Questioning Norms:

Single Professional Women in Shanghai in the 2010s

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Abstract

Despite the profound social transformations that have taken place in China since the reform and opening up in 1978, marriage has remained universal. Since the 2000s, there has been a trend of delaying marriage among urban, educated young women, particularly in major metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai. This has engendered great public confusion and anxiety. Single professional women in their thirties or even still in their twenties are stigmatized as the "leftover women," who have three "highs," namely high education, high income, and high quality, but no marriage. They face enormous pressure to marry, to conform to normative femininity defined by wifehood and motherhood. At the same time, their high socioeconomic status often proves to be an obstacle in the highly patriarchal marriage market, where women are expected to be the less capable and less assertive party in a relationship in order to maintain male dominance.

Based on extensive ethnographic research in Shanghai between 2014 and 2018, I argue that single professional women do not easily succumb to the immense pressure to marry. Instead, these women strive to carve out new femininities inside and outside of marriage; they envision companionate and equal marriages or prolonged singlehood. Their imagining and reimagining of marriage becomes a key site for them to question and negotiate gender norms. Moreover, new femininities and subjectivities emerge as these women imagine and experiment with a prolonged single life when and if marriage and reproduction do not occur. Being a single woman involves not only a reconceptualization of marriage and women's family roles, but also a reorganization of a woman's life course. This often leads single women to explore the meaning of life in other areas, such as work and civic engagement. These explorations could lead to more and broader social changes.

These single professional women adopt an individualistic approach to life, prioritizing personal happiness. They believe that they have the freedom to choose the kind of life they want to live. They espouse the belief in the power of the self and the privatization of responsibilities for taking care of one's life. The state is conspicuously absent in their self-

narratives. However, they do not live free from the state. In this dissertation, I also examine how the post-socialist Chinese state structures women's life course through the regulation of marriage, fertility, social welfare provision, social movements, and etc. By analyzing the subjective experiences and narratives of this specific group of women, I endeavor to illustrate how the relationship between the individual and the state are evolving in China and to explore the potential and prospects for feminist activism.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Among the more than 60 single professional women I interviewed, Ji Feng made a particularly strong impression on me, not only because she unapologetically and repeatedly proclaimed that she was a staunch supporter of Hayek and neoliberalism when I interviewed her. Ji Feng was born in 1983 in Changzhou, a city in Jiangsu province not far from Shanghai. She moved to Shanghai to attend university, where she earned both a bachelor's and master's degree in law. After graduation, she found a job and stayed in Shanghai. As an only child, she successfully persuaded her parents to support her financially and bought her own apartment in the city. Ji Feng's life trajectory was typical of my informants.

When I first met Ji Feng in 2015, she was working as a tax inspector for the government. Although the civil service is widely regarded as one of the most desirable places for women to work in China, Ji Feng did not find her work unit (*danwei*) women-friendly. Tax inspector positions were so male-dominated that there was no women's restroom on the floor of Ji Feng's office when she started working there. According to Ji Feng, her colleagues did not believe that women were suitable or capable of working on the front lines of law enforcement. But she proved to be quite capable. Still, she found herself an outsider in her work unit, constantly accused by her superiors and colleagues of being individualistic because she did not socialize with her colleagues after work and kept her personal life private. Ji Feng wanted to quit. In her words, there was a conflict between the individualism (*geren zhuyi*) she believed in and the collectivism (*jiti zhuyi*) that was expected in a work unit. But the idea of leaving the civil service frightened Ji Feng's mother, who valued stability and wanted her daughter to stay within the state sector (*tizhinei*), even though the mother herself had been forced into early retirement by her state-owned enterprise employer. Ji Feng was the opposite, valuing personal freedom above all else. During the interview in 2015, Ji Feng expressed clear desires. She wanted to work for a large firm and then become a partner in a smaller firm. She wanted to move to Shenzhen, which she felt was more market-oriented, and socially less hierarchical than Shanghai. She wanted to study law in the United States. It struck me that Ji Feng believed that her life was full of possibilities and that marriage was not a big part of her vision, if it was at all. I met Ji Feng again in 2017. By then, she had left her job at the tax bureau to join a private company and was

in the process of relocating to Beijing. Even before she had officially started her new job, she had developed concerns and began to believe that her ideal was to be self-employed as a tax or accounting consultant.

In terms of her views on marriage, Ji Feng was somewhat atypical among my informants. While most of the single women I interviewed focused on companionship when describing how they conceptualized marriage, Ji Feng, thanks to her legal training, approached marriage primarily as a contract, largely an economic one. She asserted that "I do not do business at a loss." Compared to other informants, Ji Feng was particularly knowledgeable about how the current Marriage Law regulates property and custody in the event of divorce and does not particularly protect women's interests. She argued that women should look out for their economic interests when getting married. For example, women should buy an apartment for themselves as premarital property if they and their parents can afford it, as she had done, or women should make sure that they are co-owners of the marital property.

Yet in many ways, Ji Feng's experiences and perspectives were similar to those of other single women I interviewed. She was also reluctant to compromise on her choice of spouse because, in her view, marriage was no longer necessary as women gained economic independence through work. Despite her portrayal of marriage as primarily an economic contract, Ji Feng, like other informants, did not prioritize wealth; rather, she wanted to find a man who shared her values. She had also experienced intense pressure to marry from her parents and relatives. But there was no love lost between her and her parents, because she interpreted the intergenerational conflict as a result of the very different circumstances in which her and her parents' generations grew up.

On brand for a believer in neoliberalism, Ji Feng, skeptical of the recent wave of rights feminism (*nüquan*)[1] in China, used the maxim "It takes a good blacksmith to make good steel" (*datie haixu zishen ying*) to summarize her approach to gender equality (*nannü pingdeng*). Ji Feng explained that women should focus on self-improvement and become self-enterprising, for example she prepared for the CPA (Certified Public Accountant) exam while working in the government, and then women will have more choices; women can vote with their feet, not to marry and/or not to procreate. However, Ji Feng was also more vocal than most of my

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[1] Tan suggests translating *nüquan* as rights feminism because: first, *nüquan* is a compound term consisting of *nü* (female) and *quan* (rights); second, "[a]lthough the use of *nüquan* does not always invoke rights-related ideas, the adoption of *quan* in the naming of feminism marks a paradigmatic shift that accentuates rights-related concepts and practices" (2023, 3).

informants in pointing out the blatant discrimination against women in the labor market, which was largely caused by the lack of institutional support for child-rearing. She called for state intervention to protect women from being discriminated against for taking maternity leave. She specifically suggested policies, such as tax deductions, that would incentivize employers to hire and promote women. Nevertheless, Ji Feng expressed confidence in social progress and saw women as the vanguard of a more open, diverse, and gender-equal society—an optimism that was shared by many of the informants.

These single professional women clearly articulate a desire to live their lives differently from the older generation, from what they see as traditional gender expectations. It is imperative to ask what femininities and subjectivities are emerging in China as these women resist the pressures of marriage? What are the implications of their claims to be individualistic and independent? Additionally, it is crucial to examine the gender ideologies and structures of inequality that limit these women and how they are able to assert their agency in the face of such constraints. Finally, it is worth exploring the role that the Chinese state plays in shaping the life courses of these women. How do single women perceive their relationship with the state as individuals, as citizens, and as women? These are the questions I seek to answer in this dissertation. Through the analysis of the subjective experiences and narratives of this particular group of women, revealing their predicaments and privileges, I also attempt to show how gender relations[2] and the relationship between the individual and the state are evolving in China, and to explore the potential and prospects for feminist activism.

The Emergence of Single Professional Women in China and Its Significance

The rise of extended or permanent singlehood has been developing into a global phenomenon during the past few decades, due to the rising status of women, the communications revolution, mass urbanization, and the longevity revolution (Klinenberg 2012). Among the expanding single population, the SPW, i.e., single professional woman (Berg-Cross et al. 2004), surfaces as a puzzling figure that disrupts the conventional cognitive association between the unmarried

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[2] In their study of the role of gender in reshaping politics and social relations in East Central Europe since 1989, Gal and Kligman explain that "[g]ender relations include the routine ways in which men and women interact with each other in social institutions: the division of labor in households, in sexual relationships, friendships, workplaces, and within different sectors of the economy. They include, as well, the kinds of life courses produced by such organization of work and the characteristic structures of feeling that orient what men and women expect out of life. In East Central Europe, change is simultaneously occurring in the institutions and routinizations of work, in images of masculinity, femininity, and marriage, as well as in narratives about life course and life strategy" (2000, 37).

and the so–called unattractive and unsuccessful (Lahad 2013). Single women attract both stigmatization for transgressing heteronormative femininity and celebration for obtaining independence and autonomy (Byrne 2000; Trimberger 2005; Reynolds and Taylor 2005; DePaulo 2006; Reynolds 2008; Lahad 2014). Undeniably, single professional women are redefining women's gender roles and social positions as well as creating new individual life trajectories and biographies.

In China, the universality of marriage remains more or less unchanged, as the rate of the unmarried has not significantly gone up since the reform and opening up (*gaige kaifang*) starting in 1978[3]. Additionally, compared to other developed countries, the Chinese tend to get married at a younger age. The 2010 national census showed that the nationwide average age of first marriage was 24.8 years for men and 22.8 for women; at the same time, the average age of first marriage (not differentiated by gender) was 29 in Japan, 30 in Australia, 31 in Germany and 32 in France (Xu and Yan 2014). Demographers disagree on whether the universal marriage pattern is changing. However, they agree that the trend of delaying marriage has emerged and is particularly strong in urban China (Gaetano 2017, 127-130). According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, the average age of first marriage for women of reproductive age increased from 21.4 years in 1990 to 25.7 years in 2017 (cited in Bao 2019, 49). Based on Cai and Wang's calculation, "for urban China as a whole… [i]n 1995, only 10 percent of women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine had never married. By 2008, the share increased to 27 percent. Even among those aged thirty to thirty–four, the share of never married women increased from 2 to 6 percent" (2014, 108). In Shanghai, the average age of first marriage in 2015 was 30.3 for men and 28.4 for women, a respective increase of 5 years and 5.4 years from 2005, showing a strong trend of delaying marriage (Peng 2018).

It is against this backdrop that the emergence of single professional women in China constitutes a relatively new phenomenon. Since the 2000s, this group has become more and more visible in major metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai, engendering great public

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[3] According to Yeung and Hu's analysis of data from the Chinese General Social Surveys conducted in 2010, 2012, and 2013, almost every woman in the most recent birth cohort (1976-83) had been married by age 30, and over 95% of men had entered their first marriage by age 33 (2016, 448). To provide context for China's demographic change, Davis (2014b) notes that "when one compares China's crude marriage rate (CMR) to those in other countries in East Asia, Europe, and North America, China is the only one where CMR has recently risen" (2014, 561). Davis explains that high rates of marriage and remarriage indicate that marriage remains a normatively robust institution. Additionally, a low percentage of men and women have never married by their late thirties, further documenting the continued desirability of marriage. For instance, when examining data from 2009, it is observed that less than 5 percent of the population between the ages of 35 and 39 years have never been married. It is only among those born after 1980 that marriage is not yet nearly universal (Ibid., 564).

confusion and anxiety. Single professional women in their thirties or even still in their twenties (mostly born in the 1980s, commonly referred to as the post-80s generation, *balinghou*; as women born in the 1990s, the post-90s generation, *jiulinghou*, enter their mid-twenties, they also come under scrutiny if they are unmarried) are called "leftover women" (*shengnü*) who have three "highs," namely high education, high income, and high quality, but no marriage. Chinese mass media have indulged in various stereotypical and derogatory definitions and depictions of leftover women, exhorting "[s]ingle, educated, urban women: stop working so hard at your careers; lower your sights and don't be so ambitious; don't be so picky about whom you marry" (Fincher 2014, 15-6; see also Liu and Zhang 2013). Matchmaking agencies, markets, websites, and television shows boom and become a conspicuously profitable industry, accentuating the abundance of single women and intensifying the anxiety of being unmarried[4]. On the one hand, single professional women have to cope with the accompanying stigma in their daily lives and pressure from parents, relatives, friends, and colleagues (Luo et al. 2014). On the other hand, their high socioeconomic status often proves to be an obstacle in the highly patriarchal marriage market, where women are expected to be the less capable and less assertive party in a relationship in order to maintain male dominance (Luo and Sun 2015; To 2015b). For example, You et al.'s quantitative study finds an educational "discount" rather than "premium" for women: for women, a college education reduces the probability of marriage by 2.88-3.60 percent, and a postgraduate degree further lowers it by 8.4-10.4 percent (2021). Similarly, Cai and Wang's (2014) analysis of marriage statistics in Shanghai shows that highly educated women are the cohort of women most likely not to marry, a predicament not shared by their male counterparts.

Despite the challenging social environment and the predicament encountered by women in the mainstream marriage market, my ethnographic study, in line with other studies (Gaetano 2014, Ji 2015, To 2015b, Nakano 2016) that have focused on the subjective experiences of single women, demonstrates that younger generations of urban women do not easily succumb to the immense pressure to marry as Fincher (2014) suggests. The state may have orchestrated the stigmatization of single professional women in the mass media in order to "achieve its demographic goals of promoting marriage, planning population, and maintaining social stability" as Fincher (Ibid., 6) argues, but these women clearly do not see themselves as subjects of the state's demographic goals, as this dissertation will show. Nor do the pressures and

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[4] For a comprehensive study on the matchmaking market in the People's Square in Shanghai, refer to Sun's research (2012). For an analysis of the popular TV dating show If You Are the One (*feichengwurao*), refer to Luo and Sun's (2015) work.

constraints they face derive solely from the state's demographic goals. Instead, these women strive to carve out new femininities inside and outside of marriage; they envision companionate and equal marriage or prolonged singlehood. Indeed, marriage still looms large in the self-narratives of many of the single professional women in my study. It would be rash to assume that because they want to marry, "most of the Chinese professional women had fairly traditional views about marriage and considered marriage to be their ultimate goal" (To 2015b, 30). The single professional women in this dissertation do not reject marriage; they desire it, but on their own terms. Thus, their imagining and reimagining of marriage becomes a key site for them to negotiate and contest gender norms. Moreover, as Gaetano (2014) argues, new femininities and gendered subjectivities emerge as these women imagine and experiment with a prolonged single life when and if marriage and reproduction do not occur or take center stage. Being a single woman involves not only a reconceptualization of marriage and women's family roles, but also a reorganization of a woman's life course. This often leads single women to explore the meaning of life in other areas, such as work and civic engagement. These explorations could lead to more and broader social changes. Research on single women that focuses only on their views of marriage inadvertently reinforces the importance of marriage for women, and there is a great need to examine the impact of being single on their other life choices. Therefore, I use the term "single professional women" instead of the colloquial terms "leftover women"[5] or "unmarried/single women" to describe the subject of this research. By using the word "professional," I refer to their white-collar employment, and emphasize their educational attainment and socioeconomic status, in other words, their social and cultural capital to resist and renegotiate. These women are not passive victims.

As previously stated, Ji Feng is in the minority. The majority of single professional women I interviewed conspicuously omit the state from their self-narratives. They live their lives primarily to pursue personal happiness; it is their individual free choice what kind of life they want to and can live. They espouse the belief in the power of the self, or what Ong and Zhang (2008, 8) term the "relying on yourself (*kao ziji*)" ethos. It is evident that they do not perceive themselves as subjects of the state. It sounds absurd to them to suggest that they have any role to play in the country's declining birth rate. However, they do not live free from the state, as is portrayed in their self-narratives. In this dissertation, I aim to unravel how the post-socialist

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[5] Many of the informants themselves used the derogatory term in the sense that it captures a social phenomenon and makes their group socially legible. But they clearly did not like the term. Some expressed strong anger at this stigmatizing term. For this reason, I will not use the term in the following except in quotes from my interviewees.

Chinese state is "governing from afar" (Ong and Zhang 2008), or perhaps not so far, with respect to this young generation of educated urban women.

The Chinese state officially launched the reform and opening up in 1978 and the one-child policy in 1979/1980. These two policies have brought about fundamental social changes in China and have greatly shaped the life course of the post-80s and post-90s generations, to which my informants belong. This is demonstrated by the self-identification of the young women in my research. When the informants are the only child of their parents (which is the case for the majority), being the only daughter is often cited as a significant, if not the most defining, component of their identity. Particularly among those born in the 1980s, the generation label is also frequently invoked. There is a widespread sense among my informants that they are very different from their parents' generation. It is evident that the post-80s and post-90s generations have been raised in a more affluent environment than their parents, due to the economic growth that China has experienced since the reform and opening up. Furthermore, social life in China has undergone a profound transformation, and the way Chinese individuals perceive themselves, relate to others, and interact with the state has also changed significantly. In the following sections, I will examine the social changes that are most relevant to the life course of single professional women and their ongoing negotiation of the meaning of marriage, femininity, and life in general. These include the transformation of the institution of marriage, the one-child policy, entrenched gender norms, and the dramatic shift in the subjective domain of the Chinese individual.

The Evolution of the Institution of Marriage in China since 1949

> Why don't the All-China Women's Federation, the Communist Youth League, and the Trade Union intervene? They used to organize activities for young men and women in work units. Why is no one taking care of this now?... Who among the private bosses will take care of it? The cadres eat and drink what we finance, drive government-funded cars, have mistresses and second mistresses, take bribes, and do all kinds of bad things, but they don't care about our children's marriage problems![6] (Sun 2012, 98)

The above statement, quoted in Sun's (2012) study of the matchmaking market in Shanghai's People's Square, was made by an anxious mother who worked diligently to find a

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[6] All of the translations of Chinese texts into English in this dissertation are mine, unless otherwise noted.

husband for her daughter. This mother regarded being unmarried as a problem or a deficiency and actively sought marriage partners for her daughter. She saw arranging her daughter's marriage as the responsibility not only of the parents but also of the state. She exemplified, perhaps to an extreme degree, the so-called outdated views of the parents' generation, from which the younger generation, namely my informants, felt alienated. This is the intergenerational conflict that Ji Feng mentioned and that most of my single female informants also discussed at length and agonized over. They also believed that this clash of different values between the two generations could not be reconciled. I argue that this intergenerational difference stems firstly from the transformation of the institution of marriage from the socialist era to the post-socialist era.

The 1950 Marriage Law represented a major achievement and a blueprint for the socialist revolution led by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) since the 1920s. The Marriage Law took effect on May 1, 1950, making it the first law enacted in the new China. Its purpose, as stated in Article 1, was to abolish "the feudalistic system of marriage" and establish "a new democratic marriage system of freedom of marriage for men and women, monogamy, and equal rights for men and women." The 1950 Marriage Law also banned bigamy, concubinage, and child betrothal. It defined marriage as a relationship between two individuals based on their free will and established the freedom of divorce.

The socialist ideal of marriage as delineated by the law is that of companionate marriage, which is characterized by personal free choice and gender equality. These principles are not rejected but rather supported by my informants, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters. During the socialist era, marriage and intimate life were disembedded from traditions or liberated from feudalism in CCP jargon. However, they also became part and parcel of the state's comprehensive social engineering to serve the higher goal of nation-building[7]. For instance, the 1950 Marriage Law guaranteed the freedom to divorce with the explicit aim of empowering women. Many women took advantage of their new rights and initiated divorces, creating what some Chinese scholars have called the first wave of singles[8] (*danshen chao*),

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[7] As a matter of fact, the circular issued by the Central Committee of CCP on the same day that the Marriage Law came into effect revealed the hierarchy of objectives: "The correct implementation of the Marriage Law will not only liberate the masses of Chinese men and women, especially women, from the old marriage system, which has been barbaric and backward for thousands of years, but will also facilitate the establishment of a new marriage system, a new family relationship, a new social life, and a new social morality, thereby contributing to the development of the political, economic, cultural and national defense construction of the new democratic China" (Zhu and Ji 2019).

[8] According to Wang (2006), the second wave of singles took place between the late 1970s and the mid-1980s, and the majority of singles were female educated youth who returned to the city after being sent to the countryside.

mostly divorced men, in China since 1949 (Wang 2006). However, three years after the law was enacted, the state tightened its control as its agents "perceived a link between a rapid upsurge in the number of divorces and social instability," (Davis 2014a, 43) and divorce became more difficult to obtain and remained rare throughout the socialist era. Personal freedom had to give way to collective "production needs" according to Article 23 of the 1950 Marriage Law.

The state regulated the institution of marriage through the legal reform. In urban China, as the anxious mother quoted above pointed out, the state was also involved in the practice of marriage through the work unit system, such as organizing matchmaking activities for young workers. Couples were required to obtain written permission from their employer, typically a work unit (or village head for rural residents), in order to register either a marriage or a divorce. Furthermore, social services such as housing, healthcare, and childcare were distributed through the work unit[9], allowing the state to exercise high degree of control and surveillance over the private sphere of marriage and family life. In essence, urban couples were transformed into "supplicants to a socialist state" (Davis 1993). It is, therefore, not surprising that the anxious mother who grew up and married during the socialist era believed that the state and the carders had a responsibility to oversee and support a citizen's (i.e. her daughter's) marriage.

Since 1978, China has embarked on a new path. De-collectivization first began in rural areas and later extended to urban areas. The state gradually abandoned the command economy, embraced marketization and privatization, and reduced its control and surveillance of citizens' private lives. Sara Friedman's (2005) study on marriage practices in a rural county in Fujian province shows that the new ideals of personal choice and conjugal intimacy, although supported by the 1950 Marriage Law and politically promoted during the socialist era, are only being realized in the post-socialist era through a convergence of state regulation, market forces, and personal aspirations. In contemporary China, marriage for Chinese citizens is no longer associated with the mission of nation-building. The younger generations in both rural and urban China are increasingly embracing the concepts of romantic love, companionate marriage, the

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Unlike their male counterparts, many women did not marry while in the countryside. Wang argues that both the first and second waves of singles were direct results of state political campaigns, and that being single was largely an involuntary choice for the individual. On the other hand, the third wave in the 21st century, led by urban educated women, has little to do with state policy and is the result of voluntary individual choice.

[9] For an introduction to the work unit system, its origin, and its transformation, see Lü and Perry (1997). For a comprehensive examination of how the work unit system became an institutionalized form of social control, achieved social integration and the distribution of social resources, and served as a point of contact between the state and the individual, see Liu (2000).

nuclear family, and relaxed sexual norms (Yan 2003; Friedman 2005; Farrer 2002; Pei 2013; Farrer and Sun 2003).

These social changes in the realm of marriage and family life are both reflected and reinforced by the law. In 1980, a new marriage law was promulgated with two important new rules. Firstly, the breakdown of affection was recognized as a ground for divorce, essentially allowing for no-fault divorce and giving individuals more freedom to divorce. This marked the selective withdrawal of the state from people's private lives. Secondly, the law also declared that it was the couple's obligation to practice family planning, which complemented the adoption of the one-child policy in 1979. Since then, the state has maintained strong control over marital fertility (fertility had already been confined to marriage by the 1950 Marriage Law), in contrast to weak control over sexual relationships (Davis 2014b).

In 1998, the state ceased to distribute housing directly to employees through the work unit system. Since the 2000s, private property prices have risen rapidly in urban China. Davis posits that the privatization of property has significantly altered the economics of marriage and furthered the privatization of marriage, as the state redefines "marriage as a voluntary contractual relationship" (2014b, 554). In the 2001 amendment to the Marriage Law, the most substantial change was the introduction of new provisions that strengthened individual property rights. According to this new legal framework, it was established that "all property acquired before marriage would be presumed to be individual unless otherwise agreed" (Ibid., 556). The 2011 interpretation issued by the Supreme People's Court addressed the ownership of the marital home in cases of divorce. Given the rapid increase in housing prices, it has become common for parents to provide financial support for their children's property purchases. The 2011 interpretation recognizes property ownership based on financial transactions, specifically the contributions made by each party (either the wife with her parents or the husband with his parents) towards the down payment and/or mortgage. Consequently, Davis laments that:

> For decades, PRC law and judicial rulings had upheld the right of each spouse to equal claims to the home in which they lived regardless of formal legal documentation specifying rights of ownership. Specifically, regulations of the socialist era emphasized that even when one spouse (most often the wife) did not have his or her name on a deed or had not made the largest financial investments, that spouse was entitled to half the conjugal home on the grounds that many years of uncompensated labor to maintain the

family, raise the children, and care for the elderly had created the conjugal assets to which each spouse held equal claims. (Ibid., 560)

The 2011 interpretation unequivocally demonstrates that the state prioritizes parental or familial property rights over conjugal claims, and ignores the protection of the disadvantaged party in a marriage. The law appears to be gender-neutral, impartially protecting individual rights and property. However, in practice, women often end up with less property than men. According to Woo (2003), women were less likely than their male colleagues to receive housing in their work unit under the state-allocating housing system. In the current real estate market, it is not uncommon for the groom's family to pay the down payment on the marital home while the bride's family pays for renovations, or for the husband's income to be used to pay the mortgage while the wife's income covers household expenses. However, recent legal changes have introduced a new risk for women in marriage. If the wife's financial contribution to the marital property is not documented by a bank, she may lose her claim to the conjugal property (Fincher 2014). This is why Ji Feng complained that the current legal system does not protect women's interests. Most of my informants were not about to get married at the time of the interview, so the issue of marital property was not as relevant to them. This may partly explain why they were not familiar with the legal provisions. They saw marriage as a private relationship between two individuals and two families, not as a legal and social institution. Accordingly, the responsibilities and risks arising from such a private relationship should be managed privately.

The Urban Only Daughters: Empowerment and Predicament

On September 25, 1980, the Central Committee of the CCP issued an "Open Letter to All Members of the Communist Party and the Communist Youth League on Controlling Population Growth in China," advocating that "a couple should have only one child" ("Footprints of the Republic" 2009). This marked the formal introduction and full implementation of the one-child policy (*dusheng zinü zhengce*) in China[10]. The Open Letter explained the significance of the policy as "a major measure affecting the pace and future of the four modernizations" (Ibid.). In 1981, the Fourth Session of the Fifth National People's Congress stated more clearly, "Limiting the number of people and improving the quality of the population is our population policy"

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[10] The one-child policy was implemented in some provinces, including Shanghai, between 1978 and 1979. By 1979, the first batch of only children had already reached 6.1 million (Feng 2020, 22).

(Ibid.). Family planning[11] was included not only in the 1980 Marriage Law as a duty of married couples, but also in the 1982 Constitution as a basic policy of the state. From the perspective of the state and its policymakers, the one-child policy is "about the nation's dreams for achieving wealth, modernity, and global power" (Greenhalgh 2003, 164)[12]; the reproductive will and rights of women and couples had to give way to nation-building.

The policy began as a one-child-per-couple rule with few exceptions[13]. However, due to resistance, revisions were made to allow rural couples to have a second child if their first child was a daughter (a 1.5-child policy) and couples in remote areas to have 2 or 3 children. The level of punishment and coercion also varied from province to province and region to region[14]. The policy was most strictly enforced and more widely accepted among urban couples (Cooney and Li 1994; Greenhalgh 1990; Kane 1985). The informants in my study are predominantly the only child of their parents, but a minority from both rural and urban backgrounds also have siblings, reflecting the complex reality of the one-child policy. Since the policy's implementation, there has been a decline in family size and a rapid increase in women's educational attainment. These two policy consequences have had a significant impact on the life chances of the emerging cohort of single professional women.

The one-child policy was not primarily about women's empowerment, but it has inadvertently benefited the specific group of urban only daughters (*dusheng nü*), who "enjoy unprecedented parental support because they do not have to compete with brothers for parental investment" (Fong 2002, 1098). Unprecedented parental support is most evident in education. Empirical studies in different regions of China find that parents of only children invest heavily in their children's education and have high expectations, regardless of the children's gender, which contributes to better intra-family status and higher aspirations for only daughters, and ultimately to gender equality in education[15] (Bian 1996; Tsui and Rich 2002; Fong 2004; Veeck

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[11] For an overview of the history of family planning policies in China from 1970 to 2010, see Wang (2012). Notably, the "*wan, xi, shao*" (late marriage and childbearing, birth spacing and limited fertility) policy implemented in the 1970s successfully reduced the Total Fertility Rate. See also Bao (2009) for a comparison of the efficacy of the "*wan, xi, shao*" policy and the one-child policy in reducing the Total Fertility Rate.

[12] See Greenhalgh (2003, 2008) for a fascinating behind-the-scenes account of how the one-child policy was shaped, by which scientists, which theories, especially Western theories, were chosen, and how natural scientists gained the upper hand over social scientists.

[13] Exceptions applied to couples of ethnic minorities and those in hazardous occupations (Ebenstein 2010, 89).

[14] For further information and discussion on the evolution of the one-child policy and its varied implementation on the ground, see for example Greenhalgh (1986) and J. Zhang (2017).

[15] Liu (2006) cautions that it is overly optimistic to conclude that gender equality in education has been achieved because one-child status has led to high parental educational expectations for their daughters. Her empirical study finds that parents still have strong gender-stereotypical expectations; while they want their children (daughters) to have the highest possible education, they still want their children (daughters) to conform to traditional binary gender norms.

et al. 2003; Lee 2012). This thesis is also corroborated by many of my informants. They recounted their school years as gender-neutral: they felt that their educational aspirations, as well as the expectations of their parents, were no different from those of their male peers.

The progress in women's educational attainment is most pronounced in higher education. In 1999, the state implemented a policy to expand university enrollment, which coincided with the only-child generation reaching the age of higher education. In 1998, the proportion of female students in universities was 38.31%. Since 1999, the proportion of female students has increased by almost one percentage point each year, exceeding that of men for the first time in 2009 and reaching 51.35% in 2012. Additionally, in 2010, the number of female students enrolled in master's degree courses also exceeded that of male students for the first time (C. Li 2016, 34). C. Li further explains that due to the unbalanced sex ratio after the implementation of the one-child policy, there were more men than women in the post-80s and post-90s generations. Taking this into consideration, women have made greater progress in higher education than men (Ibid.).

Among my sample of single professional women, almost all have at least a 4-year college education. Especially for the urban only daughters in the sample, the unprecedented parental support extended beyond their education. Because the informants were in their 20s and 30s at the time of my research, many were still establishing themselves professionally and/or as migrants in Shanghai. They shared a strong sense of security that they could always rely on their parents for support. Their access to their parents' resources, especially financial resources, was unprecedented due to the absence of competition from a sibling, especially a male sibling, best exemplified by parents helping their daughters buy property in Shanghai. Many of my interviewees received financial assistance from their parents when buying property in Shanghai, ranging from tens of thousands of yuan (the Chinese currency) as a gift to having the entire down payment paid for them. For some, like Ji Feng, it was necessary to convince their parents that buying property was a wise investment. For others, their parents were the ones who pushed for the decision. Under the current legal framework, as explained in the previous section, these properties would be considered the premarital property of these women, and marriage would not give their future spouses any claim to ownership.

In contemporary China, it is common for the parents of an only child to buy an apartment in the city for their adult children (Li and Yi 2007; Ma et al. 2011), reflecting and reinforcing the

trend within families that resources such as money flow primarily from parents to children, rather than the other way around (Shen 2013). However, Zhong's (2015) qualitative study on intergenerational cooperation and conflict in housing consumption in Guangzhou reveals that parents with multiple children exhibit a clear gender bias, favoring sons over daughters when purchasing homes for their children. This finding suggests that daughters who have male siblings have difficulty accessing the same opportunities for parental support as only daughters. This raises the question of whether so many of my informants would be homeowners if they were not only children. If these women had siblings, even if their parents had no gender bias and supported their children equally, the resources they could receive from their parents would be significantly reduced. The urban only daughters are quite privileged.

However, I want to draw attention to the fragility and limits of the empowerment that the urban only daughters have enjoyed. When urban daughters made great strides in education and status within their families, millions of girls in the same age group were missing[16] due to sex-selective abortion, infanticide, and, to a much less degree underreporting under the strict fertility control of the one-child policy (Ebenstein 2010). According to Ebenstein's estimation, "the number of 'missing girls' among children aged 0–18 increased from 3.4 million to 9.2 million between the 1990 and 2000 census" (Ibid., 94). Loh and Remick (2015) argue that China's skewed sex ratio cannot be fully explained by the one-child policy. Addressing son preference, is crucial in normalizing the sex ratio at birth. Although my informants may have been exempt from gender bias within their natal families, the society in which they live still harbors this deeply ingrained preference. I argue that the empowerment of urban daughters is both most pronounced and most limited within their families and within the context of their education; once they complete their education and step outside of their families, they are confronted with the constraints imposed by entrenched gender norms.

On the one hand, the gender-neutral expectation of their parents tends to end when these college-educated women finish their education. Many of my informants complained that their parents abruptly changed their focus when they completed their higher education. These parents told their daughters that marriage and family life were most important for a woman, which was in stark contrast to the parents' earlier exhortations to focus on their studies and not be distracted by romantic relationships. On the other hand, the education achievement they have

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[16] The natural sex ratio at birth for Caucasian and Asian populations, according to Banister (2004), is in the range of 105.0 and 107.0. In China, the sex ratio at birth (computed as male births per 100 female births) was 107.2 in 1982, 113.1 in 1987, 111.3 in 1990, 116.8 in 1995, 119.9 in 2000, and 120.5 in 2005. The rate is generally higher in rural areas and lower in cities, but the trends in rural and urban China are similar (Li 2007, 2).

accomplished do not necessarily translate into better chances in the job market (C. Li 2016), especially for the high-achievers[17]. Ji Feng's reflection is worth quoting at length because the predicament that she faced and observed is representative of this emerging group:

> My family did not instill much gender awareness in me when I was young. My father, a math teacher, valued intelligence regardless of gender. I grew up believing that boys and girls were equal... However, after graduating from undergraduate school, I noticed that the legal industry, including law firms and securities firms, seemed to favor men... Many of the men in my class had poor grades and didn't work hard enough to succeed, yet they landed better jobs with greater opportunities for advancement than women. This sense of unfairness was most pronounced when I graduated from graduate school. In graduate school, many female students are of reproductive age. Employers often ask women if they have a boyfriend or are planning to get married when they apply for a job. While the civil service and banks do not overtly discriminate against women, law firms, security firms, private equity firms, and similar businesses tend to see women only as assistants and secretaries, and value men because they can often travel to work on projects. As a result, there is a strange phenomenon: large foreign companies, as well as the civil service, often have more women in low-level positions due to the high number of women who have received tertiary education. However, the number of women in middle management and above is quite small.

Next, I will explore the gender norms, both persistent and emerging, that structure single professional women's life choices.

The Status of Gender (In)Equality and (Un)Changing Gender Norms

I was surprised at how often my young informants cited the Maoist dictum, "Women hold up half the sky (*funü neng ding banbiantian*)[18]," when I asked them about their understanding and

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[17] In her study on the empowerment of urban only daughters, Fong elaborates that in the educational system, there is "a significant bias against girls at the highest levels of academic achievement, but not at the middle and lower levels where the majority of students found themselves;" in the labor market, it is the middle level job market, especially in light industry and the service sector, that has a great demand for female workers, while "[w]omen are rare in the most prestigious and best-paid professions" (2002, 1103).

[18] Tracing the origin of the dictum "Women hold up half the sky" to popular folk sayings rather than to the invention of the CCP or Mao and its gradual adoption by the socialist state, Geng points out: "The meaning has changed from referring to and emphasizing women's role as 'laborers' to referring to and emphasizing women's equal status with men in all spheres of society, including politics, economics, and culture. To this day, 'half the

assessment of gender equality in China today. For the single professional women in this study, there is a consensus that economic independence is the determining factor in gender equality. They stress the importance of being able to work and support themselves without relying on men. Some of them went further, saying that they could not accept being a housewife, while being a housewife is a growing trend among younger women in China today (X. Wu 2014). The legacy of state-led women's liberation during the socialist era, which focused on and celebrated women's participation in socialist production while ignoring and even belittling their domestic and reproductive roles (Song 2012), still has a lasting impact on the younger generation's conceptualizations. My informants generally have a positive view of the status of women in China because of the high rate of female participation in the labor market compared to other countries, their mothers as working mothers, and their own employment in white-collar jobs. However, the economic independence they have come to take for granted through participation in the labor market may be on shaky ground.

Many scholars have drawn attention to the rise in gender inequality in the labor market driven by marketization during the post-socialist era. This has manifested in a significant rise in the gender pay gap (Cohen and Wang 2009; Tong 2010) and a consistent decrease in women's employment rates, particularly among urban women[19]. The mass layoff of female workers, including Ji Feng's mother, in state-owned enterprises during the 1990s exemplifies the challenges faced by women in an increasingly privatized economy. However, the younger generation of urban women with higher education, like my informants, have been able to take advantage of the growth of white-collar jobs, especially in foreign-invested sectors and multinational corporations; they have done well to the extent that "the social identity of white collars in China is often gendered female" (Duthie 2005, 5). It is the recent changes in the one-child policy, namely the relaxation of the policy in 2013 and the implementation of the universal two-child policy in 2016[20], that have significantly exacerbated existing discrimination against women in the labor market, and the setbacks for this cohort of women are immediately felt

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sky' has become the most important icon representing and symbolizing women's emancipation in contemporary China" (2007, 71).

[19] The Second and Third Surveys on the Social Status of Chinese Women, organized by the All-China Women's Federation and the National Bureau of Statistics, report that the employment rate for women aged 18-64 in both urban and rural areas was 90.5 % in 1990, 87 % in 2000, and 71.1 % in 2010; the rates for urban women were 76.3 %, 63.7 %, and 60.8 %, respectively (X. Wu 2014, 68).

[20] By 2011, all provinces allowed couples in which both parties were the only child to have two children. In November 2013, the CCP's Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee approved a partial two-child policy. This policy allows couples in which one party, rather than both parties, is an only child to have two children. In October 2015, the CCP's Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee decided to fully implement the universal two-child policy, which allows all couples to have two children. The policy took effect on January 1, 2016.

(Zhang et al. 2018; Zhang and Du 2019; Tan et al. 2018). A survey study conducted in 2016 by Tongquan Zhang and Yajun Zhang (2017) concludes that the universal two-child policy has a negative impact on women's employment by increasing labor costs for employers. This leads to increased difficulties in finding work, reduced wages and benefits, an increase in labor market dropout and informal employment for women. The impact is more pronounced for professional women with higher levels of education and income who work in first- and second-tier cities. Similarly, a quantitative study by Huang and Jin based on data from the China Family Panel Studies program between 2014 and 2018 finds that "the universal two-child policy has significantly reduced women's employment by 4.06% and decreased their labor income by 10.43%" (2022, 528). This study further shows that the policy is particularly detrimental to women under 25, reducing their employment opportunities by almost a quarter; to women with a bachelor's degree or higher, reducing their income by almost a third; and to women employed in private enterprises. The discrimination against women in hiring and promotion that Ji Feng experienced before the two-child policy only seemed to increase over time, according to my informants, as employers not only openly asked these single women about their plans to marry and have children, but also assumed that they would take two maternity leaves and become a burden to the employers. As educated women's opportunities in the workplace shrink, they may face more pressure to return to traditional female roles as domestic caregivers. In addition, the gender ideology that "men are in charge of the outside world and women are in charge of the home (*nanzhuwai nüzhunei*)" and the feminine ideal of being a virtuous wife and good mother (*xiangqi liangmu*) have always been strong.

It is a popular perception that there is a rupture between the socialist and post-socialist periods in terms of how femininity is conceptualized, performed, and represented. Mayfair Yang (1999), for example, categorizes the rupture as one from gender erasure to gender difference. Perhaps the most iconic representation of femininity during the socialist era are the Iron Girls—strong, sturdy, often short-haired women who performed heavy physical labor typically done by men, such as drilling, tunneling, driving tractors, etc.—realizing Mao's pronouncement, "Times have changed, men and women are the same; women can do anything men can do" (Honig 2000; Jin 2006; Zhang and Liu 2015). What has been rendered less visible against the strong impression of desexualized or masculinized female bodies of this period is the state's failure or reluctance to challenge and reform traditional gender roles and the resulting gendered division of domestic labor. The traditional gender ideology that "men are in charge of the outside world and women are in charge of the home" was reworked into the production-centered socialist mobilization (Jiang 2012; Song 2012). On the one hand, as a labor force,

women were treated as complementary and secondary to men. When jobs became scarce, women workers were quickly pushed back into the domestic sphere to make way for male workers (Jin 2006; Song 2012). On the other hand, the family was conceived as an instrument for realizing the state's goal of nation-building, and it was primarily women's responsibility to maintain marital harmony and a thrifty household. The National Women's Congress repeatedly called on women to "be good logistical soldiers for the realization of the four modernizations, carefully raise the offspring of the revolution, and handle marriage and family relations with socialist thinking" (Jiang 2012, 3). The ideal wife was to support her husband, and "[a]t no point should a wife's attachment to symbols and practices of public engagement allow her to threaten male authority" (Evans 2002, 339). Moreover, domestic work was portrayed as women's special difficulties (*teshu kunnan*) to be overcome by their revolutionary will; as a result, "reproductive responsibilities were largely individualized and feminized (not domesticated, as the primary responsibility of male workers in the family was still to participate in productive labor)" (Song 2012, 123). The work unit system provided social services such as kindergartens and public canteens, which eased the burden on urban women to some extent. However, the socialist state did not fundamentally challenge or change the deeply ingrained ideology that housework was naturally a woman's domain. Women had to bear a double burden in order to become subjects of the state (Jiang 2012). For women, including the Iron Girls, despite their advances in the productive sphere, the subject position of not marrying or having children never arose.

