play their role as gatekeepers properly. Moreover, they were influenced by the environment that included wealthy clients and sex workers to start using heroin:

> Only the wealthy can afford to consume heroin. It is a signal to show that you are rich! The first time I tried heroin was together with my boyfriend. I actually did not think much of it. I got addicted to it in half a year. At that time, the customers were generous. I gave them a discount on their expenses in the club and they would leave some heroin in return.

For Lydia, using heroin was a symbol of being rich and having power. Thrilled with the life of making quick money and easy access to heroin, Lydia never thought of the financial burden to obtain heroin. Living during the day as a college student and at night as a boss lady, Lydia was busy, excited, and stressed, putting on 25kg within half a year:

> You cannot imagine how fat I was! One night one *xiaojie* told me, "if you want to lose weight, smoke this." She also said that heroin could be helpful to make me happy and relaxed.

Weight loss and control has been found to be one of the important reasons causing women to start using drugs (Thomas et al., 2018), and it was so convenient for Lydia. Opiates, and heroin in particular, re-emerged in China after the launch of the opening up policy (Huang, Zhang, & Liu, 2011; Lu, Fang, & Wang, 2008; Zhang & Chin, 2015). Heroin entered China through the southern borders, which are adjacent to the Golden Triangle, a traditional opium cultivation and production area (Zhang & Chin, 2015; Zoccatelli, 2014), and quickly spread to large cities and then throughout the whole country (Lu et al., 2008). Since the drug was expensive and not easy to obtain, using heroin was regarded as a symbol of high socioeconomic status. Thus, heroin shortly became very attractive to wealthy individuals who made quick money during the process of economic reform and, in the late 1990s, heroin became the most popular illegal substance in the country. Moreover, the exchange and sharing of heroin also "fuels social networks and business socializing, with individuals using drugs to secure connections and business acquisitions" (Hyde, 2019, p. 486).

When Lydia graduated from college and got an offer to work at a state-funded theater, she simply declined it because she did not want to "play a small role and could not have fame anyway." For her, being a boss lady was a better option for making quick money and taking a shortcut to success. She was enjoying life as an individual belonging to the wealthy and privileged class because of her boyfriend's family, and she did not mind showing off her wealth. However, because of this choice, she was in an unsafe working environment and surrounded by a high-risk social network, since recreation places like pubs, dance halls, or karaoke clubs were places where drug use was prevalent in the late 1990s in China. Therefore, Lydia started taking heroin as a spontaneous or even unavoidable life event.

3.2. 1999–2004: Drug-Centered Life

The happy time was cut short when Lydia's boyfriend's mother was sentenced to prison for illegal financing. The first wave of corruption in China's reform era was found in the shady world of family and interpersonal connections between socialist planning and a market economy in the 1990s. Osburg (2018) argues that corruption in China shifted to a more "predatory" form after 1992 (Pei, 2006; Sun, 2004; Wedeman, 2012), involving more classic forms of rent seeking, with officials demanding ever-larger bribes, dinners, and sexual entertainment for their

patronage. Some entrepreneurs who made their fortunes in the early reform period cultivated even deeper ties with state officials, which enabled them to commandeer state power to their advantage. This was exactly the game the boyfriend's mother played, and her crackdown was due to the downfall of her high-level official protector. Shortly afterwards, the boyfriend was also caught and sentenced for seven years because of prostitution sheltering and gun possession. At that moment, Lydia had already become heavily addicted to heroin. Without her boyfriend and his mother to rely on, Lydia felt "helpless and hopeless" and could not run the business well by herself. She transferred the karaoke club to a Korean businessman but "still went to the club every night." When her roles shifted from a boss lady to a customer, her comfortable and wealthy life fell into chaos:

> I kept on using heroin in the club, together with those *xiaojies*. Sometimes I accompanied foreign customers and sang them songs, in return I got some tips. In that period, I was getting more and more addicted to heroin.

Lydia quickly spent all her money on heroin use. She had to pay 350 RMB (roughly $50 USD) to maintain her daily usage and spent more than 10,000 RMB (roughly $1,450 USD) per month, which was the equivalent of the average annual income of Beijingers in the late 1990s and early 2000s. When Lydia was a boss lady, the daily average income of the club could cover her drug use expenses. However, when she was jobless, the drug use expenses became an enormous figure and she could no longer afford it. When the craving for drugs became the center of her life, Lydia often blackmailed the Korean businessman who took over the club for money; moreover, she also asked her relatives, mostly two uncles, for money to maintain her heroin use. Lydia had a falling out with her parents because of her love affair with the boyfriend and that was why she did not ask for money (and could not get any) from her parents. However, her two uncles, both leaders of government-affiliated institutions, loved her and were willing to support her and, therefore, became her sources of money.

3.2.1. In and Out of Compulsory Treatment

Lydia was arrested for drug use for the first time shortly after she graduated from college in 1999, and in the following five years, her life was filled with "in and out" of compulsory treatment. The first arrest was caused by a taxi driver robbing her when going out at 2:00 am to buy heroin. The taxi driver was caught, but Lydia was detained too because the police found heroin in her handbag. The first arrest ended after 13 days of detainment, two days less than the standardized term. The second time was just a few days after her release. This time she was sent directly to a re-education through labor (RTL) institution for residential compulsory treat-

ment and behavioral rehabilitation, under her parents' special request.

This period of time was also an era when drug use became a fast-growing phenomenon in China. "The epidemiological figures show an exponential increase in injection drug users from a conservative figure of 70,000 in the mid-1990s to estimates of upwards of eight million by 2005" (Reid & Aitken, 2009, p. 365). Drug use is regarded as a serious deviant behavior in China, leading to police arrest and compulsory treatment (Liu & Chui, 2018). Realizing the seriousness of drug use, especially during the heroin use epidemic in the 1980s, the Chinese government started to launch various social and legal methods to prohibit drugs and provide treatment to drug users (Zhang, Liu, & Huang, 2011). Before the end of 2013, drug users who were caught in China would face three different levels of treatment depending on the number of times arrested. For the first arrest, drug users would be registered and detained for 15 days (Zhang & Chin, 2015). The second arrest would usually lead to a three- to six-month period residential term treatment in a special compulsory detoxification center. On being arrested for the third time, drug users would usually be sent for two years to police-administrated RTL institutions for residential rehabilitation (Larney & Dolan, 2010; Tang, Zhao, Zhao, & Cubells, 2006; Zhang & Chin, 2015).

Lydia relapsed in a few days after she finished her compulsory treatment in 2001. Her parents chose to send her to another residential treatment in the compulsory detoxification center for three months, but she relapsed again on the second day after finishing the treatment. Lydia's parents called the police to take her to RTL institution again when their daughter relapsed after the second treatment. Although Lydia could achieve abstinence during the compulsory treatment, it was very hard to maintain after the treatment finished (Liu & Hsiao, 2018). A 2005 study by the National Surveillance Center on Drug Abuse reported that 62% of RTL detainees relapsed within three days of release, with a further 20% relapsing within 30 days (Hyde, 2019). Community aftercare and re-entry programs were relatively undeveloped in China in the early 2000s.

During these years, whenever Lydia's parents found that she was using drugs again, they chose to call the police and tried to send her back to residential compulsory treatment. Sometimes even the police officers were reluctant to take her in and attempted to persuade her parents: "Lydia is not a bad girl, maybe you can just take her home and watch her closely?" It shows that both the family and national institutions did not have an efficient tool to help drug users achieve and especially maintain abstinence in that era.

3.2.2. Pregnancy as the "Best Cover''

Lydia had a brief affair with a married man around 2003, got pregnant, and gave birth to a baby who died quickly after three days. The pregnancy did not bring Lydia back

to her senses and she did not stop using heroin throughout her pregnancy. Instead, the pregnancy became the "best cover" for Lydia to escape from police arrest and, thus, she easily maintained her drug use.

The pregnancy became a reason for Lydia to ask for money from her two uncles since she "was going to get an abortion." The police officers caught her buying drugs four or five times, but every time, as soon as they realized she was pregnant, she was released immediately. Ironically, she never went to the hospital to have a check-up when she was pregnant. The several times she was examined and knew that the fetus was fine was because the police officers made her get a check-up.

On the day that she gave birth to the baby, she did not want to pay the medical fee in full and instead saved some money for drugs. Discharged on the second day after giving birth, she "carried the baby, took a taxi, and went directly to purchase heroin." Afterwards, she immediately went to find her uncle again to get money. "I just let my uncle see that I gave birth to the baby and that I needed money," Lydia said, "then he gave me several thousand [RMB] although he was very angry." She did not use the money to feed the baby but purchased heroin instead.

Lydia had no knowledge about how to raise a baby and knew nothing about breastfeeding. The baby soon died, lacking the necessary care. At that moment, she was devastated and looked for "one big shot to die, to be with the baby." But after a while, things returned to normal. One year after she lost the baby, she was caught by the police again. The lie "I am still breastfeeding," successfully persuaded the policemen to set her free once again.

3.3. 2004 and after: "AIDS Saved Me from the Chaos"

Lydia was arrested in 2004 and sent to RTL institution again for the third time, and also the last time. As soon as she entered into the institution, she went through mandatory HIV testing. Suffering from acute withdrawal from heroin use, both of Lydia's legs were swollen and she barely could walk. She contracted tinea capitis and started to lose her hair. She kept wondering what was wrong with her, but the guard did not tell her. She found out one day when her mother came to visit:

> My mom hugged me, told me it was AIDS. I jumped from her arms, tears were falling down....I did not say anything, faced the wall, tears kept falling.

Lydia used to joke that "maybe [she] got AIDS," and lied about AIDS once for money; however, it was still pretty hard for her to accept reality at that very first moment:

> I thought I only could live two or three years. In the clinic [of the RTL institution], there was a doctor who came to see me from time to time. Every time she would say, "this is the girl whose CD4 [cluster of dif-

ferentiation 4, a glycoprotein found on the surface of immune cells such as T helper cells, monocytes, macrophages, and dendritic cells] is dropping rapidly." I did not know what that meant, but I thought that I was going to die soon.

At that time, Lydia had a serious complication, peptic ulcer disease, and she was in pain constantly and felt like she was living in hell. The institution's clinic had limited medical resources which could neither provide her with enough treatment nor ease her pain. Living in agony and fearing the life-threatening illness, Lydia, for the first time, felt that she could no longer live like that and decided: "I have to quit!" Also, a new policy on HIV/AIDS, "Four Free and One Care," was issued on World AIDS Day 1 December 2003, which provided AIDS patients with free antiretroviral treatment, voluntary counseling and testing, prevention of mother-to-child transmission, schooling for AIDS orphans, and social assistance for HIV patients. If Lydia continued staying in the RTL institution, she would not be eligible to receive the free treatment benefits. Witnessing her serious complications and suffering, Lydia's parents decided to apply for early release for medical reasons in order to help her obtain antiretroviral treatment and other necessary treatments for different types of opportunist infections. She was then sent from the RTL institution directly to a hospital. After several weeks of hospitalization and treatments, her CD4 levels increased and she recovered from the opportunist infections. Looking back, Lydia said that she "never wants to go through that miserable experience again" and talked about her understanding of AIDS:

> Many people complained about the unfairness of God when they were infected, however, I am grateful for the disease....Someone can live with it for more than 30 years. Maybe doctors will find a cure soon. I am grateful for this disease, otherwise I cannot imagine how I could have quit the thing [heroin].

Hou (2018) adopted a concept from Chinese Taoist philosophy, "living in the face of death" (*xiang si er sheng*), to describe the optimism and courage of people living with HIV/AIDS, who embrace the illness as the gift of life and live in the moment. Hyde (2017, p. 173) pointed out that "to function as a caring citizen in market-socialist China is to foster one's own individuality by balancing caring for the self and caring for the public good."

Lydia's transformation is related to three levels. First is the individual level—she was determined to utilize "technologies of the self-permitted individuals to effect change by their own means so as to transform themselves in thought, conduct, and ways of being in the world" (Foucault, 1983, p. 238). She started to regard HIV/AIDS as "saving her from the chaos" and giving her a chance to live a new life.

Secondly, on the narrative level, it's interesting to notice that Lydia often used the third person to address

herself as the "drug user" when talking about her "drug-centered" life. In her description, "the drug user" usually was "smart, sweet-talking, outgoing, and good at building relationships and getting things done" though sometimes they would engage in "petty theft" and "compensated dating" under "devastating situations." In her narrative, "the drug user" became an absolute otherness, different from her current self and living in the eternal past.

Thirdly, on the interpersonal level, she became a volunteer for an AIDS rights group, joined an art troupe to perform in colleges and communities to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS among the general public and, once again, put her singing talent to good use. Her actions and involvement as a person living with HIV who speaks up has become the most powerful resource in breaking the silence on HIV, creating awareness and supporting the importance of prevention.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The story of Lydia is extraordinary, and her personal story links sex, drug, and HIV/AIDS together to shed light on the expansion of the sex industry and policy changes in relation to drug use and HIV/AIDS in the reform era. Her story becomes an allegory about the rise and fall of an ambitious urban young woman in pursuit of success, desire, and wealth in reform China. The illness becomes a wake-up call and turning point for her to exchange the dysfunctional self for the "more regulated, familial, self-actualized, malleable, and responsible self" (Hyde, 2017, p. 71) to become a good bio-citizen in the era of the HIV epidemic.

Romantic love became the entry point for Lydia giving up a predictable, stable life of being a musician, marching instead into a life of short-cuts to make quick money and for success. The relationship was filled with unbalanced power: She was never an equal partner to her boyfriend, her body was objectified, and lack of safe sex practices often put her in rather vulnerable positions. The roller coaster of wealth and success was so enticing that young women like Lydia chose to give up the "iron bowl" (stable job in the public sector) and eat "spring rice of youth" (Hanser, 2005). However, the anti-corruption movement in the late 1990s rushed in, causing the imprisonment of her boyfriends' mother, their financial backbone, which therefore cut her sweet dream short as she became dependent on drug use.

Lydia's story of a drug-centered life happened in the period of time of the flourishing of the sex industry in urban cities and injection drug use (syringe sharing) was the main mode of HIV infection. According to the statistics, 63.7% of total reported HIV/AIDS cases were contracted through injecting drug use by the end of 2002; and in Beijing, at least 5% of drug users were infected with HIV/AIDS (Shen, Liu, Han & Zhang, 2004). Therefore, drug treatment became a very important method to control or reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS. Lydia's story un-

doubtedly points out the inadequacy of compulsory institutional drug treatment in that era. In the end, her willingness to quit the drug was much more effective than the numerous treatments she endured. The focus of the compulsory institutional drug treatment under the RTL system was mainly behavioral rehabilitation, therefore, medical services to help drug users ease their withdrawal symptoms were generally limited. Together with the lack of community-based reentry programs, Lydia relapsed very shortly after treatment for several years. Similar to all the other times, "a stint in compulsory detoxification rarely results in a former drug addict giving up drugs" (Pisani & Zhang, 2017, p. 7).

"Four Free and One Care" was a policy breakthrough in China's history of dealing with HIV/AIDS. Lydia ended her drug treatment earlier so she could enjoy the free HIV treatment, and the minimum living security she received from the residents' committee helped her get through her daily life. Along with the issuing of Regulations on AIDS Prevention and Treatment by the state council in 2006, the anti-drug law of China in 2008, and the termination of the RTL system at the end of 2013, the Chinese government has gradually improved drug treatment services and combined the drug treatment system with the prevention of the epidemic of HIV/AIDS. The revised compulsory institutional drug treatment focuses more on detoxification rather than behavioral rehabilitation, and now encompasses different methods to help drug users achieve and maintain abstinence. Moreover, community-based drug treatment has now been introduced as an alternative approach alongside institutional treatment in China (Lu et al., 2008; Zhang & Chin, 2015). These community-based drug treatment programs include both medical ones such as methadone maintenance treatment and non-medical ones such as social work intervention (Liu & Chui, 2018). Thus, in China, individuals now, compared to the time when Lydia's story happened, can receive better treatment and aftercare services in communities to maintain abstinence.

The information demonstrates that improving drug treatment services can be one of many ways to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. HIV prevalence among drug users nationwide has continued to decline in China from 30.3% in 1999 to 10.9% in 2011 (Wu, Wand, Detels, & Bulterys, 2014), and then rapidly to 3.4% in 2017 (China CDC, 2019). Strong governmental commitment, solid public health infrastructure, and available social assistance systems build up a foundation for drug treatment and HIV/AIDS prevention. However, more active local NGOs that get involved to provide education programs and social support interventions for women living with HIV/AIDS and drug users are still essential.