In addition, the traditional gender ideology that "men are in charge of the outside world and women are in charge of the home" is also supported by an essentialist understanding of gender as "a naturally ordained set of characteristics and attributes corresponding to biological functions" that dates back to the early twentieth century during the Republican era and has remained dominant ever since (Evans 2002, 335; see also Evans 1997; Dikötter 1995). Based on this essentialist conceptualization, "the female gender is defined by a series of innate and essential characteristics associated with certain responses, needs, and capacities that naturally make women wives and mothers. Wifehood, and its invariable expression in motherhood, is the relational and biological state in which women find their truest expression*"* (Evans 2002, 336). In the socialist era, the image of the natural mother was not in the limelight amidst the preoccupation with production. In the post-socialist era, on the one hand, the image of the natural mother came to the fore again as public discourses recanted the gender politics of the

socialist era as a "murder of human nature, of women's nature"[21] and shifted the focus to the assertion of gender difference, especially traditional feminine traits (Yang 1999, 47). On the other hand, consumerism and postfeminist discourses have constructed an upgraded version of the natural mother image, known as super mothers (Zhong and Guo 2018) or super-hot mothers (Shen 2014), who balance both their career and family life, appealing to and interpellating urban educated women. In a nutshell, despite their participation and achievements in education, social production, and consumption, women in both the socialist and post-socialist periods are persistently expected to fulfill the roles of wives and mothers. The prevailing gender ideology consistently dictates that only through marriage and reproduction can women find their truest expression, while other pursuits are seen as complementary rather than essential.

Compared to the state's newfound concern with the declining birth rate, this persistent gender norm for women is the main reason why the emerging cohort of single professional women face tremendous pressure for their unmarried status. My informants almost unanimously identify their parents as the greatest source of pressure. This persistent gender norm also explains why parents of single professional women, who lived through the socialist era, viewed their daughters' prolonged singlehood as transgressive and pressured them to marry. In this sense, the emergence of single professional women and the tendency among them to delay marriage represent the first wave of collective questioning and, to a lesser extent, rebellion against this gender norm. As the following chapters will show, these young women are dissociating wifehood and motherhood from womanhood. At the same time, their negotiations with dominant gender ideologies are fraught with contradictions and accommodations.

The Individual and the State

The label most frequently used by my informants to describe themselves is the modern independent woman (*xiandai duli nüxing*). In addition to economic independence through

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[21] Rofel also argues that the denunciation of Maoism as a repression of human nature constitutes a post-socialist consciousness among Chinese, especially intellectuals, or what she calls an allegory: "In this post-socialist allegory, Maoist women's liberation is portrayed as a transgression of innate femininity that repressed gendered human nature. Maoist repression, so the story goes, deferred China's embrace of modernity by impeding Chinese people's ability to express their essential humanity, which lay beneath the cultural politics of socialism. The view that political culture impeded China's ability to reach modernity is thus wedded to the retelling of history, so that a history of emancipation from Maoism can remake the legitimacy of the state" (1999, 31). See Barlow (2004) for a critical examination of Li Xiaojiang, one of the leading feminists of the 1980s and a proponent of this post-socialist allegory, her feminist critique of the Maoist gender regime based on Marxist humanism, and her call for the recovery of women's natural femininity. See also Rofel (2007) for a discussion of Li Xiaojiang's feminist project.

employment, they also emphasize two other important dimensions of independence. One dimension is the belief that they must rely on themselves, and through personal efforts they can overcome social biases, such as the stigma of being unmarried, gender discrimination in the workplace, and potential challenges that may arise from entering marriage, such as child-rearing responsibilities and caring for other family members. Another aspect of independence is the conviction that they live for themselves and pursue personal happiness. They identify with the concept of individualism, despite the negative connotations that others may associate with it, such as selfishness and egotism, as exemplified in the case of Ji Feng, who faced criticism from her colleagues at the tax bureau. The valorization of independence among single professional women is not unique. Rather, their preoccupation with and belief in the self reflects the radical transformation that has taken place in the subjective domain of the Chinese people from the socialist to the post-socialist era.

Yan Yunxiang (2010) theorizes the transformation of the subjective domain as the rise of the individual. Yan distinguishes two phases of individualization in Chinese society since 1949. First, he traces the origin of the individualization process to certain collectivist programs, such as the rural collectives and the urban work units, during the Maoist era (1949-1976). Although individuals were fixed into "an almost immutable position with a standard biography," with their private lives penetrated by socialist transformation projects such as the new marriage law and the women's liberation movement, the Chinese individuals were disembedded from traditional networks, values, and behavioral norms, but at the same time re-embedded as socialist subjects "who prioritize[d] their loyalty to the party-state over their filial duties to the parents and family and devote[d] themselves to the grand revolutionary goals instead of individual interests" (Ibid., 492).

Second, Yan argues that the process of individualization since the late 1970s, driven by marketization and privatization, consists of "a twofold social transformation, namely the rise of the individual ... and the individualization of the social structure" (Ibid., 495). The individualization of the social structure began with the privatization of labor and the economy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, first in rural China and later in urban China. In addition, since the late 1990s, three reforms have further deepened the transformation of the social structure: the privatization of housing, the marketization of education, and the marketization of medical care. As the standard biography is first disrupted by the marketization of employment and the state retreats from the private sphere, Chinese individuals are granted more choices as well as responsibilities. In the subjective realm, the Chinese individual is increasingly becoming an

enterprising self (see e.g. Hanser 2002; Hoffman 2010), i.e. "the calculating, proactive and self-disciplined self" (Yan 2010, 504), as well as a desiring self (see e.g. Rofel 2007), which attaches increasing importance to emotionality and personal "desires of various sorts—sexual, material and affective" (Yan 2010, 505). Those desires are certainly not "new to Chinese individuals, but in both the traditional and socialist cultures, they could never be openly…elaborated, negotiated, and celebrated in…public places…[A] new inner self is constructed, replacing the previous socialist notion of class consciousness with a post-socialist notion of personal desire" (Ibid., 504-5). This drastic transformation from subjects of the socialist state to subjects of personal desire, interest, and responsibility is also emphasized by my informants. These young women repeatedly assert that they are very different from their parents' generation, pointing out that the two generations have widely divergent perspectives on life and thus appear to be very different beings. They also take a linear view to characterize this difference between the generations, placing themselves at the more modern and therefore progressive end of the spectrum and their parents at the more traditional and outdated end of the spectrum[22]. For them, the key site for articulating their modern subjectivity is how they challenge and negotiate gender norms.

Regarding the role of the state, Yan (2010) argues that in both socialist and post-socialist China, the process and degree of individualization are driven and determined by the state; the state sets the limits of freedom and liberty that Chinese individuals enjoy in the private sphere today; the state continues to view the Chinese individual as a means to the end of modernization. From a Foucauldian theoretical background, Ong and Zhang (2008) similarly conclude that marketization and privatization have led to a shift in the self-consciousness of the Chinese people, from "'relying on the state' (*kao guojia*) to 'relying on yourself' (*kao ziji*)" (Ibid., 8). In particular, Ong and Zhang emphasize the internalization of private responsibility among ordinary Chinese who accept "to take their life into their own hands and to face the consequences of their decisions on their own" (Ibid., 16), and argue that such a self-enterprising

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[22] This strong sense of generational difference among young women has also been captured by Rofel (2007). The young women in Rofel's study who never experienced Maoist socialism in the 1990s "explicitly contrasted what they viewed as their own life-enhancing practices with the self-sacrifices they interpreted as having dominated their parents' lives" (Ibid., 4). Rofel further argues that what these young women have constructed is a discourse of opposition "between a past where politics equals constraint versus a future in which consumption and the pursuit of wealth means freedom" (Ibid., 125): while their mother's generation represents traditional culture, they see themselves as unencumbered by the state and can "transcend this tradition in order to become desirable, globalized subjects" (Ibid., 126). Such a discursive construction has echoes and also divergences in the narratives of my informants, partly because I have not focused as much as Rofel on the role of consumption in the formation of young women's subjectivity.

and self-governing self is the optimal subject for post-socialist/neoliberal governmentality, allowing the state to govern from afar. Chinese individuals have gained increased micro-freedoms "to experiment with—taking care of the self in the domains of livelihood, commerce, consumption, and lifestyles," thus "widening the space between the…state and everyday activities that are now under individual control" (Ibid., 7). But these micro-freedoms do not include political rights; the state sets the limits on the desires and interests that individuals can pursue. In essence, the *kao ziji* subjectivity is in symbiosis with the maintenance of authoritarian rule. However, the micro-freedoms, although tightly regulated and controlled by the state, or exercised through consumerism, have given rise to new social relations, such a new civil rights movement (*weiquan yundong*), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and so on. In place of the teleologically loaded term civil society, Ong and Zhang propose the concept of a new social "as emerging through the complex interrelationships and interactions between the power of the self and the power of the state" (Ibid., 13). With this theoretical framework and through the lens of gender, the group of single professional women in this study will demonstrate the diversity and contingency of the enterprising and desiring self, as well as the interplay between the individual and the state.

Marriage is one area where the Chinese state has clearly retreated, or at least loosened its control, as discussed about earlier. Whereas my informants' parents needed permission from their work units or rural communes to marry, and urban couples depended on the state for marital housing, since 2003 couples no longer need letters of support from their employers or the villagers' or residents' committee to apply for marriage or divorce (Minfa 2003). It is not surprising, therefore, that my informants feel they have much more freedom than their parents, and that they see marriage as an entirely private relationship between two individuals and, at most, their respective birth families. The state, with its regulatory and enabling power, is distant, if not absent, from these young women's conception of marriage and family life. Viewing marriage and family as entirely private relationships leads these young women to view reproduction, child-rearing, caring for family members, and other family-related responsibilities also as private matters to be managed on their own. My informants take the internalization of private responsibility, especially for child-rearing[23], for granted. However, they rarely mention, let alone question or criticize, the state's dismantling of social welfare.

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[23] At the time of my research, my informants were in their 20s and 30s, and their parents were still relatively young; therefore, caring for their parents was not an immediate concern for these young women. On the other hand, most of them wanted to get married and have children, as will be shown in Chapter 3, and they had female friends and relatives who were raising children, so child care was a much more tangible aspect of their future lives.

During the socialist era, children were considered "not as privately possessed by parents, but as 'flowers of the motherland' and 'successors of communism'—the nation's fortune" (Jin 2013, 58). Although the state did not aim to transform the gendered division of labor in the family or the natural mother discourse, it did attempt to alleviate women's double burden by collectivizing certain child care tasks. For example, it established nursing rooms, nurseries, kindergartens, and other social services such as public canteens through work units (Jiang 2012; Jin 2013). As marketization unfolds, the limited coverage of social welfare and child care services by work units is being withdrawn from the state and marketized. Access to these services, which used to be determined by one's household registration status (urban or rural) and employment status (employed by a work unit or not), now depends on the resources one can muster[24]. And re-familialization has become an important strategy for Chinese individuals to maximize resources, provide for themselves, and manage risk in post-socialist China.

In the socialist period, the state's various collectivist economic and social programs disembedded individuals from traditional family-centered interpersonal relationships and at the same time made individuals dependent on the state for welfare provision. This can be seen as a process of de-familialization, as familialism[25] is defined as "the idea that the family should have the greatest welfare responsibility towards its members, both in income distribution and care provision" (Ochiai 2011, 230). In the post-socialist period, the state retreats and molds the individuals to be self-enterprising and self-governing subjects. For many Chinese today, relying on yourself is interchangeable with relying on your family, or intergenerational resource flows, for housing (Zhong 2015), child care (Shen 2011), elder care or lack thereof (Thøgersen and Ni 2010; Yan 2003). This is the process of re-familialization. The one-child policy makes the relationship between only daughters and their parents even closer. As mentioned earlier, my informants have received a lot of resources from their parents to pursue their education and settle down in Shanghai. They also expect to receive more support from their parents once they have children. They admit that child-rearing is a challenge and could be detrimental to women's

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[24] Zhang and Maclean's (2012) study examines the transformation of institutional child care in China since 1980, focusing in particular on the restructuring of kindergartens. They find that there has been a gradual dissolution of public kindergartens, mainly driven by the disappearance of kindergartens run by work units and communities, while the number of kindergartens directly run by the education departments of governments at various levels has remained stable. At the same time, there has been a rapid expansion of private kindergartens. And the state has successfully reduced its funding responsibility for kindergartens to a minimum, leaving parents as the main financial contributors and thus creating "huge class differences in formal care utilization" (Ibid., 676).

[25] Familialism is also strong in various East Asian societies, such as South Korea and Japan, not only because of their Confucian heritage, but also because these states have institutionalized family responsibility for social reproduction and public welfare in order to relieve the state of these duties in order to supposedly focus on economic development (Chang and Song 2010; Ochiai 2011; Croll 2006).

careers, but the solution they have in mind is to shoulder all the responsibilities and costs themselves, namely through their future nuclear family and with the help of their parents. Few, like Ji Feng, point to the lack of support from the state or government. As modern independent women, my informants feel responsible for themselves.

Kao ziji is the main ethos of Chinese people today, and the group of women I interviewed is no exception. However, there is also an emerging identification with feminism, however they define it, and a collective identity as women among this group. In this case, the new social between the power of the self and the power of the state is the multiplicity of discourses and practices of gender in China today. During the socialist era, gender discourses were dominated by the state; in the post-socialist era, gender discourses are structured by the interplay between the state, the market, and traditional culture (X. Wu 2009). It is already discussed in the previous section that during the socialist era the state led women into the public domain of production to serve the goal of socialist revolution and construction, without fundamentally transforming deep-rooted gender ideologies that naturalized women's domestic responsibilities. In the post-socialist era, X. Wu argues, the state has on the one hand added a focus on protecting women's rights and interests to the long-standing discourse of gender equality; on the other hand, the state has colluded with the market, both preaching individual qualities and competencies (*suzhi*[26]) without addressing structural gender inequalities. X. Wu goes on to explain that the *suzhi* discourse on women is bifurcated: one is competitiveness based on education and personal effort, which is supported and mobilized by the state because of its strong connection to the pursuit of modernity; the other is the objectification of women and especially their bodies, which is not only anchored in traditional discourses on femininity but also promoted by consumerism (Ibid., 170-2).

In terms of gender discourses, China has moved from a phase of gender erasure to one of emphasizing gender difference (Yang 1999). Rather than asking whether women's status has generally improved or deteriorated, a question that Whyte (2000) argues can be fraught with perils, Yang draws attention to the potential of emphasizing gender difference:

> Of course, gender difference was not completely erased [during the socialist period]...
> However, in many social situations, gender became an unmarked and neutralized

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[26] See Kipnis (2007) for a discussion of the *suzhi* discourse and neoliberal governmentality in contemporary China.

category, its role as a vessel of self-identity was greatly diminished, and it lost its significance for gender politics, which was replaced by class politics. (Yang 1999, 41)

The new market economy harbors retrograde forces that would return some women to the domestic sphere, position women in lower-level jobs, and subjugate women to male desire. At the same time, the logic of such desiring production also holds out a possibility of releasing female desire, which would work on a neglected area of state feminism: women's culture, psychology, sexuality, and discourse. (Ibid., 63-4)

Yang argues that consumerism's celebration of women's bodies, sexuality, and domestic roles has once again made gender a potential vessel for a collective identity, allowing women to shift their subjective consciousness from identifying themselves as subjects of class and state to subjects of gender. Yang also points out that the market has carved out a public space from state discourse and state control, enabling women to speak in public with their own voices and thus spawn feminist movements. At the time of Yang's research, the publishing industry was the main arena for the dissemination of feminist voices. At the time of my research, it is mainly through the Internet, especially social media such as Weibo and WeChat, that my informants engage in feminist discourses. The enormous pressure they face to marry and the social stigma of their unmarried status often serve as a catalyst for them to develop collective anger, question gender norms, and even become feminists. Once they become feminists and engage in feminist organizing, the state is no longer afar. The micro-freedoms granted to individuals to maximize personal interests and experiment with lifestyle choices are replaced by state repression.

Research Chronology and Methods

This dissertation is based on qualitative methods, including interviews, focus groups, participant observations, and textual analysis. I conducted fieldwork in Shanghai in 2014, 2015, 2017 and 2018. Each time, I spent between 3 and 4 months in the city. I followed the core tenets of grounded theory: "(1) minimizing preconceived ideas about the research problem and the data, (2) using simultaneous data collection and analysis to inform each other, (3) remaining open to varied explanations and/or understandings of the data, and (4) focusing data analysis to construct middle-range theories" (Charmaz 2008, 155). Analytical themes emerged from the empirical data I collected, and one period of fieldwork usually informed the focus of the next period of fieldwork.

I went to university in Shanghai and also worked in the city. Hence before I started this research, I already had an extensive social network in Shanghai. When I arrived in Shanghai in the fall of 2014, I first tried to recruit informants from my own social circles, where there were many single women. Soon after, an artist friend told me about a training course for single people, the Love Club. After I explained my research, the founders of the Love Club allowed me to conduct participant observation at their events and talk to the participants. I immediately abandoned my original plan and instead immersed myself in the Love Club. Between October and December 2014, I attended various events hosted and recommended by the Love Club, such as lectures, social parties, and workshops. I also conducted one-on-one interviews with 22 Love Club participants. In these interviews, these single women described the training course offered by the Love Club, why they signed up for it, how the course influenced them, and also shared how they experienced marriage pressures.

While there was much doubt and negotiation about what marriage meant for a woman in the Love Club informants' narratives, the focus was overwhelmingly on the self, self-improvement, and the crafting of a modern, independent femininity. Thus, in 2015, I organized focus groups to further explore how single women conceptualize marriage and, in particular, what kind of masculinities appeal to them. I contacted some informants I had met through the Love Club, as well as my own friends. Some agreed to be interviewed by me and some introduced me to their friends who were interested in my research. I approached them individually and suggested that they brought their own single female friends. In the end, ten groups were formed by the informants with their own friends. Each group comprised two to four single women. In total, 25 women participated in my focus groups, 2 of whom I had interviewed at the Love Club the previous year. During the group discussion, I showed video clips from the popular dating show *If You Are the One* (*feichengwurao*) to start the discussion. In retrospect, the visual prompt did not seem necessary because the women who participated in the group discussions had a lot to say about what they thought about marriage, suitable partners, ideal family life, and gender equality, as well as what they thought about others' views on these issues.

During these group discussions, as informants imagined family life and child rearing, they foregrounded potential conflicts with their work, and some gave vivid examples of their married friends struggling with the double burden of family and work. In addition, some of the informants I got to know were making drastic changes in their careers. I was intrigued to explore the career aspirations of single women. Between 2017 and 2018, I collected two sets of data in Shanghai. On the one hand, I attended various public events, such as evening salons and multi-

day workshops, both free and paid, on women's career advancement and entrepreneurship. This was a time when the government was heavily promoting mass entrepreneurship, and start-ups and coworking spaces were mushrooming in Shanghai. During these events, I approached attendees and interviewed those who identified themselves as single professional women and were interested in participating in my research. I also talked to some of the organizers (mostly expatriate women) of these events and asked them about their thoughts on the structural difficulties that women face in both the corporate world and the start-up scene. On the other hand, I recruited informants both from previous fieldwork and from my own social circle. My selection criteria were working single women who had changed careers out of personal interest. In total, I interviewed 30 women, 9 of whom I had interviewed in previous years, about their career aspirations.

Feminist activism was not part of my original research plan. In 2017, I was initially looking at various professional women's networks and initiatives. The founder of Ladies Who Tech, an initiative that promotes the advancement of women in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), suggested during our interview (perhaps sensing my interest before I realized it) that I get in touch with her friend Lilian, who was working to combat domestic violence. Through Lilian, I was introduced to Joy, another grassroots organizer, and stumbled upon the small and peripheral feminist activist scene in Shanghai. I attended events organized by Lilian and Joy when I was in Shanghai. While Lilian and Joy were running active feminist projects at the time of my fieldwork, Gloria, another feminist, was on hiatus at the time and recounted her experiences in retrospect. I interviewed them in person on more than one occasion, with one interview with Joy in 2021 conducted over the phone.

With the exception of these three activists, I used pseudonyms for other single professional women informants in this dissertation. In face-to-face interviews, including focus groups, I explained my research to the interviewees. Each interview, including the focus group, was semi-structured, lasted between 1 and 4 hours, and was audio-recorded with permission[27]. I then transcribed most of the recorded interviews in full. At events I attended, I disclosed my identity as a researcher when asked. Otherwise, I observed and participated like any other participant. I then took detailed notes about the events and my impressions. Of the more than 60 single

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[27] One exception is an informant at the Love Club who did not want to be recorded, but allowed me to take extensive notes during the interview. Another exception is an informant who was interviewed over the phone in 2017, and I was only able to take notes during the phone call. There was also one occasion in 2017 when the recording equipment malfunctioned and the interview was not recorded, even though the informant agreed to be recorded.

professional women[28] I interviewed, the majority come from urban families and are the only child of their parents; almost all are college-educated, white-collar workers, and heterosexual; about half are Shanghai natives and half have migrated to Shanghai at various stages in their lives.

Shanghai as the Research Site

I asked my informants what was special about Shanghai for them as single professional women. Three characteristics were most often mentioned. First, these women considered Shanghai to be permissive for them because the city is full of single women like them. Their observation is supported by demographic data showing a strong trend of delaying marriage among educated young people, especially women in Shanghai, which may eventually lead to a decline in universal marriage (Cai and Wang 2014). For women who migrated to Shanghai, the distance from their families gave them a greater sense of freedom and permissibility. Second, my informants often praised Shanghai's vibrant cultural scene and abundant consumer opportunities, which allowed them to lead satisfying single lives. Many informants admitted that they would not be able to attend events such as feminist events, women's entrepreneurship workshops, or the Love Club where I met them if they lived in a smaller city. Their enjoyment of these events and of consumerism, the latter of which is not emphasized in this dissertation but is certainly an important aspect of their single lives, is predicated on their relatively privileged economic status.

Third, the high price of real estate in Shanghai is a social reality that these women have to deal with. On the one hand, many informants complained that either renting or buying a property, but especially the latter, put a lot of economic pressure on them and took away a large part of their monthly disposable income. As a result, many Shanghai natives chose to live with their parents to save money, even though living together created tensions. Some informants complained that they were not qualified to buy property because they did not have permanent residency (*hukou*) in Shanghai and were not married (see also Fincher 2014). Not surprisingly, when asked to evaluate their life in Shanghai in general, many informants concluded that everything was fine except that housing was too expensive. On the other hand, the high price also makes the importance of housing, especially who pays for it at marriage, much greater in

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[28] See Appendix I for a list of all the informants.

Shanghai than in smaller cities. A small apartment can easily cost millions of yuan in Shanghai, but only a fraction of the price in smaller cities. Ji Feng gave the example of her cousin who had just gotten married in Ji Feng's hometown of Changzhou, a city in the economically prosperous province of Jiangsu. According to Ji Feng, because housing in Changzhou was not so expensive, it was common for couples to each have a premarital property and, if necessary, acquire a new property for marriage. As a result, her cousin never thought much about property when deciding to marry. The influence or distortion that housing has on young people's marriage decisions, as observed by Ji Feng and some other informants, is peculiar to first-tier cities such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Guangzhou. What Ji Feng and others have omitted is their own (and their parents') socioeconomic status, which has made it easier for them to own property in smaller cities.

My Positionality

As a single woman in my late 20s and early 30s, I found it easy to build rapport with my informants because they tended to see me as one of them. When they asked me about my personal life, such as my relationship status, my relationship or tensions with my parents, whether I felt pressured, and how I coped with the pressure, I would answer openly, which I think helped me further gain their trust. Initially, or more precisely in 2014 and 2015, I was concerned about how my status as a researcher from a prestigious European university affected the way my informants interacted with me. During the interviews, I noticed that some women referred to me as "highly educated," "Westernized," or "highly influenced by Western values," without necessarily elaborating on what they meant by Western values. I therefore hypothesized that there might be a tendency for some informants to construct certain images of themselves that they felt were closer to my positions. In other words, they might emphasize in their narratives ideas that they considered more modern and Western, and hide the more traditional ideas to which they subscribed. They performed a certain kind of femininity in front of me.

That hypothesis is still possible. But as I talked to more single professional women and got to know some of them over the years, I developed a different understanding. It became clearer to me that these women were holding many different and sometimes conflicting ideas at the same time, as Ji Feng so eloquently exemplified. They were probably not intentionally performing a more progressive femininity in front of me to gain my approval. They probably just felt safe, comfortable, or simply did not fear repercussions since I was a stranger, to express

some of the myriad ideas they had while being interviewed by me. For example, it took me a long time to realize that for some women it was difficult to declare that they might not want or need marriage because it might be a taboo in their social circles; for me, it was probably the most natural thing to say as a woman. Therefore, my assumed similarity to my informants was also an obstacle. I assumed that I knew what they meant, ignoring the fact that I lived in Europe, disembedded from my family and social networks in China, and therefore not subject to the social reality they were continually faced with. Upon rereading the interview transcripts, I realized that I had missed opportunities to ask my informants follow-up questions and instead relied on my own speculations. As a result, my interpretations of the narratives of the women I interviewed were influenced by my experiences and perspectives.

As this research unfolded, my identity as a feminist grew stronger. The burgeoning new wave of the feminist movement was dealt a severe blow in 2015, when several feminist activists were arrested across China on the eve of International Women's Day. Since then, the political environment has become increasingly hostile to feminist organizing. After getting to know feminist activists Joy and Lilian in 2017, actively participating in events they organized, and including Gloria, a feminist I had previously known, in my research, I began to think more actively about what I could do to help spread the feminist agenda. Gradually, I began to treat my interviews with individual women as a platform. I used interviews conducted in 2017 and 2018 to discuss my ideas about gender issues with my informants. Already in 2014 and 2015, I noticed that quite a few informants closely followed discussions about gender issues on social media, and some asked my opinion about the arguments they had read. It is not far-fetched to say that among the group of women I studied, there was an interest in gender issues and feminism, even if it was perhaps not widespread. In her study of the mother-daughter relationship in China, Evans finds that "[t]he language of 'liberation,' 'emancipation,' and 'equality' that women of the 1950s were accustomed to hearing with reference to their publicly remunerated work did not offer any conceptual tools to reflect on women's activities and gender relations in the 'inside' sphere" (2008, 107). As a result, women who were mothers during the socialist period lacked the discursive resources to demand that their husbands take on more domestic responsibilities, even if they felt a sense of injustice. This demonstrates the need for feminist concepts and ideas for women to challenge constraining gender norms. Among my informants, discontent was probably the most common emotion, but some lamented that they could not articulate what was wrong. I did not see myself as an educator, much less a liberator. I merely hoped that by offering a gendered perspective instead of the individualistic approach most of them believed in, I would provide them with alternative discursive resources that might

help them better cope with the pressures and gain more confidence in practicing their ideas. For me, I also had the valuable opportunity to try out what kinds of topics and arguments work in persuasion. I discussed this with Joy and Gloria. Based on my interaction with single professional women in my research and their feminist projects, we all concluded that the stigmatization of single women, marriage and child-rearing are issues that are most likely to attract the attention of urban young women and intrigue them to develop further interest in gender issues and feminism.

Outline of the Chapters

In this introduction, I have foregrounded the state and how it has structured women's lives. In the chapters that follow, the state will be largely absent from the self-narratives of my informants and will only be central to the narratives of feminist activists. Nevertheless, the following chapters will show different dimensions of the interplay between single professional women, gender norms, and the state.

Chapter 2 focuses on a commercial love training course called the Love Club, the demand for which is driven primarily by single professional women. The success of this course, I argue, lies in the way it addresses the pressures of marriage through the therapeutic culture's reinvention of the self. The Love Club is particularly appealing to single women because it produces an alternative subject position that I call "a daring and desiring self." To become this new self, single women in the Love Club work hard to transform the self, especially by reworking their relationships with their parents, redefining women's position vis-à-vis men in relationships, and readjusting their attitudes toward sex. While this can empower single women, it also comes with discomfort, uncertainty, and new modes of control.

Chapter 3, in contrast to Chapter 2, is based on data from focus groups conducted in 2015 and examines a more general group of single professional women and how they conceptualize marriage, noting how certain themes and understandings are shared by single women in general, not just members of the Love Club. I draw attention to how they engage in self-policing in imagining desirable masculinities: as modern independent women, as opposed to morally dubious materialistic girls or traditional dependent women, they value emotional compatibility over economic status and demand greater gender equality in their partner selection. On the one hand, I find that these women challenge the centrality of marriage in defining femininity, as

well as the rigid gendered division of labor within the heterosexual family. On the other hand, I point out that the majority of them still subscribe to the natural mother discourse, see marriage and reproduction as private matters, and imagine that all family and child-rearing responsibilities should be handled by the family.

Chapter 4 zeroes in on a small group of women who follow the "Do What You Love" mantra and explore unconventional career paths. They take the challenge of heteronormativity a step further. First, they reject the gendered prioritization of job stability in favor of uncertainty and challenge. Their vision of self-actualization involves pursuing passionate and meaningful work rather than conforming to heteronormative ideals centered on the nuclear family. Second, they challenge the middle class's embrace of materialism, and some consciously seek to carve out a new space for alternative values and lifestyles. It is important to note that their rebellion is highly individualistic and embodies the *kao ziji* ethos, which relieves the state of its responsibility to protect labor rights and provide social welfare.

While the previous three chapters demonstrate how single professional women disagree with, challenge, or accommodate dominant gender norms through an individualistic approach, Chapter 5 looks at three grassroots feminist activists and their efforts to bring a collective perspective to the transformation of gender relations in contemporary China. In these cases, the relationship between the individual and the state is tense and confrontational. The state is a complex entity comprised of a variety of actors. The personal experiences of the three activists provide insight into who embodies the state and the tactics used to repress activists. I highlight the emotional and psychological damage suffered by the activists, as well as their resilience and creativity in surviving state repression.

In the coda, I reflect on the limitations of this dissertation, discuss recent developments in the state's structuring of the institution of marriage, and hypothesize about the social changes that the group of single professional women may bring about.

Chapter 2

Producing the Daring and Desiring Self in the Love Club

A Lecture on Doing Intimate Relationships

It was 7 p.m. on October 19, 2014, in Shanghai. About 40 young men and women, along with a pair of parents, gathered in a dance studio near the People's Square to study. They sat on the floor, seemingly eager for the weekly Love Club (*lian'ai xunlianying*) lecture. This week's lecture was titled "11 Steps from Getting Acquainted, Dating to Getting Married." Bob[1], a tall middle-aged man and co-founder of the Love Club, wrote the following 11 steps on a large white piece of paper:

> 1. Getting to know each other; 2. Dating; 3. Confirming the relationship; 4. Having sex; 5. Continuing to date and get to know each other better; 6. Traveling together (staying overnight); 7. Intending to get married; 8. Meeting each other's parents; 9. Staying together on weekends to get to know each other's habits; 10. Getting married; 11. Holding the wedding ceremony.

Bob began the lecture by asking the audience where to meet potential partners. "Gyms!" "Hobby groups!" came loudly from all corners of the room. Bob teased a lady in the front row if she knew what kind of men frequented gyms. "Gay men!" some whispered. The audience immediately erupted in laughter, a joyous scene that would be repeated over the next two hours. Bob proudly introduced two interests that he had recently taken up: cycling and smoking cigars. He guaranteed that if the women in the audience took up cycling or cigar-related activities, they would have a good chance of meeting quality men. Bob then went through each of the 11 steps. He warned, however, that a relationship can stop at any stage, and when that happens, one needs to get to know another person to start all over again.

Speaking of Step 3, Bob asked if anyone remembered the four indicators; it is said that none of the four can be absent to confirm a relationship. Embarrassingly, both Bob and the veteran

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[1] All of the names of the founders, counselors and trainers of the Love Club or recommended by the Love Club are real names, or names that they use on their own.

audience dug up only three, namely confessing love, announcing the relationship to mutual friends, and being exclusive, and the fourth indicator could not be remembered all night. Regarding sex, Bob emphasized that it can take place at any stage after initial acquaintance and that the Love Club recommends premarital sex. When it came to Step 8, Bob looked solemn and asked: "Is parental blessing a prerequisite for marriage?" Opinions varied in the audience. Bob quickly summarized: "You are an adult, an individual with an independent personality. So it is not a prerequisite."

Time was running out. Bob gave up analyzing the last two steps and opened the floor to questions from the audience, especially from first-timers. A young man, attending Love Club events for the first time, put down his pen and notebook, looked confused but sincere, and asked: "Bob, you say that it usually takes about a year from the beginning of a relationship to marriage. So in that one year of relationship (*tan lian'ai*), what in the world do you do: just eat out and go to the movies?" All of a sudden, the whole room was filled with the sound of laughter and mockery. Bob jokingly asked the receptionist to come in with a cash register so that this young man could pay for the training course immediately.

Although this lecture presented a roadmap to marriage, at the end of the lecture Bob recommended a book called *Be Good with You, but Ease When I am Alone*[2], written by Wu Di, the other founder of the Love Club. Bob explained that he thought the audience should already discover that marriage is not the only means to happiness, since many of the audience's parents' marriages are not happy at all; the Love Club therefore encourages its students to seek out romantic relationships. However, as Bob further explained, the goal of the Love Club is not only to teach students how to develop a romantic relationship, but more importantly, to teach students how to handle interpersonal relationships in general. The Love Club wants to turn its students into "nice, charming, and lovable individuals" who are good at socializing, a trait the Chinese are said to lack. At the end of the lecture, some audience members approached the receptionist for more information about the three-month training course, and some asked Bob for private instruction.

What happens in this classroom? In this chapter, I will first introduce what love training is in the Love Club. Second, I will explore how the Love Club appeals to single professional

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[2] This is the English title of the book, which is a collection of short essays on various issues related to the attitudes and practices of contemporary Chinese youth in marriage and relationships. The Chinese title is *lianggeren hen meihao, yigeren ye zizai*, which literally means that it is nice to have a partner, but one can also be comfortable being single.

women by appropriating global therapeutic culture and its construction of a particular subject (Giddens 1992; Rose 1998 and 1999; Illouz 2008; Rimke and Brock 2011). I argue that the Love Club successfully persuades its participants to focus on the self by suggesting that a daring and desiring self can be created out of a sick and suffering self. I then examine what constitutes this new self, focusing on three key self-transformations that single women participants experience as self-improvement and empowerment. By renegotiating relationships with parents, positions vis-à-vis men, and attitudes toward sex, these single women assert their individuality and agency. I conclude by pointing out the dual consequences of pursuing such an alternative subjectivity. The promise of independence, autonomy, and individuality for single women is biopolitical (Foucault 2012a) because empowerment also entails normalization and policing.

The Emerging Business of Love Training and the Love Club

Since the 1990s, a psy-fever or psycho-boom (*xinli re*), that is, the flourishing of psychological ideas, practices, and institutions, has swept urban China. The initial rehabilitation of psychology and psychiatry as legitimate fields in academic and medical institutions after the Cultural Revolution has evolved into a substantial growth of academic psychology and psychiatry, creating a small professional sector consisting of university-based psychology professors and hospital-based psychiatrists, as well as institutional psychotherapists and counselors. At the center of the fever, however, is a bottom-up, market-driven private sector targeting the broader society, especially the urban middle class (H. Huang 2015; L. Zhang 2020). H. Huang further points out that a distinctive feature of the boom is the commercialization of psychological training (*peixun*) and its huge popularity among the urban middle class, and the frenzy seems to "be more about the consumption of these training programmes than gaining access to psychotherapy services;" and the notion of training "entails a wide range of motivations that are not necessarily related to the pursuit of a professional career" (2015, 13). L. Zhang also highlights the fact that the vast majority of young urbanites who enroll in commercial training programs for certified psychological counselors "seek such training primarily as a form of self-care and self-development" (2020, 34).

This widespread acceptance of psychological training has in recent years given rise to a new niche sector known as "love training," which seeks to tap into the highly lucrative marriage

market[3] in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Various courses and workshops with "love," "intimate relationship," or "emotion" in their titles have sprung up, and many self-proclaimed love trainers, emotional mentors, relationship counselors, and psychotherapists are attracting large numbers of followers, both offline and online. Love training does not directly engage in matchmaking, but offers services mainly to unmarried young people to improve their intimate relationships.[4] The Love Club is a successful pioneer in this new sector, boasting that it is "a pioneer in the marriage and love training sector in China."[5]

The Love Club was founded in Shanghai in 2011 by Wu Di and Bob. Wu Di, nicknamed the Spicy Love Doctor, began writing columns on intimate relationships for fashion and lifestyle magazines as early as 2001. Over time, she gained a reputation for her caustic writing style and extended her expertise to television as a relationship expert for shows such as the Shanghai-based matchmaking program *The Mother-in-Law Finds the Son-in-Law* (*zhangmuniang kan nüxu*). Since 2004, she has been counseling mainly married couples. Around 2007, Wu Di began to attract a new clientele: young, single, white-collar women who were having trouble finding a spouse. In retrospect, Wu Di admitted that the emergence of this new type of client coincided with the proliferation of public discourses on leftover women. Working with these young female clients, she realized "they had something in common"[6] and saw a promising business opportunity. So she talked to Bob, a salsa dancing school owner, and together they created the Love Club, which "uses unique dance therapy methods to help single men and women who have difficulties in love improve their love intelligence, clear up their misconceptions about love, and strengthen their social skills."[7]

Since its establishment, the format of love training in the Love Club has evolved from a two-day workshop to a three-month course with a comprehensive curriculum (see Figure 1 and

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[3] For example, in 2014, the online matchmaking market exceeded 2.2 billion yuan (Chen 2015). See also Sun (2012), who examines Shanghai's matchmaking corner (*xiangqin jiao*) in the People's Square, a community formed by parents who reject the marketization of matchmaking by exchanging information among themselves without going through middlemen or agencies.

[4] This emerging field of love training is largely uncharted territory. Different mentors and their trainings have very different values, and the training fees also vary. For example, Ayawawa (a love mentor with over one million followers on Weibo) uses two concepts, namely "mate value" and "paternity uncertainty," to teach women how to get and stay married. The promotion of objectification and subjugation of women in her "theories" has made her controversial. There are also trainings for men only, such as *paoxue* or PUA (pick-up artist), which teach techniques for developing casual sexual relationships. Some PUA mentors offer one-on-one private instruction and charge more than 100,000 yuan (Hong and Shi 2014; Yin and Wang 2014).

[5] The quoted statement is taken from the Love Club's promotional materials, including its flyers and official WeChat account.

[6] The quote is from my interview with Wu Di on November 1, 2014. All quotes from Wu Di that follow in this chapter are from the same interview.

[7] The quoted statement is taken from the Love Club's promotional materials.

Table 1). After paying the tuition fee of 4500 Chinese yuan[8], an enrolled student is entitled to the compulsory items in the curriculum. To better achieve the goal of "changing cognition, changing attitude and changing behavior pattern," the Love Club introduces other so-called psychological tools along with various social activities for students to choose and purchase. A two- or three-day workshop usually costs between 3,000 and 5,000 yuan, and a guest lecture or a social event usually costs 100 yuan. In addition, Bob constantly reminds students to sign up for his other dance classes, which will presumably benefit them as well. Thus, various counselors, therapists, and emotional mentors cooperate and promote each other, weaving a complex web in which they can address various love life problems, thus turning love training into a money-making business.

Figure 1. Left: Weekend lectures at the Love Club. Right: Lobby outside the dance studio. (Photos by author)

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[8] The tuition fee was increased from 4000 yuan in the first half of 2014 to 4500 yuan in the second half of 2014, and then to 5000 yuan at the beginning of 2015.