Acknowledgments

tion, Beijing Normal University, the Harvard-Yenching Institute Visiting Scholarship, the National Social Science Fund of the People's Republic of China (19BSH029), and Jiangsu Provincial Social Sciences Research Key Project, the People's Republic of China (2018SJZDI119). We would like to thank Ms. Guo Ting for her assistance in collecting and transcribing the data.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

Beyond Sex/Work: Understanding Work and Identity of Female Sex Workers in South China

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Abstract

While scholars and activists often advocate using the term 'sex worker' in preference to prostitute, in my research I found that female prostitutes in the Pearl River Delta area, south China, do not like to be addressed as such, and prefer the title *xiaojie* in Chinese. 'Sex worker' generalises the heterogeneity of meanings these women identify and attribute to what they do; it does not capture the complex cultural meanings involved in the term *xiaojie*. It is stigmatising in that what is exchanged within the transaction is less defined by sexual acts and more by a diversified range of activities. The women employ what is useful to them and infuse new meanings in it to construct gender images and identities to resist the sex worker stigma and to express their desires as rural-to-urban migrants. Using *xiaojie* becomes a destigmatising and gender tactic. I also found that the women discard the idea of finding alternative jobs partly because of the practical difficulty, and partly because they do not want to work (*gongzuo*) any more in the future. This study highlights the importance of exploring desire and agency to understand the lived experiences of this particular group of women.

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Left Behind? Women's Status in Contemporary China" edited by Robert Walker (Beijing Normal University, China) and Jane Millar (University of Bath, UK).

1. Introduction

[It] isn't a kind of work….When I have nothing much to do, I go to my friends' to play Mahjong and watch TV, and we play and drink till about ten at night. Then I prepare to go out. It is all up to me whether I go out or not. If I am not happy one day, I'll just stay in or sleep….I don't think a job/work [meaning: *gongzuo*] is like this. It should have regular income and fixed working time. It's not so free.

This is what Song said when I asked whether she thinks being a *xiaojie* is a kind of work. Her answer helps us understand what women involved in the sex industry think about work and sex work. Based on the ethnographic research on the perception of Chinese *xiaojies* regarding work and their lived experience in the Pearl River Delta

area, South China, I found that most did not consider 'sex worker' an appropriate title, nor do they want to be called 'prostitutes' or other localised stigmatising titles (such as 'chicken'). Song's narrative is typical among the women I interviewed, showing how most of them resist the idea of sex work and even work in general.

In this article I want to explore (1) how *xiaojies* understand what they do; (2) how they give meanings to the term sex worker (*xing gongzuo zhe*) and challenge work as an institution; and (3) how they identify themselves within the social, economic, cultural and political context of the Pearl River Delta area and use these to challenge labelling as women migrants from rural backwardness and sexually dangerous prostitutes.

During my fieldwork I visited various night entertainment sites in the Pearl River Delta, including five nightclubs, four hair salons, four leisure centres and two foot

massage parlours, and also places famous for street so-licitors. I lived with two *xiaojies* on and off for six months. I established good relations with *xiaojies*, mamasans, al-cohol sellers, drug dealers and users and also gang mem-bers. I also got to know people engaged in related ac-tivities and occupations including security guards at en-tertainment sites, landlords of *xiaojies*, store owners in 'red-light' districts and more, thereby assembling much information about the night entertainment industry, the area, the people and their lifestyles. In addition, for-mal in-depth and multiple interviews were conducted with 23 *xiaojies* who were doing different kinds of sex-related jobs, including street solicitors, call girls, mas-sage girls working at clients' homes, nightclub girls, ma-masans who were previously *xiaojies*, hair salon girls and freelancers (similar to 'second wives' but typically living with different men at the same time while doing other jobs like cleaning). Six of them were married at the time of the interview and three had children.

2. From *Xiaojie* to Female 'Sex Worker'

Xiaojie was a respectable form of address for young and unmarried women born into rich big families in ancient China. The term was dropped at the founding of new China due to its capitalist/feudalist connotations. It was then brought back into use by Hong Kong/Taiwan busi-nesspeople coming to the mainland in the 1980s dur-ing the economic reform, when it became a common mode of address for all women in urban areas (simi-lar to the English 'Miss/Ms.'). However, about a decade ago, women who had been quite used to the term *xi-aojie* became very sensitive about how it became a spe-cific form of address for prostitutes, the result of busi-nessmen visiting entertainment sites and using it in this way. Customers in retail shops and restaurants and ser-vice providers in these sites use other words such as *guniang* (girl), *xiaomei* (literally: little sister) or *liangnv* (pretty lady) instead of *xiaojie* to address each other. The Pearl River Delta is said to be the place where the term *xiaojie* was first used to indicate 'prostitute.' It became so prevalent that even some community offices made new guidelines for their everyday work stating that calling fe-male migrants *xiaojie* would be an offence. From then on, the ordinary Chinese word *xiaojie* was not considered ordinary anymore, and the term's ambiguous meaning have provoked many discussions ever since, especially on changes in the Chinese language and the proliferation of prostitution coinciding with the period of economic 'opening up.' It seems that *xiaojie* has become a cultural code at this particular historical moment, and it brought the prostitution issue to people's attention in a quiet yet permeative manner.

Other than in popular culture, there also seems to be an intellectual tension in grappling with the concepts of prostitution, moral decay, victims and sex workers, as well as in the meanings and associated identities at-tached to them. Much of this debate stems from Western scholars and activists, yet it has also been influential in scholarly and policy discourse in non-Western societies, including China. At the time when, with the increase of rural-to-urban migration, the notion of *xiaojie* had taken on a new cultural meaning, Chinese academics become embroiled more deeply in the contradiction of attitudes held by different schools.

The long-standing ideology that prostitution is a prod-uct of capitalist exploitation, a social corruption and a stigma of moral decay forms the basis of the moralistic views that criticise prostitute women as lazy, morally de-graded and deviant (e.g., Si, 1997; Zhang, 2004). Scholars in this school of thought insist that the institution of pro-hibition and re-education should be established to con-trol it. At that time, dominant discourses set the tone and direction for research. Jeffreys (2004) criticises these researchers' 'cold war ideology' and political stance, say-ing that their positivist standpoint and treatment of what they researched as an object rather than as a human sub-ject were methodological biases.

Some scholars began to look at the issue from a dif-ferent angle, blaming traditional patriarchal culture as the source of prostitution and of women's oppression (e.g., Ding, 1996). Within this framework, discussions are narrowly confined to first-wave feminist ideologies that see prostitute women as victims of male oppression and the patriarchal culture. There is no engagement with the many diverse understandings of prostitution, including the possibility that it might be considered as a form of labour or as an autonomous way in which women may choose to express their agency.

Since the rapid increase of HIV-positive cases in China in the mid-1980s, prostitution has attracted massive aca-demic attention with prostitutes often taken to be part of the floating population that is considered important in HIV/AIDS control (Choi, 2011). Women involved were either seen as sexually promiscuous or as the subjects of medical experiments who needed special education and regulation of their sexual behaviour so that they would not transmit the virus to the 'normal' population (He & Zheng, 1997).

For Chinese academics, this reconstituting of the na-ture of the issue provided a way of researching the taboo of prostitution from an angle other than the morally-loaded or legally-focused ones that were often facets of political propaganda (Pan, Huang, & Liu, 2005). Some scholars began to look into the social and cultural di-mensions of sexual behaviour, e.g., how the women feel about love and intimacy, how their lifestyle and work may influence the effectiveness of interventions, and so forth. Rather than engaging in moral blame, medical ana-lyses or sympathetic victimisation, they argue that sex work is a kind of work and that being a female sex worker is a right (e.g., Huang & Pan, 2003; Pan, Huang, & Liu, 2005; Pan, Huang et al., 2005). It opened up a new direc-tion for researchers to understand the complex nature of prostitution, fundamentally challenging the mainstream view that treats them as the deviant Other.

3. 'Sex Worker' or Not: Key Debates in China and Abroad

Whether prostitution is a kind of work is one of the key debates that runs throughout various feminist schools and across the globe. Associated discussions concern prostitute women's identities and what they do/sell. Recent studies have begun to show the disparate situations in which prostitution occurs and the various forms of 'labour' involved (Hoang, 2015; Kong, 2017; Musto, Jackson, & Shih, 2015). Prostitution may have both positive and negative effects on the involved women's sense of self, which also relates to social background, individual motivations, work locations and life experiences (Benoit et al., 2018). Sometimes due to the complexity of the term, women involved in prostitution are reluctant to call themselves 'sex workers' (Cheng, 2011; Frank, 2007). Each situation is unique, with its own context, suggestive of the underpinning values and pertaining frameworks that are both deeply rooted and evolving.

Key Chinese scholars on prostitution, Pan Suiming, his group of colleagues and postgraduate students, and Huang Yingying adopt an identity and rights framework and hold that *xiaojies* are 'sex workers,' just like any other labourers and workers. In their work, they interchangeably use the word *xiaojie* and 'sex worker' to imply the 'right to labour,' and state that "although the women did not explicitly say 'sex work is a kind of work,' none of them take it as not a kind of work" (Pan, Huang et al., 2005, p. 103). They argue that *xiaojies* often "talk about their work environment, the market situation, and ma-masans' attitude to them," which are "exactly the same things other workers will discuss" (Pan, Huang et al., 2005, p. 103). Huang takes the women's narratives on hard factory work and their later entry into the sex business as a causal relation and argues that sex work is a 'parallel movement in profession' from factory work (Huang & Pan, 2003), taking it as evidence supporting the idea that the sex business is a kind of work.

My study shows that some *xiaojies* have never done any factory work before taking up their sex business jobs. As second/third generation migrants, they know well about the notorious factory life and some made up their mind to leave the countryside and go directly into the sex business. Women's initial involvement in the sex business is usually due to more than one factor and so why they want to do it, how they decide to do it, what they think about it, and what they envisage the future to bring become important issues for us to understand. Most of my interviewees say they do not think what they do is a kind of work and many express no intention of working (*gongzuo*) in the future.

Although I deeply understand and appreciate scholars' efforts in advocating the women's free will, right to labour and agency, I consider this unquestioning adoption of 'sex worker' as problematic (Huang, 2018). Few Chinese scholars have paid attention to the naming issue of prostitution, most taking the label 'sex worker' for granted. Without looking into the women's own perceptions of 'sex work,' what they do and aspire to do in a specific context that is socially, economically, culturally and historically different from the West, our understanding of prostitution is incomplete.

Tsang (2019a, 2019b) has used another framework 'edgework' to describe and analyse the double-sidedness of sex workers' experience, pointing out that they need to weigh possible benefits against certain risks and to make a 'bounded rational choice' with respect to their goals (Tsang, 2018). Her work contributes to our understanding of the complexity of prostitution, especially the mixed feelings of the women towards money and other tangible/intangible benefits yielded by their desires (Tsang, Lowe, Wilkinson, & Scambler, 2018). For women who voluntarily adopt prostitution in China, poor economic condition is not the only or direct reason (Ding, 2016; Liu, 2011). After entering the sex business their economic condition may not have improved much (Ding & Ho, 2013). Considering the stigma of prostitution, the alienation created by the job and the possible physical harm, the price they have to pay seems to be too high to justify their choice as a purely economic decision. How should we therefore account for their choices? Tsang's framework redirects the focus of academic discussion that has hitherto been directed to the sex work paradigm by raising issues such as difficulty and predicament. Yet, we need to probe into the women's desires to make sense of their life choices.

4. Agency and Desire: A New Way to Understand Women's Lived Experiences

My studies show that the decisions of *xiaojies* are usually not linear, causal, clear and direct, or taken after careful thought. Not all decisions are based upon rational thinking and weighing upon options. When talking about agency, most studies focus on the conscious planning and strategising aspect, i.e., how people's social location and resources affect their personal choices and experiences. The cognitive aspect of agency relating to the women's initiative, imagination, aspirations and dreams that play an 'intangible' role in their decision making, has not been fully explored (Mahler & Pessar, 2001). These most-neglected elements are important, without which we cannot fully understand the choices *xiaojies* make, especially those that seem to be irrational, impulsive or hard to comprehend.

Tsang and Ho (2007, p. 625) argue that the language of desire creates a subjective space, embracing the spontaneous, non-rational and corporeal aspects of people's daily lives, in which they are able to construct their selves. It includes both explicit/speakable/tangible/material aspects and implicit/secretive/unconscious/sentimental longings that are often neglected in academic discourses. It can help drawing a clearer picture of how *xiaojies* come to certain decisions and how they construct their selves in a specific context. Confusions, difficulties and

uncertainties they encounter can be understood more clearly. This is important as much research conducted within the identity framework leaves the everyday, unconscious and trivial aspects untouched (Cameron & Kulick, 2003). Desire is considered to be a special conceptual site that has the most potential to subvert existing social order and norms (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 627). Thus, it is not only to be understood in professional/academic/elite discourses that usually fail to represent it fully, but should also be understood as a fluid, every day, multidimensional and transgressive articulatory system (Cameron & Kulick, 2003, p. 627).

I argue that desire and agency should be integrated into our analytical framework to catch the fluidity and multiplicity of the women's self-identifications and to understand the discursive formation of their lived experience. The 'logic of emotion' (Jankowiak, 2006) should be taken as a supplement to the logic of material, work or identity.

The sex work framework gives priority to social status and political rights, which are not the most relevant in the women's lives under the social condition in China. In an increasingly diversified sex market, it is important that we understand how *xiaojies*, bearing strong stigma without any resources, utilise different aspects of their lives to construct multiple identities in different life stages and contexts to maximise their power and freedom. They present many different gender images, and the mixed and fragmented moments deconstruct the simple identity of 'sex worker' and reveal numerous processes of becoming and identification. My studies show that these women's agency is constituted by, and expressed in, their self-identification, self-practices and in various life skills (Ding, 2017; Ding & Ho, 2013). These different modes of agency are both a result of structural constraints and a force that is breaking through.

5. The Changing Ideology of Work

After the founding of new China, the idea of work was closely linked with the nation's ambition of industrialisation and the political agenda of socialist construction. To work (*gongzuo*) in a work unit (*danwei*) was considered a source of pride for the individual. Thus 'work' has a very specific meaning in contemporary Chinese, emphasising paid labour in a recognised profession. It has to be differentiated from *dagong*, which indicates an emergence of capitalist labour employment relations outside the state sector.

In recent years, self-employment, informal employment and temporary employment such as running a 'WeChat' business (*wei shang*), webcast, running errands for different employers or doing construction work and earning a daily wage, among others, with less stable income but flexible working venue and time, have become more accepted and even popular, especially among younger generations who are familiar with the internet. *Xiaojies*' idea of work and future aspirations

are similar to these young people. Flexibility, freedom and harm-reduction are now their priorities after seeing China's three generations of migrant workers suffer from sweatshop factory work, low pay without recognition, hazardous working conditions, inhuman regulations, heavy workload and lack of dignity. Lifestyles that support these ideals go beyond personal choice for pleasure and comfort and become a resistance against impairment of individual worth and subjection by mainstream ideology.

From this perspective, Wang (2004), among the very few scholars who have discussed the 'naming' issue of prostitution in China, argues that 'sex work' is not proper and suggests that we consider a new name that can catch the multiple layers of meanings involved in prostitution and also blur the gender boundaries.

6. *Xiaojies*' Perceptions of What They Do

In order to explore *xiaojies*' perceptions of work and their current jobs, I categorise the women interviewees into four groups according to their different responses to the question: What do you think about what you do?

6.1. Playing

Thirteen of the 23 women interviewed either explicitly claim or imply that they are leading a 'playful' life. They give the word 'play' at least three meanings. First, it refers to the 'playful' and entertaining aspects of their jobs and daily lives, such as singing, dancing, playing dice, drinking, chatting, taking drugs, hanging out with friends, etc., as well as flexible 'working' time. Second, it denotes the 'performative' nature of *xiaojies*' interactions with clients.

I first met YY in a Shenzhen nightclub with a male friend of mine. She was dressed in a light-coloured short-sleeved blouse and black trousers, wearing a necklace and a pearl hairpin in her long straight hair. She did not look like other *xiaojies* who were in tube-tops and miniskirts. I found that the way she talked to me differed very much from how she talked to my male friend. For example, we talked a lot about skincare, hair styles, fashion and boyfriends, but when she turned to my friend, she used a lot of flirtatious language with sexual implications. The whole conversation went on with YY's constant shifting from a 'bestie' of mine to a 'sexy lover' of my friend. She never admitted that she provides sexual services before my friend in order to maintain a 'pure' and 'innocent' image but, when we went to the restroom together, she explained to another *xiaojie* that her period was late and discussed the possibility of pregnancy.

She told me during our second meet-up two weeks later that she sometimes felt like an actress:

> I know what they want and then I swiftly change my tones and how I behave....Sometimes the managers joke about my readiness to change, and I say, yes, I am

just playing! This is not like a proper job, so what does it matter!

The third meaning attached to a 'playful' life is the transitional and unfixed state of being that *xiaojies*' experience as rural-to-urban migrants with no clear idea of what to do in the (near) future. When I asked Hong whether she thinks being a *xiaojie* is a kind of work she said:

> How can this be a kind of work?! I don't know even what I am doing. I am just idling my time away….This is not work, just play. I won't treat it as work. Let alone sex work.

She uses 'play' to release herself from the pressure of seeking a definite direction of where she wants to go. Saying that she is 'playing' temporarily saves her from the confusion of being a migrant woman who has not achieved more with the resources she currently has. It also rationalises their 'aimless' lives overwriting the unhappiness they encounter in the job, weakening the 'work' ethic, lightening workload, responsibilities and even the stigma of prostitution.