Compulsory	Selective
1. A one-hour personal interview with either Wu Di or Bob to determine the real reasons for the difficulties in love life and to formulate the direction of this three-month study.	1. Three-day workshop "The Ability to Love" by Zhao Yongjiu.
2. Join a small class of 10 students and their WeChat group, where Bob and Wu Di will communicate with the students on a daily basis.	2. Two-day workshop "Increasing Sexual Happiness—Compulsory Course for Female Sexuality" by Ma Li.
3. Weekly dance classes taught by Bob to open bodies and minds and activate moods.	3. Sandplay therapy by Wang Qi.
4. Weekly group counseling co-instructed by Wu Di and Bob.	4. Guest lectures by male artists.
5. Weekly lecture by Wu Di and Bob (free for life and parents after the training).	5. Other parties and social events.
6. Weekly salsa party hosted by Bob to practice making friends with the opposite sex in a real social setting (additional cost).	

Table 1. Descriptions of the three-month Love Club training. (Taken from its promotional materials)

According to the founders, the Love Club's students are mostly young people of the post-80s generation with college educations, white-collar jobs, and decent salaries, yet they have few or no romantic relationships and suffer from anxiety about their unmarried status. Although Wu Di firmly believed that young men and women share similar problems and that love training is helpful for both sexes, the participants are overwhelmingly women. The female-to-male ratio during my fieldwork was about 7:3 to 8:2. Reflecting on the gender imbalance in the Love Club, some of my female informants explained that it proves that women face far more social pressure

to be single than men. However, some informants preferred to valorize their participation in love training as a form of self-investment: If men do not come, it is their own loss.

Such an investment of at least 4500 yuan is generally affordable, but it is not cheap for my informants. For example, Shi Ge, a 30-year-old human resources trainer with an annual income of about 80,000 yuan[9], admitted that she spent most of her spare money in 2014 on the Love Club, "The Ability to Love" workshop, and other counseling sessions. But she still wanted to save money for Ma Li's workshop on sex. For Sara, a 33-year-old accountant with an annual income of 150,000 yuan, if a training course cost about the same as a basic Louis Vuitton bag or the latest iPhone, she would choose the former. Sara explained that this was because a bag or a phone could only satisfy her for a short period of time, while love training would have a more lasting impact on her. Some also justified their consumption by mentioning the added value of the Love Club, such as learning to dance, accessing a new platform to make friends and engage in more activities, or simply enjoying the weekly lectures for entertainment. However, the product of the Love Club that attracts them is Wu Di and Bob's expertise on intimate relationships. This expertise is not primarily predicted on their professional credentials[10]. On the contrary, their rich life experience is praised as their greatest qualification. When asked why they are qualified to teach how to love, Liu Yun, a 31-year-old client relationship specialist, said:

> It has to do with their life experiences. Bob has gone through 3 or 2 divorces. Wu Di has married twice with three children[11] ...Now they seem to have harmonious marriages and good relationships with their children. Their lives are wonderful, so I can listen to them… Isn't it to my advantage to listen to people who have gone through difficulties to avoid detours?

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[9] The age, occupation, and income of the informants provided in this chapter correspond to their situation in 2014 during my fieldwork.

[10] Since 2002, China has had a three-tiered national licensing program to certify counselors, with Level One being the highest (Lim, et al. 2010). The Level Two counselor license that Wu Di holds is considered by my informants to be easy to obtain, as long as one takes courses at commercial educational institutions. Several informants expressed interest in obtaining the qualification themselves. As for dance therapy, both Wu Di and Bob are still in training at a commercial institution. They always emphasize that their teachers are from the United States.

[11] Different informants have given me different figures for the number of marriages and children of Wu Di and Bob. They may not remember the details, but they see the complexity as an important resource. Wu Di and Bob also often refer to their own experiences to support their arguments. One punch line Bob often uses is, "If you don't have enough relationships, you have to learn by marrying a lot." Bob is referring to his own personal life.

The Love Club is a business, and its participants accept its business logic: exchanging money for expertise. In the next section, I will examine how love training is legitimized, especially for these young single women.

How the Love Club Works: Marriage Pressures and Therapeutic Solutions

Zhang Tianqi, a 29-year-old master student and one of the most enthusiastic advocates of the Love Club among my informants, explained that the greatest benefit she gained from the love training was overcoming her anxiety about her unmarried status and embarking on a path of confidently living her life:

> Two years ago, I was a little anxious and worried about what would happen if I did not find a spouse. But this year I am in a very good psychological state. Now I feel that marriage is my business; it is for my own happiness that I seek love... I care only for my own joy... I believe that I can now take responsibility for my life... Women have the right to actively pursue what they want... Our goal is to dare to desire and dare to reject, dare to pursue things we like and dare to reject things we don't like... Nowadays I feel more and more that I don't care what others think of me, and I live my life according to my own will.

The above quote shows that the Love Club appeals to young single women. That is, the club addresses their anxieties about their unmarried status by redirecting their focus to the self, or to paraphrase Zhang Tianqi, to becoming a daring and desiring self.

Wu Di acknowledged that the Love Club's main clientele were the so-called leftover women. Rather than questioning how the discourse of the leftover woman reinforces the centrality of marriage in women's life courses and the "gender paradigm that privileges career achievement for men and marriage and homemaking for women" (Zhang and Sun, 2014, 128), Wu Di interpreted the single women who turned to the Love Club for help as facing a personal predicament:

> They do not voluntarily choose to be single... They become leftovers... because in the field of man-woman relationships, they are the ones with relatively low love intelligence and low ability. So the Love Club is...to help them improve their ability to love. In a broad sense, it is about self-growth and personality correction...If you want to attain

happiness and love, first, to quote a fashionable saying, change yourself into a better self.

The solution described by the Love Club is a therapeutic one. The ethos of contemporary therapeutic culture is "the outlook that all human problems are innate pathologies of the individual mind and/or body, with the individual held responsible for health and illness, success and failure" (Rimke and Brock 2011, 183). The therapeutic self-help culture involves shifting one's focus from structural problems to the subjective realm and the celebration of choice, autonomy and freedom. This culture constitutes a key site for inventing a hyper-responsible subject that is preoccupied with self-enlightenment and self-improvement, and that functions as a key form of governing citizens in neoliberal western societies (Rose 1998 and 1999; Nolan 1998; Rimke 2000; Rimke and Brock 2011).

In post-socialist China, therapeutic governing has also emerged along with the spread of psy-fever. Focusing on the urban poor, Yang's studies (2013a, 2013b, and 2015) examine how government-initiated psychologization projects (aim to) turn unemployed workers into happy subjects who can realize their own potential, demonstrating the potency of the therapeutic discourses and practices utilized by the Chinese state to produce a content, docile, and productive workforce for political stability and economic development. L. Zhang's (2017, 2020) studies illustrate how psychotherapeutic techniques are appropriated for personal management in organizations such as the military, police, and state-owned enterprises, on the one hand, and for self-care and self-fulfillment in everyday life by the urban middle class, on the other. "For many urban Chinese professionals, *ziwo* [the self] is becoming an object that one can work on, adjust, and improve with psychotherapeutic techniques" (L. Zhang 2020, 129), leading to a preoccupation with self-work while bypassing social structural changes. The unpacking of therapeutic governing sheds light on the new biopolitical regime engendered by the state-orchestrated privatization, which requires "a new kind of ethical training in order for self-promoting subjects to manage their lives through the pursuit of private interest, but within political limits set by authoritarian rule" (Ong and Zhang 2008, 15).

This chapter, the study of the Love Club, aims to contribute to the understanding of the rising therapeutic governing in China by focusing on how individuals are co-opted into the new ethical training. The following sections will show how the therapeutic solutions appeal to single women by providing them with resources to challenge certain familial and patriarchal constraints. On the one hand, the elevation of autonomy, independence, and personal desires

over marriage in the Love Club does not seem to orient single women towards a smooth fulfillment of the Chinese state's demographic goals. On the other hand, the therapeutic ethos of private responsibility and self-enterprising embroil single women in new regimes of living and normalcy.

Patients of Low Emotional Intelligence

To persuade single women to look inward and channel their energies into reinventions of selfhood, the Love Club utilizes the "qualitative new language of the self" (Illouz 2008, 5) developed in therapeutic culture. According to Illouz, the contemporary therapeutic self-help persuasion takes hold of the self in the form of a powerful narrative, the main characteristic of which is "a narrative structure in which suffering and victimhood actually define the self" (Ibid., 173). Such a narrative revolving around suffering and sickness is simultaneously regressive and progressive. The self becomes a patient, a potential or actual victim of social circumstances. As present predicament usually points to a past injury, like childhood or deficient families, the self is exonerated of responsibilities for the present unsatisfactory life. Yet the self also aims for normality and prospective redemption; and the self can be the sole author of one's life (Ibid., 183-6). If the right help and resources are mobilized to guarantee "ills and suffering are first defined, labeled and categorized" (Ibid., 196), self-change can take place. It is not shameful to admit that one is sick. Rather, this admission is the first step in constructing a coherent biography of the self, and to turn the narrative about the self into "a 'narrative in action'—a narrative about the process of understanding, working at, and overcoming (or not overcoming) one's problems" (Ibid.). Therefore, I ask: how does the Love Club deploy this construction of the self?

Wu Di and Bob constantly joke that the Love Club is a hospital and its students are patients of low emotional intelligence. Multiple methods are deployed to "diagnose" these women's singleness, help them to develop a "systematic" understanding of the self, and encourage them to look into themselves for "causes" rather than look outward for "excuses."

Firstly, students are directly questioned about what they want in intimate relationships. Their formal training usually starts with the one-on-one consultation with Wu Di. During this one-hour meeting, they introduce their situations, like family background, education, career trajectory, and past love lives. More often than not, they do not get a clear "diagnosis" of their

"problems" in this session, but are told that it takes time to identify the "issues." This session merely marks the start of the promised painstaking process of self-discovery. During the three-month training, Love Club students are assigned self-introspection homework. After each activity in the Love Club, they must answer open-ended questions listed on their exercise books[12]. For example, after talking with Wu Di, they should clarify within one week "their own problems," "real reasons of having difficulties in love," and "things they want to change and how." Similarly, within a week of Bob's dance therapy session, they should reflect on "what they know more about themselves," "what are their problems in interpersonal relationships," and "what are their problems in expressing emotions." They are supposed to develop knowledge of the self incrementally. This self-introspection approach that is advocated by the Love Club has been deemed helpful for life in general by my informants because through looking into the self they are encouraged to not only find what goes wrong, but also interrogate what they really desire rather than what others expect of them.

Second, figurative approaches are employed to help Love Club students discover the "truth" of the self. In dance sessions, movements are said to be revealing of the performer's cognitive and behavioral patterns in interpersonal and intimate relationships. And Bob is that decipher to expose the hidden insecurity, vigilance, lack of trust, fear, and so on. To overcome those problems, they'd better keep learning salsa with Bob. Besides, several local artists also give guest lectures, supposedly utilizing their artistic expertise to facilitate the knowing of the self in non-verbal ways. It is assumed that music, dance, acting, or artistic expressions in general are more powerful than words in teasing out the true self and the true "problems."

Additionally, the Love Club accustoms students to public demonstration and recognition of their "sickness." It is a support group with porous boundaries as many activities are also accessible to outside people who come and leave. Private conversations and individual cases are disclosed to wider audiences, either in the Love Club's lectures or in Wu Di's prolific writings in press and social media, and not always anonymously. There are complaints about infringements on privacy, but more often than not students learn to take the public censure easy, as a sign of self-growth. During weekend lectures, participants (especially those who come to the Love Club for the first time) are constantly asked to raise questions or enact typical everyday life scenarios, like blind dates, on stage based on their own understandings. Bob and Wu Di

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[12] See Appendix II for a partially filled assignment booklet by one informant.

then analyze the enactment, single out mistakes, and provide their better versions, which always shocks and/or enchants.

Past cases cited and recent examples taking place right in the classroom consolidate the patient image of the group. Reproaches and self-criticisms of lacking independence and self-confidence, being self-centered and not considerate, having bad temper, not knowing how to express opinions delicately, having outdated conceptions, living a boring life saturate not only all activities and communications in the Love Club, but also my interviews with female students. Wang Qi, a sandplay[13] therapist, revealed in her guest lecture at the Love Club that many of the Love Club students who consulted her were eager to proclaim that they suffered from low emotional intelligence.

Indeed, there are grievances about being harshly censured and feeling worthless. But single women are salvaged at the point of possibly lowest self-esteem or highest self-doubt as they are explained about why they should not be held accountable for their own deficiencies. They are patients, but also suffering victims. They are victims of their "toxic parents"[14] of the post-50s generation (*wulinghou*). Wu Di has attributed problems the post-80s generation face in love and marriage to the life trajectory and tribulations their parents' generation endured:

> *Wulinghou* are…the most miserable generation in China. Their level of knowledge is the lowest and inward anxiety the highest. Wang Shuo[15] even says every one of them has neurotic disorder. I believe their whole lives are unfortunate... Most of them have not been to college...but their mental control [of their children] is extremely scaring and strict…With regard to intimate relationships, they think they are experienced and know everything. But they know nothing. Many parents have never done a romantic relationship, and their understanding of marriage is to get by (*couhe guo rizi*).

In the Love Club, students repeatedly hear that their parents are at fault because they have not cared enough for their children emotionally; they have inculcated wrong or outdated

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[13] See L. Zhang (2014) for a discussion of the reinvention of Carl Jung's sandplay therapy with Taoist elements, and thus its popularity in China.

[14] "Toxic parents" is the title of the self-help book co-authored by Susan Forward and Craig Buck, and analyzed in Giddens (1992). In her exploration of how Chinese practitioners indigenizing western-originated psychological and psychiatric knowledge and therapeutic models, L. Zhang finds that the approach of family therapy that is exemplified by the Satir Model has gained wide popularity because it resonates well with the "long-standing Chinese cultural expectation of the self as a social self, a strong obligation to one's family, and collective-oriented values" (2014, 292). Not just the Love Club but other therapeutic workshops recommended by it all put great emphasis on analyzing and healing issues originated from the family.

[15] Wang Shuo, male, born in 1958, is a well-known writer.

conceptions in their children; and they have interfered too much in their children's lives, treating children as their private possessions. Moreover, it is China's political turmoil, especially the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, that is more to blame for this parental toxicity. Parents are toxic but are also victims of political and social torrents that they were not capable of controlling. Born to the post-50s generation, the post-80s generation is, in a sense, doomed to affliction and agony. Victimhood is passed on from generation to generation.

To understand the connection between the past and the present, between family background and current personal well-being, students are provided with therapy sessions within the Love Club, as well as in external workshops or counseling sessions, to revisit their childhood. Based on my informants' recollections, it is not a must for them to recall unpleasant incidents in childhood and share the experiences with group members, but they are assisted should they choose to do the remembering. For example, "The Ability to Love" workshop includes hypnosis and pillow hitting. After attending the workshop, Zhan Jing, a 30-year-old doctor, became a believer in the family of origin theory. She believed that she had finally acquired methods to deal with the negative aspects of the mother-daughter relationship that may have prevented her from establishing intimacy with men. Zhang Tianqi also attended the "Ability to Love" workshop and believed that the effort to gradually "reconstruct her psychological past" made her realize that her difficulties in interacting with men were related to the environment in which she grew up. The fact that her peasant parents kept having babies until a son was finally born, and that women in her home village could only be subordinate to men, were responsible for her insecurity and low self-esteem.

Stories of struggles with parents, both past and present, proliferate in the Love Club and in the interviews I have conducted. Few manage to establish an absolute causal relation between the so-called family of origin issues—ranging from separation[16], lack of approval and affection, to threats from parents—and their current situations, whether they are in pain or in confusion. Those intergenerational struggles are understood as possible explanations at best. Those stories, though, figure large in those women's coming to terms with themselves, rewriting personal biographies, and presenting this narrative to others.

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[16] In a guest lecture at the Love Club on November 16, 2014, Wang Qi said that almost all of the Love Club students who consulted her had family of origin problems, and nine out of ten had parents who were educated urban youth (*zhiqing*) and were not raised by both parents together before the age of 6. According to Wang Qi, such trauma, probably the worst kind, caused by separation from parents in childhood can lead to a sense of insecurity in intimate relationships or even a lack of emotion in adulthood.

Besides the parents, the Love Club also castigates the education system and the society's mainstream values. The education system's faults lie in its negligence of nurturing emotionality, avoidance of sex education, and curbing romance between teenagers. More fundamentally, the society narrowly defines success by wealth, thus molding young Chinese people into utilitarian (*gongli*) creatures. By utilitarian, Wu Di means that for the rational economic Chinese men and women career and material successes are naturally worth of efforts while intimate relationships do not seem to deserve practices and efforts. When Huang Anni, a 34-year-old entrepreneur, reflected on her life trajectory, she conceded that she had indeed lived her life as if it were a program: study hard, get into a good university, find a good job, and then search for a marriage partner, a path quite representative among my informants. Anni now decided to strive harder in both her career and private life, and pursue career as well as emotional and affective success.

In sum, the Love Club targets single people, but does not set the goal of its service as ending customers' (mostly women's) singleness. Rather, the Love Club pathologizes their singleness. Through putting together various symptoms and relaying them back to customers, the Love Club constructs a patient figure that suffers from low emotional intelligence and thus is clumsy and childish in intimate relationships. The Love Club goes further to explain the external causes: It locates in those single people's upbringing, encouraging them to remember and talk about childhood experiences. The Love Club also points out the faults of the education system and the society. If other social actors have neglected the cultivation of emotionality, it could be expected that those single women would have low emotional intelligence. With shortcomings or ills identified and responsibilities at least partially exempted, these women are held "responsible for taking positive steps to do something about it now" (Giddens 1992, 108). Low emotional intelligence is therefore the "narrative peg" adopted by the Love Club as "a way of framing, explaining, and transforming" (Illouz 2008, 174). In the next section, I will explore what self-changes are being made.

Becoming the Daring and Desiring Self

Taking positive steps involves changing the self, not changing others or the society. To recall the experiences of participating in the Love Club is essentially to construct a narrative of how the self has changed for the better. Among the various self-changes prescribed by the Love Club and practiced by these single women, I find three key aspects that constitute the pillars of the

new subject position, i.e., the daring and desiring self. These are relationships with parents, the position of women vis-à-vis men in relationships, and attitudes toward sex.

Manage Parents

In the Love Club, parents are portrayed as the source of suffering and agony, and the guardian of outdated and backward values. But the Love Club would not allow its students to be victims forever. Students are instructed not to "cure" their parents because they are too stubborn to change. What they should and can do is to rework their relationships with parents, to be more precise "manage parents (*guanli fumu*)." Two approaches of parents' management are applicable.

One approach involves building a rapport with parents through communication skills taught in love training. In her study of the changing mother-daughter relationships in China since 1949, Evans (2010) observes that there has been an increasing emphasis on emotional communication and affective closeness among younger generations of women. Moreover, she notes this reconfiguration of family and personal relationships has mainly placed the responsibilities of nurturing communicability upon mothers, reinforcing ideas about women's emotional attributes. In the Love Club, the responsibilities of being a good listener, a good sharer, and a good empathizer are transferred to the children because they are the ones who are willing to change the status quo marked by tensions with parents and make up for the regrettable past of being emotionally distant from these parents.

Zhan Jing claimed that she had long suffered from a terrible relationship with her mother and suspected that this tension may have exacerbated her difficulties in interpersonal relationships. For the first time in her life, she began to share developments in her love life with her mother after learning communication methods primarily from "The Ability to Love" workshop. To her surprise, Zhan Jing found a supportive side of her mother. For Zhao Huan, a 27-year-old game designer, it took a lot of effort to bring her family closer. The improvement in the family relationship was firstly due to her writing a letter to her mother—a homework assigned by the "The Ability to Love" workshop—and asking to be friends, which prompted her mother to deepen and broaden their exchanges. Second, now more sensitive and attuned to the moods and emotions of others thanks to the training, Zhao Huan successfully allayed her brother's anxiety about his wedding and received her brother's expression of gratitude for the

first time. Zhao Huan believed that the estrangement between her family members would be overcome through the communication made possible by her skills.

As the majority of participants in the Love Club are women and more often than not it is the mother instead of the father that poses the biggest challenge in those women's relationships with parents, it seems that the gendered nature of emotional communication in Evans' (2010) analysis is corroborated once again. Paradoxically, in the Love Club, communication is valorized as an ideal model for all interpersonal interactions, and is not confined to the sphere of family nor expected only of women. The skewed sex ratio, however, means that the task of nurturing emotionality and interpersonal skills is predominately carried out by women; and the pressure on men to conform to the new communicative mode remains unclear, if not less.

The other approach to managing parents, expounded in the Love Club, involves demarcating boundaries and declaring independence from parents. Many single women are labeled by Wu Di and Bob as mom's girl, tightly controlled by parents, immature, childish, and lacking basic self-care abilities. This phenomenon is said to be especially prevalent among Shanghainese women who are the only child in the family. Consequently, moving out of the parental home is promoted as a symbolic gesture and an effective method for Shanghainese single women to grow up, and win autonomy from parents, and eventually from all other authorities, including Wu Di and Bob as mentors.

Shi Ge tried to move out of her parents' house before joining the Love Club, but failed because her parents threatened that the family would collapse if she did. With the Love Club's affirmation, she has become more intent on freeing herself from her parents' control of her life, but in a more strategic way. According to Shi Ge, distancing herself from her parents would be a belated coming of age for her, and a significant attempt to gain control of her own life:

> I feel like I just came of age. Why is that? It is because I am now trying things like cutting the "umbilical cord" with my parents... I am trying my best not to hurt them... but to maximize my freedom. This means that I will no longer be completely open with them...What I do now is help them get rid of their anxieties. Let them know that their daughter is an independent person; there is no need for them to use controlling measures to tell me how to do things. I even think or hope that in the future I can completely separate myself from my parents. If I have the economic means, like Teacher Wu, I can hire people to take care of my children or do it myself...

Shi Ge's goal of moving out and becoming independent would probably be encouraged by Sammy, a 28-year-old client relations officer who had taken the advice and rented her own apartment. Sammy confessed that she had conflicts with her parents because of her changed attitudes after attending the Love Club. Her parents were particularly upset that she had adopted Wu Di's view that "I decide my own marriage, and I only show my parents my partner before I get married." Sammy, however, insisted on siding with Wu Di and challenged her parents' disapproval of her ex-boyfriend. She did not seem troubled: "I am becoming more insistent in defending my boyfriend and my choice, because I know that my boyfriend has been chosen by me." For Qiu Xinxin, a 32-year-old who worked in the import-export business and lived alone in an apartment bought by her parents, her current strategy for dealing with her parents was not to tell them much about her work and love life. Qiu Xinxin had vivid memories of her parents deciding for her which university to attend (against her own wishes) and what to study, and refusing to let her study abroad because she was told it was unfilial to be far away from her parents.

Managing parents involves renegotiating the discrepancies between what single women desire and what their parents expect, i.e., the desiring self and the filial self (see also To 2015a). One reconciliatory approach adopted by single women is to reinterpret their parents' expectations as essentially in line with their personal happiness—"they are for my own good"—so that the desiring self might incorporate the filial self. Conflicts are ameliorated by the development of emotional communication skills in these single women. Another approach is to appeal to individual independence to counter parental appeals to filial piety. Independence as an ideal is now elevated above filial piety; pleasing the self is more important than pleasing the parents. The filial self aims to get parents to accommodate its choices. The tension between filial obligations and personal desires is complicated, however, by some of the resources that parents possess. When Shi Ge declares her independence, or determination to achieve independence from her parents, she unwittingly utters the impossibility of the total separation she fantasizes about, since she will probably have to rely on her parents for childcare in the future. As for housing, many expect financial support from their parents after marriage, or their parents have already made the purchase, as in Qiu Xinxin's case. Rather, it is the idea of rebelling against parents and breaking with the past that makes these single women feel empowered. In practice, the boundary might be less clearly demarcated.

Women Can and Should Be Active and Proactive

The second important change involves women becoming more active and proactive in relationships. According to Wu Di, many single women have the illusion of love at first sight, wanting to find Mr. Right without going through a process. Such a notion is condemned as a form of laziness and passivity that transforms the responsibility of the self to the unpredictable fate. This dismissal of love at first sight as an illusion seems to be "revolutionary," exemplified by the explanation given by Huang Jue, a 26-year-old architect:

> I...form a concept that having a relationship is not a particularly difficult thing...because it is not like in literature where you wait for a special chance to fall in love at first sight; if it does not happen, you keep waiting. Instead, you can create opportunities for yourself. If it is something that you can take charge of, it is no longer so difficult...Usually girls...think that when the predestined one comes, everything will be fine. But now that I have been brainwashed by Wu Di...I have changed my attitude from waiting for chances to working hard to create chances.

Another notion the Love Club tries to change is that women should be the passive party in a relationship, waiting for men to initiate. In one lecture, when a woman mentioned that some love mentors claim that women will lower their "prices" if they take the initiative, Wu Di vehemently asked the audience never to ask her about what other so-called experts say because they are not as progressive as she is. When women went on stage to claim that they were the first to ask their boyfriends out, or the first to confess their love, the female audience always applauded. During the interviews, my informants usually proudly described their first attempts at asking for men's phone numbers, asking men out, and confessing love. By sharing their experiences of success and rejection, these informants felt they were able to demonstrate their personal growth. Many considered daring to initiate a relationship as one of their fundamental transformations in the Love Club. For example, Ju Qian, a 28-year-old IT programmer, saw this transformation as an important step toward maturity:

> It is a long-established idea that if this man is not that into you, you won't be happy with him. This is a little girl's mentality, as if you need to find someone who will take care of you and see you as a subordinate or a protected pet. Such thinking ignores that perhaps marriage or a relationship is a process of two mature people helping each other... My current thoughts are probably more mature; after all, I cannot really find a father-like man to help me in every way.

The narratives of Huang Jue and Ju Qian reveal how they once felt constrained by gender norms in intimate relationships. Ironically, Wu Di functions as an authoritative figure who sanctions their transgressions of traditional femininity characterized by passivity. For many of my informants, it is a relief, a liberation, and an empowerment to be told that women can play more active roles in intimate relationships. And in order to play these new roles, they need to cultivate skills, or so-called "love capabilities." The principle advocated in the Love Club is that if you want to find fun partners, you should first make yourself a fun person; if you long for soul mates, you should first make yourself a person with a soul. The key is to develop social skills (*shejiao nengli*) and a fun lifestyle.

The Love Club portrays the typical student not only as a patient with low emotional intelligence, but also as one who leads a boring life, trapped in a daily routine between home and work, ignoring Shanghai's vibrant cultural and entertainment scene. Wu Di and Bob see it as an important part of their job to introduce their students to interesting cultural events in Shanghai. Music festivals, theater performances, lecture series, and hobby groups are popular with the students. But even more emphasized for improving social skills are dances, parties, and nightlife in bars—the salsa party that Bob hosts in a jazz bar in a five-star hotel downtown felicitously incorporates all these most important elements. These parties represent a lifestyle that is supposedly alien to most students. Bars and parties are labeled as "realistic settings" for adult interpersonal interactions, while matchmaking activities are negated as result-oriented and awkward. The visits to bars and parties are often remembered as an interesting or slightly adventurous sporadic episode during these women's three-month training. Those who go for the first time usually describe it as an enjoyable, eye-opening experience, but have not really integrated it into their daily lives as a social activity. At the Love Club's Halloween party, Zhan Jing cosplayed as the famous anime character Sailor Moon, attracting attention for the shortness of her skirt, which she acknowledged as a personal breakthrough. She confessed, however, that she only dared to try "wildness" at Love Club parties; in real life, she would be "normal," implying a self-imposed limit on her transgression of proper femininity. Nevertheless, the idea of being proactive, improving social skills, and cultivating the self by engaging in various cultural activities that are compatible with Shanghai's cosmopolitan status is generally accepted and practiced. Pursuing a colorful consumerist lifestyle has another benefit, according to Wu Di. It increases single women's desires: they consume more, so they have to work harder to earn more money, which becomes a "healthy" cycle as they become individuals full of desires.

Getting Modern Regarding Sex

The Love Club attaches great importance to sex. First, as explained in the Love Club, sex has been a taboo subject in both family and school education in China, leaving many adult women ignorant of their own bodies and desires. As a result, they are constantly urged to attend the "Increasing Sexual Happiness" workshop conducted by sex counselor Ma Li. Whenever Ma Li lectures at the Love Club, the classroom is packed. Almost all of my informants confirm the virtual absence of sex education or even talk about sex during adolescence, with some confessing that their knowledge of sex is still limited. Zhao Huan, who volunteered to read an excerpt from Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* in front of about 80 people at one of Ma Li's guest lectures at the Love Club, admitted that she knew nothing about sex before the age of 25. Although she gradually discovered how to "satisfy her curiosity" over the past two years through BL (boy love) manga[17] and masturbation, she stated that she would like to attend Ma Li's workshop as soon as she saved enough money, as she felt that there was much more to learn, and to learn it the "right" way.

Second, it is said that the importance of sex in intimate relationships has been underestimated. The Love Club proclaims that a relationship is constituted by romantic love, interest, and sex. The importance of each of these three elements may vary from person to person, but sexual compatibility is vital to the harmony of a relationship. Such propositions are in line with new ethical codes that construct sex as a site of both individual pleasure and responsibility (Farrer and Sun, 2003; Yan, 2003; Pei, 2011; Wong 2015), which have been generated by the "sexual revolution" (Pan 2006; Pan and Huang 2011; Zhang 2011) that has taken place in China since the reform. Therefore, the Love Club's persuasion engages single women in the new sexual morality.

According to Ma Li, the students in the Love Club are all aware of the importance of romantic love and interest, but have not given enough thought to the role of sex. She wants to change that by urging students to "stop being obsessed with talking about soul mates." Such a positioning of sex is generally accepted and especially appreciated by some, who definitely list sex as the most important of the three elements. For Qiu Xinxin, such a statement gained more validity from her recent experiences. Faced with an unfulfilled relationship, she felt certain that

[17] See Martin (2012) for a discussion of how Japanese BL manga provides a collective discursive space for female Taiwanese readers to reflect on and negotiate their own social positioning as women in contemporary Taiwan. In addition to Zhao Huan, An Qi, a 30-year-old IT programmer, also cited Japanese *shoujo* (young women) manga as her main source of sexual knowledge during her adolescence. It would be interesting to explore how Japanese manga functions as a form of sex education for women in China.

"women need sex, too," but wondered if she could go so far as to pursue a purely sexual relationship. Although her close friend advised her against it, Qiu Xinxin was not completely convinced.

As the importance of sex is accepted, the Love Club advocates premarital sex. According to Wu Di, a high percentage of female students still have the lingering "conservative/traditional" idea of not having premarital sex, mainly thanks to their parents' intimidation and strict control over the years. The most frequently asked question during Ma Li's lectures so far is whether women can have premarital sex. Interestingly, though, none of my 22 informants voice opposition to premarital sex. Some, like Shi Ge, explicitly describe themselves as open-minded, showing their willingness to talk openly about sex and their approval of women having premarital sex and actively pursuing sexual pleasure. Liu Yun even singled out a male classmate who refused to attend Ma Li's lecture, calling his attitude "definitely backward" because he still thought it was best not to talk about sex openly. Being open towards sex thus becomes a key indicator of a modern progressive subjectivity, and none of my informants wants to be associated with being conservative or traditional, probably especially in front of me, a Western-educated woman in their eyes. When I cautiously broached the subject of premarital sex with Sammy, she responded by asking me about my attitude and specifically whether I accepted it when I was abroad. When I felt uncertain about her attitudes, Sammy told me (seemingly proudly) how she had disrupted the conservative impression she might have left at the Love Club:

> Sometimes Bob would tell female students... after how long [of dating] they should sleep with the guy... But he didn't ask me to do it when we communicated because he thought I was relatively conservative and wouldn't do it. But surprisingly, I did [laughter]. And I happily informed him.

In addition to Ma Li, Zhang Tianqi followed several bloggers who write extensively about sex and appreciates their efforts. However, her certainty about women's sexual freedom was overshadowed by her doubts about her own willingness to engage in premarital sex or one-night stands. Zhang Tianqi grasped the new social expectation for women to be sexually available outside of marriage (Farrer 2002, 2014) and found it in line with her feminist self-identification. However, this identity also put pressure on her to conform to the new norm. She worried that her reservations would be seen as a sign of backwardness.

Once single women realize the importance of sex, the Love Club tells them to follow experts' advice to cultivate their sexual resources. Ma Li stresses that sex is not a man's domain, that sexual skills ranging from dating to flirting and foreplay can be learned and improved, and that masturbation should be practiced diligently as a form of self-care. The right attitude, Ma Li maintains, is best embodied by the youngest student in her workshop. This college sophomore with no romantic experience came to the workshop with the goal of "grasping everything before it happens." It is praised by Ma Li as a positive attitude of being self-responsible and active and proactive in seeking sexual pleasure and personal happiness, a notion that many informants find inspiring, a notion that is to be confirmed at the workshop's graduation ceremony, when each participant holds a vibrator and shouts the slogan "I must be sexually happy[18]."

Assert the Daring and Desiring Self

The above three self-transformations emphasize the self over others, legitimize personal aspirations and desires, and thus call for the assertion of individuality. Many informants believe that they begin to assert the self with trivial events in everyday life. Yet, when told, these everyday events are described as evidence of growing self-confidence.

More importantly, asserting the self leads to a reconceptualization of marriage. The Love Club warns single women not to rush into marriage simply because it is the social norm. As Wu Di and Bob point out, marriage is not a necessity. Single women are asked to consider whether marriage is what they really want. Marriage has been (re)interpreted from a social norm to a personal choice of how to live one's life. The choice of marriage, including whether or not to marry, whom to marry, when to marry, and so on, is seen as an opportunity to become the master of one's own destiny. Some take the advice and are in the process of rethinking the meaning of marriage. Among them is Pan Jiaqin, a 32-year-old doctor, who was unsure whether marriage was right for her, now that she accepted that a romantic relationship is not necessarily bound for marriage. Among them is Kang Jiali, a 33-year-old public transportation worker who was trying to figure out what kind of married life she wanted:

> I am coming to understand that there are many other things a woman can live for besides
> marriage and love... You can have your own social circles and live freely and with ease.

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[18] The term "sexually happy" is a play on words. It is pronounced as *xingfu*, the same as the word "happiness," combining the words *xing* (sexual) and *fu* (blessing).

I want to be that kind of free woman. But I also feel that love and marriage are important for women. As Teacher Wu says, you can have no marriage, but you can have romantic relationships all your life. Everyone's choice can be different... Actually, I should broaden my view and not always think that I have to get married and have children at this age.

Indeed, marriage is still desired and pursued as these single women undergo self-transformation. But as Wong argues in an analysis of asexual marriages in China, "the emphasis on individual happiness means conformity should not be interpreted as simply the persistence of patriarchal forces or authoritarian familism" (2015, 111). On an individual level, these single women believe that they are challenging certain social and gender norms as they yearn for an alternative way to construct intimacy and work hard to pursue happiness that they try to define for themselves. In the Love Club, single women's empowerment and agency should not be negated if they do not denounce marriage; there is the potential to reconfigure marriage as well as the gender norms embedded in it.

Thus far, I have delineated a complex picture of love training and self-transformations in the Love Club. As involved actors are multiple, each individual account does not fully resemble the relatively linear line I have constructed. For most informants, they integrate only what they find empowering into their "reflexive project of the self" (Giddens 1991).

Conclusion

In this reflexive project of the self, single women are "called upon to take oneself as an object of knowledge and a field of action, so as to transform, correct, and purify oneself, and find salvation" (Foucault 2012b, 42), which brings about both empowerment and new modes of control.

What love training provides to single women is not just knowledge of sex, skills of interpersonal communication, or methods of self-reflection. This training has also provided single women with languages, discourses and frames, all in all a repertoire, to talk about themselves. The training has motivated these women to elaborate on their discomforts, confusions, fears, as well as desires, determinations and hopes, and to make their stories intelligible to others. These women become equipped with explanations about their singlehood—that is, their emotional intelligence is insufficient, but this is not their fault—and

can use these discourses to confront and counter the stigmatizing label and the social pressures imposed on them. Additionally, the Love Club constitutes a collective participatory space for single women to share their plights or simply exchange gossip. This network becomes a resource for single women to cope with external pressures.[19]

More importantly, the Love Club articulates a subject position that is individualistic, assertive, independent, autonomous, and modern. The Love Club makes this subject position available to single women while denouncing the passive, obedient daughter figure. Therefore, when these single women organize their biographic narratives by focusing on self-changes, self-improvements, such as how they dare to challenge parents and social norms, a sincere sense of liberation and empowerment can be easily detected because they feel there is an alternative way to define the self and live their lives. Perhaps most relevantly, the Love Club presents an alternative intimate relationship script[20] that allows women to play more active roles in developing relationships. The Love Club's prescribed script is alternative in the sense that its female students find it inspirational and liberating. Its advocacy of female agency, premarital sex, and emotionality is not necessarily groundbreaking or radical since the younger generations, both urban (Farrer 2002, 2014) and rural (Yan 2003), have been driving such reconfigurations since the marketization reform. Yet competing conceptualizations also exist, like the insistence on female chastity persists to trouble young women. The Love Club works for single women, who are now faced with conflicting values, when it confirms their inner doubts and lends legitimacy to their choices by ascribing a modern and progressive image to their newfound subject positions.

Indeed, in the alternative relationship script, former boundaries for proper femininity are transgressed. Such a new ideal of intimate relationships is, however, also highly normative. There are 11 steps from getting acquainted to getting married, 4 indicators of confirming a relationship, and 3 constituents of a quality relationship. When Huang Anni regrets living her past life like operating a program and now aims for love, isn't love also objectified into a program, a set of executable algorithms determined by those love training experts? And independence, emotionality, and socializing skills become competences that one needs to

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[19] L. Zhang, drawing on her own experience as a participant in various psychological training workshops in the city of Kunming, similarly emphasizes how these workshops create a trusted space that allows participants to make certain human connections that are not often available in everyday life, and generate a new form of sociality, namely psychosociality: "People who faced similar problems and shared the intention for self-exploration came together to create a safe space under the guidance of a charismatic therapist" (2020, 105).

[20] By relationship scripts, Farrer refers to common cultural scenarios, or "a linked set of 'feeling rules' or norms for expressing various elements of 'love' within a developing relationship" (2014, 67).

cultivate in order to be eligible for love. Women not only can, but must play more active roles, i.e., actively transforming the self. To pursue quality intimate relationships and personal happiness, those women labor hard (see Figure 2) to change themselves, fearing if they do not make the prescribed changes, they will be denied the chance to attain personal happiness. Widely regarded as a model student, Shi Ge unintentionally exposes the policing and disciplining dimension of the new subjectivity:

> Many students...say that I am an inspiring example. But what works for me may not work for them, because I have done what I know to do, while they may not be able to do it...I am an open person, so I can do and try in all areas. I can dress up in a sexy way and go drinking in a bar; I can participate in all kinds of social activities; or I can soften my heart. I have a strong will to carry out actions. I force myself to do things that I don't think suit me.

Shi Ge's triumphant self-explanation paradoxically reveals that "the planning of a life of one's own with recourse to an array of self-help manuals, popular fictions, and advice columns is in itself a new coercive structure" (McRobbie 2004, 11). Furthermore, the internalization of private responsibility on self-reinvention in such a new structure consolidates the "relying on yourself (*kao ziji*)" (Ong and Zhang 2008, 8) discourse of the new biopolitical regime in post-socialist China. Even though single professional women may not be rushing toward the state's demographic goals of increasing marriage and reproduction, their becoming of the daring and desiring self resonates with the ongoing privatization's requirement to be a self-governing subject.

Conversely, the Love Club evades the post-socialist heteronormative gender paradigm that exerts significant marriage pressures on single professional women. While promoting female agency and sometimes using feminist resources like *The Vagina Monologues*, the Love Club locates the site of change firmly within the self, without foregrounding a critique of patriarchy or developing a vision of collective identity. On the contrary, it tends to "un-gender" the doing of intimate relationships and the pursuit of personal happiness, claiming single women and men share the same burden of cultivating emotional intelligence and love capabilities. The skewed sex ratio in the Love Club, however, casts doubt on whether men are equally willing or required to transform the self and whether the self-cultivation for personal happiness becomes a new technique of the dominant gender paradigm to control women. In saying this, it cannot be forgotten that the trope of independence and individuality and especially the slogan "marriage

is not a necessity" serve as effective and valuable oppositional discourses for single women to resist marriage pressures and certain gender norms. It remains to be fully grasped whether/how such new imaginaries adopted by single women would reconfigure the institution of marriage in China.

Figure 2. Self-help books bought by Peng Cipei, a 32-year-old architect. Cipei wondered why it was more difficult to have an intimate relationship than her job, because she had to change so much.

Chapter 3

Imagining Mr. Right for Marriage[1]

Finding Mr. Right

Finding Mr. Right (also *Anchoring in Seattle*, *beijing yushang xiyatu* 2013), written and directed by female filmmaker Xue Xiaolu, is one of the most successful romantic films targeting urban young women in recent Chinese cinema[2]. The film centers on the self-transformation and romantic pursuits of its young female protagonist, Wen Jiajia, who is initially a mistress of the wealthy married businessman Old Zhong in Beijing and travels to Seattle to give birth to their out-of-wedlock child. In Seattle, Jiajia comes to know Frank, who works as a part-time driver for postnatal care centers. As Frank helps Jiajia settle down in Seattle, it is revealed that Frank used to be a renowned surgeon in Beijing but chose to become a house husband when his family relocated to the United States, thanks to his wife's promotion at work. Jiajia is deeply touched by Frank's willingness to sacrifice his personal successful career for the happiness of the family, as well as the closeness between Frank and his daughter, even though the local Chinese community belittles Frank's domestic role. When Old Zhong runs into trouble in Beijing and terminates his financial support, Jiajia gradually abandons her lavish lifestyle and instead works diligently to support herself. With Frank's assistance and care, Jiajia successfully gives birth to her son, and her feelings for Frank intensify.

Suddenly, Old Zhong, now divorced, shows up and proposes to Jiajia. Returning to Beijing, Jiajia becomes Old Zhong's legal wife and presides over a palatial yet always empty house. She calls Old Zhong to break up. Old Zhong first rhetorically asks, "What man who stays home every day can have achievements, and what man who carries out big business outside can accompany and talk to his wife and child every night?" He then threatens not to give Jiajia any money if they divorce. Jiajia calmly replies, "It has nothing to do with money," and ends the

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[1] A different version of this chapter titled "Finding Mr. Right: Single Professional Women Imagining Ideal Masculinities and Negotiating Femininities in Contemporary China" has appeared in *Being Single in the City: Cultural Geographies of Gendered Urban Space in Asia*, edited by Christiane Brosius, Jeroen De Kloet, Laila Abu-Er-Rub, and Melissa Butcher, 149–74. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing. https://doi.org/10.17885/HEIUP.1425.

[2] *Finding Mr. Right's* box office earnings reached 519 million Chinese yuan, making it the best-selling romantic film in China to date.

marriage. Then, Jiajia starts her own business, making use of her past working experience as an editor, and turns herself into an independent and happy single mother in Beijing. Meanwhile in the US, Frank, also officially divorced, returns to practicing medicine in New York. After both Jiajia and Frank have gotten their own lives back and embarked upon promising career paths, they finally meet again at the top of the Empire State Building and appear to be a perfect match.

Finding Mr. Right unequivocally posits Frank as the ideal man, characterized by his dedication to his family and his caring and considerate nature. This forms a contrast with Old Zhong's preoccupation with wealth accumulation and lack of affective involvement in the family. Moreover, in the film, concomitant with Jiajia's self-reflection on who her "Mr. Right" could be, is her self-transformation from a materialistic mistress into an independent career woman, exposing that the constructions of ideal femininities and masculinities are intricately intertwined, rather than isolated from each other. Taking these themes further, this chapter examines how the young generations of urban women in contemporary China negotiate masculinities in intimate relationships, and how such negotiations interact with their shifting femininity formations.

Through an analysis of my informants' narratives, I contend that single professional women regard marriage as a means of pursuing personal happiness rather than a necessary component of a woman's life course. Furthermore, the ways in which they denounce and valorize different masculinities are crucial not only to their self-identification as independent, modern women and to challenging dominant gender paradigms, but also to the self-regulation of desires. By exploring the notion of the ideal man for single professional women in Shanghai, this chapter strives to shed light on how gender configurations have shifted among the younger generations. This shift affects especially the ways in which young urban women exert agency in the intimate sphere amid strong patriarchal gender norms in contemporary China. At the same time, the chapter also draws attention to the ways in which young women participate in reinventing, regulating, and disciplining their femininities. The following section explores emerging attitudes toward marriage, before examining how these women define characteristics of "Mr. Right" while being guided by these changing attitudes.

What Does Marriage Mean to Single Professional Women?

In 2015, Lan Ting was a 30-year-old architect[3]. She was from Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan. She liked to talk about her extremely busy and demanding work, her passion for cultural activities in Shanghai, and her self-care regimen. It took her quite a while to reveal that she worked hard to remain confident and carefree, as her parents and friends constantly urged her to marry. She felt disappointed, especially in her mother, a high-achieving university professor, for not comprehending that she was, and could be content with her current life without a partner. The way she conceptualized marriage was representative of many of my informants:

> [If I find the right person,] it would be wonderful if we get married, pay property mortgage together, and buy a car together. We would experience everything together, live *happily* every day, and take care of each other. This is a very *happy* status… However, there are also people who are obviously discontent with their marriages, yet they still push me to get married as soon as possible. I simply cannot understand. (Emphasis mine)

For Lan Ting and many other informants, marriage is like a "neutral container;" only when it is filled with happiness does it become desirable to them. More specifically, what attract them are the potential benefits of marriage, such as love, intimacy, reciprocity, and companionship, not the marital status per se, which their unhappily married friends strongly value. Similarly, for Li Yifan, a 28-year-old financial analyst, she would rather explore other life options if she could not find the right person:

> Only when I feel certain that I can live a happy life with this guy will I get married. I would rather not marry than reluctantly marry. If there is a bright future lying ahead, I am willing to marry. If not, I would think every person's life is limited. Some dedicate their lives to love, experiencing life as a mother. *If I don't get lucky like that, I can dedicate my life to something other than family life, or I can create other meanings of life.* I can become a different kind of person. Maybe later in my life I can think of or do things that married people cannot. Maybe I can read many books and visit many places. (Emphasis mine)

In this way, my single women informants unequivocally desire a type of marriage that is predicated on romantic love, mutual respect, and support. Marriage is imagined as a means to

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[3] The informants' ages, incomes, and occupations given in this chapter correspond to their situation in 2015 during my fieldwork.

pursue personal happiness—for some, a very important means—but not necessarily the only gateway to a better and happier life. However, they often find that their conceptualization of marriage as an option instead of a must of one's life course, conflicts with the notions of their parents, peers, and society in general.

Jiang Xin, a 25-year-old public relations specialist, Liz, a 29-year-old financial analyst, and Dong Dong, a 25-year-old accountant, were three Shanghai-born professional women who became friends through attending concerts in Shanghai. They shared similar interests and traveled abroad together. They all lived with their parents and candidly admitted that this arrangement allowed them to spend as much money as possible on what they called a "hedonistic" way of life. Liz, with an annual income of 300,000 Chinese yuan (at the upper end of my informants' income range), confessed that her lavish spending on cultural events and travel had scared off some blind dates. Jiang Xin and Liz both claimed that they believed in feminist causes, but did not feel comfortable discussing gender issues with others because they felt that society in general was hostile to feminism. During the group discussion, however, they felt safe to vent their dissatisfaction and disillusionment. When asked about their opinions on the "leftover women" discourse, Jiang Xin and Liz concluded that the mainstream value system in Chinese society treated life as a checklist where everyone was expected to conform to a normative life course that unfolded in a strictly linear sequence of education, work, marriage, and children. Their single status, especially for Liz who was approaching thirty, was a deviation from the norm, and thus they were often regarded as "failures." Moreover, they were well aware that their predicament was exacerbated by the fact that they were women, or more fundamentally, by the middle-class gender paradigm in contemporary China, which considered "marriage…more essential for the female than the male life course" (Zhang and Sun 2014, 128). Having seen through the patriarchal ideology behind the leftover women discourse, Jiang Xin and Liz unequivocally stated that they were determined to defy this social norm and the mainstream values while keeping the option of marriage open.

At the same time, it has to be admitted that many of my informants do not associate this normative life course with a patriarchal social structure, nor do they make it clear that this norm is more limiting for women. Instead, they tend to interpret the constraints and pressures they experience as the result of a clash of different values, mostly intergenerational. What they most want to challenge is the idea that one must be married by a certain age. As daughters, my single women informants reluctantly accept their parents' insistence because, in their opinion, their

parents' generation is generally unable to imagine other life paths due to the social circumstances in which they were raised.

Li Yifan, also a Shanghai native, was working in a company "full of single women," as she put it. Because her company had a high turnover of employees and colleagues tended not to form close bonds, she did not suffer from unwanted comments about her personal life at work. In her opinion, the only source of pressure on her was from her parents. In the past, Li Yifan tried to persuade her parents to understand her views on marriage. By 2015, she had given up, conceding that it was probably best for her and her father to stick to their separate views. Her explanation of her parents' insistence was echoed by many other informants:

> For the elder generations, the world changes too rapidly. When they were young, they, including my parents, got married when they were supposed to do so. They didn't really marry out of strong desires; instead, they got married for objective reasons like housing, or for physical needs. Nowadays, we can meet so many different people, and contemplate on ourselves so much. When my parents were my age, they probably didn't think about what they really wanted to do, didn't reflect on the meaning of life, and hadn't seen as much as we have now. Their values have not kept abreast of social developments.

In Li Yifan's opinion, the difference between her parents' generation and hers is whether or not marriage is an individual choice. She seems to believe that for her parents, the institution of marriage was a means to access housing and sex. In contrast, today sexual intimacy has been decoupled from marriage (Farrer 2002, 2014); moreover, education and career have freed women from economic dependence on a future spouse. For Li Yifan and other informants, marriage is no longer considered imperative, thanks to social transitions.

Wang Siyun was a 28-year-old lawyer who came from Zhejiang, an economically prosperous but what she described as "very traditional" region where matchmaking was still the primary method of finding a spouse. There was not only a generational gap, as Li Yifan explained. There was also what Wang Siyun called a "regional gap" between the modern metropolis and the traditional provinces. While many women like her were postponing marriage or prolonging singlehood in "global" Shanghai (as evidenced by the average age at first marriage in China as a whole compared to Shanghai, mentioned in Chapter 1), Wang Siyun believed that in her hometown, "you would be castigated if you did not want to get married," and that her unmarried status was considered an offense. In stark contrast to her conservative

hometown and her "judgmental relatives" there, Shanghai was a safe space for her. The city gave her the opportunity to be away from the family network of surveillance and compliance, to explore different life options, and to exercise more personal freedom.

In her ethnographic study of young Chinese women studying in Australia, Martin (2018) argues that time abroad creates a "zone of suspension" in both geographical and temporal terms (a "time out" from the normative life course), allowing for more possibilities and different life scripts. At the same time, Martin cautions against ignoring that the normative middle-class Chinese female life course has also migrated with these young students and continues to constrain their negotiations of gendered selves. For the non-Shanghai-born informants in my study, migration to Shanghai similarly "afford[s] a partial suspension of one's home society's norms of gender and sexuality" (Ibid., 694). However, this suspension never means a complete erasure of the traditional values they grew up with in their hometowns. Wang Siyun frequently mentions annual visits to her hometown and altercations with her relatives in her narrative, to accentuate the difference between the provincial and the metropolitan. Living in Shanghai and sticking to her conceptualization of marriage as an option and a personal choice, is to resist and confront the normative female life course that orders women to marry and procreate in their twenties. Indeed, Wang Siyun and other single women have physically left their parochial hometowns. Nevertheless, the specter of traditional, normative femininity rooted in those traditional places looms large in so-called global Shanghai, where single women still have to constantly defend themselves against the stigmatizing label of leftover women. It is therefore more accurate to see Wang Siyun's portrayal of Shanghai as cosmopolitan and single-woman-friendly as a rhetorical strategy rather than a reality.

Through the lens of generational gaps and the metropolitan-provincial divide, single professional women implicitly construct a binary of traditional and modern values and adopt the conviction that the modern values they embody are more advanced than, and thus, destined to replace the traditional ones as society develops. At the same time, they reiterate that they understand and tolerate other opinions and values, and emphasize that what they expect in return is that the elder generations and society at large tolerate and accept their different lifestyles. Marriage as an option instead of a necessity is one feature of an ideal diverse (*duoyuan*) society, which they imagine will naturally materialize in the future, because society is always progressing. No one explicitly envisions any kind of collective action, for example, a women's movement.

Interestingly, my informants rarely invoke the theme of filial piety. In other studies (Gaetano 2014; To 2015a) that have examined the same cohort of single women, filial obligation is often mentioned as a source of agony and guilt: single women blame themselves for disappointing their parents. However, I did not find such self-doubt among my informants. The single women I interviewed tend to foreground the intergenerational conflicts of different values and lifestyle choices, and do not regard their single status as unfilial. Rather than feeling guilty about not fulfilling their parents' expectations, they express dismay and even intense anger about their parents' interference, manifested, for example, in pushing them to go on arranged dates with potential partners, asking them to lower their standards in selecting partners, or through scolding them about how their singleness causes their parents to lose face. Some informants describe at length the tensions between themselves and their parents, detailing, for instance, how their conversations or phone calls with their parents always end in a quarrel. Although they are frustrated or hurt by the pressure their parents put on them to marry, they see their parents' motives as being in line with their own best interests, that is, their personal happiness. A phrase I have often come across in conversations with my informants is: "The things parents do are for our own happiness."[4] From this emphasis, it is possible to discern a changing conceptualization of filial piety. My single women informants do not consider their disobedience to be unfilial[5]. My finding concurs with Yan's observation about the younger generations in China, "their happiness in life makes their parents happy and thus their pursuit of pleasure and comfort in life should be viewed as their way of fulfilling the duty of filial piety" (2011, 37).

In sum, marriage is desired by my informants primarily as a means to pursue personal happiness and a good life, rather than as a duty to be fulfilled. Indeed, the leftover women discourse belittles their achievements in education and career, and consolidates the centrality of marriage in women's life course, sparking emotions like anxiety and anger in them. By employing a traditional and modern binary discourse, these women identify themselves as progressive, modern, cosmopolitan subjects, challenging the stigma of being labeled as leftover women and the social expectation of being married at a certain age. While they may not fundamentally resist the normative life course by consciously opting for a different trajectory, such as not marrying at all, they can also imagine prolonged or permanent singlehood as a way

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[4] In her ethnographic study of the matchmaking corner in Shanghai's People's Square, Sun (2012) finds that it is out of love, responsibility, and sometimes, guilt that parents wholeheartedly devote themselves to searching for marriage partners for their children. They do not consider their children unfilial because they are unmarried.
[5] However, some informants note that they consider their male counterparts to be under more pressure from filial obligations, as producing offspring to continue the family line is mostly considered a male responsibility in a Confucian worldview.

of life—a choice that expands women's life course. Shanghai as a metropolis allows them to distance themselves from their social networks and external pressures, thus making prolonged or permanent singlehood possible.

Moreover, as Lan Ting's and Li Yifan's statements suggest, finding personal happiness through marriage depends first and foremost on finding "Mr. Right." The next question is: what constitutes an ideal man in the eyes of these single professional women? In single women's pursuit of a companionate marriage, socioeconomic status and participation in family work, including childcare and housework, become the two prominent aspects of masculinity that single professional women must navigate in relation to their identities as modern independent career women. In the following section, I will analyze how my informants construct their ideal masculinities within a heterosexual relationship amidst constraining gender norms.

Single Professional Women's Ideal Men

Wealth Does Not Automatically Make Men Ideal Marriage Partners

In the film *Finding Mr. Right*, the character of Old Zhong is rendered invisible, appearing only through his voice. But in contemporary Chinese society, Old Zhong, a wealthy businessman, as demonstrated by the lavish lifestyle and material possessions he provides for Wen Jiajia, aptly embodies the hegemonic masculinity that dominates the new sexual economy. Through analyzing the hugely popular and controversial television drama *Dwelling Narrowness* (*Woju*, 2009) and reviewing recent ethnographic studies, Zurndorfer concludes that decades of socioeconomic change have significantly transformed gender relations in Chinese society, creating a sexual economy that is:

> dominated by wealthy and politically influential men who consume femininity and sexuality. In exchange, women receive material comfort and financial security. But, this is not an equal exchange. The assimilation of gender inequality into both the official and popular views of Chinese life further normalizes the sexual economy. (2016, 4-5)

Under such gender configurations, masculinity is increasingly defined primarily in terms of money or political power, which can be translated into wealth through rent-seeking, as respectively epitomized by Old Zhong and the character of Song Siming, a corrupt government official, in *Dwelling Narrowness*. Femininity, on the other hand, is increasingly being

objectified and commodified, as shown by the rise of the so-called "beauty economy" (*meinü jingji*, literally "beautiful woman economy"), namely the practice of using young and attractive women to promote commercial products and services (Osburg 2013, 35). In this marketplace, women are sexual resources to be consumed by men; their sexuality and youthful beauty are their biggest assets. For men, as Osburg observes among the businessmen in Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan, as long as they are rich and/or powerful, they can have unlimited sexual resources:

> In the world of business populated by lustful men, women's other talents and abilities pale in comparison to the power of sexual attraction. Men, however, only need money, and even the oldest, ugliest, most uncouth country bumpkin will be transformed by wealth into an object of desire. (2013, 181-2)

Conversely, less affluent men find themselves emasculated in this new sexual economy, disadvantaged in the marriage market, as young male students complain to Osburg (Ibid., 1-2). In the popular television matchmaking show *If You Are the One* (*feichengwurao*), the desirability of the male contestants as potential partners is predominantly constructed around materialism, namely affluence, income, and the possession of real estate and cars. Possibly the most (in)famous fragment from the show is when Ma Nuo, a young, attractive female participant, rejects a male participant who makes around 3000 yuan per month, stating that she would rather cry in a BMW car than smile on a bike. This undoubtedly underscores the act of "making money as the only way to pursue personal happiness and find a girlfriend" (Chen 2017, 106), and therefore to assert masculinity. Kong (2013) contends that the controversies on the show over blatant celebrations of materialism underlie a male anxiety, namely the frustrations experienced by young men seeking to achieve an affluent life, which includes access to sexual resources in contemporary China. The marginalization of men of lesser means is an important facet of the gender inequality structured by the new sexual economy. It is worth highlighting. It is no less important to point out that young women who do not see themselves as sexual resources, who do not want to trade their femininity for material gain, also find themselves out of place in this sexual economy.

In the realm of business, women, or more specifically young women, play an integral role as a commodity that facilitates the exchange of personal gifts and favors between male entrepreneurs and government officials, as exemplified by the (allegorical) scene of the *chuzhang* (government official, literally "section chief"), the *laoban* (entrepreneur, literally

"boss"), and the *xiaojie* (hostess/sex worker, literally "miss") drinking and singing together in a private room of a karaoke bar (Liu 2002). In the realm of family or romantic relationships, for the wealthy men, women either play the traditional role of wife and mother, confined to the domestic sphere and rendered invisible, or they play the role of desirable mistress. A woman's college education, and even her white-collar occupation, become attributes that increase her value as a mistress in the marketplace of wealthy men (Osburg 2013). In the face of such strict and restrictive gender scripts, how do single professional women, who generally do not want to be *xiaojie*, mistresses, or housewives, position wealth in relation to their ideal masculinities and marriages? What discursive strategies have they developed to address the male and public anxieties directed at young women and to carve out a space for the femininities they represent?

When asked for their opinions on Ma Nuo and her statement, my informants generally think that it reflects reality to a large extent: women prioritize men's "material condition" (*wuzhi tiaojian*), that is, economic status, in partner selection. However, they find such a common view and practice in conflict with their own visions of a companionate marriage that is based on romantic love. Consequently, single professional women employ a material-spiritual (*wuzhi-jingshen*) dichotomy to differentiate themselves from the stereotype of a materialistic girl like Ma Nuo[6]. While the word "material" basically refers to wealth in my informants' narratives, the "spiritual" appears to be a vague concept. When they talk about spiritual compatibility, they refer to sharing similar hobbies, lifestyles, values, etc. Sometimes they use "spiritual" to refer to good communication with each other, while some clearly state that they are looking for their "soulmate."

The articulation of the relation and hierarchy between the material and the spiritual provided by Xie Yun, a 34-year-old real estate project manager, was quite representative of my informants' views:

> We [referring to the educated career women of the post-80s generation] have worked for a few years now. Materially, we may not be particularly well off, but we are in an acceptable condition. Of course, we hope our future partners can match our material condition, but we long for more spiritually. We are looking for someone who is spiritually compatible with us.

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[6] At the beginning of the film *Finding Mr. Right*, Wen Jiajia behaves like Ma Nuo. Both Jiajia and Ma Nuo can be read as archetypes of the materialistic girl that saturate the public imagination in contemporary China.

Similarly, the following exchange between Wang Siyun and her friend Ge Yunfei, a 29-old legal specialist from the same hometown, revealed doubts about men's use of money in a relationship, and wealth as a feature of ideal masculinity:

> Ge Yunfei: "Can the woman who only cares about money [in partner selection] have a quality life? Besides money, can she really communicate with her husband?"

> Wang Siyun: "She doesn't need communication with her husband, and vice versa. Her husband likes this kind of woman because as long as he gives her money and buys her gifts, he is treating her well. But we are different, as we want communication [spiritual compatibility]; we are demanding."

In this exchange, men's wealth was not understood as a guarantee of spiritual compatibility and was therefore considered insufficient to bring about desirable marriages and happiness. Ge Yunfei and Wang Siyun briefly denounced men who thought they could win hearts with their wealth. They then went on to discuss at length women who married for money or who attached great importance to a man's economic status.

Ge Yunfei and Wang Siyun, both of whom are not originally from Shanghai, share the view that there is a certain type of young Shanghainese woman who is materialistic and demands that her future husband own property. In addition to Ge Yunfei and Wang Siyun's discussion, this particular type also appears sporadically in other focus groups. Based on these brief mentions, the typical Shanghainese materialistic girl is portrayed as someone who shares a crowded home with her parents and thus, has a strong motivation to improve her living conditions through marriage. Moreover, this stereotypical girl has probably not graduated from a prestigious university, has a lackluster job, and revolves her life around finding a marriage partner. What some of my informants denounce is not her family background, as many of them come from backgrounds not dissimilar to hers, but rather her aspirations. Her overt appreciation of material goods disqualifies her from the pursuit of respectable middle-class femininity. She represents a morally dubious, if not outright corrupt, femininity. My informants depict such a figure as the other, against whom they demarcate themselves. Unlike the materialistic Shanghainese girl, they value spiritual compatibility over material success. Their criterion for evaluating men is

thus loftier than that of the materialistic girl. Therefore, they embody morally proper or superior femininity.[7]

Yuan Lele was a 25-year-old master's student of musicology who worked part-time as a piano teacher to support her studies and life in Shanghai. She came from a small town in Hunan province. Inspired and encouraged by her assertive mother, who ran a family business, Yuan Lele dreamed of opening her own music school upon graduation. Yuan Lele regarded independence as her key characteristic. In her opinion, prioritizing men's wealth, especially, looking for men who possess housing in partner selection, represented a traditional femininity from which she wanted to distance herself. Dai Mengcheng, a 28-year-old Shanghainese who quit her white-collar job in a multinational corporation and co-founded a theater troupe, spoke more critically of such traditional femininity:

> The idea that men need to own property in order to marry is inculcated in young women by their mothers. I think some women have not evolved well and thus do not have the capacity for independent thinking. Since their mothers have told them so, they accept the idea and never ask why they have to demand an apartment or how men could afford the property.

Many informants refrain from judging other women, as they see themselves as believers in social diversity and tolerance. Some express their willingness to make do with rented apartments, while others proclaim their willingness to share the financial burden of purchasing property with their future partners. Lan Ting went one step further, questioning the way men internalize the imperative of being the natural providers of housing in marriage.

> I find that most of the men I know accept their fate: no apartment, no wife. Why don't they find it unfair and unreasonable? I find it very unfair. They are my age and they have to buy apartments, but I don't have to… But I haven't heard any man complain

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[7] Osburg (2013) finds a similar strategy of othering among female entrepreneurs in Chengdu. Businesswomen attribute their success to their own ability and hard work; young women who participate in the beauty economy, in their view, choose to take a shortcut, trading their youth, beauty, and sexuality for the material comforts provided by men. Businesswomen, some of whom employ and use young women as commodities in their own business practices, condemn rich men's obsession with young women, but focus more on questioning these young women, attributing the lack of morals to poor upbringing and family background, or lack of education, cultivation, and quality. Interestingly, regional characteristics are also brought up to explain the moral weakness of certain women. For non-Sichuanese businesswomen, the local Sichuan culture seems to be more morally corrupt. An important reason why women entrepreneurs spare no effort to differentiate themselves from women who use their sexuality to get ahead is that the business world is hyper-masculine, and their male counterparts generally see women only as sexual resources and do not recognize women's business success as the result of personal (non-sexual) ability and hard work.

about it. Each of them just diligently makes money. When work is very tiresome, they just say they are men and have to buy apartments.

The male anxiety over wealth does not strike a chord with my informants, who tend to consolidate their self-image as modern independent women by downplaying men's material condition in their partner selection. Moreover, my female informants are sympathetic about the economic pressure suffered by their male peers. At the same time, some informants are also conscious of the male anxiety occasioned by the materialism of women. Jiang Xin, who closely followed feminist discussions on Chinese social media, questioned the public anger and censure directed at Ma Nuo:

> The public opinion is that young women today are materialistic and have high economic demands on men. But I think the public has failed to realize that the very reason women have demands for men's wealth in the marriage market is that there is no other way for women to acquire such wealth and social status except through marriage.

Convinced of women's subordination in Chinese society, Jiang Xin refused to morally judge women using marriage to achieve upward mobility. But as a career woman with her own income, able to live in a big city, she saw herself as privileged, as there was no need for her to rely on men to meet her economic needs. Instead, she could focus on searching for someone who will satisfy her spiritual needs. While Jiang Xin thought more about women from lower social and economic strata, Qian Linlin, a 30-year-old architect who considered herself a moderate feminist, felt that public anxiety about materialistic women, was restricting women like her. She came from the province of Henan and had been renting housing in Shanghai ever since she moved to the city. Experiences of being evicted by a landlord and the general lack of protection of tenants' rights in Shanghai led her to desire a place of her own. She admitted that her break-up with her former boyfriend was related to the question of who should pay for the martial property. She questioned why women could not request future husbands to provide better for them economically, given that women generally would sacrifice a lot of their previous independence and income for marriage and family. Both Jiang Xin and Qian Linlin have noticed that male anxiety about wealth has morphed into female self-policing over propriety and respectability. This is also demonstrated by the way that my informants distance themselves from the notion of the materialistic girl and strike a subtle balance between the material and spiritual demands they make of their future husbands.

Although my single women informants are very cautious about articulating the economic features of their ideal man, and they do not aspire to greatly enhance their socioeconomic status through marrying upwards, their imagined happy marriage is undoubtedly predicated on certain material conditions. These could range from buying an apartment and a car together, engaging in extensive traveling together, to sending their children abroad in the future. And while some women find the idea of a husband who is economically inferior to the wife acceptable, the idea remains rare, as demonstrated by the following conversation between Yuan Lele and her classmate Chen Jie, a 24-year-old master's student from Hubei province. It should be noted that both informants were earning around ten thousand yuan per month as part-time music teachers[8].

> The author: "Can you accept that your future husband makes less money than you do and his job is not as good as yours?"

> Yuan Lele: "It depends on how much less… If the income difference is between one and two thousand yuan per month, I think I am fine. He can earn the same as I do, or earn a bit more. All in all, the difference had better be small."

> Chen Jie: "It cannot be that I make ten thousand yuan a month and he makes only three to five thousand… But seven to eight thousand will do as long as he does more household chores."

The openly stated reason for their comments is that they would find it unacceptable to lower their standard of living upon getting married. Their ideal is to find a male peer from similar social strata and strive for an affluent family life together. Such an imagining does not challenge, but rather conforms to the mainstream marriage pattern of homogamy (marriage between people from similar sociological or educational backgrounds) and hypergamy (a person, usually a woman, marrying a spouse of higher social status than themselves) in China's post-socialist era[9].

In a nutshell, through deploying a material–spiritual dichotomy, single professional women regulate their desires for a higher socioeconomic status in their future partners. By denouncing hegemonic Chinese masculinity and constructing an ideal of conjugal happiness that revolves around spiritual as well as material compatibility, single professional women position themselves in opposition to both the opportunistic materialistic girl and the traditional

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[8] This amount falls in the middle range of income earned by the 25 informants for this chapter.

[9] For analyses of changing partner selection patterns in China and the emergence of homogamy and hypergamy as dominant patterns since marketization and privatization in the 1980s, see Xu (2000), Zhang (2003) and Li (2008).

dependent woman, and assert their modern femininity as independent career women. As they seek to share economic responsibilities more equally with men, they expect men to embrace more egalitarian family roles.

The Ideal Man Should Have a Strong Sense of Family Responsibility

In *Finding Mr. Right*, in striking contrast to Old Zhong who assumes that merely providing a materially comfortable life means that he has fulfilled his responsibilities to the family, Frank should be seen as the latest incarnation of the "postmillennial new man" (Song and Hird 2014, 214) that is gaining visibility in media and public discourses, especially in those catering to the expanding urban middle class. According to Song and Hird, the "new man" is constructed as "the egalitarian husband who believes in companionate marriage; the caring, engaged father; the emotionally expressive, sensitive man; and the educated, gentlemanly family man" (Ibid.). However, Song and Hird's (2014) ethnographic study of white-collar middle-class men in Beijing also reveals a discrepancy between the discursive ideal and everyday practices. While many middle-class men embrace the rhetoric of egalitarian conjugal relationships, in everyday life they usually maintain much less progressive attitudes and behaviors. As a result, women still end up shouldering the lion's share of family chores and childcare responsibilities. Shen's (2011) study of multigenerational households in Shanghai underlines that younger women's "liberation" from tedious housework is achieved by transferring the responsibilities to older women, namely mothers and mothers-in-law, instead of through men's greater contribution. X. Li's close reading of the "nursing dad" image constructed by the extremely popular television reality show *Dad, Where Are We Going*? (*baba qu near?* 2013) (un)surprisingly reveals that the father's greater involvement in child rearing is celebrated in popular culture as "exceptional rather than quotidian" (2016, 8). Clearly, it is not really aimed at "alleviating their female counterparts from tedious everyday parental responsibilities" (Ibid., 9). It is therefore understandable that despite expanding discourses about new ideals of familial masculinities, the single women informants I engaged with find that an egalitarian relationship is yet to become the dominant paradigm in everyday life, and consequently emphasize that their future partners should have a strong sense of family responsibility.

Most of my informants' conceptions of family responsibilities center on raising children. When they describe their visions of an ideal marriage, children figure prominently and often appear in their narratives without my prompting. For the majority of my informants, wifehood

and motherhood are regarded interchangeably[10]. When I mentioned that there were some informants who preferred not to have children, Yuan Lele, who labeled herself as independent as well as non-traditional, first responded, as if reflexively, "Why don't they want children?" After a few seconds, as if sensing she had made a judgmental and probably inappropriate comment, Yuan Lele rephrased her words by saying that "it is really not easy for those women to have such an idea." The sequence of finding "Mr. Right," getting married, and then having a child, is often reiterated as the "natural" process, revealing the tenacity of what Evans calls the "natural mother" discourse, which is sustained by the "almost universal practice of marriage and motherhood in China, and the common assumption of a biologically grounded correspondence between marriage, sexual intercourse, and reproduction" (2002, 348). Most of my informants subscribe to a seemingly biologically pre-determined subject position of devoted wife and mother, believing that they, as women, innately have a strong sense of responsibility towards children and family. They have little doubt that once they are married, they will unreservedly dedicate themselves to the wellbeing of the family. They do not demonstrate a belief in a corresponding innate, strong commitment to family among men.

Moreover, in the traditional conceptualizations and practices of marriage, the division of labor between wives and husbands is unequal. The deep-rooted idea of "men are in charge of the outside world and women are in charge of the home (*nanzhuwai nüzhunei*)" remains strong despite the advances educated women have made in white-collar professions. Rather, this idea has "evolved" into an expectation that women will take care of the household as well as of their own careers, thereby assuming a double burden. Most of my informants clearly state that becoming a housewife is an undesirable scenario for them. Analyzing her aunt's unhappy marriage, Chen Jie pointed to the predicament contemporary professional women find themselves in. On the one hand, "women need to take care of the child, clean the house, cook, and do all other housework, conforming to *traditional* ideas." On the other hand, "there is the *modern* notion that women should make money and be capable of everything" (emphasis mine). Although her aunt made more money than her husband, she stills carried out more household

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[10] Currently, the Chinese state strictly regulates fertility, attaching it firmly to the institution of marriage and thus, depriving single women of the rights of reproduction (Davis 2014a). While childless marriage, that is, DINK or "double income no kid (*dingke*)" has gained social visibility and is accepted as a matter of personal freedom by my informants, motherhood outside of marriage has yet to become an imaginable option and remains far from viable. Out-of-wedlock births are also rare in neighboring East Asian countries that do not have China's legal restrictions, suggesting that cultural factors, rather than the legal framework, determine how people couple marriage and reproduction. In 2005, the ratio of births out of wedlock was 2.0% in Japan, 1.5% in Korea, 4.0% in Taiwan, and 1.3% in Singapore. At the same time in Europe, births out of wedlock count for more than half of all births in Northwestern Europe, and it rapidly increased even in Southern Europe (20.7% for Italy, 28.4% for Spain and 31.6% for Portugal), a great contrast with East Asia (Suziki 2010, quoted in Ochiai 2011, 226).

chores than him. Chen Jie observed that her aunt acquiesced to such an unfair arrangement because she stuck to "traditional" values, believing women should obey their husbands. Similar examples of unhappy marriages proliferate in the narratives of other informants as well. For Chen Jie and others who similarly highlight their independence and rejection of traditional conceptualizations of wifehood and motherhood, such an unequal relationship is obviously unacceptable, and also considered avoidable. These women look for a responsible man who is more progressive in gender relations and willing to share the double burden more equally with his wife.

Other informants concede that they are willing to perform the traditional virtuous wife and good mother (*xianqi liangmu*) role on top of being a career woman. Many informants speak positively of this virtuous wife and good mother femininity because they believe it promises happiness and self-fulfillment within family life. It is worth pointing out that single women's proclaimed willingness to be the virtuous wife and good mother is also predicated on pessimism: they are pessimistic about transforming the social expectations of gender-based family roles and women's disadvantageous status in marriage. They accept that women will shoulder more family responsibilities but also insist that they do this out of love rather than out of obligation. It is important that their future husbands appreciate the sacrifices they will make to bring more happiness to the family. One potential sacrifice that is frequently mentioned is the risk of being deprived of social life and self-worth. Qian Linlin lamented that, once women become mothers, their other identities outside of the family are less recognized, if not neglected, by society. She gave the example of a friend who was a famous amateur runner. Once this runner became a mother, all media reports referred to her as a mother, no matter how rarely she talked about her child. The media deemed her accomplishment in marathons unimportant in comparison to child-bearing and rearing.

Moreover, Qian Linlin was also saddened by how her married female friends tended to withdraw from old networks of friends and retreat into family. Even though Qian Linlin considered the loss of an active social life regretful, she had no confidence that she would not make the same sacrifice upon entering marriage because she also highly valued family. Another sacrifice commonly anticipated is that of career progression. Many informants during my research observed that there is open and prevalent discrimination against women of reproductive age who apply for new jobs in Shanghai's white-collar job market. In the face of the negative impact that reproduction might impose on their careers, women need to work especially hard to make themselves so outstanding that their employers find them irreplaceable,

as Dai Mengcheng suggested. Alternatively, they have to accept an easy job that allows them to spend more time taking care of their children but offers limited prospects for future development because "the social structure dictates so," as Ge Yunfei proposed with resignation.

Finally, my informants are also concerned about the double standards revolving around infidelity in society, concluding that the status quo is that men face fewer social consequences than women do if they cheat on their spouses. When single professional women delve into the everyday life of marriage, they reveal a surprisingly bleak view of it, contrasting with their earlier narratives that described the free pursuit of greater personal happiness through marriage. They realize that their desires are constrained by social norms and reality; they feel that they must compromise and even sacrifice personal development in order to build a nuclear, child-oriented family.

At the same time, it must be emphasized that some informants' desires for a partner who champions gender equality, include not only the ideal of a more equal sharing of family responsibilities between husbands and wives, but also more flexibility in marital roles. Liz was the most vocal in calling for more radical conceptualizations of marriage. She decided not to have children because she was "selfish" and unwilling to sacrifice her lifestyle for children. Family does not necessarily have to be child-centered, and wives do not necessarily have to become mothers, according to Liz. Her ideal model of marriage was practiced by a pair of her friends in Hong Kong. While the wife had a full-time job and provided for the family, the husband devoted himself to pursuing his hobbies, and the couple switched roles every few years. What she admired the most about this model was the fluidity and equality involved in (re)assigning family responsibilities. Additionally, in Liz's narratives, the West was frequently invoked. She proudly called herself a xenophile, "blindly worshipping foreign (western) things (*chongyang meiwai*)." The West she admired and longed for was characterized by gender equality and more personal freedom. It was invoked as an inspiration to configure alternative gender relations and marriage scripts, and as the more advanced/progressive/modern Other as well. With this inspiration, Liz could address and criticize the restraints she experienced as a single woman in China. But unlike the Japanese professional women who imagine Western white men as their agents of professional, romantic, and sexual liberation from patriarchal constraints, as discussed in Kelsky's (2001) study, Liz did not come up with a strategy of searching for Western men to accommodate her desires for equality. Instead, immigrating to the West, either to Western Europe or North America, was envisioned as a more effective way to escape the constraints she experienced as a woman in China.

To summarize, most of my informants imagine a nuclear family, seeing children as a vital source of their future happiness. At the same time, they also resist the current dominant gender-based and unequal divisions of household labor, especially that of child rearing. Their ideal men should have (or acquire) a deep sense of family commitment, involvement, and responsibility, as the women themselves already have. Some concede that if men cannot be as family-oriented as they are, they should at least be understanding and feel grateful for women's sacrifices. Occasionally, children are not imagined as an essential part of marriage, and the boundaries between family masculinity and femininity are challenged and blurred.

Conclusion

A strong sense of discontent and resistance saturates the self-narratives of the single professional women I have talked to, and marriage is a fiercely contested site for them to construct their subjectivities. Lan Ting confessed, "Only in terms of marriage am I resisting the mainstream… As for other aspects of life, I have never thought too much about resisting [social norms]." Juxtaposing Lan Ting's introspection with Liz's contention that any deviation from the normative life course is negatively judged in China, I contend that by articulating their imaginations of marriage—viewing it as an option instead of an obligation of a woman's life course—and emphasizing their longing for more egalitarian conjugal relationships based on spiritual compatibility, single professional women question and challenge social norms, particularly gender norms. The binaries of the traditional and the modern, the provincial and the metropolitan, together with the concepts of personal happiness, diversity, and tolerance serve as significant discursive resources for them to refute constraining social expectations and assert their new femininities.

Yet, the discourse of marriage as a personal choice has several pitfalls. First, marriage and prolonged singlehood as life options carry different meanings for most of my informants. Most of them unequivocally desire marriage, and prolonged singlehood is implied to be acceptable, though not as optimal as marriage. Li Yifan's account, also quoted above, is telling:

> If I don't get lucky like that, I can dedicate my life to something other than family life, or I can create other meanings of life. I can become a different kind of person. Maybe later in my life I can think of or do things that married people cannot. Maybe I can read many books and visit many places.

This assumption, "if I don't get lucky like that," implies permanent singlehood as an insufficiency, as incomplete, as a deficient identity. But, instead of concluding that most of my informants unconsciously reinforce the centrality of marriage and family life to femininity, or questioning their sincerity when they express their hopes for a diverse and tolerant society where women would not be judged for being married or single, I propose another interpretation. When my informants talk about marriage and family life, they never run out of topics—from mortgage to child rearing—or anecdotal stories of successful and unsuccessful marriages. But when they envision a prolonged or permanent single life, no vivid image or detailed descriptions emerge. Usually, the narratives halt abruptly after one or two sentences, like Li Yifan's. Occasionally some mention high-achieving single women they know in the workplace. For this reason, I contend that single women are faced with a lack of discursive resources from either popular culture or real-life role models to imagine a life beyond marriage and family. Heaphy eloquently explains the difficulty in conceptualizing and constructing life scripts around relationships like friendships, community, and partnerships other than marriage and family. He argues that:

> family is so "naturalized" and taken for granted that its discursive and fictive nature very easily slips away from view. Its effectiveness as a form of relational governance is evidenced in how difficult it is for relational practices and displays to escape being viewed through the family frame: as family or not. (2011, 34)

Despite the enormous challenges associated with breaking with such a frame, Li Yifan and others like her may gradually develop alternative life scripts that do not revolve around heterosexual coupledom, reproduction, and domestic happiness, and more confidently disassociate singlehood from lacking. Their extended single lives may become an inspiration to future generations of women.