6.2. Doing Business

Some women refer to themselves as businesswomen. The title implies the ability to negotiate, balance and plan that requires vision and competence. They think that it is a better form of address than 'sex worker' since it creates a sense of being urban and modern, an image of sophistication and success, and a sense of security in being able to make their own decisions.

Haibin is very confident, describing herself as a "born businesswoman" having "business acumen at a young age." Her family runs a small shop that has taught her much about maximising profits with limited resources. When she talked about how she decided to be a *xiaojie* she said:

> Everything has its own value. I see not much difference between my insurance job, model job and being a *xiaojie*, in terms of building client networks. Just that…the latter two need more business acumen and self-motivation….Being a *xiaojie* is a kind of business that needs input in appearance and interpersonal skills. You need to learn these things before you can earn money and establish relations.

Women working in nightclubs may have a stronger sense of doing business since there has always been a unique connection between businessmen, corrupt government officials and women-centred entertainment (see also Osburg, 2013; Uretsky, 2008; Zurndorfer, 2016). *Xiaojies* may establish personal networks with these men and learn to make good use of them for personal benefit. Mei showed me a pile of perhaps 100 name cards she had received from clients and other sources. She would call some of them regularly to keep contact. She comments:

> Business manager, to be honest, is a good description of my job as a *xiaojie*. It's not work. It's all about business, establishing relations and building mutual interests. Sometimes I don't think it's easy to be a *xiaojie* because it needs courage and vision.

It seems unlikely that Haibin and Mei would have been able to attain the same extensive social networks, raised self-esteem and sense of involvement through work in a factory or as a cleaner, waitress or domestic helper.

6.3. Chulai

Some women used the Chinese word *chulai*, literally 'came out,' to describe their ambiguous, dynamic, changing and unfixed condition. *Chulai* has four layers of meaning to it. First, and most obviously, it refers to the geographical movement from rural village to the city. Secondly, it means moving away culturally from rural 'backwardness' to urban 'advancement,' just as Lan describes it: "The feeling is really like coming out from a closed house." Most interviewees mentioned 'urban,' 'open' and 'modern' when they described their city life. Urban symbols like high street shops, gyms and supermarkets help in acquiring urban knowledge and values (Ding, 2017). For married *xiaojies*, it also means stepping out from marriage to a new personal space. When they realised that they may not have a more certain future and enjoyable life through marriage, they decided to "find something to do in cities" to obtain a sense of security for themselves. According to Wen, "this 'something' was not necessarily a kind of work," as it was "more like an 'add-on'" to what she had. The fourth connotation of *chulai*, rare but interesting, as in one *xiaojie's* narratives, means having overseas exposure.

This group of women find in their unsettled existence a means of expressing their desire to break away from under-developed, static rural environments and become modern, urban and open. The ambiguity of the terms *chulai*, *zuoshi* (to do something), *zuo* (do), or *chuqu* (going out) destigmatises their status and provides space for them to articulate their choices, especially at a transitional stage in their lives. Migration and being *xiaojies* are perceived to be just temporary choices where the fixed and stigmatised identity of 'sex worker' is not applicable.

6.4. Work

Juan is the only woman among my informants who takes being *xiaojie* as a kind of work. She has a 4-year-old daughter who was born to a client. As a single mother she has a clear goal of earning money and providing the best she can for her daughter. She firmly believes that:

> It is work, with or without regulation….I depend on this work to raise my daughter. The clients pay us be-

cause we give out our labour. So, I earn this money for a reason.

She thinks that every form of labour is work, "even grocery shopping is a kind of work." However, she does not think that *xiaojies* should be called 'sex workers' for it sounds "too deliberate."

7. Why 'Sex Work' Doesn't Work: Beyond 'Sex' and 'Work'

7.1. Neither Sex nor Work

Twelve out of the other 22 interviewees, like Juan, said the term 'sex worker' only focuses on the aspect of 'sex.' In the increasingly diversified and highly developed sex market in the area, what *xiaojies* have to offer is far more than just sex. They need to incorporate different aspects of their personal capabilities and create different gender images to tailor to the clients' needs. From the 'work' aspect of the term, the reason why most *xiaojies* preferred not to be called 'sex workers' are fourfold. First, it cannot guarantee a stable income. This is especially true for street solicitors. Secondly, some feel that they have little dignity in the job. They have to deliberately create a sense of belonging and pride in themselves, which prostitution does not offer as naturally as other jobs do. Thirdly, *xiaojies* may find no sense of responsibility attached to the job. Hui compared her massage job with her former job as a salesperson. She said the latter "would impose pressure" on her; if she could not "sell that much" in order to meet the basic salary, she would blame herself as a drag on all others. The massage job brought no such feeling because any problems that occurred seemed to her to be "more of an operational or managerial problem of the boss" that had nothing to do with her. She said it was the sense of responsibility of work that brings a sense of fulfilment, which would make one feel better about oneself. Fourthly, *xiaojies* tend to associate work with the idea of life goals. They consider that a proper job should give a sense of direction in life providing stability, fulfilment and personal growth whereas being a *xiaojie* does not achieve this.

7.2. Future Aspiration: Beyond the Work Paradigm

Twenty-one women among the interviewees showed little interest in finding 'proper' and stable jobs (*zhao gongzuo* or *dagong*), such as working in factories, as a domestic helper, a waitress and in sales. Under heavy regulation, migrant workers are 'stuck' in a space between their own lives and modern China, neither attached to the traditional rural values nor able to fully embrace the fruit of development. As rural migrant 'workers' at the lower end of urban employment, they can only be docile bodies and disposable labourers and are deprived of the opportunities to enjoy modern lifestyles and citizenship—and, more importantly, a space of their

own where they can explore what they want. It is hard for them to find good and decent jobs which they imagined doing, such as working in companies and being 'white collars' due to their lack of education and skills. Their desire to be sexual, urban and modern subjects cannot be fulfilled under the current employment regimen.

Trying some 'unusual' way outside the work paradigm becomes acceptable, especially in a social environment that promotes self-support and entrepreneurship. The network and experience accumulated by being a *xiaojie* creates images of being independent, smart and competent, equipping them with strength and courage to face endless challenges. Being a *xiaojie* thus becomes an alternative outside the 'work' paradigm. They feel a need to make good use of their youth and body and earn themselves a chance to catch up with the fast-changing world as desiring subjects. They are doing what they think to be right at the moment and right for themselves, by breaking away from confinements and taking the risks they think are needed for a better life. What they want is to be seen firstly as people, not as any type of institutionally confined workers (Cheng, 2007, p. 247). Interviewee Hong said that "any deliberate fighting [*duikang*] is unnecessary." This to some degree shows that work and identity are not what the women care about the most. Instead, they want to anchor themselves in city lives, grasp the chance to transform themselves into urban, modern and sexual subjects. Their refusal of the 'sex worker' label demonstrates their refusal to accept a fixed identity at this transitional stage. And their refusal of, and confusion over, the word 'work' is a challenge not only to the label 'sex work' as perceived in academic debate, but also to the work paradigm as a whole.

8. *Xiaojie* as Destigmatising and Gender Tactics

The term 'sex worker' emphasises only the most tabooed aspect of the job, as if what the women sell in exchange for money is just their body and sex. It resembles a negative Chinese term for prostitution—*maiyin* (selling eroticism)—which strongly emphasises the 'sex/flesh' aspect that is condemned by both the deeply rooted Confucian culture and socialist morality. With their multiplicity of roles/images, the women do not want to be defined merely as 'sex' workers. The term *xiaojie* is ambiguous and does not have a fixed institutional definition of the person to whom it can be applied. The women can appropriate titles and addresses that are useful and proper in different settings to weaken the prostitution stigma.

8.1. Xiaojie *as Urban Signifier*

Xiaojies want to embrace an urban way of life to weaken the rural stereotype imposed on them and to raise their self-esteem. They had imagined city life before migration, as indicated in different ways in their narratives, e.g., in their complaints of rural poverty, longing for pretty clothes, dreams of candies, the giving-up of schooling,

wishes to work in the cities and more (Ding, 2011). The imaginary operates as a mode of agency. They do not want to stay in rural villages where they cannot share the national economic progress, especially as the unfairness perceived is highly gendered. Their strong desire to be urban makes them willing to take risks rather than to pursue factory life, which is usually considered more normal and stable. Their wish is to anchor themselves in urban space, to participate in the fast-paced urban life and to find themselves places in the Chinese economic transition to a post-socialist state. As different women express:

> No matter how, I feel happy right now. I earn my own money, enjoying a different life here. My time is flexible….I can't go back to rural life. (Juan)

> We don't want to farm anymore. Farming has no future. We must go out and see how people are living their lives in the cities. We are different from our parents' or grandparents' generations because we have the chance to see more. (Lan)

Xiaojie, with its specific urban connotation, gives them space to evade the image of being rural, passive and weak and to express urban dreams. They may package themselves as smart businesswomen or internationally experienced *xiaojies* to create a gender image that incorporates urbanity, sophistication and competence and which counteracts the image often imposed on them in both the popular media and academia.

8.2. Xiaojie *as Young and Virginal*

Historically the term *xiaojie* was associated with youthfulness, being unmarried and virginity. Even now in our everyday language, it is used mostly to address young women in urban settings. From their migration and urban living experience, the women have come to new understandings of youth—a good time to try new things, face the reality of the enlarging rural–urban gap and explore new lifestyles. Youth is also perceived as connoting important traits of a modern woman, including the awareness and skills to maintain bodily and emotional activeness and youthfulness. The women utilise the term's underlying meanings instead of 'sex worker,' which says nothing about women's gender, age or femininity, in order to express their desires for an 'eternal youthfulness' and a fresh new life out of rural poverty and marriage.

They can be 'playful' wives who enjoy sexual freedom and pleasure and take pride in their sexual skills without concern of being regarded as promiscuous. They gain more knowledge on love and intimacy and build up their experience and confidence to resist the existing gender/sexual stereotypes that women should marry early, be subdued and faithful, care for their children, be passive in sex, be monogamous, etc. They endure the difficulty encountered in keeping up with the pace of urban life but, in so doing, increase their social and sex-

ual knowledge and life perspectives. At the same time, they turn their rural past into a kind of quality that shows perseverance, adaptability and a willingness to engage in hard work. Together with their youthfulness, they become healthy, strong, flexible women who combine urbanity and rural 'purity.'

8.3. Xiaojie *as Modern Connotation*

The women interviewed project their desires to be open, flexible, independent, sophisticated, onto the term *xiaojie* and create new meanings for it. By being *xiaojies*, either according to its literal meaning or as an occupation, they hope to acquire modern women's sexual autonomy and the ability to utilise their sex and body, often their only capital and resources, to gain more control of life. They also hope to have more social exposure, a greater personal space and better prospects. These hopes are reflected in many of their decisions, such as to migrate, enter the sex business and to have extra-marital relationships; and also, in their perceptions of work, marriage, intimate relations, opportunity and challenges. They try to make the best out of their adverse situations and negotiate gender images to present a femininity that is associated with autonomy, openness and flexibility. They understand these as the character and core values of modern women—not being confined in a static and limited space, not being satisfied with what one already has, not to be bounded by rural and gender kinship norms, but to be competent and to live in one's own way.

9. Conclusion

This article is a reflection on, and critique of, the tendency of academics and activists to characterise Chinese prostitute women as 'sex workers.' In everyday life, *xiaojies* experience repeated discrimination not only because they are labelled as immoral and illegal prostitutes, but also because they are considered to be promiscuous and bad women, as well as being backwards, coarse and uncultured rural migrants. They utilise destigmatising and gender tactics not only to weaken these stereotypes but also to break away from existing gender and moral standards and refashion themselves as sexy, open, urban, modern and capable women. 'Sex worker' is too homogeneous and overarching a term to be able to adequately represent all these factors. It fails also to reflect *xiaojies'* perception of work, while its use may even prejudice some of their desires and aspirations to be modern, urban and sexual subjects.

Academic discussions on the nature of prostitution and the labels should not focus solely on work identity but should also embrace consideration of the desires and multifaceted aspirations of women engaging in prostitution and recognise how their perceived identities differ in various contexts. It is difficult for women engaged in prostitution to imagine substantial improvements in their livelihood arising from institutional reform (such as po-

litical recognition of prostitution as a legal form of work, or acknowledgement of workers' rights) without fundamental change to the household registration (*hukou*) system and to the many related regulations that effectively discriminate against the working class. They do not attempt to improve their situations via any form of political efforts. Their self-identification as *xiaojies* rather than sex workers, and apparent lack of interest in discourses on sex workers' rights, may reflect their anti-institutional sentiments—a resistance against the institutional ascription of class and gender roles for migrant women. By reviewing key Chinese literature on prostitution situated in a global trend, I argue that it is important to explore the desires and aspirations that have motivated these women to go beyond multiple boundaries—beyond their place of origin, social roles, gender normativity, traditional work ethics, proper femininity, etc., to become migrants and *xiaojies*.

The term *xiaojie* is imperfect because it is already stigmatised. But its ambiguity gives space for women practising prostitution to transform, to become, and most of all, to struggle against people's negative impressions of this marginal lifestyle, albeit the space available to them is heavily constrained by China's legal, moral and cultural regulation of prostitution. As migrants, the women are leading drifting lives, and are always on the move. Confusion and uncertainty characterise many of their experiences in their pursuit of modern gender subjectivity. I argue that it is important to consider these experiences, desires, aspirations and actions to be modes of agency and destigmatising tactics, rather than as a manifestation of weakness. The women are willing to take risks, transgress boundaries and explore new ways in order to seek a way out of their predicament. What they think and have done may seem to be trivial, unnecessary and unworthy to most of us, but the women nevertheless use their agency to create opportunities for exploration and becoming. It is through little positive resources that women account for why they have deviated from the dominant cultural storyline, while maintaining an image of self-worth. They may not be able to achieve the kind of success that they want because of the limited resources they have and the unfavourable circumstances they are in, but their efforts as individuals should be recognised as expressing their desires for a better life and a refusal to be excluded from the process of modernisation.

My argument against 'sex worker' is not just based on some *xiaojies*' personal preference or individual standpoint, but for the purpose of reaching a deeper understanding of the women's daily lives, and their micro resistance to existing gender relations, gender stereotypes and social discrimination. My views of reconsidering the appropriateness of 'sex work' is an entry point into a bigger reflection of how we want to address women's rights and social position, and what is a more pragmatic approach of reaching the goal.

This research shows the importance of identifying the gap between academic/activist viewpoints and the women's own experiences and voices. The language of desire is employed to understand their lived experience. In the women's everyday lives we can see another kind of power that is micro/mundane, yet subversive.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Social Media as a Disguise and an Aid: Disabled Women in the Cyber Workforce in China

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Abstract

Existing literature shows that people living with physical impairment are systematically disadvantaged in the workforce and their voices are often silenced. With a perspective of intersectionality, this article looks into how disabled women suffer from multiple forms of discrimination and how social media may emerge as a tool of empowerment for them in both the workforce and their everyday lives. Drawing on five cases of Chinese disabled women in the cyber workforce, the study finds that the booming Internet economy enables more disabled women to financially support themselves. Social media appears as a cover for these women to disguise their disability identity and get more job opportunities. It serves as an aid in many cases to allow these women to increase social participation, to project their voice, and to form alliances. The risks and challenges that disabled women often encounter in the cyber workforce are also discussed.

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Left Behind? Women's Status in Contemporary China" edited by Robert Walker (Beijing Normal University, China) and Jane Millar (University of Bath, UK).

1. Introduction

How Does It Feel To Be a Disabled Person Sitting in a Wheelchair? This is the title of the first video clip Nana, a patient with brittle bone disease, put online as a vlogger. In this video, she used a voice changer to alter her pitch and voice speed, telling people her experience as a wheelchair user. She changed many outfits to cosplay different people, sharing her observations and thoughts in a hilarious way. The video attracted more than ten thousand viewers. After that, she was invited to sign up with a live streaming company and create her own channel on this platform. Nana is very excited about this opportunity. This employment not only brings her a stable income, it also fulfills her wish to help other people understand more about the lives of disabled people.

People who are with physical impairments are systematically disadvantaged in the workforce and their voices are often silenced. For working disabled women, the predicament is even worse. Existing literature has documented the multiple forms of discrimination they encounter compared to working men with and without disabilities (Randolph, 2005). As a result of being negatively stereotyped as weak and incapable, they often find it difficult to demonstrate their competencies. In some cases, to avoid reminding their colleagues of their disability and exposing themselves to negative attitudes, they even refrain from disclosing their disability or requesting accommodations at work (Moloney, Brown, Ciciurkaite, & Foley, 2019).