Secondly, single professional women regard both singlehood and marriage as life options, but most of them tend to see singlehood and marriage as an either-or situation: either they find "Mr. Right" and get married, or they do not find "Mr. Right" and stay single. Why cannot romantic relationships and coupledom take other forms like partnership and co-habitation? Why is marriage inevitably considered the telos of romantic relationships? Why is it not an option to find "Mr. Right" and then not marry him? Why is reproduction predicated on or only legitimatized by marriage, and why is single parenthood not a normal family configuration? These possibilities are rarely discussed by my informants. They confront the social and parental

pressure to marry at a certain age by elaborating their visions of an ideal marriage. Their renegotiations and resistances may become more challenging to the norm of universal marriage if other ways of having romantic relationships and families are more discussed and practiced.

Thirdly, although I have interviewed twenty-five single women, their imaginings of an ideal marriage are disturbingly similar. They reify marriage as a means to pursue personal happiness, which is defined by heterosexual romantic love, and this romantic love is based on spiritual and implicitly material compatibility. To pursue marriage for any other end, especially economic upward mobility, is the antithesis of the modern independent femininity they (aspire to) embody. But when the happiness they long for is concretized in their descriptions of a domestic life, these are shown to make up a conservative image of a middle-class nuclear family, marked by property ownership, dedication to children's education, and consumption.

In the face of structural constraints, that is, the modern double burden of both family and career, single professional women envision a countermeasure at the most personal level, that is, finding a "Mr. Right" who is open-minded, egalitarian, and progressive enough to accommodate their modern independent femininity. They predominantly regard children as essential to marriage, and consider child rearing to constitute the bulk of family responsibilities. The issues and the negative impact child rearing could have on professional women are predominately understood as purely private matters to be solved within the family, ideally with a spouse who has a strong sense of family responsibility. The ideas of autonomy and agency are key to single professional women's self-identity and self-worth, yet no discourse on rights is born out of their constructions of ideal femininities and masculinities in intimate relationships. The potential of associating autonomy with rights, such as demanding that both the state and the corporate world tackle gender discrimination and improve social welfare, or exploring ways to expand women's participation in public policy-making and make women's voices heard even in an authoritarian society, remains an under-tapped option.

Without fundamentally questioning the natural mother conceptualization, how can single professional women's imaginings of marriage and ideal masculinities transform the ideas of men, whom they perceive to be slower to change? Could they even find their "Mr. Right"? If not, are they going to compromise on their ideals, and how? Furthermore, without questioning the privatization of child rearing and calling for better social welfare, how can they cope with the evolving discrimination against women in the labor market (see Chapter 1)? Without

collective actions and feminist movements, can society progress naturally, as they seem to believe? I cannot convince myself to be optimistic.

Chapter 4

Pursuing Self-Actualization:
Passionate Work, Post-Materialism, and Its Limits

The Story of Lan Ting

I first met Lan Ting at the Love Club in 2014. Among all the informants I recruited from the Love Club, she stood out as confident and carefree. As an architect, she was happy with her work; as a migrant from Yunnan province, she enjoyed her life in Shanghai. I interviewed her again in the summer of 2015, along with one of her female colleagues, Peng Yibo. I was surprised to find that in less than a year, Lan Ting's attitude had changed drastically. She was neither sure about her career as an architect nor about staying in Shanghai for the long term. By her account, the biggest change in her life was the intensification of her professional commitments: she had to work 10 hours a day, 6 days a week. In addition to the stress of work, Lan Ting had existential doubts, albeit she admitted she was living the life she had always dreamed of: looking good, having her own money to spend, and living in a city she liked:

> I feel like I am on board a train with everyone else, and we all move forward at the same pace…But I do not want a life led by this train… In terms of marriage, I have been resisting against the mainstream…As for other things, I have not given them much thought, I have not wanted to resist, I have not quit my job to pursue my dream. If I know clearly what I want, I can spare no effort to pursue it, for instance quit my job. But the issue now is that I only vaguely feel something is wrong. I need more time to figure out what goes wrong.

> [Regarding that something is wrong,] I mean I have not fully demonstrated my energy and potential…When I was a kid, I was not much constrained by my surroundings; I had my own navigator, which told me what made me happy, what made me sad, and what I wanted. But as I have gotten older, there have been more and more outside voices telling me what I should do, what I need, and what I had better. Lately my navigator has been a bit down. I cannot pick up my inner voice…

Lan Ting's colleague Peng Yibo affirmed she could totally relate to and share Lan Ting's doubts; furthermore, Yibo followed up and wondered if their love for architecture was a result of all those outside voices: it is after all a respectable and well-paying occupation and brings them mainstream social recognition. Both single professional women wondered what they truly wanted for career and for life.

The next time I interviewed Lan Ting was in October 2017. Earlier that year, she had indeed quit her job as an architect to pursue her dream. While Lan Ting had had doubts about architecture being her lifelong career for quite some time, the realization of what her dream really was struck her suddenly. Lan Ting recounted that she went through a phase of decluttering and got rid of most of her possessions. Looking at what remained in her relatively empty apartment, she realized that she had kept nothing related to architecture and that the things she did keep were all related to beauty. It dawned on her that she no longer loved architecture and that her true passion was beauty. But Lan Ting did not immediately quit her job after this sudden realization. She explained that she stayed as an architect for a few more months in order to make sure her intuitions were not ephemeral. After this re-evaluation period she only became firmer about her passion for beauty and quit her job regardless of strong objections from her former colleagues. After a six-month vacation in Yunnan, Lan Ting enrolled in a training course at the Shanghai Theater Academy and embarked on a new path. I asked Lan Ting to define her new profession because the term she used, i.e., "the pursuit of beauty," was not an intelligible occupation. Lan Ting claimed that she could present herself as a makeup artist, but she insisted that she would not be satisfied with just doing makeup for others; what drove her to pursue this path is that she wants to change people's narrow view of beauty:

> I think everyone is beautiful. Everyone has their own characteristics...but the trend nowadays is to make everyone look the same, like internet influencers. Everyone is chasing the same kind of beauty. It is really a shame that people wasting their talents. My goal is to show the most extreme beauty of each individual as a human being.

As for the narrow view of beauty, Lan Ting specifically lamented that society could not appreciate aging, especially the aging of women. Lan Ting could not agree with the mainstream beauty standard that requires women in their 30s, 40s, and even 50s to appear youthful and girlish. She excitedly envisioned what might lie ahead as she pursued her goal of changing people's perceptions of beauty. In the future, she might study anatomy to improve her skills;

she might have her own makeup brand; she might be a wedding makeup artist until she retires. Lan Ting added that being a businesswoman is not necessarily more appealing, because it is the realization of her full potential, not money, that brings her personal happiness. She could see herself as a lifelong craftsperson as long as she gets satisfaction from the work. To demonstrate how much she enjoyed doing makeup, Lan Ting shared a recent experience. She was invited to do a bridal makeup for a friend. Although the friend booked a suite for Lan Ting in a fancy hotel with many entertainment facilities such as a hot spring, the happiest time for Lan Ting was the three hours in the early morning when she immersed herself in doing makeup for her friend. She added:

> The fun of these three hours lies in using my talents, gifts, aesthetics, and techniques to make my friend look her best. For me, this is the most enjoyable game in the world. Nothing can replace it. I don't care about my social status at all.

Aware of Lan Ting's nonchalance about social status, I asked her if she felt insecure about her economic prospects, given that she used to have a well-paying job. Lan Ting laughed, "I am doing what I am most gifted at and what I enjoy the most. There's no way I won't make money. I'm not worried and I don't feel any pressure. Maybe I am just optimistic." Coincidentally, Lan Ting's optimism echoes American self-help guru Marsha Sinetar's (1987) bestseller *Do What You Love, the Money will Follow*, in which she instructs readers on how to find their passions and assures them of financial returns because "our enjoyment predisposes us to create more and better works and enables other to see value in it" (quoted in Sandoval 2018, 115).

Single Women and Work

Lan Ting is not the only informant who has drastically changed her career. Huang Jue, whom I also met at the Love Club in 2014, resigned from a state-owned architecture institute and planned to study psychology with the goal of becoming a psychological counselor. Dai Mengcheng, whom I interviewed in 2015 and who worked in market research for several years, co-founded a comedy troupe and became an actor. What prompted them to pursue a completely different career? Did their single status affect their career decisions? In Lan Ting's introspection quoted above, she candidly admitted she had confusions about life: while she had clarity about the position of marriage in her life (see Chapter 3), she was not certain about what kind of work

she truly wanted to do for life. Lan Ting's self-reflection implies that marriage and work are intertwined in single professional women's exploration and pursuit of a meaningful life. Most studies on single women in China "often privilege the personal and leave behind issues of work" (Chow 2019, 3). Like Chow's (2019) study of single women in Shanghai's creative industries, this chapter aims to fill this gap.

On the other hand, in the mid-2010s, when Lan Ting, Huang Jue, and Dai Mengcheng made their career changes, the Chinese government's mass entrepreneurship and innovation initiative (*dazhong chuangye wanzhong chuangxin*) was unfolding, with the goal of upgrading the economic growth pattern and creating more jobs (China State Council 2015, 2018). Were they heeding the government's call? At around the same time, the Chinese government abolished the one-child policy and intensified the promotion of traditional family values[1]. How did these women navigate these macro trends in society?

In this chapter, I focus primarily on the self-narratives of the cohort of informants represented by Lan Ting: single professional women who changed their career paths to pursue their true passions, such as switching fields, becoming freelancers, or starting their own businesses. This represents about half of the 30 informants I interviewed between 2017 and 2018, when I focused on the career aspirations of single women. The other half of the 30 informants, as well as women I interviewed in previous years, may not have made major changes, but they have their aspirations, concerns, and confusions. I also draw on their experiences to better understand the group of women I focus on in this chapter.

I argue that this group of single professional women are not heeding the government's call for mass entrepreneurship. Rather, they are using the discourse of pursuing one's true passion, of doing what one loves to challenge 1) heteronormativity by imagining and living a life not predicated on the heterosexual nuclear family; 2) materialism by deviating from the mainstream

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[1] Since the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012, Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed the importance of family values and family education for national development and social harmony (Zhao 2017). In October 2013, Xi met with the new leadership of the All-China Women's Federation and delivered a speech that clearly signaled a shift toward traditional gender roles and values. In this speech, Xi stated that "it is important to focus on the unique role of women in promoting Chinese family virtues and establishing good family customs, which are related to family harmony, social harmony and the healthy growth of the next generation. Women should consciously shoulder the responsibility of respecting the elderly, loving the young and educating their children, and play a role in building family virtues, helping children form a good heart and encouraging them to grow up healthily and become useful to the country and the people when they grow up. Women should carry on the Chinese people's fine tradition of hard work and self-improvement, lead a positive, civilized and noble life, and promote the formation of good social customs" (*Xinhuanet* 2013).

middle-class lifestyle. But their resistance is highly individualistic and seems ambivalent about structural issues such as labor rights and gender discrimination.

The remaining chapter is organized into the following sections. First, I will review the existing literature on the post-Fordist work ethic of DWYL (do what you love), paying particular attention to the discrepancies between theories originating in Western societies and the contemporary Chinese context. Second, I will examine how single professional women use the discourses of passionate work and DWYL to challenge the gendered valorization of stability. Single women are under enormous pressure because they are not married. If they do marry, they are expected to have a stable job to support the family and to prioritize family over their career, a burden not placed on their future husbands. These women's vocal disdain for stability, as well as their embrace of uncertainty, challenges heteronormativity and proper femininity as defined by wifehood and motherhood. Third, I will highlight the post-material values that my informants display. They emphasize that they work out of love, not money, and do not identify as entrepreneurs. Some leave high-paying and esteemed occupations and experience downward social mobility. Their goal is to achieve self-fulfillment and to have a positive impact on society through their own growth and development. Finally, I will draw attention to the structural conditions that my informants have observed and/or endured, pointing to the possibility that they may develop a collective identity as workers with rights or as women facing gender discrimination, beyond the individualistic approach they predominantly take in their self-narratives.

Do What You Love Ideology

The new careers my informants have found are concentrated in the service sector, such as travel, beauty, wellness, hospitality, entertainment, and education. To enter and succeed in these new fields, these college-educated women rely more on their hobbies, consumer experience, and interpersonal skills than on formal education, like the enterprising women analyzed by Gray (2003) and their use of informal knowledges in new modes of work. For many of them, compared to their previous office-based white-collar work, their new work often requires them to interact with customers, and brings both heightened affective rewards and burdens from such interpersonal interactions. The career shifts these women undergo reflect the rise of immaterial, emotional and affective labor (Mills 1951; Lazzarato 1996; Hochschild 1983; Negri and Hardt 1999) as the global economy transforms into post-Fordism.

The transformation of the capitalist economy from Fordism to post-Fordism entails not only the expansion of the service sector and the emergence of new forms of labor, but also changes in how people relate to work, the identities people invent and invest in work, the ethical relationship between work and the self, i.e. the work ethic. Weeks (2011) traces the mutation of the work ethic from early capitalist, Fordist to post-Fordist societies in the United States, and concludes that work has become increasingly determinant of subjectivity. Continuing with Max Weber's (2002) classic thesis that the Protestant work ethic promised salvation in the next world as reward for work, Weeks (2011) contends that the Fordist work ethic promised the working-class material gains and upward social mobility as reward for work. With shift to post-Fordism since the mid-twentieth century, "another element, present but not as stressed in the industrial discourse, came to the forefront of the new postindustrial work ethic—an element that characterized work as a path to individual self-expression, self-development, and creativity" (Ibid., 46). Work is viewed less and less instrumentally, but functions more and more intensively in forming subjectivities. McRobbie concurs that "work has been re-invented to satisfy the needs and demands of a generation who, 'disembedded' from traditional attachments to family, kinship, community or region, now find that work must become a fulfilling mark of self" (2018, 22). The DWYL (do what you love) ideology stems from this post-Fordist work ethic. Sandoval argues that it represents "the epitome of this hostile takeover of the desire for self-actualization and pleasure" (2018, 115). If Benjamin Franklin's famous maxim "time is money" represents the Protestant work ethic (Weber 2002), then Steve Jobs embodies the DWYL ideology of our time. In his commencement address to the Stanford University graduating class of 2005, Jobs preached to college graduates:

> You've got to find what you love. And this is as true for your work as it is for your lovers. Your work is going to fill a large part of your life, and the only way to be truly satisfied is to do what you believe is great work. And the only way to do great work is to love what you do. (Quoted in Tokumitsu 2014)

Tokumitsu, in her examination of the contemporary obsession with the notion of success and happiness, unapologetically calls DWYL a lie, arguing "that DWYL is an essentially narcissistic schema, facilitating willful ignorance of working conditions of others…DWYL exposes its adherents to exploitation, justifying unpaid or underpaid work by throwing workers' motivation back at them" (2015, 4-5). On the one hand, workers toiling in low-end jobs are rendered invisible in the DWYL discourse, such as the tens of thousands of migrant workers who manufacture Apple products in China (Sandoval 2013; Ngai and Koo 2015). On the other

hand, empirical studies especially on the emergent and initially widely celebrated creative industry expose how the DWYL mandate diverts attention from exploitation, inequalities, and the dismantling of the welfare state (e.g., Gill 2014; Harvey and Shepherd 2017; Kim and Lee 2020; Bulut 2023; Standing 2018). Consequently, the DWYL ideology "depoliticize[s] the employment relation by impeding the formation of collectivities and undermining relations of solidarity" (Weeks 2017, 46-7).

In addition, feminists point out that ideas of passionate work, DWYL appeal to young women in particular. McRobbie warns that "nowadays young women's feminine status depends on having an interesting, possibly creative and ideally glamorous job...Passionate work in turn becomes a further mark of feminine intelligibility and success" (2018, 91). Women are often encouraged to pursue careers which they are passionate about, but this is just the first step towards achieving successful femininity. The work ethic of DWYL inherently demands an entrepreneurial mindset. To pursue their true passions, women must also develop an entrepreneurial subjectivity and focus on self-improvement. As a result, the ideal and successful entrepreneurial femininity precludes collective mobilization against structural inequalities and patriarchal disciplines, and at the same time reinforces certain traditional femininities (Gray 2003; McRobbie 2015; Rottenberg 2014, 2019; Duffy and Pruchniewska 2017).

In contemporary China, however, DWYL has not yet become what Weeks sees as "hegemonic as a cultural script and normative ideal" (2017, 40). Intimate love for work has not replaced the love for family as a marker of successful femininity for women in China. Rather, the discourse of DWYL is used by some single professional women in China to resist dominant gender norms. And the first enemy of these women is the notion of stability.

What Do Single Professional Women Want from Work

Why Don't They Want Stability?

At first glance, the DWYL believers I interviewed do not mention, let alone emphasize, their gender when explaining their aversion to stability. Stability is often explicitly singled out as the antithesis of pursuing their dreams and realizing their full potential. Duan Judy was born in Shanghai in 1984 to parents who both held *tizhinei*[2] employment. Judy began to question the

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[2] The term "*tizhinei*," which literally means "inside the system," is widely used in everyday life to refer to employment within the state sector, including the civil service, state-owned enterprise, public education system,

concept of stability without any prompting from me. She had aspired to become a teacher since her adolescence, and thus pursued a degree at a normal university, which is specifically designed to prepare students for teaching. After obtaining her bachelor's degree, she taught biology at a public middle school for over a decade. However, she gradually recognized that her work provided little personal fulfillment or challenge. Judy consequently resigned from her stable job to work in the travel industry. She candidly revealed that it was her fear of getting stuck in repetitive work and losing the motivation for self-improvement that led her to make this drastic change in her career:

> I think I can see how I will be when I retire [as a teacher]. It is quite scary. I can predict that when I retire, I would have the Senior Teacher title, do teaching and that's it. It is like life is planned without twists and turns. It sounds boring. I think life should be varied. Maybe I want to try other paths because I have been down this path and know what is coming. I want to try something new. I even thought "why do I want stability?" Now I think life should consist of instability. Maybe the nature of life is that you do not know what will happen later. I do not want to know what I will look like when I retire many years later.

There is no mention of marriage, family, or children in Judy's negation of stability. This omission is common in my informants' initial accounts, as they tended to focus on explaining where their passions came from. In Judy's case, she had a lot to say about her various travel experiences and the love she had for travel. Some informants, such as Lan Ting, began their stories by recalling how the realization of where their passions lay came to them like an epiphany. However, when they further elaborated on why they were making career changes to embrace challenges and unpredictability, they often compared and contrasted themselves with their female friends who prioritized stability or the ideal scenario presented by their parents. They concluded that in China today, the mainstream expectation for well-educated and economically independent women is still to have a stable job, rather than a promising and rewarding career, and to revolve their lives around marriage and children. During my research in Shanghai between 2014 and 2018, I heard many informants mention the idiom "it's best for a woman to have a stable job," usually given to them as sincere advice from their parents. The single professional women interviewed for this chapter are more vocal about their disapproval of this admonition. The gendered nature of the valorization of stability is laid bare before them

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other various institutions that are affiliated with the state, and consequently, the enjoyment of better social welfare provision.

because they deviate from the mainstream expectation. It is difficult for them to accept this reality. As the only child of their parents, these young women grew up being encouraged by their parents to strive for the same academic achievements as their male peers[3]. But once they complete their education and enter the job market, the parental and societal expectations of them shift from their personal development to their family roles.

The majority of informants felt resigned to the parents' admonition and change of attitude. Some felt indignant. Tang Fei, the only child of her parents, was born in 1989 in the nearby province of Jiangsu. In college, while majoring in economics, she gradually developed interests for education and earned a master's degree in education in Yunnan, where she participated in research projects in regions lacking educational resources. After graduation, she was determined to work for education-related NGOs and dreamed of establishing her own educational institution. She felt that there were so many problems with the education system in China, and she wanted to make some small improvements. At the time of the interview, she was also considering pursuing a doctorate abroad in the near future to expand her horizons. But her parents kept asking her to move back to her hometown and start a family:

> Since I am the only child, my parents hope that I will have stability as a girl. They do not expect me to make a lot of money. They just want me to get married and have children...My mother even said she wished I had not studied so much so that I would not have [different ideas]. It is frightening that she believes in the uselessness of education (*dushu wuyonglun*). If she were from Yunnan, I could understand her thinking... But she lives not far from Shanghai. Yet she has such an idea about women. I am shocked.

The discrepancy experienced by my informants results from the cultural ideology that perpetuates divergent gender role expectations in China. Lisa Hoffman's study (2010) argues that the formation of professional subjectivity in post-socialist China is fundamentally gendered. Based on extensive ethnographic research in the 1990s and early 2000s in the port city of Dalian, a leading trade and manufacturing hub in northeastern China, Hoffman finds that a risk management strategy of "one household, two systems"[4] has been developed by middle-class

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[3] See discussion on urban women's education achievement in Chapter 1.

[4] "The term '*yi jia, liang zhi*' is a take-off on the phrase '*yi guo, liang zhi*' (one country, two systems) that describes the Hong Kong–China relationship after the British returned the colony to Beijing's authority in 1997. Although Hong Kong was once again a part of China, it also had its own legal and financial systems—hence, one country with two systems. 'One household, two systems' refers to one person (usually the wife) staying in the state system while the spouse (usually the husband) ventured into private business" (Hoffman 2010, 125). Hoffman finds it surprising that at a time of continued layoffs from state-owned enterprises and the withdrawal of the state's

individuals and families against the backdrop of marketization and flexibilization of the labor market. Under this gendered division women are expected to pursue stable and secure employment in the state sector to shoulder the increasing uncertainties for the nuclear family, while their male partners are allowed more freedom to explore (often more lucrative) opportunities in the private sector. In Hoffman's study, many young professional women felt "torn between dreams of developing themselves as *rencai* (talent)—paralleling reform-era narratives of growth and development—and conforming to ideals of femininity embedded in the virtuous wife and good mother role (*xianqi liangmu*)" (Ibid., 122). After ten to twenty years, young professional women are still constrained by such cultural ideologies of proper femininity. My informants still report that they have been inculcated to seek *tizhinei* employment, such as working for the government, public schools, or state-owned enterprises. According to their parents and, to a lesser extent, their friends, civil servants and teachers are the two most suitable jobs for women because *tizhinei* jobs mean lifelong employment, less competition, and more free time to take care of the family. On the other hand, the state policy of mass entrepreneurship has not significantly improved the hostile environment for women. Female entrepreneurs are stilled faced with enormous gendered obstacles and social censure for choosing non-traditional work[5]; for single women, entrepreneurship does not alleviate the social and parental pressure on marriage (Song and Li 2023).

The sociocultural valorization of stability for women makes many informants feel marginalized. Their desire to do what they love, their quest for self-realization outside the family, is not recognized, or deemed irrelevant before they have a family. Sometimes this valorization seems to be an obsession with *tizhinei* employment, leaving some informants deeply confused or hurt, wondering if their parents even care about what they want.

Liu Xiaoxue was born in Jiangsu province in 1991. She moved to Shanghai for university and stayed. She chose psychology as her major because she had always been a good listener to her friends from a young age, and she wanted to learn methods to relieve her friends' psychological burdens. When she was going through a hard time, the idea of opening a studio for mental health struck her. She explained: "When I am very sad, I draw while listening to music. I pay no attention to anything else. I do not check my phone. I just draw. Afterwards I

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guarantee of housing and employment, "ideas about stability, security, and the state [still] intermingled, reproducing cultural ideologies of masculinity and femininity" (Ibid., 136).

[5] See, for example, Lin Zhang's (2017) study of Chinese female entrepreneurs who specialize in the resale of Western luxury goods online and their calculated performance of traditional femininity in order to gain social acceptance and commercial success.

feel better. Suddenly I wonder if I can have a place where anyone can come, draw, listen to music, and do nothing else. Isn't that wonderful?" Within a few months, she had single-handedly opened a studio, first conceived as a place for people to release stress, and later as "a space for individual free expression."

Liu Xiaoxue's parents did not interfere in her choice of what to study in college. According to Xiaoxue's father, a civil servant, it did not matter what she studied because she would take the civil service exam in her hometown after graduation anyway. But Xiaoxue knew early on that she did not want *tizhinei* employment. In addition, her parents hoped that Xiaoxue would return to her hometown because they did not want their only child to face hardships alone in Shanghai. Many non-Shanghainese informants heard the same plea from their parents. Xiaoxue's father went even further, suggesting that Xiaoxue enlist in the army so that she would have to return to her hometown. Xiaoxue could understand her father's preference for working within the state system, but entering the system by joining the army was plainly absurd. She simply ignored her parents' request. Moreover, her father was not the only one around her who was obsessed with *tizhinei* employment. According to Xiaoxue, her best friend, a woman, and she had completely different values. Her friend was determined to become a teacher and would not accept other jobs. Xiaoxue, whose dream was "*not* to be stable, satisfied with teaching and making some money" (emphasis mine), could not understand why her friend was so certain about being a teacher for 30 years and the stability it promised. After getting a teaching job, this friend started a relationship through matchmaking and was about to get married after dating for about a year. This path fit perfectly with this friend's imagination of a stable life. But the couple broke up unexpectedly. And the friend began to ask Xiaoxue about job opportunities outside the school system. Xiaoxue sounded pleased that her friend was showing more ambition in life and that their values were getting closer.

For informants who quit *tizhinei* jobs, conflicts with parents were far more painful. Both Duan Judy and Lei Qiaoqiao are the only child to their parents. Both are Shanghainese and their parents all hold *tizhinei* jobs. Judy left her job as a public-school teacher to work in a start-up company and then as a freelance tour guide; Qiaoqiao left a state-owned architectural institution to freelance in the fashion industry and later co-founded a coffee shop. When their parents learnt about their resignations, the parents fiercely scolded their daughters. Judy's father, according to Judy, "exploded (lashed out at her);" Qiaoqiao's mother cried in front of her, tormenting her. They felt hurt that their parents reacted as if they had committed a sin when all they had done was change their career paths. Even with the passage of time, their parents had yet to show

support for their daughters. At the time of the interview, Judy had left the start-up company for a few months and was freelancing. But she did not tell her parents because she could not imagine how badly they would react. Her parents still urged her to return to her former employer, the public school. She continued her 9-to-6 schedule, pretending to go to work as usual since she was living with her parents. Qiaoqiao moved out of her parents' place; at least she did not have to argue with them too much. Qiaoqiao had the feeling that if she were a son, her parents would be more open to her leaving the system and becoming an entrepreneur; it was legitimate in her parents' eyes for a son to embrace opportunities that promise greater financial return.

Tizhinei employment as a marker of proper middle-class femininity is peculiar to the contemporary Chinese context. Many non-Shanghainese informants reiterated that if they moved back to their hometown, they did not see many job opportunities besides *tizhinei* employment; in Shanghai, they believed they had more options. The majority of the informants for this chapter have never worked for the state sector. They acknowledge that *tizhinei* jobs are highly regarded for women, but are not too affected as they are not part of that system. The ideology of stability disciplines them through the hegemonic status of the heterosexual nuclear family and the enduring ideal of femininity as the virtuous wife and good mother, making them doubt their desire to want more from work.

Xia Yuxin was born in Guangdong in 1987 and is the only child in her family. She attended university and graduate school in Guangzhou and Shanghai, respectively, majoring in information science. Since her freshman year, she started volunteering for charity organizations and participated in projects in various places in China. Even after she started working as a consultant for a multinational IT company after receiving her master's degree, she was still active in the nonprofit sector. She first transferred from the IT company's core consulting business to its corporate social responsibility department so that she could consult directly for charities. When I first interviewed Xia Yuxin in October 2017, she had just passed an extremely competitive selection process and been offered a job with an international organization in Europe. At the time of our first interview, Yuxin had just celebrated her 30th birthday, but she seemed more stressed than happy. As a 30-year-old single woman, she felt that her biological clock was ticking fast. She worried that being abroad for at least two years would further diminish her marriage prospects as she envisioned finding her partner in China. Yuxin asked a lot about my research on single women. She wanted to know how other single women think and cope with the pressure to get married. I tried to allay her fears and reassure her, which seemed to be effective. She wrote a summary of the interview and shared it with me. In her

note, she wrote that it was refreshing to learn that the quality of sperm also decreases with age but public discussions only focus on women and warn about the dangers of geriatric pregnancy. She also pointed out that she seemed to be unconsciously pitting career against family, a conflict that women have to balance but not men. This is because she observed that the mainstream expects a person to marry and have children at an appropriate age. But this expectation prevents a person from freely exploring life. At her former IT company, many female consultants move to supporting departments because pregnancy, breastfeeding, and child-rearing take up too much energy. Yuxin expressed her skepticism about such a life path, as well as about her ability to deviate from the mainstream expectations of a woman.

In January 2018, I interviewed Xia Yuxin again. This time, she seemed much more excited about starting a new chapter in her life. She had recently opened a WeChat subscription account because she had been reflecting on her life so far and wanted to share her life, especially her journey in the nonprofit sector, with a wider audience. Marriage was no longer at the forefront of her mind. She confidently stated that the theme of her life was "charity and exploring the world." Continuing our last conversation, Yuxin again criticized herself for assuming that women must prioritize family over career, stability over change. After she got the job at the international organization, a close female friend called to inquire about similar opportunities. But Yuxin's first reaction was to dismiss her friend's curiosity by pointing out that her friend was about to get married. Yuxin reflected that in her subconscious mind, traveling around the world or moving to another continent for work is only for single people; once a woman is married, she should settle for a stable life centered on her family. But now it took her little time to realize that it was the deeply ingrained sexist ideology that was talking. She felt more at ease with her own strong desire to explore the world despite the uncertainties it held. She negated an earlier phase of herself when she was stressed about getting married and having a family of her own. I met Yuxin again in Europe in the summer of 2019. At that time, her main concern was how to extend her work contract with the organization in Europe. She was in no hurry to return to China or start a family.

At the time of my interviews, most of the participants shared a status similar to Xia Yuxin's in 2019: they experienced marriage pressures but were not overly distressed, instead focusing on career explorations and self-actualization. Overall, they conveyed confidence and pride in their choices. At times, feelings of loneliness emerged, stemming from being the sole member of their social circles and friends who desired a lifestyle outside of the conventional heterosexual nuclear family. They lacked role models and understanding friends to share their

fears, desires, and confusion with. Even Lan Ting, who was always optimistic, sounded subdued when she confessed that she had only one friend who truly understood her. Lan Ting suspected that her childhood friend needed her support more than the other way around. Her friend had quit her job at a state-owned enterprise in their hometown of Kunming and was contemplating the prospect of launching a flower shop. Furthermore, her friend's married status meant that she faced disapproval not only from her own parents, but also from her husband and in-laws. The intensity of the disputes was such that the friend moved back to her parents' home. Comparing her situation to that of her friend, Lan Ting said that it was easier for her to deviate from the norm because she was single.

The single professional women that I interviewed expressed feelings of marginalization as a social minority. At the same time, they appreciated being single as it afforded them more freedom to make significant changes in their lives. All they needed to do was to consider what they wanted for themselves. If they were married, particularly with children, they perceived that implementing such changes would pose a greater challenge due to their increased responsibilities. As unmarried women, their actions could only upset their parents, as in the case of Duan Judy and Lei Qiaoqiao. Some women, such as Judy and Dai Mengcheng, opted not to have children even if they married. Hence, they did not anticipate having exponential responsibilities to others in the future. They could focus only on themselves when marriage, reproduction and nuclear family life may not necessarily occur.

In contrast, some noticed that their male peers did not share their mentality of focusing on the self and the present. Lan Ting pointed out that her male friends seemed to be more cautious because they always seemed to be thinking about getting married, buying property and putting economic considerations first. Lan Ting lamented:

> This society is relatively tolerant of women, isn't it? By tolerance, I mean that society tacitly recognizes that houses, cars, and money are men's business; that even though we grew up with boys with the same education, we had exactly the same starting point, our education was the same, but once we enter the workforce, it will somehow stratify. What is expected of women is that as long as they marry a good man, take care of the family, and balance work and family, it will be enough. For men, there is no family to speak of, they have only one path, which is to pursue their careers. In my opinion, men have few choices... It is really a pity that many men give up what they really want to do for economic reasons.

Lan Ting is not alone in pointing out that both men and women are constrained by the dominant gender ideology. Several informants state that gender norms nowadays can be boiled down to this: a man's success is measured by his wealth, while a woman's success is measured by her ability to marry a successful man. Under such a stringent gender regime, men also are allowed little space to explore alternative life paths. Supporting Lan Ting's empathy for her male acquaintances, Kim et al.'s empirical study of work preference and gender roles among parents in urban China highlights the stress men face because "husbands and wives still held on to a cultural model of gender in which husbands were responsible for providing the main source of income in the family while their wives were responsible for taking care of housework and their child" (2010, 952). Regardless of their income level, men experience increased stress as a result of the financial burden caused by the birth of a child (Ibid., 953).

Indeed, the institution of heterosexual marriage and family imposes different norms on different genders. In China today, marriage, family, and reproduction still determine the course of life for both men and women. DWYL clearly becomes an important discursive resource for some single women to define the meaning of their lives outside the reproductive family system. They declare that their lives as women, as adults, are not lacking. On the contrary, they are confident that their lives are meaningful because they are doing what they are passionate about, fully exploring their potential by constantly challenging themselves and sometimes pushing boundaries. They are aware that they are transgressors and on the defensive. Therefore, they emphasize that they are serious about their new careers, that they are not playing around, and that they are not just looking for new excitement. They show determination to dedicate their lives to their callings. For example, Lan Ting mentioned that she could work as a makeup artist until she retires; Lei Qiaoqiao said that she could see herself working as a barista in her 40s and 50s. Interestingly, Lan Ting and Xia Yuxin brought up the idea of settling down, a term traditionally used in the context of starting a family, raising children, and seeking stability. For Lan Ting and Xia Yuxin, settling down means finding their callings and becoming certain that they will devote their lives professionally to a particular field. After finding out where their true passions lie, they believe they can stop a lifestyle of constant change, settle down in one place and one career, and perhaps start a family. I argue that there is a subtle breakthrough here: by focusing on their career aspirations, these single women are imagining stages of their lives beyond marriage; even if they are not actively rejecting the institution of marriage and getting married themselves at some point in the future, they are taking steps away from the centrality of marriage and family in defining a woman's and an adult's life. They are actively carving out a space to experiment what life might look like for a woman without marriage and children.

They regret not having many examples to follow. This also means they could become role models for younger generations.

These women's high regard for work and how it shapes their identity and purpose in life can be seen as a testament to the triumph of the post-industrial work ethos, which "characterized work as a path to individual self-expression, self-development, and creativity" (Weeks 2011, 46) and "the center of their lives and as an end" (Ibid., 69). Nevertheless, the following section will illustrate that the passionate work pursued by these single women is not necessarily self-centered. They may expand the concept of love beyond the personal level and strive for a positive impact on society.

Post-Materialism: Work for Love (and a Better Society), Not for Money

My informants are acutely aware of two mainstream norms. One is the expectation that women put family first. The other is the worship of money. Faced with the dominance of materialism[6] in society, they feel frustrated, tacitly object, or openly resist.

First of all, it must be emphasized that the key informants for this chapter are all the only child in their families and come from an urban background. Their parents are relatively well off, and many of their parents are *tizhinei* employees. Therefore, these young women do not have the burden of supporting their parents, at least as they understand it. On the contrary, they can receive financial support from their parents. For the Shanghainese, their parents usually own property. These women can save on rent by simply living with their parents. Or they know they will inherit their parents' property and have less economic pressure to save. For informants

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[6] Inglehart (1971) contends that a "silent revolution" has taken place in the basic value priorities of young generations in Western societies. This revolution refers to a shift from materialistic to post-materialistic values. Materialists view economic growth, low crime rates and strong national defense as important social priorities. Post-materialists, on the other hand, place far greater emphasis on freedom of speech, public political participation, and protection of the environment. According to Bao (2019), although many Chinese scholars have suggested that China is undergoing or about to undergo a post-materialist turn, multiple World Values Surveys show that materialism is undoubtedly the dominant value system among Chinese. Bao's own 2016 survey of young people aged between 18 and 35 in Shanghai finds this: When asked "What is the most important development goal for the next 10 years," "maintaining social stability" was the first choice of the majority (74.9%) of youth, far ahead of "more participation in decision-making" (13.0%), "economic growth" (6.2%), and "freedom of expression" (3.7%). With maintaining social stability and economic growth representing materialistic values, and more participation in decision-making and freedom of expression representing post-materialistic values, the percentage of young people who hold materialistic values is 33.5%, while the percentage of young people who hold post-materialistic values is only 6.3%, the latter of which is far lower than the average of 25% in Western countries. It is worth noting that in a 2011 nationwide survey of the same age cohort, "economic growth" ranked first (48.9%), followed by "maintaining social stability" (27.9%) as the most important goal (Ibid., 51).

who are non-Shanghainese, housing, whether renting or buying, is a major economic burden. But their parents are usually willing to help them buy property, or have already done so. In Liu Xiaoxue's case, her parents provided a substantial portion of the investment to open and run the studio. Although Xiaoxue felt indebted and was eager to repay her parents, she was certain that if her business failed, her parents would not ask for their investment back. Her father once comforted her by telling her that she could think of this experience as paying for a lesson.

The lack of economic pressure experienced by these urban women is in stark contrast to that of Zhang Tianqi, whom I met at the Love Club in 2014. Zhang Tianqi was from the countryside and had several siblings, the youngest of whom was a brother. In recent years, she came to realize that her parents, her extended family, and the culture of her hometown clearly favored sons over daughters. Her parents went to great lengths to have a son and did not hide their preference for him. After graduating from university, Tianqi found a job as an English teacher in a college in Heibei province. Soon she had the opportunity to study for a master's degree in Shanghai. While studying in Shanghai, she developed an interest in psychology and began to dream of a career as a psychologist in Shanghai. In order to pursue this dream, she had to terminate her employment contract with the college in Heibei. According to the contract, she had to serve the college for at least five years after receiving her master's degree. Tianqi ended up with a huge bill of 160,000 Chinese yuan to compensate her former employer. Her savings were far from enough, and she had to ask around to borrow money. She never felt like asking her parents for help. Finally, her parents got wind of her plight and lent her 100,000 yuan. This gesture from her parents seemed to give her some hope. When she thought about moving from Shanghai to Hangzhou and buying a property in Hangzhou, she asked her parents for a loan. Her parents replied that they could lend her money, but they would charge her 10% interest. Meanwhile, Tianqi learned that her parents were spending lavishly on her little brother's wedding, giving the newlyweds a nice car and the bride's family a large dowry. Tianqi said it suddenly struck her that she was at the bottom of society, while her family was actually above her on the social ladder. In the past, she used to send money to her parents to fulfill her filial piety. Now, she was shirking her duties as a daughter because her parents were not fulfilling their duties. In many ways, Zhang Tianqi's career change was not so different from that of Duan Judy who also used to be a teacher. Tianqi also quit a *tizhinei* job to pursue a career that matches her passion and in an emerging sector where freelance or self-employment is common. However, unlike her urban counterparts, Tianqi's tone was far less optimistic, and she openly admitted that she was always stressed about money and that it was so hard to pursue her dream on her own.

I tell Zhang Tianqi's story here not to generalize about the urban-rural divide. Tianqi is not the only informant who comes from the countryside and has siblings, but others report less economic tension with their parents. The group of single women I focus on in this chapter do not consider their parental family to be rich, and therefore tend to ignore the resources and privileges they enjoy. A comparison of the struggles faced by Tianqi illustrates the middle-class socioeconomic status of these urban women.

Focusing on how the post-Fordist work ethic produces classed subjectivities, Farrugia (2019a) identifies two typical manifestations, namely subjects of achievement and subjects of passion:

> Subjects of achievement tend to be from working-class backgrounds and understand the working self in terms of the successful realization of skills and competencies that lead to recognizable achievements, successes, and aspirations for social mobility. Subjects of passion tend to be from middle-class backgrounds, and understand the working self in terms of passionate investments that lead to personal development and personal growth without reference to specific material outcomes. (Ibid., 1087)

As a performance of their classed subjectivity, subjects of passion emphasize in their narratives their nonchalance toward material gain and portray "their passionate labor as an altruistic force for good in the world" (Ibid., 1096). The urban DWYL believers I interviewed can be categorized as subjects of passion. Their comfortable socioeconomic background contributes to their lack of interest in upward social mobility. They also insist that they work for love, not money. But unlike their Australian counterparts in Farrugia's study (2019a, 2019b), they perceive materialism as the dominant value of their middle-class peers in China and see themselves as deviants.