In China, although disabled people encounter new difficulties and challenges resulted from social changes

such as the privatization of health care system and dismantling of the rural cooperative medical system, they benefit from the developing market economy and their participation in the labor market has been encouraged by the government through tax incentives and employment services (Kohrman, 2005; Shang, 2000). In addition, a range of personal narratives of disability experience has been published since the 1980s, increasing the visibility of disabled people in the current Chinese cultural and social context (Dauncey, 2012, 2013). However, examined with a gender lens, the situation remains worrisome. For example, despite its praiseworthy achievements, the China Disabled Persons' Federation (the most important and well-known quasi-governmental disabled persons' organization in China) is also criticized for some of its practices that reinforce gender inequality. The fact that this entity is run predominately by men and that its intervention program of providing three-wheeled motor bikes to increase economic and social inclusion of disabled people was limited to urban men with walking difficulties are cases in point (Kohrman, 2005). Such practices perpetuate the stigmatic notion that men are more competent and more likely to achieve institutional success. Also, within the bourgeoning trend of self-representation and self-advocacy of disabled people both on an individual and group level (Dauncey, 2013), disabled men seem to have more opportunities to have their voice heard and their experience understood (Dauncey, 2017). Less is known about disabled women's endeavor to live economically positive lives in contemporary Chinese society.

In this article, through the cases of five disabled women strategically using the Internet to seize job opportunities to financially support themselves and to increase social participation, we discuss how Internet access may provide new routes to economic and social inclusion for people with disabilities. While demonstrating how cyberspace facilitates the empowerment of working disabled women, we also call attention to the risks and challenges faced by these women in the cyber workforce such as cyberbullying, harassment, insufficient skills, and lack of competitive edge.

2. Literature Review

Most of the literature on disabled women examines how disability and gender intersect to compound negative outcomes for these women. Some studies center on the theorization of intersectionality and elaborate how disability relates to a critical category in the important concerns of feminist theory, calling for the reimagining of disability and the liberation of both disabled and nondisabled people from oppressive narratives. For example, based on close readings of literary texts of the eighteenth century, Deutsch and Nussbaum (2000) argue that notions such as defect and deformity could be precursors of modern concept of race. The discriminative ideology that designates femaleness as a defect could be in the same vein of cultural meanings as these derogative no-

tions, which makes the intersectional analysis of gender, race, and disability meaningful. Built on a systematic review of research in the field, Garland-Thomson (2005) points out that the available cultural narratives of disability are often disempowering and oppressive. Meanwhile, in the similar way that disability studies challenge the notion of normal, feminism goes beyond gender differences to encompass diverse identities that enable the manifestation of multiple gender subjectivities. Garland-Thomson therefore emphasizes the importance of feminist disability studies. She argues that the gendering of disability not only "recognizes the differences among the wide variety of stigmatized forms of embodiment that constitute disability in its broadest conceptualization," it also "calls attention to the hidden norm that lurks behind our understandings of disability, one that makes some bodies seem naturally deficient or excessive and others seem superior"(Garland-Thomson, 2005, pp. 1558–1559). Thus, the intersectional alliance of disability studies and feminism helps to enlighten oppressive social scripts and liberate both disabled and nondisabled people.

Applying such intersectionality in disability and gender studies, some researchers provide empirical evidence of the discriminations suffered by disabled women. Most of these explorations center on women's experiences in fields like education, employment, and earnings. Existing literature shows that in the US and UK labor market, disabled people who are also women or members of other minority groups encounter dual discrimination in their workplace experiences (Jones, Latreille, & Sloane, 2006; Randolph, 2005). Data from the Income and Program Participation Survey from 2004, in the United States, indicate that approximately 10% of the observed wage differential for men and 20% for women is potentially attributed to disability-related discrimination (Baldwin & Choe, 2014). In Australia, compared to their male counterparts, female employees with disabilities are also more negatively susceptible to precarity of work and unemployment (Oguzoglu, 2016). Even when disabled women have better educational backgrounds, they have lower employment and earnings than their male colleagues. The disturbing evidence is that gender employment and earnings gaps continued to expand even after interventions such as vocational rehabilitation services had been launched in the United States (Mwachofi, 2009). Situations in developing countries remain unfavorable as well. For instance, in South Africa disability intersects with gender as well as race to disadvantage women in education, employment and income; among disadvantaged people in South Africa, black disabled women are the most disadvantaged (Moodley & Graham, 2015).

In China, according to the latest official statistics, there are 85,020,000 disabled people (approximately 6.21% of the total population; see China Disabled Persons' Federation, 2012). Among them, 17,040,000 are of working-age—aged 16 to 60 for males and 16 to

50 for females—while 9,524,000 (55.9%) are currently employed (The Central People's Government of the PRC, 2019) There exists statistically significant gender differences in employment among people with disabilities. Yet, this is an under-researched issue. A few exploratory studies show that men with disabilities encounter less discrimination than their female counterparts in the job-seeking process and have better career development prospects. For example, in both urban and rural areas, the employment rate of disabled men is higher than that of disabled women (Chen, 2018). The number of child births is negatively related to the employment rate and quality of employment of disabled women, while it barely affects the employment opportunities of disabled men (Chen, 2019). Also, educational attainment has positive effects on the probability of choosing employment for the disabled, especially for the female disabled (Xing & Wang, 2016), while household income and being married show weaker relationships with employment among disabled women than men (Wang & Li, 2018).

Although the discriminations and disadvantages encountered by disabled women in the workforce have been documented in detail, knowledge of these women's coping strategies is insufficient. Much existing literature examines participation in workplace-based disability management programs and the strategy of 'going the extra mile.' However, disability management interventions are mostly accessed by people who work in large companies that have enough resources to establish a disability management system and provide health care services (Jones, Tanigawa, & Weiss, 2003; Pomaki, Franche, Murray, Khushrushahi, & Lampinen, 2012). Likewise, the approach of earning respectability by working extra hard and performing at a higher standard may be applicable only to women with higher-paying and management-level government jobs (Moloney et al., 2019).

How women with disabilities deal with the challenges and figure out strategies to increase their life chances remain poorly understood. In addition, most studies focus on the experiences of disabled people who work in traditional, face-to-face settings. Although statistics indicate that there exists a digital divide between people with and without disabilities in Internet access and use in both the United States and many European countries (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006; Scholz, Yalcin, & Priestley, 2017), more and more technologies and platforms are emerging that enable disabled people to benefit from the online access and foster their participation in social and economic life (Domingo, 2012). An example of this in China is the rapid development of information communication technologies, which allows disabled people to take advantage of the wave of 'Internet + disability' and transform themselves into new self-enterprising subjects (Lin, Zhang, & Yang, 2019). People with disabilities use popular social media platforms to better satisfy their information needs with respect to work, living services, leisure, entertainment, etc. (Wang, Wu, Yuan, Xiong, &

Liu, 2017). The disabled even use the Internet to create active constituencies and develop online activism to empower the disabled population (Qu & Watson, 2019). However, studies also show that policy support for the development of information accessibility for disabled people is still insufficient, which worsens the digital divide and employment inequalities for people with disabilities. This is especially true in less-developed ethnic areas (Gao & Fan, 2018; He, 2018).

In view of this, our study contributes to understanding of the field in two ways. First, given that disabled people experience multiple forms of discrimination and that disability and gender intersect to bring about even more negative outcomes for women in China (Dauncey, 2013; Kohrman, 2005), our study enriches the understanding of how disabled women counter stereotypes and cope with the adversity in the workplace and in their social lives. Second, by presenting the experiences of five disabled women in the cyber workforce, this article explores how the Internet economy facilitates economic and social inclusion of disabled women. We also discuss how cyber work serves as both an opportunity as well as a challenge for disabled women.

3. Profiles of the Research Participants and Research Methods

In this study, we take five disabled women as case-studies. All these women use social media as tools and/or platforms to work in different professions such as e-commerce service provider, salesperson, editor and vlogger. Their age ranges from 23 to 51 years old and their annual income ranges from 30,000 to 250,000 RMB (4,200 to 35,000 USD). Four of them grew up in small towns and now live in bigger cities with husbands or by themselves, only one girl who grew up in Guangzhou, a metropolitan city in south China, never experienced migration. One woman has a college degree, one finished six years of education in a vocational school for the blind, two women only received four to five years of school education (which equals a fifth-grade education), and one had never been to school but was homeschooled by her parents. They have different levels of physical impairments since birth or due to disease. One woman is married and has a 3-year-old daughter. One is married without children. The other three are unmarried and without children.

Finding participants for this study was not easy since many disabled women don't like to talk about their disabilities. The third author of this study is a former volunteer at a non-profit organization for people with disabilities and managed to find the participants by snowball sampling. The principle of choosing participants was to maximize the variation of the participants in terms of their family background (from a rural or an urban area), education (with or without a higher education degree), profession, marital status, level of physical impairments. The diversity may provide a rich, contextualized under-

standing of the changing nature of disabled women's lives given the new availability to Internet. It is not our goal to generalize their experiences but rather to help the reader understand the significance of their experiences and what makes them worthy of study (Seawright, Jason, & Gerring, 2008)

Most of the interviews were undertaken using social media. Besides online chat, two women also agreed to be interviewed face to face. They were all asked about experiences of growing up, work, choices in relationships, daily life, needs and expectations. We also collected and analyzed their vlogs, posts, media interviews, and comments from their followers. How these women perceive and how they interpret their own perception is the focus of our analysis of the intensive qualitative data.

All names in this article are pseudonyms. Even though one of the participants, Nana (pseudonym), is a popular vlogger known widely as the "brittle bone lady," she would still like to share her stories with even broader audiences. Findings and discussions of the present research were sent to all participants for their feedback, and we obtained their consent to publish it in English.

4. Seizing Opportunities in the Cyber Workforce and Networking: Social Media as a Disguise

All five women had work experience before they joined in the cyber workforce. However, they all complained about being treated unfairly in work arrangements and salaries compared to other colleagues. In the words of one of the participants, social media gives them opportunities to be "normal" (*zhengchang*) in the workforce. Since the 1990s that state propaganda has been encouraging disabled people to become socially and economically productive 'able-bodied people' (*jianquanren*), and the latter still constantly need to deal with stigma regarding disability (Dauncey, 2013). In this context, social media serves as a cover for these women to conceal their disabilities in order to better sustain themselves in the job market online.

25-year-old Nana is a wheelchair user because of brittle bone disease. She used to be an after-sales service provider who could work from home. However, she did not like this job because it was "boring and with little payment." With the developing of social media, she grabbed the opportunity and became a popular vlogger. In her vlogs, she is known as a brave and hilarious "brittle bone lady" by her followers.

51-years-old Lily is a WeChat agent for Chinese herbs. It is worth noting that Weishang, WeChat's online shopping platform used to attract potential customers (Ng, Huang, & Liu, 2016), is a noticeable example of freelance work popular among disabled women. In 2017, active users of WeChat reached 30 million; the WeChat-driven information consumption accounts for 4.7% of China's total information consumption, which ushers a new era of the digital economy (CAICT, 2018). Before joining Weishang, Lily has tried many business ideas such

as a beauty shop, bridal boutique and an online shop selling rare coins. Eventually she built her own WeChat business to sell Chinese herbs. However, the business is not very promising because of its low entry barrier and high competition. Lily insists she is not "using disability" to attract customers. "People won't patronize your business only because you are disabled. On the contrary, they may doubt your professionalism," she said. 23-years-old SS (abbreviation of the nick name Second Sister, a common nickname in China) is an editor of a website. She never discloses her disability to her colleagues because of similar considerations. Social media becomes a viable platform to cover their disabilities.

The other two participants use different strategies both to cover and to disclose their disabilities via social media under different circumstances. 31-year-old Kitty has never left the wheelchair since she was five years old because of infantile paralysis. She never went to school. When she was a little girl she worked in her mom's grocery store. At age 26, she left her home in the countryside and moved to Shenzhen. In Shenzhen, Kitty lives alone but does not reject help from neighbors and volunteers from non-governmental organizations. In front of these people she discloses her disability, and social media facilitates their interactions. For example, every time she receives help from her neighbors, she updates her WeChat moments (*pengyou quan*, which literally translates to 'friends' circle') to express her gratitude. All these neighbors are her WeChat friends, thus they can read her posts and keep interacting with her online. She also contacts NGOs by email or phone calls, inquiring about the services or benefits she could get. Sometimes she even participates as an active representative of disabled people and appears in media reports. Kitty states:

> I don't hide myself [in these cases], and I feel proud of being a capable woman. When other women in wheelchairs know what I'm able to do, they are encouraged to reach out and even live by themselves as well.

However, Kitty never discloses her disability when she works online selling cosmetics and skin care products. In the interview, she explains her consideration: "My customers don't have to know my situation [with disability], otherwise they probably think I am selling my 'miserableness,' instead of cosmetics. I don't like that and I don't need it."

Besides working as an online salesperson, Kitty has another part-time job—providing an "emotional companion [through] live chat services [*qingganpeiliao*]." Her colleagues include housewives, college students, and some other disabled people. Providers of this service are mostly women. They use voice call or video call in social media to provide "emotional companionship" to their clients, most of whom are men. "Except pornographic and illegal information, we chat about everything," Kitty said. For example, she is not allowed to eat a banana in

front of the camera as such an activity is forbidden according to the work instructions. Nonetheless, she has certain ways to engage with the clients emotionally and let them fantasize that they are cared for by a "young and beautiful" woman. In this job, Kitty does not disclose her disability either. She understands that her "charm" is one of the key elements to attract and keep the clients.

27-year-old Xiaojia is a makeup advisor. In her vlog channel, besides sharing makeup skills, she also promotes some skin care products she represents. In her spare time, she is active in participating in welfare programs for the blind. Her husband is also an activist in this area. Both of them are visually impaired, but their 3-year-old daughter is a fully sighted girl. Soon after their daughter was enrolled in kindergarten, Xiaojia joined a WeChat group of mothers of children in her daughter's class. She interacted with them frequently but never mentioned anything related to her visual impairment. Regarding their offline interactions, in the first few times when Xiaojia picked up her daughter in the kindergarten, none of the other mothers found out about Xiaojia's blindness as she pretended to "look at" others' eyes and responded "normally." She also presented herself well with dedicate makeup and dresses. According to Xiaojia, by successfully pretending to be a "normal mom," she won the friendship of her peers. Only after Xiaojia was certain that other mothers had taken her as one of them, she posted an article online sharing her experience as a "blind mom." This news shocked the 'moms' circle' and won her more respect and trust from other parents. Later, Xiaojia even became the leader of the 'moms' circle' as well as one of the most influential parents in the kindergarten.

The participants' thoughts and actions imply that 'normalcy' remains the aspiration of disabled women when discrimination create barriers for them in both the workforce and their social lives. Only when they are convinced that their "special situation," in their own words, could be transformed into an asset and earn genuine respect from others in some cases, they would disclose their "secret." When they felt that the existing social rules might not adequately protect them from discrimination, social media worked as a cover for them to better situate themselves in the society. This may be a consequence of state propaganda encouraging disabled people to become "responsibilized disabled citizens" and "able-bodied people" (Dauncey, 2013, p. 137; see also Dauncey, 2012) since the 1990s, and that the market reforms once stimulated "the need and desire for welfare assistance" and "made such assistance embarrassing" (Kohrman, 2005, p. 165). The participants endeavor to achieve economic independence so as to distance themselves from the stigmatic negative connotation of disability status in popular discourse. It is also worth noticing that even when they choose to disclose their disability status, it is related to the creation of new narratives of disability experience, and not to identify with the "disabled crowd" for personal and social benefit as observed in previous research (Dauncey, 2013).

5. Empowerment of Disabled Women in the Cyber Workforce: Social Media as an Aid

Disabled women are among the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups in society. Their physical impairments and the disability discrimination they suffer hinder their access to resources necessary for improved livelihoods, exacerbating their vulnerability and social exclusion. Findings of this study suggest that Internet accessibility may help bridge the divide of disabled people and the mainstream society. The experiences of these participants demonstrate that the digital economy and the relevant cyber workforce can help to enhance the economic and social participation of disabled women. These women also try their best to get in, stay in and get on in this specific work environment.

5.1. Economic Inclusion: Financial Gain and Increased Life Chances

With the emergence of the Internet economy, disabled women have more options of employment. The present case studies suggest that flexible working arrangements are the key characteristic that makes the cyber workplace especially attractive to disabled people. Internet employment takes many forms, which includes full-time, part-time, flexible time employment, entrepreneurship, etc. It allows disabled women to choose the appropriate employment style according to their different capability and physical conditions. The option of working from home is another crucial reason why the participants prefer Internet employment. As for the economic activities taken by disabled women, some count as employment such as being an editor and in customer service. Others are better described as self-employment or freelancing like being a vlogger or an e-commerce store owner. All participants considered freelancing as being more attractive. According to them, they earn more and feel better as freelancers.

For instance, the trend of Weishang exerts significant impact on the life of the participants. Except SS, who works as an editor for a website, four of the participants have their own WeChat businesses. Lily sells Chinese herbs. Kitty is a WeChat agent for cosmetics and skin care products. After marrying her husband and settling down in Malaysia, Nana and her Malaysian husband also use social media platform to provide transnational e-commerce services. WeChat businesses has gradually become an important source of income for these women. Simultaneously, it increases their social participation and social impact. This is especially true for Xiaojia. Besides offering courses on image enhancement for disabled people, she has two other jobs. While working as an agent for cosmetics and skin care products, she also has a WeChat public account in which she uploads articles about knowledge of makeup, skin care, fashion trend, and even parenting skills. She updates this account every day and has gradually become a KOL (what they call in

marketing a key opinion leader). As her public account attracts more and more followers, Xiaojia makes use of this platform to promote the products that she represents and benefits from financially. Meanwhile, her activity on social media helps her to make a name for herself, which in turn facilitates her welfare program of offering courses for disabled people.