Liu Xiaoxue and Lei Qiaoqiao could be described as entrepreneurs, as the former owned a mental health service studio and the latter a coffee shop. At the time of the interviews, mass entrepreneurship dominated public and private discussions like the zeitgeist. However, both women distanced themselves from the entrepreneur label. Their rationale for rejecting the identity was that they did not start their businesses to make a fortune. Economically, they were probably worse off than in their previous employment situations. Liu Xiaoxue's business was losing money at the time of the interview. To cover the losses, Xiaoxue occasionally rented out her studio on Airbnb, and the financial return was quite good. She was convinced that if she turned her studio into a full-time Airbnb rental, she could quickly make ends meet. But she was

not ready to give up her dream of creating a safe space for people to deal with psychological struggles. To subsidize the cost of running the studio, she had to take on more part-time language teaching gigs. Unlike the entrepreneurial bloggers who believe in aspirational work and the promise of financial returns in the future studied by Duffy (2017), Xiaoxue was not looking for a rosy future in which all of her previous unpaid or underpaid work would be rewarded. She never imagined that her dream would be associated with making a lot of money. That was fine with her because her need for material comfort had always been low. But Xiaoxue wanted to make the business profitable so that it would last longer. She tried to find business partners. After talking to a few potential partners, she found that the female ones mainly talked about content for the studio, like what programs they could bring, while the male ones focused exclusively on business models. These men fit Xiaoxue's image of an entrepreneur. Xiaoxue was inclined to choose a female partner, although she admitted that she probably needed more of a business mind at that moment.

When Lei Qiaoqiao started her coffee shop business in 2014, she had a male partner. Their approaches were different, and they eventually parted ways. In Qiaoqiao's words, she attached a lot of importance to the coffee shop, such as creating a connection between coffee bean farmers and coffee consumers, and making customers feel relaxed and equal in her shop. Her partner, on the other hand, just saw it as a business. Qiaoqiao also pointed out that in recent years, the newcomers to the Shanghai coffee shop market were mostly men who saw it as a good investment and were looking for big financial returns. She, on the other hand, was just a coffee lover. She made coffee in the cafe during the day, baked coffee beans at night, and traveled to Yunnan to select coffee beans. The hours were long and the work was physically demanding. Qiaoqiao compared herself to an assembly line worker. But she found that after years of intellectual work, engaging in manual labor was liberating. As for economic gains— her cafe was famous in Shanghai—she confessed that after covering all the costs, including the salaries of the employees, there was not much left from the revenue. Therefore, she had to downgrade her lifestyle. For example, she used to take a taxi when she went out. Now she rode a bicycle. In the past, she admitted that she was vain, especially during the time she worked in the fashion industry after quitting her job as an architect: "The first floor of department stores was like paradise for me. I would look around and think about which bag to buy after I finished my next project. Material things gave me a lot of satisfaction." Now she got her satisfaction from making a tasty cup of coffee, from the direct feedback from customers, and from the appreciation of other cafe owners. She enjoyed her work so much that she saw herself doing it for the next ten to twenty years. Qiaoqiao kept saying that she had left the *tizhi* (system). At the

same time, she found a new "non-mainstream and *tizhiwai* (outside of the system)" circle to insulate herself from mainstream values of materialism and gender-based ageism. She accepted that her socioeconomic status had slipped downward. But it did not matter because she felt internally peaceful and grounded.

While the two business owners emphasized that they did not open their businesses for money, other informants highlighted the lack of understanding when they left their well-paying careers. Their peers typically changed jobs for higher salaries and career advancement. Therefore, their search for meaning seemed incomprehensible to others. When Lan Ting informed her former colleagues at the architecture firm of her decision to become a makeup artist, they objected strongly. According to them, the new profession would cause Lan Ting to lose her respectable middle-class social status. A man who was courting Lan Ting during her career transition explicitly expressed his disapproval, telling her that this new occupation would make him lose face if they became a couple. Lan Ting was well aware of the mainstream criteria for success and respectability, and her decision represented a departure from the mainstream. She knew that her goal was not limited to being a makeup artist; she had a higher ambition to change people's perception of beauty. But the people around her most of the time did not understand her idealism. After a while, Lan Ting came up with a strategy to silence the doubters. She simply stated that a wedding makeup artist could easily earn 2,000-3,000 yuan a day, implying that she could easily make more money than her former colleagues. Although money was never her ultimate goal, it was the best justification to other people because the society generally put wealth first. Compared to dream, passion, meaning of life, money was the language everyone understood.

Lan Ting felt alone because what she was doing was rare in her social circle, which consisted mostly of architects, in Shanghai. Her childhood friend in her hometown, who had quit her *tizhinei* job, was the only friend she felt she could talk to about her confusions and dreams without being judged. For Xia Yuxin, her deviation from the mainstream was less lonely. Xia Yuxin attended two prestigious universities in China for her undergraduate and graduate studies. She had social networks of alumni from these two top universities. Meanwhile, Yuxin had started volunteering for charity projects in her freshman year of college. Since then, she had been deeply involved in the nonprofit sector, where she also made many friends. According to Yuxin, she straddled two very different social circles. The first was made up of social elites, the typical metropolitan middle class (aspirants). She felt that material wealth was more or less the only indicator of success in this circle. After earning her master's degree, Yuxin became a

consultant for a multinational IT company. Then she moved within the company from consulting to the corporate social responsibility department. It was a logical move for her, as it allowed her to combine her consulting expertise with her passion for charity. But many friends tried to stop her. She understood their concerns because she also considered the economic consequences. When she started her career in the IT multinational, she was already earning less than her friends in the financial sector. But for the first few years, the gap was not that big. If she were to move to another consulting firm, not only would she get a big pay raise, but she could also expect a steady increase in her salary. Going into social responsibility, on the other hand, meant saying goodbye to big paychecks. Her graduate school friends did not understand her. Yuxin expressed gratitude towards her friends in the nonprofit sector for their great influence:

> I think the most important thing [I learned from them] is that life is diverse and the choices are multiple. As we discussed last time, the middle-class path is not the only option. I think they have an impact on my courage to choose a different path. It is a good idea to look at the possibilities and include different options because I have met many different groups like LGBT, ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis) patients, children born with OI (Osteogenesis Imperfecta) and so on. After seeing all these, on the one hand, I feel that the state of life is very diverse. On the other hand, the people in the charity sector are very nice and friendly. A friendly environment suits me better. I am not suited to a highly competitive environment... People in the charity sector are friendly and enthusiastic, have public ideals and want to do something for the world. Through them, I am able to strengthen my own resolve; knowing that I have people to work with, I feel that I can and should carry on.

Xia Yuxin viewed the chance to work in a European-based international organization, whose areas of work included education, as an opportunity to gain more international experience and develop her skills. Eventually, Yuxin planned to return to China to work in the field of education. Yuxin expeditiously enumerated some of the shortcomings of the Chinese education system, such as its emphasis on conformity, discouraging questioning of authority, and prohibiting romantic relationships. She acknowledged that she needed more time to figure out how she could most effectively contribute to the education sector. Nevertheless, her passion and ultimate objective remained the advancement of public welfare.

While most informants modestly wished that society to be more tolerant of their alternative post-materialist way of life, Summer, on the most radical side of the post-materialist spectrum, openly denounced consumerism and advocated "the revolution of everyday life." Summer was born in Shanghai in 1990, the only child of her parents. For her undergraduate studies at a prestigious university in Shanghai, she majored in management, but quickly got bored with the subject. She switched to study psychology for graduate school. Later she found it was art not psychology that gave her a perspective to understand society. She entered the arts field first by working part-time for a small arts education project and then for museums. She went on to work as a coordinator for an academic institution with a strong focus on the arts. At the time of the interview, she had resigned from the academic institution, had been out of formal employment for some time, and was focused on running an alternative space for like-minded young people to develop social intervention projects. This alternative space, a shabby house, which Summer called the Mutual Aid Society, was located in an underdeveloped district in Shanghai which used to be an industrial center and house mostly state-owned enterprise workers in the socialist era. Now the area's lack of redevelopment meant that it was predominantly populated by low-income Shanghainese and migrant workers. Its landscape was the opposite of the clean, gentrified and grand former French concession districts in the city center. Summer reflected that when she had formal employment, although she lived in this exact house her time here was very limited; she did not live her everyday life in the neighborhood. Now a freelancer, a nomad—a description that appeared sporadically in Summer's accounts—she tried to do so because:

> Everyday life can be quite revolutionary. If you do not go to work, if you do not work in a big company, you can stop ordering take-out, buying expensive clothes, cosmetics, and food, or maintaining social circles. You do not need that kind of life. You can live on a low budget. The place where the Mutual Aid Society is located is connected to other places, and it also has the advantage of being an old community where things are very cheap. Many residents here rely on interpersonal relationships to solve problems... I want to spend half a year experimenting with this way of life by living my own daily life here. Intuitively, I think it is possible. Every month my expenses can be small; maybe I only need 1,000 yuan to live. It does not require a lot of money. I am also going to get the exchange of second-hand clothes and other things up and running.

> …It is very important to make changes in everyday life. The founder of the space now lives a middle-class life. She and her husband work for the establishment, live in a big

apartment, have children, and there is no way out for them. I have nothing against her way of life. She cannot help it. She is a product of her time and her environment. But I think I can do more... I live a very slow life now. I do not buy into capitalism and I do not worry about having nothing to do. I just lie down for hours, like I did when I was in graduate school. And I don't feel anxious.

At the start of the interview, Summer asked if she met my requirements for single professional women given that she was currently not working. As she expounded on her personal experiences and political views, it became clear that what she really questioned were ideas linking work, morality, and citizenship. Summer took an anti-work stance, which rejects "capitalism's obsession with hard work as human virtue and as the key means for social integration" and "attacks the very center of a work ethic that glorifies busyness and relegates those out of (waged) work to the margins of society" (Sandoval 2018, 118). Summer was heavily influenced by the Amateur Riot movement in Tokyo, led by Matsumoto Hajime[7]. Her political beliefs strongly opposed capitalism, consumerism, and gentrification. These principles were reflected in the social intervention projects she and fellow members of the Mutual Aid Society created. In addition to the used clothing exchange, in which I participated and met Summer and other members, a series of activities were organized during the summer of 2018 in the neighborhoods surrounding the Mutual Aid Society around the theme of reclaiming public spaces. Summer founded the (temporary) Mutual Aid Society to carry out her revolution of everyday life. She also wanted to give the members she recruited, mostly young people in their 20s and early 30s who might not be as radical as she was, a platform to express and experiment with their ideas that were critical of the status quo. Summer had secured funds to pay for the house rent for a few months. She acknowledged that she may have to return to formal employment in the future for economic considerations, but she was determined to find new ways to continue her resistance in new environments.

How can we assess the tendency towards post-materialism among single professional women? First, this trend is undoubtedly predicated on their middle-class socioeconomic status. As the only child, urban women have greater access to their parents' wealth. With the end of the one-child policy, it remains to be seen whether future generations of women will have access to similar resources.

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[7] For an introduction to Matsumoto and the movement, see Driscoll (2015).

Second, embracing post-materialism and opposing mainstream materialism plays an important role in shaping their identity as independent, autonomous individuals. These young women define materialism as accumulating wealth for themselves and their families. They assert that, for a typical urban middle-class family in China, owning property and automobiles is a necessity typically falling under the purview of the husband. Women, on the other hand, are expected to participate in consumerism, particularly through purchasing items such as bags, as Lei Qiaoqiao used to do. They disagree. They argue that an individual's worth and meaning of life should not be determined solely in terms of material possessions. They hope that their passionate work will contribute to the welfare of others and of society as a whole.

Zeroing in on the phenomenon of college graduate Chen Xiao selling her remaining life time online, Xia Zhang (2015) has coined the term "new idealism" to unpack the rise of affective labor among Chinese youth as the state further withdraws from welfare provision and youth unemployment rate continues to rise. Essentially, Chen Xiao sells customized services on China's largest e-commerce platform, Taobao. Examples of these services include purchasing a new cup and flowers on behalf of a client to console that client's friend. Affective labor, as embodied by Chen Xiao selling the remaining time of her life, becomes the ideal mode of work to contemporary Chinese youth because it not only provides paid employment opportunities— albeit precarious—but also addresses their "desire to establish a more peaceful, loving, and equal working relationship with others while securing a measure of freedom and creativity" (ibid., 534). It is important to note that the discourse of love and care for others is prominent in both Chen Xiao's self-fashioning and her supporters' identification with her. However, Zhang finds that the youth understand care as personal rather than social responsibilities and hence elide structural inequalities. Therefore, Zhang concludes that affective labor reconciles "the seemingly incompatible discrepancies between the state's desire to produce self-enterprising yet depoliticized citizens and the individual workers' desire for meaningful lives;" the new idealism of doing meaningful work created by the youth "is carefully channeled by the state to commercial activities" and "fails to directly address structural inequalities" (Ibid., 518).

To a certain extent, I concur with Zhang's worry regarding the channeling of young people's passion for social change into commercial activities rather than political action. For example, Lei Qiaoqiao expressed her desire to create an atmosphere in her coffee shop where everyone feels equal. Most of her employees were college graduates. She hoped that society could stop looking down on service workers. However, the term "everyone" in her ideal equal space refers to consumers who can afford to purchase a coffee that costs 30 yuan. Lan Ting sought to expand

society's rigid conception of beauty, particularly with respect to women. The solution she seemed to suggest was to increase the range of consumption options. Nevertheless, I contend that it is crucial not to underestimate the post-materialist inclination of my informants, even if they do not openly challenge consumerism.

In their study of young fashion designers in Russia, Gurova and Morozova stress the political precarity faced by the creative class in an authoritarian regime, where the possibilities for the creative class, as part of the middle class, to express their views through political and civic activities are severely curtailed. Gurova and Morozova recognize the potential of the "small deeds" performed by designers as a foundation for solidarity and political action:

> The designers try to improve the lives of people around them and thereby to improve life in society in general by doing what they are doing: entrepreneurship in fashion… [T]he designers contribute to the changes by disseminating alternatives to the dominant values and principles through their designs, because fashion is a global phenomenon; it is sensitive to novelty and progress. Therefore, through fashion the designers can transmit values of openness and orientation to the future; they exemplify innovation and individuality as opposed to neo-conservatism and nationalism. (2018, 720)

The values of post-materialism, openness, and freedom of self-expression, embraced by the creative class, pose a challenge to the ideologies of the Russian state. In China today, the authoritarian state's consensus with the middle class is to become rich yet apolitical. The professional women examined in this chapter reject the pursuit of a wealthy life measured solely by materialistic possessions such as houses and cars. They actively engage in creating spaces and communities for alternative values and life trajectories. They may yet to develop political identities, but they also do not fit the ideal depoliticized yet self-enterprising subjects desired by the state. They are politically disruptive. Besides Summer, another telling example comes from Liu Xiaoxue. Xiaoxue offered her studio to Joy, a feminist activist, free of charge for public events. Xiaoxue identified herself as a supporter of the LGBTQ community, though not as a feminist. She admitted that she did not agree with some of the views held by Joy. When police officers visited her studio to instruct her to sever ties with Joy, she did not comply. She explained that she had promised to lend her place and was concerned that Joy would have difficulty finding another location if she withdrew her offer. Regarding her personal safety, she dismissed any concerns. In fact, she found the incident exciting, in accordance with her desire not to live a boring life:

I was happy that day [when the police came to the studio] because it was a completely novel experience for me. I enjoy having new experiences, which is why I founded this studio and started my own business. I strive to do things that neither I nor those around me have done before.

Small deeds like this stem from an individualistic pursuit of self-actualization but hold the potential for solidarity and political agency. Within my small sample of single professional women, there is a trend for them to move into the culture, leisure, and wellness industries, as well as a trend for them to move into public service and activism in pursuit of their public ideals. There are also informants who, although they have not changed careers, seek to devote their free time to work for the public good. The three activists to be discussed in the following chapter are also women who pursue passionate and meaningful work. Two of them, namely Lilian and Gloria, developed feminist projects in addition to their regular employment. The third activist, Joy, resigned from her corporate position to become a full-time activist. Joy believed that she could have become an example of success for a girl from the countryside who achieved social mobility through education and hard work. Despite facing financial struggles, Joy was satisfied that she relinquished her middle-class aspirations. In general, these young women have the conviction that by living their lives in unconventional ways, they can promote diversity and tolerance in society.

Discussion

Critics of the DWYL discourse are most concerned with its depoliticizing effect: "What is problematic about DWYL is not the hope to gain pleasure and enjoy out of one's work but the assumption that this can be achieved on an individual basis, rendering social and political change obsolete. As part of a neoliberal work culture, DWYL transfers the battleground from society onto the self. It favors self-management over politics" (Sandoval 2018, 120). At first glance, the depoliticizing tendency is also evident among my informants. They insist on the pursuit of personal dreams and happiness and refuse to be co-opted by the mainstream. They see no role for the state in their career choices or in their lives in general. They tend to believe that individuals must manage the uncertainties and risks of their choices on their own. The rebellion these young women are engaged in, intentionally or not, is therefore highly individualistic. They do not express a clear demand for social structural change other than the hope for social tolerance and diversity. However, they are not oblivious to issues such as

working conditions, social welfare, or gender discrimination in the labor market. They are ambivalent about how to relate to these structural issues and how to incorporate them into their own personal narratives.

Labor Rights

In recent years, there has been increasing attention and condemnation of the 996 work regime in China (working from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., 6 days a week) (e.g. Li 2019). Such a demanding work culture is not limited to the widely discussed IT sector. The most extreme case of all the single professional women I interviewed is Lan Ting. In 2015, when I interviewed her, she typically worked more than ten hours a day, six days a week. To manage her grueling schedule, Lan Ting simplified her daily routine, especially the tasks she did at home. To illustrate, she took me on a tour of her apartment and showed me, for example, how she arranged her makeup in a certain order after tests and trails so that she could do her makeup in ten minutes. Another trick she came up with was to take a taxi instead of public transportation to save an hour each day, which she figured amounted to 40 workdays in a year. Lan Ting admitted she followed her schedule rigorously, as it was crucial for her work productivity and personal well-being. Any slight deviation from her rigid schedule would mean falling behind at work and losing valuable time for personal activities that maintained her health. During our interview regarding her career change in 2017, Lan Ting barely mentioned the long working hours as a reason for quitting. Instead, she highlighted her newfound admiration for beauty and a lack of passion for architecture. She did not explicitly criticize the grueling working conditions at her former company, but she was absolutely clear that she was extremely happy to have a long vacation to rest as much as she wanted and to be in charge of her time after leaving her former employer:

> This [referring to the six-month leave she took after her resignation] is the first time in my life that time stood still. I did not study, I did not read books, I did not socialize with people, I did not do anything useful. I could spend a whole day just zoning out, or sitting by the window and feeling the breeze, or looking at flowers. These activities were not useful, but I felt so happy... While I was working, I was not putting myself first. But now I am. Now I am becoming a freelancer and I am my own boss...I no longer have to listen to [others]...Freedom is one of my main goals. I will determine my own time. I am now free to sleep at home for a whole week.

Lan Ting's narrative is primarily about her change of perspective, but it simultaneously carries an undertone of dissatisfaction with the status quo of overwork and lack of rest. Other informants also complained about harsh work demands, especially long hours. As a result, parents become concerned and urge their daughters to seek easier work and, in the case of non-Shanghainese, to return to their hometowns for more familial support. Instead of critiquing employers and exploitative industries, the parents invoke the deep-rooted gender ideology that women should seek stable, less demanding jobs. They tell their daughters that enduring hardship is unnecessary. During Lan Ting's university studies, her teachers discouraged her from the study of architecture on the grounds that it was an industry that was too difficult for women. Despite their warnings, Lan Ting remained steadfast in her pursuit. Even after she quit, she did not believe that women were not made for architecture, citing a former female colleague who held a high-level management position as further proof.

For the women who leave formal waged employment to become freelancers, their rights to social benefits become uncertain. Interrogating the production of labor precarity in various periods in China, Ching Kwan Lee argues that "the state is central to the structuring and reproduction of precarity through laws and government policies" instead of the prevailing belief "that precarious and informal labor is caused or defined by the absence of state regulation" (2019, 66). For instance, the Labor Law and the Labor Contract Law establish differential treatments for dispatch workers when compared to regular workers. Consequently, dispatch workers are legally excluded from social insurance and other labor protections (Lee 2019; So 2014). After resigning from the start-up company, Duan Judy began working as a freelance tour guide for a well-known travel company. She was compensated by the hour, but the company did not contribute to her social security[8]. Judy accepted the arrangement as a temporary phase of her career in the travel industry. Previously a *tizhinei* teacher with a high degree of job security and benefits, Judy clearly did not like the disruption to her social security account. But it seemed to Judy to be standard practice and perfectly legal in the industry, and she had no room to negotiate with the company. It is worth noting that there is also an undercurrent of mistrust of the state. Some participants expressed low confidence in the social security system. They had doubts about whether they would have a pension at the time of their retirement. This

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[8] In China, employers should pay for its employees' "Five Insurances and One Fund (*wuxian yijin*):" namely pension (endowment insurance), medical insurance, unemployment insurance, maternity insurance, work injury insurance, together with the Housing Provident Fund. For a more detailed discussion of the social welfare system in post-socialist China, see Leung and Xu (2015) and Pan and Wang (2019).

distrust further reinforces their belief in self-enterprising and relieves the state of its responsibility to provide social welfare.

Given the poor working conditions and lack of labor rights protections for white-collar professionals, many voices in society advocate a gendered solution: women should take the easier path and let men strive for work and wealth. The professional women I interviewed for this dissertation (not limited to this chapter) generally disagree with the idea of women giving up but tend to subscribe to an individualistic solution. Guiheux's (2018) research on the career trajectories of white-collar workers in Shanghai shows that for middle-class individuals, personal development and autonomy are the most important stakes that a job can offer. Meanwhile, Guiheux also notices the same discrepancy that I observed among the DWYL believers who were once mainstream white-collar workers: "Interestingly, the analysis of white-collar workers' subjective opinions does not turn up demands for better wages, working conditions or compliance with labor laws (as is the case with industrial workers, especially since 2010), but individuals who develop strategies to increase their income and knowledge, to work in an environment more in line with their personal interests and needs" (Ibid., 16-17). Collective action and unionization are increasingly prevalent among industrial workers as younger generations of migrant workers form worker subjectivities and demand rights (Lee 2016; Gallagher 2014). In contrast, there is currently a lack of discourse and awareness of labor rights and collective identity among middle-class workers. There is also a lack of demands directed at the state. However, this does not mean that the DWYL believers, single professional women or white-collar workers refuse to subjectify themselves as workers entitled to labor rights and social welfare protected by law. If working conditions continue to deteriorate, if the public discussion of these issues and problems becomes more widespread, the preoccupation with self-enterprising may turn into collective identities and actions, or into passivity such as quitting.

Gender Discrimination

Structural gender discrimination in the workplace is another social trend that my informants are ambivalent about. During the reform period, marketization has led to a rise in gender inequality within the labor market. This has manifested in a significant rise in the gender pay gap and a consistent decrease in women's employment rates, particularly among urban women. The implementation of the universal two-child policy in 2016 and the state's redirection toward

increasing the birth rate have created new structural barriers for women in the labor market. The impact is more pronounced for professional women with higher levels of education and income who work in first- and second-tier cities (see Chapter 1). In light of this disconcerting trend, the Chinese state is not enhancing social welfare measures such as support for child-rearing and reforming maternity insurance[9] to support women in the labor market, but is instead focusing on promoting traditional family values.

Most respondents do not believe that gender discrimination or a lack of opportunities at their previous employer played a role in their career change. When asked about the status quo of gender equality in their workplace, many informants, like Lan Ting, would first mention the presence of women in higher positions. However, they would also provide examples of gender discrimination that they had heard about or personally experienced. The most frequent occurrence mentioned was the inquiry regarding marital status and whether the female candidates have children during job interviews. *Tizhinei* employment is widely touted as the best for women, particularly because it is widely believed to offer generous maternity benefits and to be less discriminatory toward women than private sector employers. This popular belief was contested by Duan Judy, who recounted an experience when she applied for a higher position within the school system. In the course of a face-to-face interview, she was questioned about her marital status and whether or not she had children. She observed that the interviewers altered their demeanor significantly upon realizing that she was not married. Judy believed she had performed well in the interview prior to this fateful question. In the end, she did not get the position. Other informants may not have personally experienced such discrimination, but they have heard quite similar stories from their female friends and acquaintances. There is a sense of uncertainty and confusion among my informants regarding how they personally relate to the reality of gender discrimination cases and broader social trends.

Summer was an exception. During our interview, she reflected on her entire work experience from a gender perspective. I asked her if she took this approach because of my research topic. She disagreed, explaining that my interview simply gave her an opportunity that she had not had before to share her thoughts. Up until the interview, Summer's work experience spanned the arts and academic fields. She worked with many left-leaning artists and scholars who were

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[9] Analyzing data from the Third Chinese Women's Social Status Survey conducted in 2010, Huang (2014, 2015) argues that the government and employers currently do not provide enough support for women to reduce career interruptions due to reproduction, and advocates expanding the coverage of reproduction insurance and improving public childcare facilities such as kindergartens. In particular, Huang (see also 2018) stresses the need for the state to assume more responsibility for reproduction.

highly critical of the status quo. It gradually became evident to her that women generally had access only to administrative jobs that served the male artists and academics in these two fields. She became disillusioned that deeply ingrained gender ideologies and structural inequalities were not being adequately challenged even in progressive circles. She sought to take further action on her own. Summer felt inadequate in her understanding of feminism and lacked clarity on how to integrate a gender perspective into social intervention projects undertaken by the Mutual Aid Society. Then she thought of a concrete contribution she could make: offering her alternative space to feminists and activists who were often struggling to find safe places to organize events.

During my research in Shanghai between 2014 and 2018, I asked about gender discrimination especially in workplace in my interviews with single professional women. Regarding the common situation of women being asked about their marital status during job interviews, it was not uncommon for my female interviewees to express a willingness to give lower priority to female candidates on the grounds that women needed to take time off to give birth and care for children. According to these informants, if a woman excels at her job, employers have no reason not to hire or promote her; it is the woman's fault if she does not find a supportive husband so that she can devote herself to her career advancement; it is the woman's fault if she does not try to find non-traditional employment so that she can be more flexible with her time to take care of her family. Such an attitude reflects that, as in the West, there is also a rise of neoliberal feminism in contemporary China. During my fieldwork in Shanghai between 2017 and 2018, I also participated in multiple events that aimed to encourage women's entrepreneurship and success in the corporate world. The organizers of those events, who were predominantly expatriates or Chinese women with overseas experience, embraced the "lean in" approach promoted by Facebook's COO, Sheryl Sandberg. In dissecting the lean in discourse, Rottenberg argues that it "forges a feminist subject who is not only individualized but entrepreneurial in the sense that she is oriented towards optimizing her resources through incessant calculation, personal initiative and innovation" (2014, 422) and functions "to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair" (Ibid., 420).

Lean In feminism appeals to some single professional women. For many others, it does not resonate strongly as they do not aspire to great career success, such as becoming an entrepreneur or holding a leadership position. Meanwhile, it becomes difficult for them to ignore instances of blatant gender discrimination, such as job advertisements stating that only male applicants will be considered, or the challenges faced by their married female friends with children.

Towards the end of interviews, I usually invited respondents to ask me questions. I noticed that many informants asked me to compare gender equality situation in China and Europe and showed particular great interest in parental leave policy. I was surprised when Lan Ting inquired about the impact of extended maternity leave on women's employment prospects, after she had passionately described her career change. Lan Ting's narratives tended to be highly individualistic. Confident in her abilities, she seldom considered gender as a factor in her decisions or predicaments. I propose that in the case of Lan Ting and many other single professional women, subscribing to an individualistic approach is not a rejection of collective identity and solidarity. Rather, there is a deficiency in public discourse constructing gender inequality as structural and calling for feminist solidarity. These women have the willingness to embrace a collective framework instead of an individualistic one.

In the previous chapter, I have shown how single women are challenging the dominant gender norm that dictates that marriage is a must for women. This chapter focuses on a group of single women who embrace the idea of DWYL, and how they take the challenge of the dominant gender norm one step further. They reject the gendered prioritization of work stability and instead value uncertainty and challenge. Their vision for self-actualization involves pursuing passionate and meaningful work rather than conforming to heteronormative ideals centered around the nuclear family. They also challenge the middle class's embrace of materialism. They are carving out space for alternative values and life paths as they deviate from the mainstream.

Their rebellion is highly individualistic. Born during the reform era, they fundamentally embody the ethos of *kao ziji* (relying on yourself), which relieves the state of its responsibility to protect rights and provide social welfare. But in the face of heightened gender discrimination, they show a willingness to embrace a collective identity and feminist politics. And in the next chapter, I will introduce three feminists and examine their activism.

Chapter 5

Surviving State Repression:
Grassroots Feminist Activism in Shanghai

The Arrest of the Feminist Five and the Aftermath

On March 6, 2015, young activists across China who were coordinating to hold simultaneous anti-sexual harassment campaigns on public transportation the next day were detained by police. Initially, more than 10 activists were detained in several cities; some were released shortly; eventually, five activists, namely Wu Rongrong, Wang Man, Wei Tingting, Li Maizi, and Zheng Churan, publicly known as the "Feminist Five," were detained by police in Beijing for 37 days (Zhao 2015). The arrest shocked the world, attracting intense international media coverage, prompting high-profile public figures such as Hillary Clinton to condemn the Chinese government, and provoking protests from feminists around the world (Karimi 2015). After spending 37 days in detention, the maximum amount of time police can hold suspects without charge in China, the five feminists were released on bail without charge, and the bail was revoked a year later. Initially, there was great confusion as to why the feminists had been arrested. What they were planning to do had been done before, had been covered by the mainstream media before, and had even occasionally led to policy changes (such as the ratio of men's and women's toilets in public places) before (Zhao 2015). That's why some observers speculated that the state's repression in 2015 was not aimed at the feminist agenda per se, but rather at the organizing and the NGOs for which those feminists worked (Wang 2015; *Chuang* 2015; Cao 2016). These NGOs were not feminism-centered, but rights advocacy groups. Thus, the arrest should be interpreted as an unsurprising continuation of the Chinese state's intensifying crackdown on rights movements. Based on this interpretation, feminist activists may think it is safe for them to continue as long as they differentiate themselves from the Feminist Five.

Now years have passed. It has become abundantly clear that feminism, feminist advocacy and activism, are direct targets of state repression. Xi's promotion of traditional family values and women's role in maintaining families (*Xinhuanet* 2013) is a confirmation of this. The relentless crackdown on feminist social media and activists is another clear indication. The

permanent shutdown of the Feminist Voice (*nüquan zhisheng*) in 2019, on March 9, symbolizes a kind of end of an era. On the one hand, feminist organizing is less and less visible; on the other hand, feminist agendas still manage to flourish, albeit briefly, such as the MeToo movement in Chinese higher education (Lü 2019). Feminist activism continues. This chapter focuses on three feminist activists, namely Gloria, Lilian, and Joy, and their grassroots projects in Shanghai around and after the arrest of the Feminist Five, and tries to answer the following questions: 1) How do they navigate an increasingly repressive environment? How does state repression manifest itself in multiple ways through the personal experiences of the three activists? What has this repression done to them? 2) How are they coping? What strategies and tactics have they developed? 3) How can we measure the impact of their activism? Can we still be optimistic about the future?

Before delving into the experiences of the three activists, in the following sections I will first explain how I conducted my research on the activists and how I positioned myself. Then I will give a brief overview of feminist activism in post-socialist China: developments in the constitution of activists and modes of activism; changes in the relationship between activists and the state.

Meeting the Feminist Activists

I first met Gloria in November 2014, during a women's film festival in Shanghai. Gloria was a volunteer for the event, and I was a panelist to share my preliminary findings on the phenomenon of single professional women. Gloria approached me and introduced herself as the manager of the Teaplus Women Bookstore (*nüshu*). The following year, when I was doing fieldwork in Shanghai, Gloria made the bookstore available to me for interviews. But it wasn't until late 2017 that it occurred to me to study the feminist activist scene in Shanghai, for two reasons. First, when I conducted a large number of interviews with single professional women between 2014 and 2015, none of them mentioned that they were involved in feminist groups or projects in Shanghai, although some mentioned that they followed online feminist influencers. Therefore, I didn't think that feminist activism was important for the cohort of women I interviewed. Second, I did not consider Shanghai to be the center of feminist activism in China. The most influential feminist projects and networks, such as the Feminist Voice and the Women Awakening Network (*xin meiti nüxing wangluo*), are respectively based in Beijing and

Guangzhou. None of the activists detained before International Women's Day in 2015 were based in Shanghai.

In 2017, I was back in Shanghai again, this time with the initial goal of researching female entrepreneurship. The founder of Ladies Who Tech suggested that I get in touch with Lilian. And then Lilian recommended that I also speak to Joy. Not in my original plan, I stumbled upon the small and peripheral feminist activist scene in Shanghai. Between November 2017 and the summer of 2018, I conducted lengthy one-on-one interviews in Shanghai with Gloria (twice[1]), Lilian (twice[2]), and Joy (several times[3]). I also attended offline events organized by Lilian and Joy. In 2019, Joy traveled to Europe, and I helped organize a public talk she gave in Heidelberg on July 16 and interviewed her before the talk. In 2021, I interviewed Joy by phone on April 28 while she was studying in the United Kingdom. Of the three activists, Joy and I remain in constant contact to this day.

The data used in this chapter includes my formal interviews with the three activists, casual conversations with them and other participants during the events that were organized by the activists, and my observations of the events. When I attended these events, I did not just sit and observe. I actively participated: I voiced my opinions and sometimes argued with others. These activities became my platform for practicing feminist advocacy. I became a beneficiary of their projects. Gloria, Lilian, and Joy are not only the subjects of my research, they are also my friends and comrades. When I interviewed them, we also discussed strategies and tactics to improve their projects. We also shared feelings of fear, sadness, and depression. Therefore, this chapter is not only about the work of the three activists, but also about my involvement and self-reflection.

Paradigm Shifts in Feminist Activism and State Control

The detention of the Feminist Five announces to the world the emergence of a new generation of feminists in China. Domestically, the year 2012 is touted as marking a new era of feminist movements with the emergence of the Youth Feminist Action School (*qingnian nüquan xingdongpai*) and its new activist tactics (Tan 2017, 175; Wei 2014, 97; Wang 2018b). In 2012,

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[1] On April 6 and 17, 2018, respectively.
[2] On December 7, 2017 and April 27, 2018, respectively.
[3] I conducted formal interviews with Joy on January 18, April 9 and 16, 2018. Since we saw each other quite often in Shanghai in 2018, we also engaged in many shorter conversations that were not recorded.

a series of performance art advocacy actions took place in public spaces across the country, the most prominent of which included the Occupy Men's Toilet protest against the inadequate supply of women's toilets in public facilities in Guangzhou (*China Daily* 2012), the Bloody Bride protest against domestic violence in Beijing (Li 2012), and the anti-sexual harassment protest on public transportation in Shanghai[4] (*BBC* 2012). What is refreshing is that compared to the older generation of feminists, these young activists of the the post-80s and post-90s generations are no longer confined to established institutions such as academia and government organs, they are taking to the streets and provoking. At the same time, with the rise of social media, platforms such as blogs, Weibo, and later WeChat provide tech-savvy young feminists with new channels to reach a wider audience and spread their gender equality agendas. The Beijing-based Feminist Voice and the Guangzhou-based Women Awakening Network have gained significant followings on social media and thus influence in mainstreaming gender issues[5]. Feminists, as well as LGBTQ advocates, have been able to mount online campaigns to challenge the status quo, which are unsurprisingly quickly curtailed by censorship, but have taken place nonetheless[6]. For a short time, the feminist movement seems to be flourishing and promising under the leadership of the new generation. Indeed, some caution against overestimating the impact of these activities.[7] But they are significant because they have already enriched the repertoire of the feminist movement and contentious politics in China (Wei 2014).

Behind the dazzling new tactics, be it provocative performance art advocacy in public space or online, is a paradigm shift in the relationship between feminist activists and the state. First, as Wang (2018a) succinctly points out, this new generation of feminist activists come from "outside the system[8]," in stark contrast to the older generation. The older generation comes from within the system; most of them are academics, journalists, lawyers, and party/government carders; they are either employed by the state or have personal connections with people inside

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[4] For an insightful analysis of this protest and the public discourses it generated, see Wei (2013).

[5] See Wang and Driscoll (2019) for a discussion of the history and contributions of the Feminist Voice and the Women Awakening Network. See also Lü (2020) and Zou (2018) for first-person accounts of the founding of the Feminist Voice and its eventual ban.

[6] See, for example, Liao (2019) for an examination of hashtag LGBTQ activism on social media and its interplay with censorship.

[7] For example, in their study of Chinese feminists' media strategies, Jun Li and Xiaoqin Li are concerned that mass media cover young feminists' activism "for its news value rather than to support an issue" (2017, 66), and have no sustained interest in mainstreaming gender issues when particular acts by activists do not appear newsworthy. As a result, it is unclear how broad an audience feminist activism can reach. At an event organized by Lilian in June 2018, which will be discussed in more detail at the end of this chapter, Xiong Jing, who was in charge of the Feminist Voice at the time, admitted that before the Feminist Voice was forcibly shut down on Weibo, its follower count was quite small compared to other influencers on the platform, despite its continued growth.

[8] *Tizhiwai* (outside the system), is the opposite of *tizhinei* (inside the system), referring to the status of not being employed in the state sector.

the government (see also Lü 2020). Since the 1980s, the older generation has begun to establish women's studies programs in universities to challenge the state's monopoly on the ideology of gender equality during the Mao era (Wang 1997; Li and Zhang 1994; Min 1999). The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 was a particularly important event for the development of feminist movements in post-socialist China. This event greatly exposed Chinese feminists to women's rights ideas, theories, and practices in other parts of the world. Among the influx of information and inspiration, the concept of gender and gender equality[9] and the concept of NGO (Non-governmental organization) were introduced. In particular, the concept of NGO proved particularly useful for Chinese feminists in the 1990s and 2000s to expand the scope of feminist activism, innovate forms of mobilization, and facilitate international cooperation (Wang and Zhang 2010).

The political environment as well as the position of these feminists vis-à-vis the state, i.e., from within the system, allowed them to practice "embedded activism" (Ho and Edmonds 2008). The Anti-Domestic Violence Network (2000-2014) and the eventual promulgation of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law in 2015 is an epitome of embedded feminist activism. How did the network become embedded? First, the Network was founded by leading feminist scholars and experts in Beijing, and their proximity to the system allowed the Network to affiliate with the China Law Society (the official people's organization of Chinese legal academics), a status rarely achieved by NGOs in China. Second, the Network actively cooperated with the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF, *zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui*), trading autonomy for legitimacy and access. Third, the network prioritized party lines and ideologies, such as harmonious society, at the expense of diluting feminist agendas. Finally, it sought institutional change, especially legislative change. It confined itself to the institutions (as well as enclosed spaces) (Zhang 2009; Wang 2010; Dong 2014). But even embedded activism is precarious. There is no absolute safe space for activism. Even high-profile feminists and their organizations, such as Guo Jianmei and the Women's Legal Aid Center she founded, are subject to crackdowns and eventual closure, despite the caution with which they tread (Tatlow 2016). In an authoritarian state, nothing can be taken for granted (W. Wu 2014 and 2015).

Whereas veterans mostly come from within the system and have connections to gain legitimacy and key information, younger feminists generally do not have such resources. They usually enter the feminist movement scene quite personally, following a bottom-up route (Wang

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[9] Gender equality is translated as *shehui xingbie pingdeng*, conceptually and discursively distinct from the state policy of equality between men and women.

2018a). But I disagree with Wang Qi's assertion that the new generation decides to be antagonistic to the state, or as one activist puts it "we don't play with the system any longer" (quoted in Ibid., 263), because of their beliefs. The three activities I focus on began without any plans to engage the state, as contacting or working with the ACWF never seemed necessary or important to them. It was only when they encountered oppression that they gradually realized that the state was trying to eliminate their very existence. The short-lived flowering of feminist activism in the early 2010s is, in retrospect, more like a brief window of opportunity when the state has its attention elsewhere.

Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the state's approach to civil society has changed qualitatively. Tolerance for embedded activism is disappearing. For a long time, the Chinese state has developed a mechanism of "graduated control" to manage civil society, especially NGOs (Wu and Chan 2012). This model explains why and how, under the authoritarian regime during the Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao administrations, certain areas were open to civic actors and opportunity structures existed for grassroots participation and even contention. In a three-tiered system of control based on the nature, funding source, and size of civil organizations, feminist activism fell into the second category of "advocacy in non-sensitive areas" (Ibid., 11) and thus enjoyed some freedom and recognition. But under Xi, state control, or rather state repression, has not only increased and consolidated, it has also changed in form: "from framing repression as safeguarding social stability to safeguarding national security; from sporadic harassment to criminalization; and from reactive to proactive repression" (Fu and Distelhorst 2018, 120). The graduated and fragmented control under Hu and Wen has evolved, or regressed, into what Yuen (2015) calls a "friend-or-foe" approach. The small space left for civil society to develop and maintain a degree of autonomy and independence is being further squeezed. To continue in this friend-or-foe environment, NGOs are either co-opted into service delivery and live off state funding, or expect to be suppressed and eliminated (Fu 2018).

"Why is Beijing afraid of Chinese feminists?" asks Fu (2017) in a Washington Post op-ed. Fu offers three reasons. First, these young feminists are "astute activists" who are "embedded in a broad network of organizations." They demonstrate the potential to create nationwide movements. Second, they are "exposing [growing gender] inequalities that prick the public conscience." Third, they ally themselves with labor activists. I would like to add one more characteristic that makes young feminists even more suspicious in the eyes of the state. Feminists, both older and younger generations, have strong ties with international, especially

Western, organizations and movements. The feminists' tendency toward internationalism goes against the tide of patriotism under Xi.

Feminist activists are heterogeneous. The three activists in this chapter, Gloria, Lilian, and Joy, are not strictly speaking part of the Action School. Nor is the Chinese state an easily defined entity: it is "both a high capacity juggernaut capable of demarcating no-go zones and a hodgepodge of disparate actors ambivalent about what types of activism it can live with" (Stern and O'Brien 2012, 174). To better understand how the state works, one approach is "to view it from below, from the perspective of people advocating change" (Ibid.). The personal experiences of the three activists will shed light on the constitution of the state, who embodies the state, and how they use various tactics to repress activists. This chapter will show the difficulties of survival in this antagonistic environment.

How the State Represses

Mundane Harassment by a Single Local Policeman

Inspired by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in concept and Taipei's iconic Fembooks[10] in practice, the Teaplus Women Bookstore[11] (Teaplus hereafter) was founded in 2013 to create a cultural space for women. As it was administratively difficult to open a bookstore in Shanghai, founder Zhu Ying, who holds a PhD in architecture from the United States, rented a ground-floor apartment in a trendy area of downtown Shanghai with about 50,000 Chinese yuan raised through crowdfunding, and turned it into a library of feminist books and cultural space for women to meet.

In 2014, Gloria, in her late 20s, returned to Shanghai after obtaining her master's degree in the United States. She attended a film screening at Teaplus and fell in love with the space. Gloria was looking for a place to live at the time, so without much thought she took over the bookstore from the second-generation operators and was advised by founder Zhu Ying to develop the space in line with her own understanding of feminism. Gloria saw running the bookstore as an opportunity to put her identification with feminism into practice. It also allowed

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[10] Fembooks (*nüshudian*), a feminist bookstore established in 1994, is the first of its kind in the Chinese-speaking societies. As a bookstore, Fembooks chooses books that are "by women, about women, for women." In 1996, Fembooks began independently publishing feminist books. In addition to selling and publishing books, Fembooks has also been a hub for various activities that promote feminism, LGBTQ issues, and social movements (Su, 2004).
[11] The Chinese name is *nüshu*, which literally means female trees.

her to pursue her dream of running an NGO in China. On the one hand, she continued to hold discussions and film screenings where participants could share their opinions on gender issues. On the other hand, she also organized events that were, in her words, "not so feminist," such as spiritual healing and craft workshops that women tend to enjoy. In her opinion, "it is not necessary to limit the activities to certain formats. It is also a way of practicing feminism to gather women in this space and let them know that they can check out the books in this space. It probably works better if you try to influence people gradually rather than preaching feminism to a newcomer right away."

From the beginning, Teaplus' existence was not entirely legal, giving the police plenty of excuses to check and question. Teaplus was not officially registered as a business. Registering as a company is a common practice for NGOs in China to circumvent strict regulations that require NGOs to be officially affiliated with a government institution. Such a workaround was not realistic for Teaplus, which was essentially a one-person project. Gloria had few resources, especially time and money. Between September 2014 and the end of 2015, Gloria was in charge. During this time, she worked full time in a company and financially supported the operation, mainly rent (around 60,000 yuan for this period) and utilities, out of her own pocket. Gloria charged participants for activities, usually 20 to 30 yuan per session for film screenings and lectures, and 100 yuan per session for the writing workshop. Therefore, no matter how small the amount she charged, she could easily be accused of running an illegal business. Besides, Teaplus was located in an old residential building. In recent years, businesses operating in residential buildings had been increasingly targeted by the Shanghai government for crackdowns (Zhou 2017). Operating a somewhat public space in residential buildings is probably no longer a gray area worth risking.

Having a permanent location also meant that Teaplus was an easy target for the police. It was convenient for the police from the neighborhood police station to drop by at any time without prior notice. Gloria also suspected that Teaplus' neighbors collaborated with the police to keep Teaplus under surveillance. The surveillance and harassment of Teaplus never went beyond the level of the neighborhood police station. State repression was carried out in a relatively mundane manner. The particular policeman who worked on the surveillance of Teaplus never cared much about the content of the activities at Teaplus. Gloria also thought that the policeman probably had only a vague idea that Teaplus dealt with gender issues and might be politically sensitive. The policeman was most interested in breaking up the gathering of people at Teaplus. He would come during events and demand to check everyone's IDs and

take pictures of everyone. It upset Gloria that this policeman didn't follow any procedure or show any official document and acted as if he could ask anything just because he was a policeman. When Gloria was asked to speak with this policeman, her main concern was not that she would end up on some kind of blacklist. Instead, she brought a friend with her to the meeting to prevent her from losing her temper and arguing with the police. This policeman was not intimidating, but mostly annoying in her eyes.

The shadow of state repression was one of several factors that led to the closure of Teaplus. The immediate reason for the closure was not state repression; personal reasons, financial difficulties, dissatisfaction with the impact were more direct reasons, according to Gloria. But there was no denying that the risk was always in her mind. The detention of the Feminist Five further confirmed Gloria's dire prediction for the future of NGOs and civil society in China. The climate was becoming increasingly hostile. How could this realization not have a negative impact on every activist? Gloria asked me a series of rhetoric questions: Where to look for lessons? Does the history of any other country provide useful information and strategies for contemporary Chinese activists? Are feminist activists also easily arrested and sentenced in other countries? Gloria concluded that when an activist is identified by the state apparatus, it is over.

Uncertainty: "Why Am I not Flagged by the Police?"

Lilian was born in Europe to Chinese parents in the early 1990s. Although she holds a foreign passport, moved around the global as a child, went to an international school in Shanghai and received her college education in the United States, she considers herself "a Chinese with an immigration history."

While Gloria seemed uncertain about claiming the activist label, stating that she did not do public protest or performance art, Lilian proudly proclaimed that she is an activist. She credited her feminist awakening with her college education and the influence of a queer activist friend. She didn't start practicing activism until 2015, when she became a volunteer for the Shanghai Pride Film Festival after attending one of its events. That same year, she became a moderator for the Queer Talk, a biweekly bilingual[12] group discussion event. In 2017, Lilian launched the

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[12] Lilian insists on providing English and Chinese translation, either by herself or by volunteers, for all the events she organizes.

Anti-Domestic Violence Series for the Shanghai Pride's Women Up! initiative. For this series, Lilian invited veteran activists, some of whom had been blacklisted by police in other cities, to give talks to raise awareness and organize workshops to incubate new activists and projects. One of Lilian's principles is that all the events she organizes are free.

The fact that the police never contacted her puzzled Lilian. She theorized as to why she had been spared so far. First and foremost, Lilian was of the opinion that the fact that she was a freelancer was probably her best protection. She compared herself to other activists. During the MeToo movement[13] in Chinese universities in early 2018, many student activists were silenced and/or punished by university authorities. Lilian personally knew an activist who was stripped of their scholarship by the university for writing an article about Weibo's banning of the Feminist Voice. A friend of hers got into trouble for giving a presentation on the LGBTQ movement in China at an American university. Another reference for Lilian came from a close colleague of hers on the Shanghai Pride organizing team. This colleague appreciated the Anti-Domestic Violence Series that Lilian organized and convinced her employer, a multinational corporation, to hold a lecture on the same topic at their company. Shortly after the internal event, Lilian's colleague's supervisor received a call from the authorities. The message was clear: anti-domestic violence has nothing to do with the company's business and they should not hold such events in the future. And Lilian's colleague complied so as not to inconvenience others in the company. Compared to students or full-time employees, as a freelancer, Lilian was, in her words, "very much outside the system." She reported to no one, and it was harder for the authorities to pressure her. Second, Lilian did not believe that her foreign nationality offered her a great deal of protection. The registration requirement for foreigners is very strict, and if the police wanted to, Lilian had no doubt that they could easily find her. Even her mother warned her not to think of her foreign nationality as protection. The warnings of Lilian's mother were based on solid evidence. In early 2016, Swedish activist Peter Dahlin was arrested, forced to confess on television, and expelled from China. Chinese-born Swedish publisher Gui Minhai had lost his freedom since late 2015. It is clear that foreigners, especially political dissidents and activists, are no longer spared from fear in China. Third, Lilian suggested that her deliberate avoidance of publicity might also have been helpful. She did not put her name on promotional materials, and at events, even when she was the host, she revealed as little as possible about herself. Finally, Lilian maintained good relations with several Western consulates in Shanghai.

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[13] For studies on the MeToo movement in China, see for example, Lin and Yang (2019), Huang and Sun (2021), Yin and Sun (2021).

The Canadian Consulate sponsored the Anti-Domestic Violence Series. She felt that such cooperation gave her events legitimacy and protection. But Gloria and Joy believed the opposite, that association with Western governments put them in danger.

Lilian's theories are plausible, but she cannot be sure. Lilian's case once again confirms the centrality of uncertainty in the experience of activists on the ground in China. According to Stern and Hassid (2012), although there is no way to verify whether uncertainty is intentional on the part of the state as a strategy of control, it has been shown time and again to be a powerful tool for constraining activists and NGOs. Uncertainty in the Chinese case refers to ad hoc retaliation rather than a predetermined limit. It is effective in putting pressure on activists to navigate and self-censor. The ideal countermeasure is to have an epistemological community that educates activists about how the state is repressing them. But the lack of trust among activists[14] and the weakened network under Xi do not make information sharing easy. What makes the situation worse is that compared to older generations of feminists who are usually inside the system and therefore have a better understanding of how the government and the state work, younger feminists like Lilian are outside the system and have limited experience interacting with the system and therefore tend to gain knowledge ad hoc or rely on speculation[15].

At the heart of the control strategy of uncertainty is the circulation of control parables, "a type of didactic story that invent or recapitulate an understanding of why certain types of action are dangerous or even impossible" (Stern and Hassid 2012, 1240). And "control parables dissipate political possibilities from below. The 'economy of fear,' to borrow political theorist Corey Robin's phrase, runs on 'small acts of education' that minimize the amount of actual coercion and maximize its effect" (Ibid., 1241). The most obvious control parable in Lilian's experience is the anti-domestic violence event at her Shanghai Pride colleague's company. The call from the authorities led Lilian and her colleague to conclude that a line had to be drawn. They are unlikely to organize similar events in companies in the future. Lilian tends to draw conclusions from a single case. But there seems to be no alternative. How could she gather a

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[14] Dividing activists and sowing distrust among them is also a tried and tested strategy of the Chinese state (e.g. Fu 2018).

[15] There is this lesson for Lilian and me: Lilian was approached by people who claimed to work for the Youth Federation (*qinglian*) and were commissioned by the ACWF to write a report on the domestic feminist movement. Lilian showed me their business cards and asked me what the Youth Federation was. I had no idea. I later found out that the Youth Federation (full-name All-China Youth Federation, *zhonghua quanguo qingnian lianhehui*) was essentially just another name for the Youth League (*gongqingtuan*), a branch of the CCP responsible for instilling ideology and educating young people. But I didn't make the connection when Lilian asked me, because I had never heard of *qinglian* before. The Youth Federation representatives seemed friendly to Lilian and even offered to help if Lilian was contacted by the police. It was difficult for Lilian to determine whether they were a danger to her.

scientific sample and deduce logically? In retrospect, during my research in Shanghai, in all the interviews and informal conversations, I was also actively circulating control parables. I would pass on information about one activist's encounter with the authorities to another with my interpretations. I was so worried about their safety at the time that I suggested to them that they might want to be inactive for a while or follow the "advice" of the authorities. I was complicit in the economy of fear.

Joy's Multifaceted Experience: A Chronology

Joy is the same age as Gloria. She moved to Shanghai for work after graduating from college in northeastern China. Similar to Lilian, Joy initially got involved with LGBTQ rights groups in Shanghai. But she found that these groups did not necessarily have a feminist agenda, and there did not seem to be a feminist organization in Shanghai that shared her interests. She knew about Teaplus and its closure. Hence, she started her own project, the We and Equality (*women yu pingquan*) project, on her own in late 2016. She started the project by setting up a WeChat subscription account. On the account, she publishes articles, which are mostly first-person accounts of women on topics such as sexual discrimination, harassment, eating disorders, and how they become feminists, etc. She also writes reviews of books on feminism, and later solicits book reviews from subscribers. Since May 2017, We and Equality has been organizing bi-weekly offline activities, namely small group discussions and film screenings. Like Gloria, Joy supports the project financially almost entirely on her own. At first, she had other part-time jobs. But after a short time, she quit completely and lost a steady source of income. Although she sells products at events, the income from selling t-shirts and the like, along with the small admission fees (about the same rate as Teaplus) for offline events, is not enough to support her full-time commitment to the project. She relies on her savings, cuts back on her living expenses, and approaches potential donors such as businesswomen for funding, but without much success. To save money, Joy finds venues that are free to use for offline events. These venues include private apartments, shopping malls, and freelancers' studios throughout the city. To secure a venue, Joy relies on the goodwill of others.

At first, although she was aware of the arrest of the Feminist Five, Joy did not think that what she was about to do was dangerous. And her reasoning at the time was that she was different from the Feminist Five: she did not plan to take to the streets, and she only wanted to educate, not confront. In her words, "We and Equality is an educational project" and "we are

trying to solve problems for the state." With the development of We and Equality and the emergence of the MeToo movement in China in 2018, Joy first came to the attention of the Shanghai police for organizing offline discussion events on sexual harassment.

Joy's first encounter with the police was in March 2018. Joy was abroad at the beginning of March. She attended her first demonstration in Turkey on International Women's Day. Around the same time, the police visited her rented apartment where she lived with her partner, her relative's house, and the venue where We and Equality was holding in-person events at the time. When I attended a group discussion of We and Equality at the end of March, Joy and the owner of the venue (Liu Xiaoxue, see Chapter 4) informed me that they had recently been contacted by the police. But they both brushed it off and made it sound like no big deal. It was only later, when Joy and I had a chance to sit down and talk at length, that the chilling effect of the visit began to sink in.

After Joy returned to Shanghai, the police did not show up on the day they said they would visit, and then did not contact Joy at all for two weeks. The waiting tortured Joy:

> I felt a lot of pressure before the police met me because they had already visited people around me a few times... I have been mentally prepared to be contacted by the police. What surprised me was that they came to me while I was abroad. This affects far too many people...I do not want my relatives and my partner to be affected. If the police have a problem with me, they should target me. I hope that the people around me are not affected [by my activism].

After waiting anxiously, Joy finally met with the police. The meeting took place in a commercial building near Joy's home. There were two police officers present, a woman and a man. The woman appeared to be the superior of the man. Joy ordered a glass of juice and the meeting lasted two hours. The following is Joy's interpretation of this first encounter:

> The meeting has the atmosphere of an interrogation. As it unfolds, it seems like they're educating me, telling me to focus on my life and not to do things… In the end, they did not give me a clear order, like what not to do. But the gist of the meeting is to warn me: "Be careful, don't let us come to you again." (Joy somehow impersonated the police by speaking the quoted sentence in an intimidating tone.)

Joy deduced that the police had two goals. First, they seemed more interested in getting information from Joy about other activists. Joy suspected that she was too small a fish in the

eyes of the police. Second, despite the small size of We and Equality, the police were sending a clear message to Joy that they are watching her and want to intimidate her. In case Joy did not get the message from their meeting, a surveillance camera [16] was installed outside Joy's neighbor's front door. Joy checked the camera and found that it was focused on the front door of her apartment. The neighborhood committee was also informed of Joy's existence. The police probably labeled Joy and her partner as troublemakers and asked the neighbors to keep an eye on them.

In this initial encounter, some of the classic tactics have been employed: uncertainty, such as changing plans, radio silence, and waiting to maximize psychological torture; as well as "relational repression," (O'Brien and Deng 2017) which involves harassing people close to the activists and recruiting neighbors who have no emotional ties to the activists to exert pressure.

In August 2018, We and Equality organized an offline event on sexual harassment in defiance of police warnings. The police called Joy, but never made it clear to Joy that she needed to cancel the event. When the event took place, Joy did not notice any suspicious participants. However, one person recorded the event. Joy made the person delete the recording in front of her. Joy thought that this person was more likely an opportunist trying to steal credits for activities than an undercover police officer. Nonetheless, incidents like the recording against the warning damage trust and ferment paranoia. Meanwhile, Joy and I basically gave up online communication. We only used WeChat to schedule face-to-face meetings. We didn't talk much online. We tried to be vague. In the summer of 2018, Joy interviewed me in person for her anti-sexual harassment booklet. She also used WeChat to distribute the survey and solicit interviews for this booklet.

In October 2018, Joy was asked to talk to the police for the first time in a police station. In addition to the two police officers she had already met, their supervisor was also present. For Joy, the atmosphere at the police station was intimidating on a whole different level: "I did not obey the police to cancel the August event. I think they wanted to see me at the police station to show me who the real boss is. I was quite scared at that time because it was my first visit to a police station in my entire life." Joy spent hours at the station talking to the same two officers and waiting what seemed like an eternity for their supervisor. Finally, the supervisor showed up and talked to Joy for about ten minutes (by her estimation), or just a very short period of

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[16] The CCTV tapes of the venue where We and Equality was holding events at the time were also taken away by the police.

time. This person seemed much more threatening and frightening. When their meeting ended, he offered to drive Joy home. Joy vividly recalled one detail: "He says my house is close by and they could give me a ride home in their police car. What's the optics of being driven home in a police car! I refused."

For the next three weeks or so, Joy was asked to meet with them once a week, but no longer at the police station. In November, the first China International Import Expo was to be held in Shanghai. Joy thus assumed that it was a politically sensitive time. Unlike in August, she was obedient and canceled all events for a month.

2019 was exceptionally quiet. In March 2019, *Our Stories*, an anti-sexual harassment pamphlet, was printed and distributed nationwide, both physically and digitally. In retrospect, Joy thought she probably met the same pair of police officers again in the spring. But the encounter must have been too routine to be forgotten. She also did not remember any hindrance to We and Equality events and projects. In the second half of 2019, Joy attended a summer school in Europe and an UN-funded conference on gender in Southeast Asia without any problems. When she visited me in Heidelberg in July 2019, Joy was perplexed, but also worried:

> Actually, I was very afraid of being contacted when *Our Stories* came out in March. But no one came to me and I did not know why. I knew that other activists had been contacted. I asked them what was going on. They haven't talked to the authorities yet, so I don't know what's going on. I have no idea why I have been spared so far this year. Now I have received financial support [from a US consulate]. It is likely that I will be contacted when I return to China. Anyway, when October comes [as the annual Import Expo convention approaches], I think they will come to me.

As she predicted, after her application for funding was approved by the US consulate, she was contacted by the National Security Agency (NSA, *guoan*)[17]. Two agents spoke with her. Joy did not remember much: "But the meeting was not of a coercive nature, the agents were polite and didn't act like they were interrogating, so it didn't leave much of an impression on me."

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[17] As succinctly elucidated by Pan, "[t]wo key state agents are running the surveillance machine. One is the Public Security Bureau (PSB) (*guobao*). They are the local police who keep law and order in the community where they are based. The other one is the National Security Agency (NSA) (*guoan*), which deals with issues of China's national security and therefore operates vertically on municipal, provincial, and national levels" (2017, 145).

At the end of 2019, Joy began to implement the project with the aforementioned funding. For this project, Joy collaborated with other activists to hold workshops aimed at promoting critical thinking. Her workshops were held outside of Shanghai.

Then came the pandemic. In 2020, We and Equality stopped offline activities for months. And the workshop project also went online. In May 2020, the second booklet of *Our Stories* was published, this time focusing on gender discrimination, again without police harassment. In August, a screening of the American TV series *Ms. America* was to take place at a bookstore. Joy was escorted from the event:

> Their visits began in August. We organized a movie screening in a bookstore. We wanted to see *Ms. America*. I was first taken to a local police station. There they told me that it was wrong for me to show this film [sic], and that the *Our Stories* gender discrimination booklet that we put in the bookstore was an illegal publication... Then they showed me some documents. There were five or six people sitting in an office [with me]. This was undoubtedly an interrogation...I arrived at around ten in the morning. It was not until four or five in the afternoon that the interrogation ended. They even went to my house and confiscated my laptop. After that session, they took me away from time to time. Later I was taken to the Shanghai National Security Agency, and then to a hotel near my apartment. It lasted until September 15, as I was scheduled to leave for the United Kingdom on September 16. In all, I must have been interrogated eight to ten times. I didn't memorize them. If I went through my notes, I could probably find out the dates on which I was taken, but I do not particularly want to find out. Once I was locked up in the Agency for almost twelve hours. Other sessions lasted four hours, or maybe six to seven hours…

> They showed me stacks of files. They printed out documents on my laptop. They wanted me to say something so they could build a case against me...I was consistently uncooperative and said nothing. When they asked me questions, I answered that they had my computer to search. At the time, I did not know if I was doing the right thing. If I was more cooperative, could I be spared some pain? Or if I was even more uncooperative, could I be spared some pain? I had no idea. Miraculously, on September 15, they returned my laptop and let me go...I consulted a lawyer and was warned that I might be on the "no-fly" list.

The lawyer's concern is not unfounded. The Chinese state is increasingly imposing travel restrictions on activists. One of the Feminist Five has been denied a permit to study in Hong Kong (Su and Zhou 2017). In the end, Joy went to the United Kingdom as originally planned. After a year and a half of study, Joy completed her master's degree in the United Kingdom and returned to Shanghai. While she was abroad, the trauma began to unfold for her. She struggled. Upon her return to China, Joy began to look for another opportunity to go abroad. She wanted to live without fear.

Personal Consequences

The consequences of state repression include an endemic of mental health problems among feminist activists, as well as the destruction of trust between people. The damage at the personal level deserves more investigation. I propose to start with stop using the term "drinking tea (*hecha*)." It is illegal interrogation. Call it what it is. Why adopt a euphemism that humanizes the repressive state and state actors? Furthermore, the term *hecha* is a euphemism that questions the fear and trauma experienced by activists. Activists suffer from constant self-doubt and survivor's guilt. Lilian went to an underground workshop where she met some of the Feminist Five. She listened to their first-person accounts of being persecuted by the state. She was moved by their courage. She wanted to do more. She felt guilty for not doing enough. She saw shortcomings in herself. In Joy's case, even after a period of intense interrogation, she still doubted herself: other activists had been through far worse, the damage done to her could not be as massive. She was uncertain about whether she deserved to complain about what she had endured.

The concept of fear is difficult to articulate and comprehend. It is often challenging to convey the nuances of one's internal experiences to others. In my interactions with activists, I frequently found myself grappling with the discrepancy between my understanding of their experiences and the limitations of my own perspective. To gain a deeper insight into their struggles, I had to draw upon my own internal conflicts and struggles. When I was interviewed for *Our Stories* on sexual harassment, Joy offered to let me use a pseudonym, citing the potential risks associated with her work. We both recognized the potential dangers inherent in her project. I considered her proposal, but ultimately decided against it. I subsequently berated myself for even entertaining the idea. Joy was engaged in far more extensive activities, while I was merely speaking out as an insider and a gender studies scholar about sexual harassment in academia. I

despised myself for being a coward. I could only imagine that activists endure this ordeal with greater frequency and greater intensity.

In addition to fear, loneliness is also a common sentiment among feminist activists. Firstly, it is challenging to trust others in the face of the uncertainty and surveillance orchestrated by the state. Joy was initially cautious when I first approached her. It took some time for me to gain her trust. In contrast, Lilian seemed much more approachable at our first meeting. Only later did I realize that she was practicing self-protection by tacitly choosing the venue for our interview. She met me (and the dubious individuals from the Youth Federation) in a queer-friendly restaurant where the staff were well acquainted with her and would monitor the situation. It was also in this restaurant that Lilian and I shed tears together. We both recognized that it was too risky to discuss our mental struggles with psychological professionals within China. Second, Gloria, Lilian, Joy, and other feminists I encountered during my research expressed varying degrees of discontent with the schism they have with advocates in other fields. There is no natural alliance between feminists and LGBTQ rights activists. In other areas, such as environmentalism and workers' rights, misogyny and chauvinism are rampant. Feminists feel that they are fighting for gender equality alone.

Dealing with the State

Self-Censorship, Disguise, and Masquerade

It is no exaggeration to say that self-censorship is an innate feature of activism in contemporary China. The majority of activists and protesters do not question the legitimacy of the state (at least the central government), tacitly shy away from sensitive issues, and keep a low profile during politically important periods such as the two sessions each spring (Ho 2008; Stern and O'Brien 2012; Pan 2019). At least for the three activists studied in this chapter, Gloria, Lilian, and Joy, they began their projects with the vision that what they would be doing, i.e., consciousness-raising and community-building, was different in nature from the more public and confrontational approach of the Action School and the Feminist Five. They might be critical of the regime, but they decided that their feminist projects did not have to reflect their own political views. They imagined that spreading feminist messages would not be seen as the same as demanding political reform. But despite their willingness to depoliticize from the beginning, they have faced constant crackdowns. They have to constantly readjust their coping strategies.

To deal with an authoritarian state, Wang (2017) has traced the history of the politics of concealment among Chinese feminists. During the socialist era, the politics of concealment were twofold. First, camouflage: feminists concealed feminist agendas under state socialist discourses. Second, self-erasure: feminists did the work but gave credit to carders from other departments. In the post-socialist era, feminists inherited such a strategy and updated it by camouflaging/embedding the gender and human rights framework in the state's pursuit of modernity and connection with the world (*jiegui*) discourse, and giving credit to the ACWF. For the younger generation, especially the Action School, Tan (2017) reinterprets the concept of masquerade to analyze their activism in the digital age. Tan identifies several layers of masquerade. First, these young feminists "pose for the camera, the journalist, and ultimately the readers of the news and users of the Internet" (Ibid., 176). They carefully craft images and narratives that the mainstream media deem newsworthy and safe to disseminate. Second, the Action School emphasizes visual manifestations. In the age of digital surveillance, images are harder to censor than text. Furthermore, these feminists masquerade to challenge gender norms by "staging controversial bodily performances" (Ibid., 178). The Action School masquerades to provoke.

Gloria, Lilian, and Joy have also adopted the tactic of self-erasure. In their case, they do not work within the system like the older generations; therefore, they have no state actors to hide behind and give credit to. They erase themselves by remaining anonymous. The nature of their projects, namely offline community building, and their personalities are cited as reasons for not seeking publicity. However, it is first and foremost a preemptive measure to protect themselves. They use common English names to address themselves in public. Even as an organizer, Lilian typically did not include her name on promotional materials. When she hosted events, she simply introduced herself as Lilian without disclosing any additional personal information. Similarly, when Joy was a guest speaker at a multi-day workshop aimed at training college students, her name was not included in the official program. The workshop featured high-profile veteran feminists as speakers. It would have been beneficial for We and Equality if Joy's name appeared alongside these famous feminists. However, to avoid police attention, Joy chose to remain inconspicuous. She was gratified that her session proceeded without incident. Gloria, Lilian, and Joy were responsible for the organization of the event, but they did not wish to become the public face of their projects. None of them sought fame or recognition.

In the summer of 2019, by which time Joy had been on the police watch list for some time and lived in constant fear for her safety, Joy delivered a talk to a small audience in Heidelberg.

In a rare display of vulnerability, Joy implored the audience to speak up for her if she were to be disappeared. Among those in the audience were Perry Link, a scholar who has been banned from entering China for co-editing *The Tian'anmen Papers*, and Chang Ping, a Chinese journalist and dissident living in exile in Germany. Joy later explained to me that each time the police took her away, she informed a few close friends. If she did not turn up, these few friends would attempt to locate her. This was the extent of the public support she could imagine, as she considered herself a nobody among activists. Joy recalled a scholar informing her that her feminist projects were not worthy of research because she lacked recognition (or fame). Self-erasure is a tactic employed by activists to attract less attention from the authorities. However, this approach simultaneously hinders their ability to build name recognition and social capital, which are crucial for obtaining funding and garnering external support in times of crisis.

Meanwhile, the younger generation of feminists is also developing new forms of camouflage. The older feminists of the NGO generation usurped the state's rhetoric of gender equality to legitimize their feminist agendas and projects. These discourses, such as gender equality is state policy or gender equality is part of the state's goal of achieving modernity, are not rejected by Gloria, Lilian and Joy. They can recite them perfectly. What they have discovered is that utilizing state-sanctioned discourses does not facilitate their interactions with individual state actors. While they may pledge allegiance to the state, this does not confer legitimacy upon their activism in the eyes of the police.

During the first interrogation with the police, Joy tried to explain to the two police officers in charge of her case how her project facilitated the government's policy of improving women's living conditions, but to no avail. The policewoman argued with Joy, telling Joy that there was no sexual harassment in her life, so there was no need for Joy's project. In the eyes of the police, Joy was a troublemaker, regardless of what she preached. The police never attended any We and Equality events, according to Joy's observation. They never showed any interest in the concrete content of the events and publications. Similarly, Gloria complained that the local police, who constantly harassed Teaplus, did not seem to understand or care what was actually being discussed inside. Both Joy and Gloria found it impossible to talk to the police and identify the problems and limitations. Their frustration stems from the transformation of the repressive system. Zeng's[18] (2015) insightful explanation is worth quoting at length:

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[18] Zeng Jinyan is a human rights activist who is married to Hu Jia, another human rights advocate.

[A] trend…began in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics: with the rise of a younger generation of state security police, the task of "maintaining stability" is increasingly devoid of ideological meanings. That task has now become depoliticized, operationalized, routinized and commercialized... Guided by this new methodology, the state security apparatus has no real interest in distinguishing the content and nature of different activists' work, their individual characteristics, the threat they pose to the regime or their level of cooperation with the state, nor are the police keen to weigh the impact of their arrest on the government's performance and public image. This new methodology has turned rights activists into standardized objects of business.

The true interests of the authorities lie in how to improve their business and increase output. Consequently, norms which originally played an important role in constraining the conduct of the police, such as humanity, morality, ideological values, the government's image and public opinion have been severely weakened in the current police system.

Consequently, Gloria and Joy conclude that there is no room to communicate, let alone negotiate, with the repressive state actors on the front lines. Once "MeToo," "sexual harassment," and "feminist" become sensitive words, the state actors on the ground are indifferent to the activities of the activists. Their objective is for the activists to either disappear or confess. This reality has led to absurd praise from Lilian and Joy. They were interviewed separately by state actors who were willing to listen and engage in discussions with them. Lilian and Joy recalled these encounters as not repressive and the officials as polite.

In order to continue despite pressure and crackdowns, all three activists have resorted to camouflaging the feminist agenda as entrepreneurship or consumerism to some extent. This is an ironic situation. The socialist discourse of equality cannot serve as a shield, but capitalism and consumerism [19] can. Gloria attempted to portray Teaplus as a precursor to her entrepreneurial endeavors. She informed the local policeman that she would eventually transform the space into a money-making business by offering wellness services to women. While the police may not have been fully convinced, at least the narrative was one that he could comprehend.

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[19]See Wallis and Shen (2018) for a discussion on commodity activism for women's equality.

In Joy's case, it became evident that the police were not monitoring the actual events of We and Equality. Instead, the police appeared to focus solely on the announcements of events on WeChat. Consequently, Joy began to prioritize the concealment of feminist messages within the titles of the events. To circumvent the use of sexual harassment in the advertisement for one group discussion, she titled the event "The Limits of Flirting." The underlying subject matter, however, pertained to sexual harassment in the workplace and social interactions. Another group discussion was advertised as being about whether women should travel alone. However, the true purpose of the discussion was to introduce what Joy referred to as "conscious travel," which entails utilizing the opportunity of traveling abroad to access information that is censored by the Great Firewall. The inspiration for this event likely originated from Joy's personal experience. Prior to founding We and Equality, Joy traveled extensively in Southeast Asia and engaged in the reading of materials that were banned in China. Joy considered the temporary freedom of speech, including access to information and free discussion with other people, to be fundamental to the formation of her feminist activist subjectivity. By camouflaging, Joy admitted, "you win something, and you lose something; there is no other way." We and Equality once organized a lecture on labor law. Joy was concerned about the potential repercussions of this highly sensitive topic and the timing of the event, which was scheduled for June 4, the anniversary of the 1989 crackdown on the pro-democracy movement, a date that made her consider the entire month a dangerous time. The official title was "Disseminating Knowledge of the Law to *Shechu*." *Shechu*, which is the Chinese translation of the Japanese word *shachiku* for wage slave or corporate slave, was a niche term. Joy disclosed that she was previously unaware of the term and deemed the title to be unclear and confusing. Only approximately 20 individuals attended the lecture. Joy expressed disappointment regarding the turnout, as the lecturer's expertise could have benefited employees.

Even prior to the commencement of police surveillance, I observed that the titles of certain activities organized by We and Equality were not overtly provocative or conspicuously feminist. This approach was also employed by the Queer Talk and Teaplus. Evading the crackdown was undoubtedly a contributing factor. However, the more significant reason was that the three activists shared the classical feminist belief that the personal is political, and believed that issues revolving around personal lives appealed to a wider audience and were more persuasive. According to my participant observation, the softened titles did indeed help attract participants who were not feminist but interested in learning more, as well as people who were apathetic or even hostile to feminism. As an ordinary participant, I was most surprised that these activities were not echo chambers. A significant number of participants came to the events without

knowing about the feminist mission of We and Equality. They discovered We and Equality's activities through portals that listed lifestyle, leisure, or hobby events. I once encountered a participant who initially presumed that the group discussion was intended for people interested in debating. Nevertheless, this person attended a We and Equality event a second time. In this regard, it can be argued that the camouflaging, or what Joy frustratingly referred to as compromise, is not solely directed at the police but also at the potential audience. The Action School masquerades to provoke, while Joy, along with Lilian and Gloria, masquerade to not stand out and to attract non-feminists.

Keeping it Small and Replicable

The projects undertaken by Joy, Lilian, and Gloria are modest in scale. The number of participants in a single event is typically in the double digits. Furthermore, they operate their projects independently, with the occasional assistance of a few volunteers. The infrastructure they have developed, the activities they have initiated, the team of volunteers, and the network of contacts they have established are not sufficient to be considered organizations. Lilian and Gloria have explicitly stated that they once aspired to establish their own NGOs. The lack of financial resources and time has undoubtedly hindered their ability to develop their projects into fully-fledged organizations. However, in light of the increasing repression they face, it is crucial for them to keep their activism at a small or even atomized scale (see also O'Brien 2023).

Prior to fully dedicating herself to We and Equality, Joy undertook an internship at a charity in order to gain experience in the field of NGO development and management. The advice she received during this period focused on the expansion of the organization, with the overarching goal of "making it bigger and stronger (*zuoda zuoqiang*)." However, she was initially skeptical about this approach. As she became increasingly involved in feminist activism and had her first encounter with the police, it became evident that this strategy was too dangerous. When survival was the primary concern, there was little capacity to consider capacity-building. In a highly unpredictable environment, the experiences of others were not applicable to Joy. By the summer of 2019, when Joy attended a summer school in Europe, We and Equality had a core team of Joy and two volunteers, as well as a group of less committed volunteers. Joy eventually agreed to let the volunteers assume the risk. She informed the volunteers of her experiences with police interrogation, requesting that they feign ignorance and blame her if questioned by the authorities. Joy would undoubtedly blame herself if the volunteers were implicated for participating in We

and Equality: "I'm already on the list; I don't need to add more people to it." Activists keep their projects small in order to protect themselves and others.

To keep it small also refers to activists choosing not to have strong connections with other activists and organizations and not to develop a tight-knit community of feminists. Lilian is the person who introduced me to Joy, and I introduced Joy to Gloria. These three activists know about each other, but they do not seem to cooperate or even interact much. They all seem to be committed to atomized activism. But they keep distance from each other, partly out of necessity.

The first encounter with the police also made Joy realize that the police wanted to get information from her about others. To protect the safety of herself, her volunteers, and other activists with whom she was in contact, Joy decided it was best not only to keep We and Equality small, but also not to develop strong ties with other activists. On more than one occasion, the authorities tried to recruit Joy as an informant to spy on other activists, even when she was supposed to be going to the United Kingdom. Joy concluded that the less she knew about others, the better, because when the police pressed her to be an informer, she did not have to lie: she could honestly say that she did not know. Joy does not say so, but I suspect she is isolating herself because she does not trust other activists. This again demonstrates the success of the Chinese state in sowing division and mistrust among activists. Without a community to rely on, Joy has very limited resources, and thus little hope when the police take her away. When Joy is safe, she also cannot find a reliable channel to pass on her lessons to newcomers. This reality is not only due to Joy's choice of isolation. In fact, it is a predicament created by the state and faced by Joy's peers. The restriction on the free flow of information is likely to result in potential activists entering the field unaware of the risks associated with feminism. At an Anti-domestic Violence Series lecture event, a guest speaker mentioned 2015, and someone in the audience asked what happened in 2015. Even the high-profile case of the Feminist Five was not well known to the general public. When Lilian reported on the event on social media, she deliberately left out this part of the question-and-answer session. Lü Pin (2019), founder of the Feminist Voice, who was exiled after the arrest of the Feminist Five, shares her first-hand experience:

> When many offline activities are banned and online communication is monitored and blocked at any time, people are always cut off and isolated, resulting in a failure to form a public community of like-minded people; people have to retreat into private

relationships and rely on their personal networks for private support, which is exactly the kind of private capital that the younger generation lacks.

It is too dangerous to build a close community of feminists. But individual projects keep popping up. The three activists of Gloria, Lilian and Joy all proclaim that building community is their goal. Based on my observations, it is more accurate to say that their goal is to nurture feminist subjectivities. They prefer small, personal interactions; they do not see the number of people they reach as a key index of the impact of their projects; they care whether they can change participants' views. Lilian explains, "Because everyone is connected, even if my event influences only one person, that person can influence people around him or her." They are most proud when their projects inspire participants to start their own grassroots initiatives.

Both Lilian and Joy have conducted workshops specifically on how to start and run grassroots projects. They also share their resources during routine events and encourage participants to run their own projects. When I attended a group discussion on We and Equality, I witnessed a participant asking Joy for advice on how to run such a group event after the session. The two core volunteers, who had just started to get involved in facilitating and organizing We and Equality during my research in 2018, eventually left Joy to work on their own projects. Lilian was pleased with the Anti-domestic Violence Series, because participants raised real questions and some seemed ready to take actions. She was particularly impressed that one person, who worked in human resources for a company, asked what they could do to subtly offer help to victims in their company. Lilian and other speakers at the event did not have ready answers, but they encouraged this HR staff to use all the resources they could provide and to explore different approaches that were discussed together. Another participant was inspired by the speakers and asked how they could start a similar project in a nearby city, where they lived.

In retrospect, Gloria expressed doubts about the effectiveness of consciousness-raising activities. She sounded defeated when she said that she did not end up creating a community. But when she talked about the writing workshop that she organized in 2015, it showed that her assessment that Teaplus did not have enough impact was not true. Gloria's predecessors at the bookstore organized a writing workshop in 2014. She attended the workshop in 2014 and was deeply impressed by the awakening another participant had. According to Gloria, this participant used to work for a state-owned company (which meant job security and other social privileges) and gradually began to question her life's path. The writing workshop prompted her to break out of the system. She organized similar events and a women's art exhibition in Suzhou,

a city near Shanghai. Due to the positive feedback, Gloria continued the initiative in 2015, this time as the organizer. The 2015 workshop was titled "Tell Your Stories" and the mission was to "provide women with diverse creative experiences and life alternatives." In her recollection, Gloria vividly and fondly recalled how several participants changed during and after the workshop, gaining the confidence to challenge the heteronormative roles assigned to them as mothers and wives. One became a painter, opened a shop, and invited Gloria to hold events in her space.