Besides WeChat businesses, the participants also actively explore other types of economic activities in cyberspace. Kitty's experience of providing "emotional companion live chat service" is a case in point. With the advantage of her attractive face and communication skills, Kitty earns 5,000 to 6,000 RMB (700 to 840 USD) every month from this channel. Coupled with the income she gains from WeChat business, she sustains herself quite well in Shenzhen.

While enjoying the freedom and flexibility of their economic activities in the cyber workforce, all the participants emphasize that they benefit most from the income and increased life chances brought by Internet employment. The capability to sustain themselves and to make financial decisions independently leads to a series of changes in the lives of disabled women. First, income from the Internet employment brings disabled women a sense of security. As they earn more, not only do they have greater capability to deal with risks, they also have more freedom to enjoy life. A post in Kitty's WeChat Moments illustrates this clearly:

> I work hard to earn money and to earn a life that I can buy whatever I want, go whenever I want, afford the medicine when I get sick, and invite my best friends to dinner….Self-sufficiency allows one to live a life with dignity.

Second, financial independence enables disabled women to live alone and achieve autonomy. Four of the five women have moved out of their parents' house and live independently. The exception, SS has also submitted the application of public rental housing herself and plans to "live a more convenient life." For these women, living alone has a symbolic meaning. It signifies that they are capable of taking care of themselves. They are trying their best to tear down the negative labels of incapability and 'being a burden' that often attaches to disabled people. The process of moving out of their parents' house also facilitates the building of self-confidence and autonomy. This echoes Dauncey's (2013) finding that by distancing themselves from the stereotypical "disabled crowd," some disabled people offer alternative narratives of disability, which in turn facilitate their self-empowerment.

Third, self-sufficiency makes it possible for disabled women to take more control of their love lives. 51-year-old Lily enjoys her single life. She doesn't consider marriage as a necessity. "I've prepared the money to go to the nursing home when I'm old," she said. With a good economic condition, she gains support from her family of her life choice. 31-year-old Kitty faces parental pressure

to get married, but she does not compromise. She insists on finding the right person. In the interview, she straightforwardly criticizes disabled women who get marry to find a caretaker as "indecisive," "incapable," and "unambitious." For 23-year-old SS marriage is still far away. She hasn't had any sexual experience. In the interview, SS admits frankly that her current concern is to find a sex partner. She has even planned to move out of her parents' house "so as to have more freedom to arrange [her] private life."

In public discourse, the image of disabled people that is often constructed is they are incapable and dependent (Nario-Redmond, Kemerling, & Silverman, 2019). Findings from these cases indicate that the income from Internet employment helps disabled women to fight such stereotypes. Financial independence not only allows them to support themselves, it also increases their control over their lives. For these women who are often marginalized and whose images are often derogatorily described, such progress is worthy of attention and recognition.

5.2. Social Inclusion: Boosting Self-Confidence and Finding Voice

While developing multiple ways to get in and get on in Internet employment, disabled women also acquire resources that facilitate further social inclusion. Participation in the cyber workforce expands their social network. Dealing with various kinds of people online motivates them further to examine their relationship with the society and their self-awareness. The experience of overcoming difficulties along the way makes them more tolerant and self-assured. For example, when working as a live streamer, Nana used to receive malicious feedback. In the interview, reflecting on this experience, she told us that the things that once hurt her remind her of the things she cares about. Such reflection furthers her self-awareness and self-confidence:

> I always wanted to live a decent life, and I used to think that having expensive and gorgeous things is the symbol of decency. Thus I once tried to save money to buy luxury goods and show off the things I have….Later, I realized that one will never be at ease if she can't appreciate herself and recognize the value of her life….The real decency is self-acceptance. It doesn't require anyone's approval or recognition.

In addition, cyberspace enables some disabled women to make their voices heard and influence others' lives. For instance, in her public account on WeChat, Xiaojia often uploads articles to help her followers understand more about the lives of people with disabilities. Through live streaming platforms and live chat services, Nana and Kitty provide comfort and hope to many people, which is also a way to enhance their social participation and contribution.

Both the self-sustainability and social inclusion resulting from Internet employment contribute to destigmatizing disabled women. To some extent, they also facilitate the demystification and de-stigmatization of this group of women.

6. Risks and Challenges Encountered by Disabled Women in the Cyber Workforce

When disabled women enter the labor market, they encounter many difficulties regardless of their occupation. Because of their physical challenges and the structural constraints, compared to other employees, they are more disadvantaged. Although Internet employment provides these women more opportunities for economic and social inclusion, it also brings them many risks and challenges. These five cases show that cyberbullying, harassment, insufficient skills and competitive edge are the major issues that bother disabled women in the cyber workplace.

The discomfort and pain brought by malicious speculation, prying gaze and even bullying are often increased as people find themselves in the diverse and less regulated social environment of cyberspace. For example, in the live streaming platform, Nana encounters attacks from at least five strangers every day:

> The moment they saw me sitting on a wheelchair and doing live streaming they started to insult me as Internet beggar. They don't care what I said. They just assume that I'm using my physical condition to do a begging scam.

According to Nana, her dignity was "seriously trampled on" because of such experience. Kitty's story is a bit different. When providing her "emotional companion live chat service," she never discloses her disability status to her male clients. She admits that concealing her physical condition helps to avoid the risk of losing clients. As Kitty admits, the live chat service targeting male clients unavoidably involves some emotional and sexual innuendos. A disabled female body is usually not a sexually attractive object to the ordinary male gaze (Solvang, 2007). Meanwhile, people with disabilities are often collectively imagined as defective (Garland-Thomson, 2005), rather than people who destabilize the conventional standard of normalcy. Therefore, it is difficult for disabled women to take advantage of their disability status in such a context. Given the risks of losing clients or being harassed, concealing their disability is an understandable strategic choice.

For disabled women who choose to join the cyber workforce as entrepreneurs, many of them are troubled by their insufficient business knowledge and skills resulting from their relatively low educational attainment and limited social experience. 51-year-old Lily is the eldest of the five participants. She did not continue her study after graduating from technical secondary school.

In the past 20 years, like many people who venture into in the market economy, with an 'opportunist' mindset, Lily keeps venturing on everything that seems profitable. Nonetheless, even though she could earn some money at first, most of her business ideas failed as more competitors appeared. "When you don't have a technical advantage or any competitive edge, it's very difficult to survive," she said.

Before working as a freelance lecturer and running her one-person WeChat business, Xiaojia used to have more than 30 employees when she first got her sales contract for the skin care product she represents. Many of these employees were also disabled women. However, even with the ambition to make a difference to the lives of disabled women, she encountered a serious loss of employees due to a lack of management skills and finally decided to disband the team.

The participants also mention other challenges they encounter in Internet employment. For example, there is inadequate legal protection and insurance coverage for disabled people when they participate in the cyber workforce. Compared to other employees, disabled women are more vulnerable to risks brought by cyberbullying, sexism, precarity of work, and unemployment. When institutional protection is insufficient, disabled women can only turn to their families for help and support. Some of them are unaware of their right to request accommodations in the workplace. Some women refrain from seeking extra support to avoid being negatively typecast. Therefore, many disabled women share the mindset that the only way to fare well and to maintain dignity is to earn as much money as possible. However, even though they are eager to fair well, their insufficient knowledge and skills often hinders their career development in the fast-changing and highly competitive cyber workplace.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Scholars point out that disability is both a sphere of existence and a socio-cultural formation (Deutsch & Nussbaum, 2000; Garland-Thomson, 2005). Disabled people also constantly re-define their identity in the light of different circumstances (Kohrman, 2005). For example, in China, some disabled people identify with the "disabled crowd" to gain social and personal benefit, some prefer distancing themselves from the same crowd and endeavoring to create alternative narratives of disability experience (Dauncey, 2013). In this study, we examine different experiences of disabled women and how these women actively increase their life chances in the developing market economy in China. Since the focus of our study is the economic and social inclusion of disabled women, the participants' thoughts and actions of re-imagining and re-defining the experience of disability are highlighted. The five cases studies demonstrate that due the influence of urbanization, migration, modern womanhood and especially the booming Internet economy, Chinese disabled women have more opportunities

to become independent financially, socially and ideologically. In the cyber workforce and in their relevant social lives, they act as qualified employees, entrepreneurs, family breadwinners, leaders of social groups, activists in welfare programs, as well as spokeswomen for disadvantaged people in media reports. Their life stories have significant meaning in facilitating our understanding of gender and disability in a fast-changing world.

It is worth noticing that some of the participants would not have achieved what they have today without the help of NGOs and relevant activities targeting people with disabilities. In social interaction and within the ordinary workforce where an ideological commitment to the social inclusion of disabled people is downplayed (Nario-Redmond et al., 2019), many of these women still try to disguise their disabilities so as to avoid discrimination and exclusion. Under such circumstance, social media can work as an irreplaceable tool that can blur the boundaries between 'normalcy' and 'specialness,' enabling disabled women to become equal players with others in many social activities. Simultaneously, we have to be cautious that the participants' experience of increased economic and social inclusion with the help of social media does not cause us to ignore the fact that more productive intervention programs offered by the government and quasi-governmental organizations for disabled people in China are needed. Future research may further examine how such intervention could be accessed by more disabled women and how the effectiveness of these programs could lower the possibility of exposing people's disability status and evoking social stigmas.

We also must admit that empowered by web accessibility, the women in this study are 'luckier' than many others who are disadvantaged because of their physical, socio-cultural and economic conditions. For example, the severity of participants' disabilities were such that they could rely on some adaptive hardware such as an alternative keyboard or a screen-reader to access the Internet. However, for people who suffer from severe disabilities such as muscle atrophy or spinal cord injuries, using a computer can be extremely difficult and prevent them from participating in today's digital society. Further studies are needed to explore the challenges faced by people with intellectual disabilities to determine how they might be aided to overcome the forces of social exclusion.

All five participants live in urban areas, three in the first-tier cities of Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. Geography significantly affects the experience of disability. For residents with a local *hukou* (a household registration record which officially identifies a person as a local resident) in these big cities in China, people with disabilities have access to social welfare which covers most of their medical and life expenses. Disabled people in big cities also benefit from better transportation, accommodation and support from volunteers and volunteer organizations. However, around 80% of disabled peo-

ple in China are rural residents (Kohrman, 2005, p. 24). Disabled people with a rural *hukou* often do not have the opportunity and capability to migrate and settle in big cities that offer a friendlier environment for people with disabilities. Due to an absence of enforcement mechanisms, the implementation of disability programs is also less effective in the rural settings. Disabled people in rural areas often lack the education, social status and political connections to pursue their rights and receive the assistance provided by government and institutions such as the China Disabled Persons' Federation (Kohrman, 2005). Therefore, further research is required to explore how Internet accessibility and the new opportunities provided by the Internet economy can be harnessed to expand the life chances of disabled people living in less favorable conditions.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Part IV.

Left Behind in Poverty

Article

Mothers Left without a Man: Poverty and Single Parenthood in China

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Abstract

Most single-parent families in China are headed by women, and single mothers represent one of the fastest-growing groups living in poverty. Yet few studies have examined this group. This article seeks to better understand how (and why) single mothers are disadvantaged in China. Based on in-depth interviews conducted in Zhuhai, Guangzhou Province, it demonstrates that single mothers are left behind in four respects: lower income and worse economic conditions, lower employment and career development opportunities, worse physical and mental health, and poorer interpersonal relationships and less chance of remarriage. The causes of these disadvantages include Chinese family beliefs, a culture of maternal sacrifice, the traditional division of labour between men and women and social stereotypes about single mothers. The article highlights the impacts of Chinese familism culture on single mothers and advocates incorporating a gender perspective into the agenda of family policy and other relevant social policies in China.

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Left Behind? Women's Status in Contemporary China" edited by Robert Walker (Beijing Normal University, China) and Jane Millar (University of Bath, UK).

1. Introduction

The UN's Sustainable Development Goals, which seek to eliminate extreme income poverty and halve all forms of poverty, has popularised the language of preventing people from 'being left behind.' China is a party to this UN initiative and has launched one of the most compelling poverty alleviation programs in the world. However, very little is known about the incidence and effect of poverty on women in China, especially single mothers.

This article seeks to fill this gap by exploring the issue of female poverty in China by examining single mothers. Single-parent households are increasingly common and have become a social concern in global contexts (Leung, 2016; Leung & Shek, 2015; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015). Single-parent households are more likely to be economically disadvantaged, and to fall below the poverty line, than two-parent households across countries (Christopher, 2005). As Freeman (2016, p. 675) explains, "the nuclear family remains the normative model, and single-parent-headed families continue to be

characterised in terms of 'deficits and disadvantages"' (see also Zartler, 2014).

Single mothers far outnumber single fathers in China: They represented 70% of single-parent households in 2010 (National Health and Family Planning Commission, 2014). Single mothers are much more likely to be unhappy than single fathers for both social and economic reasons (Kramer, Myhra, Zuiker, & Bauer, 2015; Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013).

Socially, single mothers are excluded from mainstream social relationships. According to public opinion polls, they are perceived negatively (Zartler, 2014). These perceptions can be partially explained by traditional Chinese culture and conceptions of marriage, which do not recognise or approve of divorce. Therefore, single mothers often have the idea of fulfilling their children by sacrificing themselves (Leung, 2017). The influence of traditional culture has contributed to single mothers in China becoming 'the poorest of the poor.'

Economically, single mothers have limited access to resources and public services. The need to care for chil-

dren restricts their employment opportunities, which makes it difficult for them to find jobs (Leung & Shek, 2015; Millar & Ridge, 2009). Therefore, families with a female head household with no husband are more likely to fall into poverty (Wang, 2002; Wang & Chu, 2009). According to the *Report on Living Conditions and Needs of Single Mothers in Ten Cities* (SWR), at least 25.6% of single-mother families living in China's first-tier cities are below the poverty line (CAMF, CWDF, & Vipshop Public Welfare, 2019). The SWR is based on a project that selected ten first-tier cities as sample cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Tianjin, Nanjing, Chengdu, Changsha, Shenyang, and Xi'an. A total of 1,206 questionnaires were collected, including 946 single mothers and 175 single fathers.

Studies on single mothers have focused on issues such as economic conditions, social network, mental health, and raising children (Brown & Moran, 1997; Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; Freeman, 2016; Millar & Ridge, 2009). Beyond these debates, single mothers have also received great attention from poverty researchers. Lower wages, lack of spousal support, and the burdens of raising children made single mothers specifically vulnerable (Brandy & Burroway, 2012; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015; Sorensen, 1994). Due to the intergenerational transmission of economic disadvantage and social status, their children are also more likely to live in poverty when they reach adulthood (Chant, 2007).

The development community characterises global poverty as having a female face (United Nations Development Programme, 1995). The available literature also supports the notion of the 'feminisation' of poverty. According to Pearce (1978), this notion has two levels of meaning: (1) The poor population is increasingly female and (2) the percentage of poor households headed by women is increasing. More recently, Chant (2007) has pointed out that the feminisation of poverty is characterised by a higher incidence of poverty, more severe and more permanent poverty among women, and single mothers facing a greater burden and higher obstacles to escaping poverty than men. The institutional culture of gender inequality leaves women few social resources with which to fight against poverty. As such, gender plays a staggering role in the income gap and poverty between single parents.

The concept of 'gender' first appeared in the international women's movement in the early 1970s. As a figure of gender theory, Ann Oakley (1972) pointed out in the book *Sex, Social Gender and Society* that gender division of labour is a social norm of intentional gender inequality caused by society. Gayle Rubin (1975) proposed the concept of 'gender system' as the root cause of women's subordination. She pointed out that the gender system is a patriarchal system based on male domination of women. This system restricts gender relations and controls the social and cultural life of human beings.

It is generally believed that gender theory includes three basic contents: gender differences, gender roles and the gender system (Sun, 2013). On the basis of affirming gender differences, the gender system reveals a hierarchy and power relationship between men and women constructed by socio-cultural and social relationships. In gender culture, the concept of women is always considered negative and inferior to men. In gender relations, women are in fact subordinate and oppressed in all aspects. Following the gender roles approach, individuals have been disciplined by traditional gender culture since birth, and are shaped by thinking and behaviour, and then develop into 'men' and 'women' that meet social requirements. Based on the needs of this research, in order to incorporate gender theory into China studies, the author selected the gender system and gender roles as two levels to build the analysis framework.

The number of single-parent families headed by mothers is growing fast in China, and this group is increasing under the poverty line. Nevertheless, studies of single mothers in poverty remain scarce. Current studies have neglected to analyse the in-depth causes of single mothers' vulnerability and neglected to take a gendered perspective to explore the groups left behind in poverty. Based on fieldwork conducted in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, from a gender perspective, this article seeks to better understand how (and why) single mothers are disadvantaged. To the best of my knowledge, this study is the first to investigate the effect of China's familism culture on single-mother poverty.

2. Poor Single Mothers and Lone Parenthood in China

Since the reform and opening up in 1978, China has undergone significant changes in patterns of marriage, birth, migration and family development that challenge traditional family functions and responsibilities. For instance, families now tend to be smaller, and the family form is diversified. Divorce is the main factor in the production of single-parent families. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the divorce rate has been on the rise since 2000, nearly doubling between 2009 (2.47 million) and 2018 (4.46 million). The number of single mothers in China is estimated to reach nearly 20 million in 2020 (Ministry of Civil Affairs, 2018; National Health and Family Planning Commission, 2014).

In general, China's poverty reduction policy lacks gender sensitivity, attention to the needs of poor women, and a focus on the needs of single mothers. Women's federations and non-governmental women's organisations are driving attention to women's poverty alleviation. These organisations participate in national poverty alleviation and development work, coordinate and integrate resources with government departments, and promote the introduction of relevant policies. They provide preferential services such as entrepreneurship, education and training, credit funds, and information services to help poor women escape from poverty (Ke, 2016).

However, due to the lack of a gender perspective in social policy, it is challenging to incorporate the sur-

vival and development issues of single mothers into the decision-making process; therefore, social and public policies do not adequately support their needs or those of their families (Li, 2007). At the same time, China's various family-related social policies are decentralised and fragmented. The government mostly provides family support in the form of subsidies, comprehensive and systematic policy support such as finance, taxation, public services, and social support is lacking. Government subsidies often fail to meet the needs of single-parent families.

In addition, the interests of single-parent families headed by women are not fully reflected and maintained in current marriage laws. Although the government has introduced many supporting provisions to guarantee equal rights to husband and wife, the lack of enforcement has made it difficult for many single mothers to get maintenance fees in full and on time.

In summary, since social policies in China have not been formulated with single mothers in mind, this growing and overlooked segment of society largely has to solve its problems on its own. This article examines how (and why) single mothers are disadvantaged and suggests operational policy implications to help improve their situation.

3. Research Method

This article reports the results of a qualitative study based on fieldwork in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province. Located on the western bank of the prosperous Pearl River Delta, Zhuhai is one of the five special economic zones that pioneered China's economic reforms. The city's GDP per capita was one of the highest in the country in 2017, at US$22,100 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2018). Meanwhile, there are also some social problems in Zhuhai, such as a large floating population, a huge gap between the rich and the poor, and the lack of protection of women's rights. It can be seen as a microcosm of fast-growing China. Therefore, the Zhuhai case would contribute to the existing scholarship on female poverty in China.

I conducted fieldwork from May to July 2019 as part of a larger program on low-income single mothers who participated in a community-based antipoverty program in Xiangzhou district of Zhuhai, the "Women's Development Plan." The program seeks to strengthen the communication between single mothers and the government through various activities and provides a social support platform for single-mother families. It is run by a non-profit organisation named Fulian, which is under the auspices of the Municipal Women's Federation. The incomes of the single mothers who received support were all below the poverty line and each faced various problems; therefore, the samples were strongly consistent with the goals of this study.

Three types of interviewees were selected for this study. Each interview was one to two hours in length. In order to learn more about the group of single mothers from different aspects, in addition to single mothers, we interviewed government staff related to the "Women's Development Plan" and some community residents.

The first and most critical type of interviewees is single mothers (n = 42, coded M) who live with at least one child and are responsible for their upbringing. The author conducted one-to-one semi-structured interviews with these respondents, who are all participants of the "Women's Development Plan." More than half (52.4%) of the mothers interviewed were aged 40 to 49, 33.3% were aged 50 to 59, and 14.3% were aged 30 to 39. They had generally low levels of education: 38.3% had completed junior high school, while only 14.3% had a college education or above. Nearly two-thirds were divorced, nearly one-third were widows and a small number had never married. Almost equal proportions of the single mothers interviewed had one child (52.4%) and two children (47.6%). More than four-fifths (85.7%) lived alone with their children, yet most also support elderly family members: 33.3% help one older person, and 28.6% assist two elderly persons.

The second type of interviewees were staff members (n = 8, coded S) in the district government, the Municipal Women's Federation and communities. Two group interviews were conducted to discuss the living conditions of poor single mothers and the reasons why they were left behind in the socioeconomic sense compared with single fathers. Third, we interviewed ordinary residents of Xiangzhou district (n = 22, coded R) to compare general public perceptions of single mothers versus single fathers.

4. Findings: How Single Mothers Are Disadvantaged

Changes in marital status introduce multiple pressures on single mothers that make them extremely likely to fall into poverty. Most of the single mothers, government officials, community workers, and residents interviewed for this study reported that single mothers are more vulnerable than single fathers, and therefore face multiple risks. As a qualitative study, the author hand-coded firsthand interview notes obtained from fieldwork. The in-depth interviews revealed that single mothers are left behind in terms of income and economic conditions, employment and career development, physical and mental health, and interpersonal relationships and chances of remarriage.

4.1. Income and Economic Conditions

For families with parenting responsibilities, changing from dual to single parenting destroys the structure of the family's 'basic triangle.' This imbalance in family structure impairs economic resources, deteriorating the financial condition of single mothers and increasing the pressures associated with raising children (Cooper, Mclanahan, Meadows, & Gunn, 2009).

Our fieldwork revealed that single mothers generally face economic pressures, and their main sources of income are wages and social assistance. Of the single mothers interviewed, in 2019, annual incomes were US$2,845–4,267 for 33.3% of the sample, US$4,267–5,689 for 38.1%, and over US$5,689 for 19%. In contrast, the average annual income in Zhuhai was US$11,522 in 2017 (Zhuhai Human Resources and Social Security Department, 2018). Annual expenditures of single-mother families are as high as 33.3% of more than US$5,689. Most of the single mothers interviewed said the family's income was "not enough to make ends meet," and only a small portion of them said that "they were able to live within their means."

Not coincidentally, according to the SWR, more than 60% of single mothers in first-tier cities have a monthly income of less than 4,000 Yuan (CAMF et al., 2019). Of the single mothers who participated in the survey, the proportion of them who own property was 39.9%, which was 23.4% lower than the percentage for single fathers.

On average, single mothers spend about half of their total income on childcare each month. This is not only a consequence of the economic pressures they face; it also reflects single mothers' hopes for their children's future and a certain degree of compensation mentality for the child:

> I have no money left every month. At the time of the divorce, he [the ex-husband] said that he would not pay for living expenses, and a child could not spend too much money. Because he is a native of Zhuhai, I don't even have a house after the divorce. My daughter is not guaranteed to live with me. Life is too hard. (M4, 27 May 2019)

> In China, some women are used to relying on men financially, but over time, the pressure on their husbands will be more significant. If they divorce, the wife will face great difficulty in the economy. But men have little influence because they are in charge of making money. (S3, 20 June 2019)

> One of my aunts is a single mother. She has three children. She doesn't have a fixed job and income after the divorce and lived on odd jobs. Life is hard. In order to take care of the children, she never married again. Her ex-husband, however, was soon reunited after the divorce, and his work and life seemed largely untouched. The older generation of single mothers that I know basically had very low incomes. (R2, 15 July 2019)

There is thus a growing consensus that single mothers face severe economic pressures compared with single fathers. In addition to worrying impoverishment, the country's weak social protection system exposes single mothers and children to risks.

4.2. Employment and Career Development

It is widely agreed both in literature and in my interviews that single mothers are disadvantaged in the job market. In addition to the gap in occupational income, single mothers also lag behind in job acquisition and career development.

Single mothers are more vulnerable to employment discrimination during the job search process due to their physical limitations and family responsibilities. Most of the single mothers interviewed were temporarily unemployed (33.3%) or unemployed (14.3%), and more than half felt that job hunting was difficult. Meanwhile, single mothers tend to focus on their children, making them less likely to be promoted, while single fathers may be more inclined to focus on developing their career:

> I had a good job before I was sick, but I had to give it up to take care of my children. In contrast, it's easier for single fathers to make more money than us. (M6, 29 May 2019)

> It is easier for a single father to find a job than a single mother. Even if you are doing physical work, men are better than women, and men are given priority when looking for a job. Men make more money. (M18, 21 June 2019).

Because mothers are the primary family caregivers, work-family conflicts are bound to affect their career development. Few single mothers have the opportunity to combine work and family; their happiness and living standards are greatly reduced by their weak economic conditions and living needs.

Furthermore, single mothers must often balance the conflicting roles and norms of employees and mothers. The interviewees explained that in their role as employees, single mothers need to comply with the rules and regulations of the work unit, complete the tasks, and accept unwritten constraints from colleagues and other subjects. Yet in their role as mothers, they must take care of their children's daily diet and spend time with them. The competing demands for their attention affect the quality of both their work and parenting. However, since single fathers often outsource childcare responsibilities to other family members, their role conflicts are less obvious:

> I get up at four every morning, do housework, and take care of two children. After sending my daughter to school, I go to work and take my younger son with me because no one can take care of him at home. I feel that my boss is not satisfied. Single fathers are different. Children have other relatives to help bring them up, and men go to make money. (M9, 10 June 2019)

> Compared with men, women have no advantage in their career. In order to maintain career competitive-

ness, single mothers are bound to invest more energy. But they also have to bear the housework and take care of their children, which is very difficult to balance. (R16, 18 July 2019)

In addition to lagging behind in career development, it is also difficult for single mothers to achieve a balance between work and family. The conflict between parenting and career development is a big challenge for both working and non-working single mothers.

4.3. Physical and Mental Health

The single mothers I interviewed who have lived under pressure for a long time are facing physical and mental health problems. Over two-thirds (67%) of the single mothers in the sample reported that they are in poor physical health and 19% think they are in ordinary health. Those with poor health often suffer from chronic diseases such as hypertension and diabetes, which require expensive long-term medication. The remaining 14% thought they were in good health, but still expressed concerns about their physical condition:

> I don't have a big problem with my body now. But if I get sick, it will be miserable. With so little income, it is difficult to maintain a basic life. If I am still ill, how can I even live? (M29, 1 July 2019)

> Single mothers who have given birth should not be overworked for a certain period of time. However, most men are still at the golden age of work after a divorce, which has little effect on them. Compared with single fathers, single mothers have physical disadvantages. (S1, 19 June 2019)

Single fathers are generally in better physical health than single mothers in the same age group, and typically have more valuable human capital, which confers advantages in other aspects, leading to multiple gender differences (Sung & Sun, 2018).

In addition to the problems associated with poverty and physical health, many single mothers suffer from mental health problems (Brown & Moran, 1997). According to the fieldwork conducted for this study, 80.9% of single mothers mentioned that the current psychological pressure on them was high.

This pressure is mainly derived from three areas. First, divorce and the death of a husband have an enormous impact on single mothers, coupled with the exhausting demands of day-to-day life, at work and with their children. Second, feeling guilty about the impact of single parenthood on their children and worrying about their growth often triggers self-blame and anxiety. According to the SWR, 90.6% of single mothers feel that they owe a debt to their children, particularly for failing to provide a complete family (46.0%; CAMF et al., 2019). Interviewees recognised that single-parent fami-

lies have additional negative effects on children. For instance, 25.5% of the single mothers interviewed for this study said that the social environment is "unfriendly" to single-parent families. The third pressure comes from society. The perception and acceptance of single mothers within the community greatly affect the psychological status of single mothers in China. According to the SWR, 61.9% of respondents believe society has a low acceptance of single mothers (CAMF et al., 2019).

Worse still, single mothers have a high probability of feeling inferior and depressed due to their life experiences. Many single mothers' marital experiences seriously affect their desire for social interaction; they often confine themselves to a narrow social circle (Wang & Chu, 2009):

> Three of our project assistance objects have serious psychological problems. Most of the others are relatively closed, do not participate in social activities, and do not communicate with others. The problems are sensitivity, inferiority, resistance, and so on. There are few single mothers in normal single-parent status. One of them always feels that people around her are targeting her. She felt helpless and didn't know what to do. (S2, 20 June 2019)

In short, single mothers are both physically and psychologically disadvantaged. Yet the government's social protection system largely overlooks these problems.

4.4. Interpersonal Relationships and Chances of Remarriage

The purpose of interpersonal communication is to obtain additional social capital or to consolidate one's existing social capital. However, changes in family structure have a particular impact on social capital. The situation of single-parent families (and particularly with single mothers) will directly or indirectly encourage them to reduce their interactions with the outside world. Furthermore, negative social stereotypes and social exclusion affect single mothers' social integration (Wang & Guo, 2010).

According to the SWR, due to economic pressure and the burden of being the primary family caregiver, 34.3% of the respondents believe that being a single mother harmed their social interactions (CAMF et al., 2019). Single mothers are also affected by stigma and social exclusion to a certain extent, and unfriendly speech and behaviour hinder their social integration. By contrast, single fathers' social capital is less affected by changes in the family structure, and these modifications do not reduce their interpersonal relationships due to the more widespread acceptance of social networks for single fathers:

> There were some friends before the divorce. But when you are divorced, everyone feels that you are poor, and cut off contact with you gradually.

Society is very realistic, so I don't bother others when I encounter problems. And my life circle is getting smaller and smaller. But my ex-husband's life has not changed; he still has a bunch of friends. (M13, 12 June 2019)

Gender differences also exist in remarriage: Single mothers are less likely to remarry in urban China. Single fathers are more inclined to re-establish families, but most single mothers give negative answers. The interviews revealed that when contemplating remarriage, single mothers need to consider the feelings of their children, the acceptance of the remarriage market, the attitude of significant others and their objective conditions. Single fathers consider fewer factors and therefore have higher remarriage rates.

According to the SWR, among the single mothers surveyed, more than 70% claimed that they never had love partners after becoming single (CAMF et al., 2019). The underlying reason is that single mothers' dual identity as 'self' and 'mother' raises the stakes for remarriage requirements. In a single mother's mind, the ideal marriage partner should first meet their expectations, and then be kind to her child; both are indispensable. The pursuit of a perfect marriage and the reality of being excluded from the marriage market have made it difficult for single mothers to marry, forcing many single mothers to 'actively' choose singlehood:

Men will remarry, but not necessarily women. And the child is too young, how can I think about remarriage? Besides, I have to consider a lot of things if I choose to remarry. First, am I suitable for him? Second, will he be kind to my child? I don't have any confidence in any man now, wanting to bring up my children. (M14, 18 June 2019)

Single fathers can find young ones, but single mothers can only find old ones, or many lose faith in marriage and love and never marry again. (R4, 15 July 2019)

On the one hand, a single father's interpersonal communication will not change because of his single-parent status, while a single mother will actively or passively reduce her social interactions, thus decreasing her accumulation of social capital and weakening her social support network. On the other hand, the remarriage market 'prefers' single fathers; single mothers are excluded because of their self/mother dual status. Exclusion from the remarriage market is one of the main reasons for the vulnerability of single mothers, which increases their family poverty.

5. Discussion: A Gender Perspective

As analysed above, gender inequality contributes significantly to the disadvantage of single mothers. This article explores the deeper reasons why single-mother families are more likely to fall into poverty from the perspective of the gender system and gender roles.

5.1. Gender System: Chinese Family Beliefs and Maternal Sacrifice Culture

A complete social gender system has developed over time that is closely related to a country's economic and political system and plays an essential role in maintaining social stability. China's gender system is based on the notion that males are superior to females (*nan zun nv bei*) and has constructed a mainstream discourse system in a patriarchal society. This system lays the cultural foundation for the vulnerability of single mothers. Single mothers have a relatively low social status within this system, and they tend to believe that family is at the core of life and follow the cultural norms of subordination and sacrifice.

Chinese family beliefs constitute the laws underlying the operation of society as a whole. Yang (2006, p. 300) defined familism as "a person's complex system of social attitudes toward their family, family members, and family-related affairs." Family obligations, family reputation, maintenance of social relationships, and respect for seniors and parents are foundational elements of Chinese collective familism (King & Bond, 1985; Leung, 2017).

Under patriarchal ethics, the man has decision-making authority in a family; thus, family beliefs have particular implications for single mothers. Women's low social and family status gives them fewer resources in terms of education, human capital, and social capital than men, which limits their development prospects. Interviewees confirmed that they did not receive a fair distribution of family resources during their childhood, which resulted in a limited education and further difficulties in career development, forming a vicious circle of poverty.

Under the impact of familism, Chinese parents focus on family solidarity and family pride (Yeh & Yang, 1997). Although it has entered modern society, divorce in China is still not acceptable to some parents. What's more, the older generation of parents thought that divorce would shame the family. Therefore, sometimes divorced single mothers face not only social exclusion but also family exclusion. In reality, some women may maintain an unhappy marriage in order to keep their family complete.

Female subordination and the culture of maternal sacrifice are another integral part of the Chinese gender system. In Chinese culture, parenthood implies undertaking "responsibility for the children" and "making a sacrifice for the benefit of the children" (Lam, 2005). This sacrifice requires parents to abandon their own personal needs and interests for the sake of their children. They consider their children's developmental needs as more important than their own needs (Leung, 2017).

Moreover, the gender system based on the assumption that males are superior to females is more evident

in the family domain, where women occupy subordinate positions. Especially in low-income families, women reduce their own living needs to the lowest level and have the attribute of 'sacrifice,' that is, 'self-poverty' (Wang, 2018). In single-mother families, the dependents and objects of sacrifice for single mothers shift from husbands to children, giving priority to the needs of the children. They invest lots of time, money, energy, and emotions in parenting, and even make extreme self-sacrifices (Chant, 2009; Elliott et al., 2015). Hence, based on the altruism and submissive norms of women under the gender system, single mothers subordinate their own needs to the needs of their children and are even willing to sacrifice their career development and emotional and physical health.

Furthermore, influenced by Chinese traditional culture, single mothers tend to form self-role cognition of family care as a duty. As a result of this role cognition, single mothers spend most of their time caring for their family and accompanying their children, which severely affects their career development and social interactions, thus increasing the probability of falling into extreme poverty.

Therefore, single mothers and single fathers have different self-role orientations and cognitions. Single mothers are responsible for family care, while single fathers are career-oriented, which results in differences in personal development. Because of this, single mothers are always lagging behind.

5.2. Gender Roles: Social Division of Labour and Social Stereotypes

Gender roles refer to the fact that different genders have different role norms in social culture, and both men and women are virtually constrained and restricted by role norms. The gender roles of single fathers and single mothers are quite different. Single mothers are often left behind in their gender roles in two ways. First, the fixed division of labour between a men-dominated 'outside' and a women-dominated 'inside' (*nan zhu wai nv zhu nei*) reduces the importance of single mothers' social role. Second, social stereotypes and negative public opinion prevent single mothers from integrating into society.

The family role model—as in the traditional saying—of "men farming and women weaving" (*nan geng nv zhi*) laid the foundation of Chinese traditional culture, and the social division of labour still has a significant influence in modern society. Gender biases tend to suggest that women should devote more time to their families. Public opinion holds that they should sacrifice their career to take care of their families and cannot devote themselves to their jobs (Huo & Lin, 2015).

The social division of labour along gender lines has brought employment discrimination and other problems to single mothers. Employers' biased impressions of single mothers have led them to unemployment and unstable employment, which has increased their chances of falling into poverty. However, it is socially acceptable for single fathers to prioritise their career, which further increases the gender gap.

In addition, gender stereotypes of single mothers are widespread. They are considered to be fragile, difficult to get along with, encumbered by children, and so on. Social stereotypes make it more difficult for them to integrate into society, which leads to disparate treatment for single mothers. To a large extent, this stigmatisation harms public opinion, social relations, career development and remarriage.

6. Conclusion

This study has explored the issue of female poverty in China by examining single-mother households. Based on the investigations conducted in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, we found that single mothers are left behind in the fields of income and economic conditions, employment and career development, physical and mental health, as well as interpersonal relationships and chances of remarriage. It is important to reiterate that we have discussed the deeper reasons why single-mother families are more likely to fall into poverty from the perspective of gender systems and gender roles.

The research makes three main contributions. First, it enriches our knowledge on the living conditions of poor single mothers in China as well as our understanding of how and why single mothers are disadvantaged. Second, it employed two particular factors to explain the poor condition of single mothers—traditional Chinese family beliefs and maternal sacrifice culture. Third, it draws more attention to the Chinese government and society to the single-mother group.

The article highlights the limitations of current social policies that fail to acknowledge the impact of the country's familism culture and the public pressures affecting single mothers. These findings have at least three important policy implications. First, great importance should be given to women's rights and gender equality in order to eliminate gender and identity discrimination. Second, the current family-based childcare model should be reconsidered: Multiple forms of childcare should be developed to alleviate the conflict between single mothers' work and family responsibilities and enable them to achieve better professional development. Third, in order to fight for women's rights and gender equality, it is exceptionally urgent to incorporate a gender perspective into the agenda of family policy and other relevant social policies. Economic assistance and psychological help should be integral to social programs to help single-mother families escape poverty and obtain fairer development opportunities.

The study suffers from two main limitations. First, due to social stereotypes, single mothers are a relatively hidden group, partly because they are usually reluctant to disclose their single-parent status. The sample selected for this survey is more concentrated on single

mothers who have already expressed an urgent need for social support. This will affect the representativeness of the sample to a certain extent. Second, while the overall situation of single-father households is better than that of single mothers, some single fathers are less economically secure and thus also require social attention, support and services.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Perceiving and Deflecting Everyday Poverty-Related Shame: Evidence from 35 Female Marriage Migrants in Rural China

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Abstract

This research examines how poverty is perceived and deflected by a group of female cross-provincial marriage migrants in contemporary rural China. It presents accounts of poverty-related shame in everyday village life. Known as migrant wives, respondents in this research have experienced both absolute and relative poverty over the course of their lives. The personal lament of insufficiency and the social discourse of poverty respectively underpin internal and external poverty-related shame. Correspondingly, migrant wives employ strategies of recounting misery and redefining identity to normalise their poverty and their stigmatised social image, hoping to mitigate the psychological and social impacts of shame. This research contributes an empirical analysis to our understanding about the origin, manifestation, and impact of poverty-related shame, which is usually a neglected consideration in poverty studies. It also sheds light on the gender-specified risks, burdens, and social expectation that affect migrant wives' perception and experience of poverty.

Keywords

marriage migration; migrant wives; poverty; poverty-related shame; rural China

1. Introduction

As a number of multi-sited poverty studies indicate, a universal and immutable link between poverty and shame has long existed in human society (Chase & Bantebya-Kyomuhendo, 2014; Walker, 2014; Walker et al., 2013). Poverty-related shame is externally imposed by the society, via individuals and through social institutions, and is further internalised as a powerful adverse emotion about insufficiency, hardship, degradation, and social exclusion. This definition highlights the intricate nature of poverty-related shame as a psychological and social process that involves multiple determinants at both individual and social levels. As Lister (2013) suggests, pain is "all too often associated with poverty: disrespect, humiliation and an assault on dignity and self-esteem; shame and stigma; and also powerlessness, lack of voice, and denial of full human rights and diminished citizenship." Discussion on shame as a negativity of poverty

is both theoretically and practically significant, since it bridges understanding of how poverty challenges social norm and personal well-being by looking into the interaction of multi-level agencies. Following this path, the research adopts an original angle of vision to examine how poverty-related shame is perceived and deflected in an everyday context.

This article presents an account of poverty-related shame in contemporary rural China. It focuses on the phenomenon of cross-provincial marriage migration in the 40 years after the country's reform and opening-up, when more than ten million rural residents, mostly female, left their natal villages and settled down in new communities through distant, inter-provincial marriage (Fan & Huang, 1998; He & Gober, 2003). The migration demonstrates a clear-cut geographic pattern: Economically advanced areas in East China are common destinations of the population influx (Liang & Chen, 2004). Consequently, cross-provincial marriage migra-

tion is usually interpreted as an economically motivated phenomenon and an individualised effort of poverty alleviation (Bossen, 2007; Fan, 1996, 1999). As Bossen (2007) points out, female marriage migrants are subject to gender-specified risks and restrictions on their social mobility in particular: Marriage is perhaps the opportunity of a lifetime for them to climb up the social ladder. However, even though many female marriage migrants manage to step out from absolute poverty through migration, they have few choices but to marry into financially disadvantaged families, hence falling into the quagmire of relative poverty almost instantly after relocation (Fan & Li, 2002; Jiang, Zhang, & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2015). The fact that female marriage migrants usually have experienced both absolute and relative poverty makes them ideal subjects for understanding the psychological and social impact of poverty on individuals.

This research examines 35 female inter-provincial marriage migrants' everyday experience of poverty. The following narratives and analyses answer the key question of this research, i.e., how poverty-related shame is perceived and deflected by female marriage migrants in rural China. This article argues that poverty-related shame is not only an internal psychological feeling of insufficiency, but also an external socially fabricated discourse of identity. Female marriage migrants tend to employ misery recounting as an active strategy to neutralise poverty and mitigate internal shame. Meanwhile, they strive to integrate into the social mainstream and differentiate themselves from other disadvantaged groups so as to deflect the externally imposed shame derived from their social label as 'impoverished incomers' in the neighbourhood.

2. Literature Review

This research bridges three sets of literature: first, on the psychological and social impacts of poverty; second, on the gendered manifestations of poverty; and third, on the phenomenon of internal marriage migration in post-reform China. It signifies the realm where poverty studies intersect with migration, gender, and family issues under the scope of social inequality. This article contributes to scholarship by offering empirical insights that contextualise the origin, manifestation, and impact of poverty-related shame.

Years of academic research seeking the essence and the manifestation of poverty has acknowledged the multifaceted nature and multiple measurements of this phenomenon (Alkire et al., 2015; Kakwani & Silber, 2008). Poverty not only describes a status of insufficiency and deprivation at the individual level, but also points to the inequitable distribution of resources in the society (Ravallion, 2001); it not only sets forth a number of material parameters to evaluate the scarcity, but also highlights the social expectation for well-being and affluence (Medeiros, 2006). Consequentially, poverty is invariably construed as a policy problem, given its foci on hu-

man rights and social equality (Walker, 2014, p. 13). In this sense, the conceptualisation and visibility of poverty is inherently social and political (Walker, 2014, p. 5). The fact that poverty needs to be understood from the perspectives of both individuals and society underpins a dual-layer analytical framework, with which this research engages.

Poverty has long become part of people's everyday life. Much existing literature sheds light on how impoverished people internalise their experience of marginality, helplessness, dependency, and not belonging as daily routine (Daly & Kelly, 2015) and how the degradation and the exclusion of the financially inferior groups becomes a normalised practice and discourse in society (Lang, 2011). Among many daily manifestations of poverty lies poverty-related shame. According to Walker (2014, p. 2), shame has long been a 'missing consideration' of poverty. This research sheds light on poverty-related shame in everyday occasions by observing and analysing its origin and influence on the basis of personalised accounts.

The intellectual significance of examining China as a medium through which to comprehend poverty is twofold. The dichotomised urban-rural, dual-sector society in the transforming socialist regime sets the stage for understanding the relationship between poverty and inequality. The political classification of its people (Davis & Wang, 2009), the household registration (*hukou*) system (Du, Park, & Wang, 2005), the social division of welfare (Dollar, 2007), and the rapid implementation of privatisation that "allows some people to become rich first" (Chang, 2001) are among the most-cited discriminative policies that perpetuate long-standing inequality. In addition, as Li and Wei (2010) note, the regionally unbalanced development model exacerbates the disparity in wealth and resource holdings, rendering a spatial structure of poverty in the country. Complementary to the aforementioned structural factors is the nexus of poverty, culture, and social discourse in China. Li (2005) sheds light on the vulnerability of impoverished people in a discriminative social and political environment, whereas Solinger (2006) points out that the 'underclass' has already accepted its poverty as destiny. The culturally framed aetiology of poverty, e.g., laziness and lack of will power, constitutes the mainstream explanation for poverty (Gao, 2017). Since 1949, poverty has been downgraded from an indication of being spiritually advanced and reliable to a sign of backwardness and shame (Yang & Walker, 2019). Both the structural backdrop and the cultural dimension of poverty in China contributes to our knowledge about the dynamics of this phenomenon. It provides a framework to understand how my respondents perceive and deflect poverty in their everyday life.

This article focuses on female inter-provincial marriage migrants. The phenomenon of distant marriage has been well discussed in both gender and migration studies. In China, marriage migration is chiefly undertaken by women (Davin, 1996, 2007). While the increasing number of marriage migrants and the enlarging pattern of

marriage circle signifies higher social mobility of women, it also brings along a number of challenges to the migrants themselves. Marriage migration inevitably results in migrants' distant relocation and adaption of the post-marital patrilocal residence. In most cases, migrant wives are partially or utterly cut off from natal kin as a cultural arrangement (Fan & Huang, 1998; Stockard, 1989). Meanwhile, they are simultaneously regarded as incomers in their husbands' families (Bossen, 2007; Zhang, 2009). Tan and Short (2004, p. 152) portray migrant wives as 'double outsiders.' They point out that their prevailing sense of disorientation after distant marriage manifests itself as persistent difficulties of identification, crisis in the newly established families, and failures of establishing and managing new social networks (Tan & Short, 2004). Despite of the risks, millions of females opted for inter-provincial marriage as a way to enhance their life prospects. As Davin (2005) argues, marriage is among the very limited opportunities for women in rural China to climb the social ladder and get a better life. The economic incentives behind the choice of distant marriage shall never been neglected. Findings in this research resonate with the existing literature in the sense that they exemplify migrant wives' sacrifice of cultural and physical dislocation as a strategy of poverty alleviation. Noteworthy enough, the purposeful marriage exchange powered by economic incentives serves as an underlying reason for the unbalanced power relations between husband and wife and poses challenges to migrants' adaption and social inclusion (Bossen, 2007; He & Gober, 2003). In this sense, the insight of migrant wives' perception and deflection of poverty is key to understand how they handle and react to the difficulty of identification, the gender-specified risks, and the burdens in their migration and marriage. This illuminates the significance of studying poverty-related shame facing migrant wives in rural China and outlines the article's theoretical and empirical contribution.

To sum up, this article takes a dual-layer approach to examine the structural and cultural manifestations and impacts of poverty with reference to the female marriage migrants in rural China. It pays attention to poverty-related shame at both individual and society levels. It marks the intersection of theories about poverty, poverty studies in China, and empirical research of China's internal marriage migration.

3. Fieldwork and Research Methods

This research is grounded in a series of investigations undertaken in a village in East China over the past five years. An 11-month on-site fieldwork was implemented in 2014 and 2015, followed by three return visits. The time spent in the field enables time-lapse observations on a part of the research subjects' life course and the changing social settings in the locality. Such time-lapse ethnographic approach, as pointed out by Douglas (2019), reveals the dynamics and adds a stronger longitudinal diachronic element to data analysis. In a way, it constitutes the methodological originality of this research.

The research site is a village named Jiangbin. It is located on the outskirts of Hangzhou, the capital of Zhejiang Province. Jiangbin is an economically advanced industrialised village, thanks to its location and the regional development-boosting policies. The demographic features of this historic rural community have long been shaped by its capsular nature, with four dominating clans characterising the local kinship networks. Marriage in Jiangbin used to be confined within a geographically specified circle, which in return preserves the 'purity' of local culture. Since the 1980s however, villagers have observed an increasing number of migrants entering the neighbourhood. By 2018, the village accommodates about 4,000 people, of which approximately a third are migrant workers attracted by the thriving industries and job opportunities in the locality. Parallel to the occupation-driven population flow is the inter-provincial marriage migration. Females comprise an absolute majority of the population married into Jiangbin over the past four decades. Female marriage migrants are referred to as migrant wives (*wailai xifu*) in the village. The number of migrant wives, according to the village committee of Jiangbin, reached 100 by 2018, and is still growing.

This research follows qualitative and ethnographic approaches in data collection. 35 female inter-provincial marriage migrants constitute the key respondents. They were mainly recruited through personal relations and snowballing, while a small number of respondents are a random sample from a name list provided by the village committee. All the interviews were conducted by the author. The duration of interviews ranges from 30 minutes to two hours each. The investigator used a topic guide to facilitate the semi-structured interviews, aiming at ensuring the quality of data. 11 sets of questions were designed, featuring their basic personal info, adaption to the local culture, family members, other social relations, relationship and financial arrangements with their natal kin, decision-making for the marriage and migration, post-marriage everyday life, identity, personal and family finance, perception and experience of poverty, and vision for the future. As part of the time-lapse ethnographic approach, the investigator stayed in touch with all the interviewees via telephone or Wechat (*weixin*), a smartphone-based chatting tool popularised in China, so as to update their situation and arrange further meetings. In addition, interviews with ordinary villagers and village cadres, as means of triangulation, ensure the comprehensiveness and reliability of the qualitative data. A random sample of 12 local villagers were interviewed, in which the investigator collected their basic personal info and their opinions on the local marriage culture, the phenomenon of migrant wives, migration, gender, and poverty.

The 35 migrant wives constitute a sample of great heterogeneity. It covers a wide age spectrum from 24

to 61. Respondents come from ten different provinces spreading across Middle and Southwest China. They can be divided into three age-graded cohorts following the paradigm of life-course analysis (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Each cohort demonstrates characteristic features, reflected in the migrant wives' education level, motives of migration, interpretation of hardship in life, and social networks before and after marriage. However, interviews clearly demonstrated that all of the respondents have experienced absolute and relative poverty at different stages of their life course. Despite of the multiple factors that influenced the way how poverty-related shame is individually perceived and deflected, this article focuses on the respondents' common experience of marriage migration and quests after its correlation with the negativity of poverty. The research question points the direction for data selection and analysis in this article, where special attention has been paid to migrant wives' experience of migration, identity, and their connection with poverty-related shame.

In this research, data in forms of interview notes, transcriptions, fieldwork diaries, photos, and scanned archival documents have been archived and protected by encryption software. The fieldwork runs in accordance with the principle of inform consent. Pseudonyms for the village and the participating individuals are used to protect the respondents' privacy.

4. Internal Shame and the Misery Recounting

The aetiological complexity of migrant wives' internal shame is in the first place rooted in their life course. Associated with migrant wives' distant marriage is their multiple identity as incomers in the village, wives and mothers, impoverished people leaving their natal kin for a better life, and above all, financially inferior members of the community. Findings from Jiangbin underpin the causal links between poverty-induced shame and the dynamic process of identification. As Walker (2014, pp. 33, 106) suggests, 'the self' and 'the other' mark the 'dual points' of respondents' internal shame of poverty. This project sources and interprets migrant wives' internal feeling of shame by examining how they evaluate their own experience and respond to the social expectation.

Noticeably, the development gap between Jiangbin and the respondents' natal communities is a recurrent theme in their accounts of life trajectories before and after migration. Almost all of the migrant wives who settled in Jiangbin in the 1980s and the early 1990s mentioned the low living standard in their maternal families, where "parents struggled to feed the children." The description conforms with the definition of absolute poverty, which plots the scarcity of and the limited access to resources to cover basic human needs. Marriage exchange is among the very few options for young women to break away from financial destitution. The process inevitably results in the commodification of marriage and the associated fatalism and shame for their inferior financial and gender statuses. Female migrants referred to their decision of distant marriage as 'a final resort' to "officially depart from the impoverished life in the natal communities." They felt jealous of other wives married in from nearby areas of Jiangbin, who "did not necessarily need to 'vend' themselves in exchange for a decent life." In many cases, the migrant wives could not even instantly inform their parents of the wedding, let alone get financial and psychological support from their maternal families. This gives rise to the feelings of regret and shame. As for the marriage itself, some respondents reflected on the purposeful and commoditised marriage. They felt ashamed of the 'impure' marriage, which "resembled a transaction" they "had no option but to accept."

In addition to the previous experience of absolute poverty and the unequal economic status in the marriage, the finance of the nuclear family after marriage serves as another source of migrant wives' internal shame. Distant marriage is by and large an institutional arrangement to fulfil the needs of males who cannot find a partner or cannot afford to marry locally. As Zhang (2018) points out, it is either because of the inherent disadvantages of the husbands (e.g., age, appearance, intelligence, etc.) or the inferior financial status of the husbands' families. Therefore, the new nuclear family of a migrant wife is usually subject to material insufficiency. According to many of my respondents, relative poverty pertains after marriage, preventing them from climbing up the social ladder. They felt depressed because they "strived hard to make ends meet every year with little spare money left" and that "rich people got richer" while they "stayed poor despite of the great endeavour to earn and save money." The desperation manifests itself in the form of self-denial, which resonates with the definition of shame.

Poverty-related shame, reflected in migrant wives' everyday experience and self-denial, is internalised as a series of routinised practices and expressions. Female marriage migrants in Jiangbin usually start the conversation by framing poverty as an inescapable situation. "No way out of poverty" and "desperate about the future" are common responses to an impoverished life. Despite continuous effort to step away from poverty, significant financial improvement seldom takes place in migrant wives' families. According to the respondents, it is the structural factors that shape their inferior financial statuses, hardship, and the associated shame and desperation about the predicaments. Such shame on one hand arises from migrant wives' social identity, and on the other, persists to reinforce their identity through daily practices on the social stage (Goffman, 2009).

Among the migrant wives in Jiangbin, a most identifiable practice motivated by the poverty-related shame is recounting misery. Misery refers to the private experience of hardship. In Jiangbin, migrant wives' accounts of their misery centre on their experience of poverty before and after marriage. Rather than keeping the personal experience confidential, migrant wives tend to share their

stories on various occasions and in different forms, ranging from daily complaints at home, small-talk in the neighbourhood, to statements in the public arenas such as the village committee. The practice of recounting misery is interpreted as a way to properly handle and deflect the poverty-induced internal shame. Through recounting hardship in daily settings, migrant wives strategically normalise the poverty-related shame, which in return entails a counterbalance to moderate their sense of disqualification and self-denial.

Recounting misery as a strategy to normalise internal shame manifests itself primarily as an attempt to neutralise its effect. It illustrates respondents' reflections on poverty as a common phenomenon pertaining to various temporal, geographical, and social settings. In the recitations, migrant wives present structural explanations to normalise their poverty and the associated feeling of shame. By doing so, poverty is neutralised as an externally determined status and a common experience of the whole generation from 'backward provinces' in China:

> Every family in my village faced hardship and hunger at that time. There was no exception. We distributed crops on a per capita basis within the brigade [*shengchandui*]. The only things we could keep for ourselves were the remaining potatoes after harvest. My younger brothers and I used to spend hours after school searching in the field, round after round, till all the left-over potatoes were dug out. It was among the very few occasions we could eat as much as we want for dinner. (Ms. Jin, 55, from Lincang, Yunan, married into Jiangbin in 1989)

> Every August, my dad had to sell home-made popcorn in the town five miles away to subsidise the kids' tuition. It was a hilly road and he had to go on foot. I went with dad once on a rainy day and I remember I could not even recognise the colour of my trousers under the muddy stains when we returned….My hometown is doomed to be poor because of its geographical conditions. It was a common situation for most of the West provinces. If it were as flat as here, we could have easier connections to the outside world and a more vibrant economy. (Ms. Yu, 51, from Fuling, Chongqing, married into Jiangbin in 1988)

Recounting misery takes place on everyday occasions within and without the circle of migrant wives. It usually resonates with the crowd, since middle-aged residents in rural China have, more or less, experienced insufficiency throughout their lives. When the experience of poverty becomes normalised in local discourse, migrant wives take a step further and frame the status of being able to live with poverty-induced hardship as a virtue. This enables them to normalise their struggles against relative poverty after marriage and to legitimate their recourse to external supporters, the strategies of which

range from borrowing money from neighbours, claiming subsidies from the village, to receiving financial aid from the state:

> I do not have the fortune to enjoy a good and easy life for even a single day after marrying into Jiangbin. My husband has three brothers. They could not afford to marry locally. All my sisters-in-law are migrant wives. I knew we could not end up living in the old family house for a lifetime, so I saved every penny to build our own house. Even in the first month after I gave birth to my son, I resumed part-time work as an umbrella-packer to subsidise the household….We [migrant wives] are apparently tougher in face of hardship than the local women. (Ms. Guan, 58, from Panxian, Guizhou, married into Jiangbin in 1983)

The normalisation of poverty and the justification of endurance in hardship through the recounting of misery is psychologically beneficial to the migrant wives. Such accounts frame poverty as a structural result of unbalanced development, a common life experience for the generation, and a challenge to which they respond with perseverance and diligence. Their accounts decrease the impact of internal shame. Recounting misery also gives rise to a sense of common identity among the migrant wives. By imagining hardship as a neutral or even positive life experience, migrant wives justify their struggle against poverty and differentiate themselves from local brides. In this sense, hardship becomes a source of dignity rather than shame for the female marriage migrants in Jiangbin.

Nevertheless, when it comes to the competition for material benefits, recounting misery seldom wins the impoverished migrant wives any advantage. Even though some respondents publicly expressed hardship so as to justify their recourse for aid and benefits, they soon realised that the distribution of benefits for poverty alleviation is determined by other mechanisms, e.g., the established administrative process or informal social connections (*guanxi*) in the locality. The accounts of chronic poverty and insufficiency cannot necessarily compensate for migrant wives' limited social capital in the struggle for material resources.

5. External Shame and the Dynamic Approaches of Identification

Complementing internally generated self-denial and disqualification, external shame serves as another psychological manifestation of poverty among the migrant wives in Jiangbin. As Scheff (2003) suggests, shame itself is inherently social. It is intricately connected to one's social identity and to the process of identification. Social identification emerges in the interaction between individuals and social groups s/he belongs or does not belong to (Ellemers, van Knippenberg, de Vries, & Wilke, 1988). It is conceptualised via the cognitive and social process of association and differentiation (Hogg & Terry,

2000). Jiangbin, as a space that accommodates migrant wives' social connections and activities after marriage, outlines the realm where social inclusion and exclusion takes place. The way cross-provincial marriage migration is perceived in the village plays a pivotal role in the formation of migrant wives' identity and serves as a source for their external shame. In Jiangbin, migrant wives' identity is usually defined according to their natal origins and their inferior financial status before and after migration. In this sense, poverty and alienation are usually intertwined. They simultaneously mark the sources of the externally produced shame from the community.

External shame has its root in the prevalence of prejudice against poverty in Jiangbin. Many respondents reported that they were not adequately valued in the village as a qualified wife, mother, and village member because of their disadvantageous financial status. As observations from Jiangbin indicate, migrant wives' experience of external shame has become a part of the community culture and structure. Culture wise, local villagers in Jiangbin tend to emphasise the causal relations between diligence and fortune. Correspondingly, they usually cite laziness as the reason for poverty. This echoes with the World Values Survey, which shows a high percentage of the population in East Asian countries reckoning poverty as a result of laziness and lack of willpower (Walker, 2014, p. 134). The mechanism of social stigmatisation streamlines the multiple causes behind poverty and associates it with distain and contempt for individuals. In addition, the dominant masculine discourse in the village prescribes a set of social expectations on female members. Apart from the obligations of reproduction and care (for both the old and the young), women married into the village are also expected to maintain the family budget, to take up household chores, and to contribute an income by assuming paid work (Cook & Dong, 2011). These high expectations exhausted many respondents, who complained about "relentlessly spinning day by day." Worse still, migrant wives that fail to meet the social expectation are shamed publicly. This exemplifies another source of external shame in female migrants' life experience, which, according to Walker (2014, p. 110), is usually gender-specified.

In addition, external shame is also reinforced by geographic settings and social relations in the community. The geographic intimacy among households and the condensed social networks in the locality set the stage on which external shame can exist, develop, and influence the impoverished female migrants. In Jiangbin, the shaming process usually takes place on everyday occasions, ranging from quarrels between female migrants and their family members, comments on each other's family life, small-talk in groups, to the village-wide evaluation of a household's financial status. Densely fabricated formal and informal channels of information in the social space of Jiangbin makes it hard for the villagers to maintain their privacy. It is through everyday social interactions that impoverished families are named and shamed.

Consequentially, poverty-related external shame manifests itself in the process of labelling, in which migrant wives are simultaneously identified as incomers and financially inferior members of the community. Such social exclusion denotes the form of external shame experienced by many respondents.

While migrant wives have spotted ways to moderate internal shame by actively fabricating discourse about poverty, the extent to which such accounts mitigate external shame cast by the community remains questionable. The social impact of normalising poverty by recounting misery is usually confined at an individual level or within groups of migrant wives of a similar background. Given their inadequate social capital, migrant wives could hardly change or influence the mainstream value in the community however enthusiastically they broadcast the way they live with and fight against hardship. They have no choice but to integrate themselves into the mainstream of the community. It is through practicing the mainstream value and redefining their identity that migrant wives manage to handle and minimise the impact of poverty-related external shame on their everyday life. Observation suggests that the pursuit of a new identity comprises the individualised endeavour of integration and intentional differentiation with other disadvantaged groups.

Instead of resigning themselves to external shame, most migrant wives choose to keep up appearances in their everyday social life. Their individualised efforts of integration range from learning and speaking the local dialect, dropping in around the neighbourhood for chats, and joining the women's federation (*fulian*) of the village. Nevertheless, these endeavours only entail acceptance to a limited extent, whereas the migrant wives in Jiangbin yearn for due respect from the community. The insurmountable gap between expectation and reality serves as another source of external shame. Many respondents believe that the absence of respect is rooted in their inferior financial statuses. Poverty brings about contempt rather than sympathy in the local culture. Following the initiative of stepping out from poverty, most migrant wives have to work excessively towards the improvement of family finance. They positively respond to their poverty-related external shame by accepting, adapting to, and practicing mainstream values prescribed to women. As Ms. Ran remarked below, excessive hard work is the only solution to reconstruct her social identity, to gain recognition from the community, and to help the next generation avoid an interprovincial marriage:

> I work in the factory eight hours a day and I do another part-time job of sewing curtain edges in the evening. The work ruined my knees and my eyes....Why do I work so hard? It is all for the sake of my son. I do not want him to marry out, nor do I want a daughter-in-law from a remote province. I know every bit of the hardship to marry out remotely. It means hard-

ship, not only for the bride, but also for the couple and the whole family. We are not a rich family at all, but I will spare no effort to earn a house and a car for my son before he gets married. I am now living a life like most middle-aged women in East Xiaoshan: If I did not work and went to play cards in the teahouse, I would be criticised by the whole village as an unqualified mother and wife. (Ms. Ran, 48, from Youyang, Chongqing, married into Jiangbin in 1996)

Ms. Ran is not alone. Most migrant wives in Jiangbin adopt similar individualised strategies to cope with poverty-induced external shame. They are eager to be rid of their social image as incomers from impoverished areas. At the same time, they have an urgent need for an improved financial status. In this sense, the reconstruction of an identity according to local values and social expectations is of both psychological and material significance for the migrant wives.

Apart from localising themselves by embracing the mainstream and positively responding to normative social expectations, migrant wives also seek 'others' to differentiate themselves from so as to reinforce their identity as being 'native.' The comparison gives rise to a sense of confidence and satisfaction, which in turn mitigates their poverty-related external shame. The fact that Jiangbin accommodates more than 1,000 migrant labourers working temporarily in the nearby factories enables a close observation of the interaction between the two types of migrants. Migrant wives tend to draw a clear boundary between themselves and the migrant workers who temporarily reside in Jiangbin for occupational purposes. The differentiation is reflected in migrant wives' sense of inherent superiority. Their remarks on the migrant workers usually encapsulate criticism about young migrant workers' lifestyle and poverty. As Ms. Duan commented on her tenants:

Those young people spend every penny they earn. They do not even think about a future life. All of my tenants paid thousands to purchase the newly popularised water fans [shuishan] last summer. They always go for trendy stuff without thinking of the value. The situation when I left home and married into Zhejiang was so different from now. If I were them, I would definitely tighten the budget and save some money for the future. (Ms. Duan, 44, from Longli, Guizhou, married into Jiangbin in 1996)

With identity-motivated differentiation in place, migrant wives and migrant workers become 'the most familiar strangers' living under the same roof. Xiao Gao, a young worker from Guizhou, told me he did not know that his landlady is originally from Guizhou and that their hometowns are actually quite close:

The only time I talk to the landlady is at the end of each month when she comes up to my room and col-

lects the rent. She speaks Xiaoshan dialect to us like the local people, so I did not even realise that she is a fellow Guizhou woman.

The address of 'fellow countryman' (laoxiang) seldom came from the mouths of migrant wives in their daily interaction with migrant workers, however. The intentional differentiation helps migrant wives reinforce their identity as members of the village. The remarks about migrant workers' spending habits and financial statuses serve as a way to divert poverty-related external shame and to transfer that shame onto even more financially inferior individuals in the locality. This observation exemplifies another practice of identity reconstruction, where 'othering' less privileged groups becomes a strategy of migrant wives which allows them merge into the social mainstream.

To summarise, the observations above demonstrate two typical ways to deflect poverty-related shame. Since external shame is conveyed by attitudes, thoughts, and the actions of others, it signifies one's social relations and position in the community. The way migrant wives perceive, handle, and respond to poverty-related shame from external sources is therefore tightly associated with their social identity in the community. The endeavour of integrating into the mainstream and of othering less advantaged members of the community reconstructs the migrant wives' social identity. These dynamics underpin Walker's argument on the fluidity of stigma: The subject of socially produced shame can become the main body of shaming on another occasion (Walker, 2014, pp. 52–53).

6. Conclusion

This research article presents a qualitative account of poverty and poverty-related shame based on the phenomenon of inter-provincial marriage in rural China. It resonates with existing empirical studies of China's internal marriage migration by revealing the prevalence of poverty among migrant wives. It outlines the fact that migrant wives usually experience both absolute and relative poverty in their life course and endure perpetuated poverty after marriage. Poverty-related shame marks a key dimension to understanding how poverty is perceived and deflected in migrant wives' everyday life.

Empirical findings suggest that migrant wives' poverty-related shame can be comprehended through two different channels. Internal shame represents migrant wives' personal reflections on insufficiency, whereas external shame demonstrates the influence of socially imposed degradation and exclusion on the impoverished community members. Both internal and external shame are strategically deflected by migrant wives, who aim at minimising its negative impact on their psychological wellbeing and everyday social life. Through recounting misery, migrant wives normalise their experience of poverty as an inevitable product of structural inequality and frame their ability of living with hard-

ship as a virtue. Through reconstructing identity, migrant wives practice the locality's mainstream values by integrating themselves into the local community and differentiating themselves from other disadvantaged groups in the village, such as migrant workers. Migrant wives are exposed to a series of gender-specific risks, burdens, and social expectations, which make them particularly vulnerable to the psychological and social negativity of poverty. Correspondingly, the way they handle poverty-related shame is embedded in their gender identity as well. Observations from Jiangbin illustrate the origins and manifestations of poverty. Meanwhile, they exemplify how the psychological and social impacts of poverty are handled and deflected by ordinary residents in everyday life.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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