The three activists also endeavor to avoid assuming an authoritative role. Lilian and Joy are more vocal in their criticism of the pervasive elitism within the Chinese feminist movement[20], and they make a conscious effort to decentralize and flatten the hierarchy. When participants propose ideas at their events, they do not attempt to incorporate these new ideas into their own projects. Instead, they encourage and support individuals to implement their ideas. The small size of these projects and the goal of raising awareness through discussion, and thus politicizing personal lives, make them easily replicable. They are especially attractive to aspiring participants from smaller cities where such events are scarce. Group discussions, film screenings, etc. are not revolutionary. Their existence is important. Behind each project, which may be temporary, are people who have become feminists and activists (or doers, if they feel they are not as confrontational as activists). The constant emergence of new projects across the country evokes the imagery of a famous Tang poem:

> Lush grass on the plains,
>
> in one year, withers and thrives once each.
>
> Wildfire does not burn it completely;
>
> when spring winds blow, it lives again.

The state is not omnipotent. But it would be cruel to celebrate the vitality of young feminists. The small size of grassroots feminist projects contrasts with the older generation's focus on developing NGOs. Lü Pin (2020) laments for Chinese feminists, "The disorganization and decentralization of the movement is a result, not a choice...people have to pretend they have no connection with other activists and pretend to bring their own resources to participate in and

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[20] Edwards (2008) argues that the women's movement in China has been dominated by privileged, urban, and educated women since its inception in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and is therefore always fraught with elitism. Joy has personally experienced discrimination based on her educational background. She did not graduate from a prestigious university in China and felt that she was not taken seriously in feminist circles. On the other hand, she would like to draw more attention to women of lower socioeconomic status and not just focus on young, college-educated urban women.

sustain the movement." Lü (2019) elaborates on the lasting damage that disorganization could do to the feminist movement in China:

> The impact of the closure of the core organizations is much more damaging than the disappearance of individuals; that's how the movement is weakened. The sudden blow of the arrest of the Feminist Five is not immediately fatal, but it is followed by four years of continuous weakening. When organizations with a mission are restricted and even silenced, stigmatized and tabooed, when professional activists lose their funding and have to find other ways to make a living... this is a terrible direction because the energy of the movement is lost.

Meanwhile, Lü (2020) also admonishes herself that "hope may be very important, as an organizer of the movement, I probably cannot allow any negativity or pessimism in my speech." The following section will discuss an event that gives me hope.

An Inspiring Example

The 2018 first half was a challenging period. The Feminist Voice was permanently banned from Weibo, the MeToo movement in universities was subjected to a crackdown, and LGBTQ voices on social media were restricted. In the context of low morale and a heightened sense of insecurity, an event co-organized by Lilian offered a glimmer of hope.

The fourth event in the Women Up! Anti-Domestic Violence Network Series, titled "Panel: Raising Awareness," was held on June 9, 2018 as part of the 10th Shanghai Pride program. The main venue for Shanghai Pride 2018 was a 5-star hotel in Xintiandi, an upscale business district in Shanghai. The Women Up! event was allocated the conference room in the attic, which was spatially situated on the periphery of Shanghai Pride. During registration, I noticed that there were two posters for overseas IVF (in vitro fertilization) services. The session preceding Women Up! addressed the topic of commercial surrogacy, a practice that has gained popularity among affluent gay men in Shanghai. Lilian, in a display of anger, tore up the posters and reiterated her condemnation of the exploitation of women's bodies. The 5-star hotel, which served as the backdrop for the advertisement for expensive fertility services, exemplified the consumerist and classist nature of Shanghai Pride (Bao 2011). However, it also demonstrated a degree of resourcefulness, as it allowed for the reservation of a space for a more critical feminist event. Lilian had her own critique of Shanghai Pride. She utilized the resources and network

strategically. Prior to the event, higher-ups in the Shanghai Pride organizing team advised her to refrain from campaigning against the crackdown on feminist student groups or holding events to commemorate the death of the Feminist Voice. She complied with these requests. The event was not promoted, but it was included in the official program and covered in the daily summary on Shanghai Pride's social media. Everything proceeded smoothly, with no police interference.

The event featured a series of guest speakers, including Zhu Xixi, Zhang Leilei[21], Xiong Jing, and Wang Zheng. Zhu Xixi, based in Hangzhou, and Zhang Leilei, based in Guangzhou, have continued anti-sexual harassment campaigns in the wake of the arrest of the Feminist Five. In their presentations, Zhu Xixi and Zhang Leilei provided detailed accounts of their campaign activities, with the former focusing on petitioning representatives of the People's Congress and the latter on creative representations on social media. Xiong Jing, who was in charge of the Feminist Voice in its final years, recounted the history of the Feminist Voice. Wang Zheng, a veteran feminist scholar and activist, delivered a much-needed pep talk at this challenging time.

Before the commencement of the event, Lilian and her co-host Xiaoyu[22] played "The Song of Women."[23] The woman sitting in front of me, wearing a T-shirt with the slogan "This is what a feminist looks like" (see Figure 3), joined in the singing. Zhu Xixi and several others in the audience were also wearing the same T-shirt. Videos of Xiong Jing and her friends in remembrance of the Feminist Voice were also played. For me, the most moving moment of the event was when Xiaoyu asked the audience to raise their hands if they identified as feminists. About half of the 80 or so people in the room raised their hands. I almost cried. Xiaoyu seemed very emotional as well. Some of the faces in the audience looked familiar to me. I had probably met them at other feminist events. Usually, feminists are scattered. I had never seen so many feminists in the same physical space. The sense of belonging to a community of feminists became tangible. In this attic conference room, we shared the stigma and loneliness of being a feminist in China; we collectively mourned the death of the Feminist Voice and remembered the suffering of activists. As Wang Zheng said in her speech, when we are with like-minded people, we do not feel lonely. As a veteran who is older than almost everyone in the audience,

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[21] See Lam (2019) for an interview with Zhang Leilei about her feminist activism.

[22] Given that the event was open to the public and Xiaoyu's name had been disseminated via social media, I did not assign her a pseudonym.

[23] The song, also called "Do You Hear the Women Singing", is an adaptation of the famous song "Do You Hear the People Sing" from the musical *Les Misérables*, with lyrics written and sung by young Chinese feminists ("The Song of Women" 2022).

Wang Zheng encouraged us not to lose hope because we see ourselves as the unappreciated minority; it has always been a minority of people who have fought for justice and progress.

Figure 3 Feminists "come out" in public. (Photo by author)

Figure 4 Brochures from various feminist organizations/projects at the reception desk of the Women Up! event at 2018 Shanghai Pride. (Photo by author)

Looking back, this gathering reminds me of a women's parade that Wang Zheng (2017) discusses in her book on the history of state feminism in socialist China. The Shanghai ACWF organized a mass rally on International Women's Day in 1951. The rally was called by the Shanghai Municipal Committee to protest the United States' rearmament of Japan. 300,000 women from all walks of life, including housewives and prostitutes, took to the streets and appropriated the patriotic theme of this officially sanctioned parade. Wang highlights the enthusiasm of the women participants in archival documents: "The [internal] report commented on its effect on women's empowerment. 'The parade participants all felt that women now have power and status'" (Ibid., 33). The significance, Wang explains, is that by "[p]arading in a public space with official endorsement, women in households and women from various subaltern groups symbolically staged their legitimate position in the new political order" (Ibid.). The parallel between the historical rally and our assembly can be observed in the embodied collective act of "coming out" in public. In 1951, women of low social status presented themselves to spectators as equal citizens of the nascent People's Republic, and we similarly came out among strangers and recognized each other as feminists.

The presence of multi-generational feminists is also significant. The majority of the participants were young women in their 20s and 30s. When one participant introduced herself as a high school student, the audience responded with enthusiastic cheers. In the context of numerous setbacks currently facing the feminist movement, it was a particularly encouraging and inspiring sight to witness younger generations joining the cause. The student posed a series of questions that arose from the fact that individuals in her social circle lacked an understanding of her feminist perspectives. She expressed confusion and sought counsel from the more experienced speakers. I interpreted this interaction as an illustration of the coming together of three generations of feminists and the overcoming of the limitations imposed by the deprivation of a genealogy.

By the deprivation of a genealogy, I refer to the state-orchestrated erasure and amnesia of historical feminist efforts. It has been observed that the younger generation actively seeks to distance itself from the older generation (Liu et al. 2015; Wang 2018b), such as referring to the socialist-era feminist movement as "the ghosts" and declaring that the younger generation is either "ambivalent about this state-sponsored 'tradition'" or "eager to break away from it" (Liu et al. 2015, 12-13). I do not disagree. But does the younger generation really know the older generations and the history of their struggles? The feminist movement in the socialist era was erased in the grand narrative of nation building (Wang 2017). The NGO generation of feminists

in the post-socialist era operated cautiously in limited areas and spaces. The history of feminist movements in China has not been mainstreamed. In my scores of interviews with young women, the Maoist slogan, "Women hold up half the sky," was most often mentioned when interviewees talked about the historical aspect of gender issues. In addition to this Maoist slogan, the name of Qiu Jin, the feminist revolutionary martyr who died in 1907, was mentioned a few times. Few knew about the 1995 UN Women's Conference in Beijing. I didn't know about it until I took gender studies courses in graduate school. In our interview, Lilian admitted that she was very embarrassed that she didn't know about the existence of the Anti-Domestic Violence Network, which grew out of the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference, and that people pointed out that her project's name was too similar. It is not her fault that she was not told or taught the history of Chinese feminism. We are deprived of knowing and writing our genealogy. We are thrown into isolation, cut off not only from our contemporary comrades but also from our ancestors. In this sense, today's feminists are more like floating duckweed than the tenacious grass described in the Tang poem quoted above. Grass has roots; duckweed does not.

When Wang Zheng finished her encouraging speech, both Lilian and Xiaoyu looked tearful. Lilian told the audience that it was a great honor to have Wang Zheng. I was also very touched. Meanwhile, I was also skeptical about Wang Zheng being the last speaker. Her talk was a historical review of feminist movements in China, and she ended her speech with advice for the young people, which made her seem like an authority. But Lilian was against hierarchy. Then it dawned on me that I had confused model with authority. Wang Zheng was not telling us what to do. In the assembly, she represented her generation and served as a pioneer, a guide, and a mother figure. I did not know that such a figure was desperately needed. It is empowering to be recognized, to have the assurance to carry on, to see continuity. It is reassuring to be placed in a history of shared struggles.

Optimism as a Form of Resistance

"I am pessimistic about the future of the feminist movement in China," said Zhang Leilei at the event. This pessimism is shared by Joy and many more feminists. In the current climate, feminist activists have to keep a low profile most of the time, as if they have given up on the cause. But when there is an event with a feminist agenda, people show up. I keep seeing familiar faces at different events. It is important to keep going, no matter how little one can do at the moment. The authority wants activists to censor themselves to the point of giving up, to admit

that nothing is possible now. It is not about pushing the boundaries now. It is about not giving up, not withdrawing completely (O'Brien 2023). To believe that there is always something an activist can do, to have faith, to have hope, is resistance.

Joy continually generates novel ideas. She appears to believe that there is always something she can do, despite the limitations imposed by the authorities. If she is prohibited from raising awareness through group discussions, she could develop art exhibitions. If she is compelled to leave China, she will continue her activism abroad. In this regard, she maintains an optimistic outlook, echoing Gramsci's adage of "pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will." It is the people who matter, not the organization. Following the closure of Teaplus, Gloria did not abandon the feminist movement. Instead, she sought to identify more effective formats for engagement. She joined an all-women house-building project in Thailand, which involved physical labor, interaction with individuals from diverse professional backgrounds, and most importantly, the tangible result of a constructed house. This experience imbued her with a sense of empowerment. She aspired to initiate projects that would afford women the opportunity to construct tangible objects and foster their confidence. Gloria, like Lilian and Joy, subscribes to the view that action is essential. In the current climate, it is more important than ever to take actions, however modest, and to maintain hope.

Chapter 6

Coda

The Personal Is Political

In 2022, China recorded its first population decline in six decades since the great famine[1] caused by the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962). The repeal of the one-child policy in 2016 has not resulted in an increase in the birth rate (Ng 2023). If the leftover women discourse is state propaganda designed to address the demographic crisis, it would appear that the state has thus far failed. In contrast, Ji Feng's assertion in 2015 that women would vote with their feet, not to marry and/or procreate if it were beneficial to their own interests and happiness, appears to be a more accurate prediction.

When Ji Feng made this statement, I was skeptical because the majority of the women I interviewed between 2014 and 2015 expressed an unmistakable desire for marriage and children. Even when they questioned the stigmatization of women's unmarried status, very few did so from a gender perspective or attributed the cause of the stigmatization to patriarchal gender norms. Moreover, the egalitarian, companionate marriage script that resulted from their reconceptualization of marriage as a means to personal happiness rather than a necessity for women still harbored the natural mother discourse and centered on the heteronormative nuclear family. Overall, they still viewed singlehood as a temporary phase of their life course; their conceptualizations of intimate relationships still revolved around marriage, without alternative scripts such as cohabitation, out-of-wedlock births. Consequently, I reached the conclusion that single professional women question the gender norm that defines femininity by fulfilling the role of wife and mother. However, I was uncertain about the extent to which they revolt against this norm.

In hindsight, I believe that I underestimated the potential and power of resistance embedded in their not-so-revolutionary reconceptualization of marriage. Regardless of their subjective desires and ideals, these single women are de facto living a prolonged single life. They have already deviated from the conventional and normative life course. I concur with Lü Pin's (2023)

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[1] For an examination of both the power struggle among the elites and the everyday experience of ordinary people during the Great Leap Forward and the devastating famine it caused, see Dikötter (2010).

theorization that "not marrying and not having children is passive resistance, non-violent and non-cooperative" which can lead to social change.

First, as long as single women remain unmarried and childless, they remain outside the economic structure of the middle-class nuclear family, which in Shanghai and other large cities in China is characterized by decades-long property mortgages and high child-rearing costs. Although I have emphasized in previous chapters that quite a few informants bought their own apartments in Shanghai with substantial financial support from their parents, there is also a large proportion of informants who did not own property and/or did not have the burden of paying mortgages. Some of them made it clear that they did not want to become *fangnu* (mortgage slaves), and would rather spend money on lifestyle consumption, with travel being a popular option. Moreover, during my research in Shanghai, many informants, although childless themselves, observed that the cost of children's education (e.g., private kindergarten, extracurricular activities) was rapidly rising. With a mortgage to pay and children to support, as Summer (see Chapter 4) pointed out, there is no way out, such as exploring different careers or embracing post-materialism. Not anchored in a middle-class nuclear family, single women have room to *zheteng* (be restless, try different things, see also Chow 2019). Through their *zheteng*, they could carve out a space for alternative lifestyles and values that would challenge the conservative tendency the nuclear family usually represents, such as the valorization of stability and maintaining the status quo.

Secondly, the wish for a more diverse and tolerant society expressed by my informants is likely to be more than mere rhetoric, extending beyond the discursive level. Indeed, only one informant explicitly stated that individuals espousing non-mainstream views on marriage and reproduction should advocate for their beliefs and try to influence others' values. Others discussed social progress as a given, without articulating the specific actors and agency involved in social change. Single women may become the actors of social change. Although the majority of my informants subscribed to an individualist approach to life, and embraced the *kao ziji* (relying on yourself) ethos, the predicament they experienced in the marriage market as high-achieving women and the increasing discrimination against women in the labor market have upset and angered them. This has led some of them to embrace gender as a vessel of self-identity, engage in feminist discussions, and even become self-proclaimed feminists.

During the Blank Paper movement (*baizhi yundong*), which targeted the Chinese state's zero-Covid policy, in late 2022, it is notable that young women played a prominent role in the

protests that took place across China (Nakazawa 2022; Lü 2023). The most striking scene during the protest in Shanghai was undoubtedly the chanting of anti-CCP and anti-Xi slogans. What struck me most, however, was that as the crowd shouted profanities that objectified women, a young woman's voice could be heard loudly changing the object of the abuse from women to men. I saw this as a feminist intervention in mundane misogyny, as well as a protest against and an attempt to change the overly masculine representation of political dissent in China. I called Joy, and told her that I could imagine that women who participated in her events being among the protesters in Shanghai. During the pandemic, Joy had to shift all her activities to online mode and felt frustrated. Joy's project matters. All grassroots awareness-raising projects and organizing matter. They contribute to the construction of feminist and political subjectivities, even if on a small scale. Joy's belief that the personal is political is not outdated in China today. As discontent grew during the pandemic, the slogan that "we are the last generation" gained popularity among the younger generations (Yuan 2022). This is essentially young people, especially women, politicizing personal reproductive choices. By not having children, women thwart the state's goal of having more self-governing subjects or "docile bodies" (Foucault 1995). By not having children, women have less to worry about and can act more boldly. Even if such a thinking is limited to a small proportion of young people, it enriches resistance.

State Power on Women's Life

It is justifiable to focus on the Chinese state as it has become increasingly repressive since Xi took power in 2012. It is clear that the Chinese state has decided on a heavy-handed crackdown on the new wave of feminist movement. However, it is important to note that even the authoritarian state is not omnipresent and omnipotent in structuring women's lives. In her analysis of Indonesian development regimes, Tania Li cautions against "overestimate[ing] the capacity of 'the state' to fashion or present itself in its chosen terms and to implement the projects that are designed to embed relations of rule" (1999, 315). Similarly, in their study of gender politics during the socialist to post-socialist transition in East Central Europe, Gal and Klingman (2000) also emphasize that individuals do not readily become the subjects that the state attempts to constitute. They argue that "[p]olitical discourse succeeds in mobilizing people only when they recognize themselves as its addressees. Such recognitions must be actively

created, and when successfully done, their construction is later effectively obscured" (Ibid., 117).

The results of my ethnographic research indicate that the state propaganda on traditional family values and policies aimed at boosting the birth rate do not have a significant impact on single professional women's attitudes towards marriage and reproduction. Their privatization of marriage and reproduction means that they do not perceive themselves as the intended addressees of the political discourse and state goals. The dominant discourse developed by single professional women revolves around personal happiness, companionate marriage, more equal division of domestic labor, and a diverse and more tolerant society. These ideas are incongruent with the state discourse. As of January 1, 2021, a 30-day cooling-off period is required for couples who file for divorce registration as stipulated in Article 1077 of the Civil Code. The objective of this legislation is to reduce the high divorce rate (Zhang and Zhang 2023). In May 2021, the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee approved the implementation of the three-child policy. These latest state policies are unlikely to reverse the trend of delayed marriage and the low fertility rate among urban, educated women. It is possible that the introduction of additional barriers to divorce may result in a reduction in the willingness of young people to marry (Zhai 2023). Should the state implement more restrictive measures to promote marriage and reproduction, the adage "Stay unmarried, stay childless, and stay safe" (*buhun buyu baopingan*) may gain more traction among women.

Although direct state intervention does not appear to be changing the way single professional women choose to live their lives, the rapidly increasing discrimination against women in the labor market due to the universal two-child policy may prove to be a more influential and detrimental force for these women. As China's economy slows down after the pandemic, the disadvantage and discrimination that women face in the labor market will only increase. In both the socialist and marketization eras, when jobs were scarce, women were repeatedly pushed back into the domestic sphere to give men their employment opportunities. It is a commonly held belief among single professional women that economic independence is their greatest strength. This enables them to circumvent the necessity to depend on men and to marry. In light of the concerning developments in the labor market, it appears that women are encountering increasing challenges in achieving economic independence through employment. Consequently, there is a growing likelihood that they will face greater pressure to return to the family.

In addition, the coercive power of the state can impose itself directly on women's bodies. Currently, China may have one of the most liberal abortion legal frameworks in the world, thanks to the implementation of the one-child policy (Cao 2013). Forced IUD insertions, late-term abortions, and forced sterilization, which were common during the height of the enforcement of the one-child policy, may now feel like distant history. Nevertheless, they serve as a reminder of the extent to which the state can exert control and violence over women's bodies. The state could revoke women's rights to abortion, restrict access to contraceptives, and thereby deprive them of reproductive freedom. It is not implausible to fear that the Chinese state may transition from one extreme represented by the one-child policy and consequent forced abortion to the other extreme that desperately promotes reproduction and forbids abortion. It is possible that the perception among my informants that the state is absent from their lives may shift, or even be replaced, by the perception that the state is encroaching upon their lives.

Limitations

As the twenty-first century enters its third decade, China has undergone a profound transformation. During the 2010s, when my research was conducted, the majority of single professional women I interviewed expressed optimism that Chinese society would become more diverse and tolerant, and that they could achieve happiness through personal striving. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes. It would be beneficial to conduct follow-up interviews with my informants to ascertain whether there have been any changes in their personal lives and outlooks. Have they developed different relationship scripts? Have there been any changes in their perception of the relationship between the individual and the state? As the informants age, their parents also age, Therefore, it is pertinent to inquire whether the care of their parents has become a more pressing concern.

During the course of my interviews, many women asked about the opinions of their male counterparts. On the one hand, many of these women appeared to be quite convinced that while women's attitudes evolve rapidly, men tend to adhere to traditional conceptualizations of gender. On the other hand, they also appeared genuinely curious about whether there are significant differences between men's and women's ideas on marriage, family, reproduction, and gendered social roles. Some informants articulated well how the mainstream gender norms constrain men as well. It would be beneficial to conduct research on men regarding these

matters. Their responses may provide insight into the reasons behind the lack of change, or the slower pace of change, among men, and could inform strategies for engaging more men in feminist causes.

In this dissertation, I have not sufficiently addressed the embodied experiences of women in urban environments, that is, the ways in which women interact with and construct urban space. The city of Shanghai fades into the background. In the self-narratives of my informants, living in Shanghai constitutes a significant aspect of their self-identity. I conducted interviews with these women in different parts of the city and in a variety of spatial settings. These included consumption spaces such as restaurants and coffee shops, offices of multinational corporations and start-ups, and co-working or other commercial spaces that had been temporarily turned into venues for feminist activities. The interplay between consumption, placemaking, and women's subjectivities in Shanghai needs further investigation. In addition, the transnational flow of ideas and people has not been adequately explored in this dissertation. The reception and localization of Lean In feminism and the MeToo movement during my research already raised questions about transnationalism and feminisms. The activists I studied also asked questions about how to learn from international experiences, how to build transnational alliances, and how to develop a deeper understanding of gender issues in China. These are not only important academic questions, but also important for the advancement of women's rights in China.

Appendix I

List of Informants

Informants for Chapter 2

Name	Year of Birth	Place of Origin	Education	Occupation	Income (1k=1,000 yuan)	Living Arrangement	Only Child or Not	Interview Date
Sammy	1986	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	client relation	10k per month	renting her own apartment	Yes	October 29, 2014
Shi Ge	1984	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	HR (human recourses) training	80k per year	living with parents	Yes	November 9, 2014
Sara	1981	Shanghai, Chongming	bachelor's degree	accountant	9-10k per month, 30-50k bonus per year	living in her own apartment	No, an elder brother	November 5, 2014
Tang Xinru	1989	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	accountant	5k per month	living with parents	Yes	November 11, 2014
Liu Yun	1983	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	client relation	8k per month	living with parents	Yes	November 19, 2014
Fan Fan	1985	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	sales	10k per month	living with parents	Yes	November 28, 2014
Qiu Xinxin	1982	Shanghai, Jinshan	bachelor's degree	import/export trading	100k per year	living in an apartment bought by parents	Yes	November 24, 2014

Name	Year of Birth	Place of Origin	Education	Occupation	Income	Living Arrangement	Only Child or Not	Interview Date
Kang Jiali	1981	Shanghai	associate degree	Metro, service worker	4-5k per month	living with parents	Yes	November 28, 2014
Li Nan	1984	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	secretary	9k per month	living with parents	Yes	November 29, 2014
An Qi	1984	Jilin	bachelor's degree	IT support	120k per year	living with parents	Yes	November 21, 2014
Yang Fan	1982	Jiangsu	bachelor's degree from the Netherlands	sales	100k per year	living with parents	Yes	November 2, 2014
Huang Jue	1988	Heilongjiang	bachelor's degree	architect	100k per year	living in her work unit's dormitory	Yes	October 27 and December 12, 2014
Zhan Jing	1984	Guangdong	master's degree	doctor	80k-100k per year	renting her own apartment	Yes	November 4, 2014
Ju Qian	1986	Anhui	master's degree	IT support	6-7k per month	renting her own apartment	Yes	November 4, 2014
Zhang Tianqi	1985	Jiangxi, countryside	bachelor's degree	master's student	2k per month	living in the university dormitory	No, several sisters and a brother	October 30, 2014
Liu Wen	1987	Zhejiang	associate degree	office clerk	3k per month, parents' allowance	living on her own in an apartment owned by parents	Yes	November 1, 2014
Peng Cipei	1982	Henan	bachelor's degree	architect	200k per year	living in a shared apartment	No, a younger brother	November 16, 2014

Name	Year of Birth	Place of Origin	Education	Occupation	Income	Living Arrangement	Only Child or Not	Interview Date
Pan Jiaqin	1982	Hebei	master's degree	doctor	10k-15k per month	renting her own apartment	No, an elder brother	November 14, 2014
Zhao Huan	1987	Hubei	high school	gaming industry, designer	8k per month	renting her own apartment	No, three elder brothers	November 15, 2014
Jenny*	1984	Heibei, countryside	master's degree	teacher	100k per year after tax	renting her own apartment	No, a younger brother	November 12, 2014
Huang Anni	1980	Jiangsu	MBA	consultant, entrepreneur	several 100k per year	living on her own with a dog	No, an elder brother	November 26, 2014
Lan Ting	1985	Yunnan	bachelor's degree	architect	300k per year	renting her own apartment	Yes	November 21, 2014

* Jenny did not sign up for the three-month Love Club course. She attended only a few of the Love Club lectures.

Informants for Chapter 3

Name	Year of Birth	Place of Origin	Education	Occupation	Income	Only Child or Not	Interview Date
Focus Group 1							
Dai Mengcheng	1987	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	self-employed, actor	100k per year	Yes	July 19, 2015
Ding Meihui	1986	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	sales	70k per year	Yes	July 19, 2015
Cai Chang	1987	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	HR	100k per year	Yes	July 19, 2015
Focus Group 2							
Zhan Jing	1984	Guangdong	master's degree	doctor	80-100k per year	Yes	July 25, 2015
Ji Feng	1983	Jiangsu	master's degree	civil servant	90-100k per year after tax	Yes	July 25, 2015
Focus Group 3							
Liz	1986	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	financial analyst	300k per year	Yes	August 1, 2015
Jiang Xin	1990	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	PR (public relations)	100k per year	Yes	August 1, 2015
Dong Dong	1990	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	accountant	60k per year	Yes	August 1, 2015
Focus Group 4							
Lan Ting	1985	Yunnan	bachelor's degree	architect	300k per year	Yes	August 22, 2015
Peng Yibo	1985	Xinjiang	bachelor's degree	architect	150-200k per year	Yes	August 22, 2015

Name	Year of Birth	Place of Origin	Education	Occupation	Income	Only Child or Not	Interview Date
Focus Group 5							
Xia Wen	1988	Jiangxi	bachelor's degree	civil servant	8k per month	Yes	August 27, 2015
Li Yifan	1987	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	accountant	10k per month	Yes	August 27, 2015
Focus Group 6							
Qian Linlin	1985	Henan	bachelor's degree	architect	240k per year	Yes	August 30, 2015
Tang Li	1985	Jilin	bachelor's degree	operations officer	7k per month	Yes	August 30, 2015
Focus Group 7							
Xie Yun	1981	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	operations officer	150k per year	Yes	August 30, 2015
Ding Yihui	1982	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	accountant	100k per year	Yes	August 30, 2015
Focus Group 8							
Wang Siyun	1987	Zhejiang	master's degree	lawyer	160k per year	Yes	September 13, 2015
Ge Yunfei	1986	Zhejiang	master's degree	legal counsel at a state-owned enterprise	above 100k per year	Yes	September 13, 2015

Name	Year of Birth	Place of Origin	Education	Occupation	Income	Only Child or Not	Interview Date
Focus Group 9							
Wang Yuqiao	1987	born in Shangxi, moved to Shanghai at the age of 7	master's degree from the US	marketing	20k per month	Yes	September 19, 2015
Wen Hui	1986	Anhui	master's degree	teacher	90-100k per year	Yes	September 19, 2015
Tian Tian	1987		master's degree	entrepreneur		No, an elder sister	September 19, 2015
Lin Zhan	1986	Guangdong	bachelor's degree	journalist	9-11k per month	Yes	September 19, 2015
Focus Group 10							
Yuan Lele	1990	Hunan	bachelor's degree	master's student	10k per month from teaching musical instruments	No, a younger brother	September 24, 2015
Chen Jie	1991	Hubei	bachelor's degree	master's student	10k per month from teaching musical instruments	No, a younger brother	September 24, 2015
Huang Qingxin	1990	Henan	bachelor's degree	master's student		No, an elder brother	September 24, 2015

Informants for Chapter 4

Name	Year of Birth	Place of Origin	Education	Career Status	Only Child or Not	Interview Date
Summer	1990	Shanghai	master's degree	freelancer; running social intervention projects	Yes	June 13, 2018
Xia Yuxin	1987	Guangdong	master's degree	resigned from IT multinational to work in an international organization; long-time volunteer for non-profit organizations	Yes	October 16, 2017 and January 9, 2018
Lan Ting	1985	Yunnan	bachelor's degree	freelancing as a make-up artist while receiving training	Yes	October 29, 2017
Duan Judy	1984	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	freelancing as a tour guide	Yes	November 24, 2017
Mo Yuan	1985	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	resigned from a state-owned enterprise to work in a private travel company	Yes	November 2017*
Lei Qiaoqiao	in her 30s	Shanghai	bachelor's degree or above	coffee shop owner	Yes	January 22, 2018
Liu Xiaoxue	1991	Jiangsu	bachelor's degree	self-employed, running a mental health business; also working part-time as a Chinese language teacher	Yes	April 17, 2018
Dai Mengcheng	1987	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	self-employed, actor, co-founder of a theater company	Yes	October 31, 2017
Huang Jue	1988	Heilongjiang	bachelor's degree	resigned as an architect; studying psychology with the goal of becoming a psychological counselor	Yes	October 27, 2017 (by phone)
Amy	1992	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	used to work in the field of art; now a barista	Yes	December 6 and 15, 2017

Name	Year of Birth	Place of Origin	Education	Career Status	Only Child or Not	Interview Date
Ji Feng	1983	Jiangsu	master's degree	resigned from the civil service to work in a private company	Yes	November 12, 2017 (with Zhan Jing); December 3, 2017
Zhan Jing	1984	Guangdong	master's degree	doctor; no career change	Yes	November 12, 2017
Tang Fei	1989	Jiangsu	master's degree	working for an educational NGO/social enterprise	Yes	December 13, 2017 (with her colleague); December 22, 2017
Tang Fei's colleague		Fujian		used to work in the import/export trade; now working for an educational NGO/social enterprise	No, younger siblings	December 13, 2017
Su Fei	1991	Xinjiang	master's degree	resigned from a publishing company to work for an educational NGO/social enterprise	Yes	December 15, 2017
Zhang Tianqi	1985	Jiangxi	master's degree	resigned from a teaching position at a college; now working for a mental health charity	No, several siblings	November 9, 2017
Li Nini	1993	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	used to work in the technology sector; now working at a private early education institute as a music teacher	No, a younger sister	November 3, 2017
Teng Limin	1987	Shanghai	bachelor's degree	from full-time employee to freelancer; music tutoring and performance	No, a younger brother	November 2, 2017
Xing Fengzhan	1989	Hubei	master's degree	architect at a state-owned institution; participating in Summer's social intervention projects	Yes	June 3, 2018 (with Liu Yuanzhe); June 12, 2018
Liu Yuanzhe	1991	Jiangxi	master's degree from the UK	architect at a state-owned institution; participating in Summer's social intervention projects	Yes	June 3, 2018

Name	Year of Birth	Place of Origin	Education	Career Status	Only Child or Not	Interview Date
Wen Hui	1986	Anhui	master's degree	teaching Chinese at a college; wanting to change jobs	Yes	January 22, 2018
Yuan Lele	1990	Hunan	master's degree	self-employed, co-founder of a private dance school (her second attempt to start a business)	No, a younger brother	June 28, 2018
Gu Duo	1989		bachelor's degree	entrepreneur, technology industry		November 21, 2017
Zou Xun	around 30	Shanghai	master's degree from the US	software programmer, interested in starting her own business in the future	Yes	January 8, 2018
Su Qiaoling	1988	Inner Mongolia	master's degree	working as a strategy consultant, interested in starting her own business in the future	No, an elder sister	March 29, 2018
Qin Xiang	in her 30s		bachelor's degree	resigned from *tizhinei* employment in Anhui and moved to Shanghai to work in the private sector	No, younger siblings	November 2017*
Sara	1981	Shanghai, Chongming	bachelor's degree	accountant, no career change; interested in investing; started an Airbnb business	No, an elder brother	November 23, 2017
Hong Xiaoteng	1990	Shandong	bachelor's degree	working in a foreign company; also doing part-time jobs on the weekends; wanting to be a slash youth	No, a younger brother	November 19, 2017
Jiang Zhiyun	in her 30s		bachelor's degree from the UK	worked in the advertising industry for a long time; now working for a start-up fashion company		November 16, 2017
Mao Ning	1988		bachelor's degree	working in media; interested in starting her own business; realizing what she truly wants is to contribute to society	No, a younger sister	March 31, 2018

* The exact date of the interview cannot be retrieved.

Appendix II

The Love Club 3-Month Private Coaching Course

Assignment Booklet

Student:

Date of Enrollment:

Arrangement of the Course and Activities:

1. One-hour face-to-face interview with Wu Di to excavate the fundamental reasons for difficulties in love and to confirm a plan for self-correction.

2. 3-hour group dance therapy instructed by Bob for self-observation and discovery of the psychological status of the self and the problems in interpersonal communication.

3. 3-month introductory salsa course, twice a week with Bob.

4. Attend lectures organized by the Love Club every Sunday evening.

5. Complete the assignment booklet (i.e., self-introspection record) on time; communicate with Wu Di and Bob before each lecture, dance class, and party.

6. Listen to your thoughts and feelings at any time during the 3 months; solve all kinds of questions during your relationship development through Weibo private messages, WeChat messages and face-to-face conversations. Wu Di and Bob observe students' discussions in WeChat group chats every day, ask questions and give timely instructions.

7. Ten students form a group, sharing and encouraging each other. Organize activities each week on your own, get to know strangers, and expand your social circle.

8. Join the SALSA PARTY (at the JZ LATINO bar at the five-star Renaissance Shanghai Yu Garden Hotel) hosted by Bob every Saturday and practice your ability to make friends of the opposite sex in a real social setting.

9. Attend the "Turning Pretty Immediately" fashion class taught by the creative director of the Love Club, DREAM, every Saturday night to cultivate the self both internally and externally. An admission fee of 100 yuan applies.

10. Attend the large-scale singles party organized by the Love Club each month, and practice your ability to make friends of the opposite sex in a real social setting. Admission fee applies.

The Love Club Questionnaire

Name_____   Sex_____

Telephone_____   Email_____

Conditions	About "Me"
Age	26
Height/Physique	163 cm 58 kg
Native Place	A. Local Shanghainese **B.** Come to work in Shanghai from another place
Character	Introverted, gentle, timid, considerate, having a wide range of hobbies
Occupation	Architect
Income	8000 yuan per month
Education	B.A.
Marital Status	A. Single B. Divorced Single C. Married
Housing	A. Live with parents B. Rent your own place C. Rent and share a place with other(s) D. Bought your own place
Hobbies	Writing, playing Chinese chess, drawing, traveling, ice-skating
Love Experiences (to what extent/how long/whether marriage is discussed)	One long-distance relationship; 1 year and 2 months; about to get engaged
Family Background (parents)	Father: teacher Mother: doctor
Lived with Whom from 0 to 10 Years Old	parents
The Goal of the 3-month in the Love Club	Hope to chat with people of the opposite sex smoothly; to learn the method to make friends; to enjoy life more; and to have the courage to try out various interesting things.

1. What do you think are the reasons why you are currently single? (Multiple choice question)

■ lack of charm, not confident

■ social circle is small; acquaintances of the opposite sex are few

□ emotional burden from previous relationships

□ busy with work

□ intervention from parents

□ internally not mature; don't want to grow up

■ lack of love experiences; don't know how to interact with the opposite sex

2. What ways have you used to get to know people? (Multiple choice question)

□ arranged blind dates (introduced by friends and relatives)

■ various types of social activities, hobby groups

□ chance encounters

□ matchmaking websites, agencies

■ making friends online, through WeChat

□ others⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯ (please specify)

3. Are you willing to express yourself, directly or indirectly, when you meet someone you like?

■ Yes, I am willing

□ Yes, I am willing, but I don't know how

□ No, I am not willing

4. Can you understand the implied affection from the opposite sex?

□ understand

■ don't understand very well

5. Which part of your body do you find most beautiful? <u>eyes</u>

6. In which setting do you think you are most attractive? <u>In a reading group</u>

7. Do you have sexual experience? <u>No</u>

What is your attitude towards sex?

□ there cannot be sex before marriage

■ sexual relationship is a necessary step to undestand each other

□ sex is dangerous; women are easily hurt

□ my parents would never accept me having premarital sex

8. How long do you hope to find the significant other to get married?

□ in three months

□ in half a year

□ in over a year   ■ others <u>I have not decided whether I want to get married.</u>

9. In your opinion, which animal do you resemble in intimate relationships? <u>pig</u>

What animal would you like your partner to be like? <u>dog</u>

10. Which of the following is your style when you are in love? <u>A</u>

A. I find it easy to get close to others and to develop mutual affection and dependence with others. I am not worried about being abandoned by my partner, and I don't feel nervous when my partner and I are very close and intimate.

B. It makes me uncomfortable to be close to others. It's very hard for me to fully trust others, and I don't want to depend on others. When others are too close to me, I get nervous. My partner often wants to be closer to me, which bothers me.

C. I like relationships to be intimate, but others don't seem to like that so much. I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me, and I worry about being abandoned. I long to be fully integrated into my partner's life, but such a thought frightens my partner.

11. Please fill in your requirements for your future spouse according to the table.

Conditions	Ideal Type	Second Choice Type	Acceptable Type
Age Range	25-30	22-25/30-40	≤ 45
Height/Physique	180-185cm, neat figure	170-180 cm, above 185cm	Anything goes
Native Place	As long as he is Chinese	Anything goes	Anything goes
Character	Good tempered, having aspirations	Good tempered	Moral character is not bad
Occupation	Related to research, education	Engineering such as IT, architecture	Anything but sales
Income	More than mine	More or less the same as mine	Anything goes
Education	Graduated from Fudan or better universities	Graduated from key universities with bachelor's degree	Graduated from ordinary universities with bachelor's degree
Marital Status	Unmarried	Divorced/widowed, no child	Divorced/widowed, with child
Hobbies	Have artistic, literary hobbies	Have healthy hobbies	Have at least one hobby
Family Background	Better than my background	Similar to my background	Anything goes

I'd like to add my bottom line: no interference with each other's beliefs.

Records of Self-psychological Introspection

I. Findings after the psychological consultation with Wu Di (finish within one week after the meeting)

1. What are your own problems that you have been able to seen through?

I am not very clear about what I really want, and I have not worked hard enough on my own things, and I just worry blindly about the future. I am not spiritually independent enough, thinking that I have to do what everyone else is doing, which may not suit me. I am not open-minded, always afraid of this or that, not daring to try new things.

2. What are the real reasons for your difficulties in love?

I have low self-esteem, think I am not good enough, fear being seen by others, and feel shy about talking to guys. I despise men for being lascivious. I'm lazy, don't spend much time on grooming and allow myself to get fat. I am picky, unable to discover the merits of my admirers and therefore easily pass them over.

3. What are the aspects you want to actively change? How can you start?

Improve my appearance, lose weight, learn how to dress and apply makeup.

Participate in all kinds of activities, talk more with men, and aim for the full grade, i.e., 100, of the course.

Talk more with men who like me and try to find out their merits.

II. Inspiration from Bob's dance therapy (finish within one week after the meeting)

1. What is your further understanding of yourself?

2. What are the problems in your relationships with others?

3. What problems do you have in expressing your emotions?

III. What are your feelings after your first salsa class, please write in detail about your new discoveries about yourself and your interactions with classmates of the opposite sex?

IV. What are your feelings after your first salsa party, please write in detail about your new discoveries about yourself and your interactions with people of the opposite sex, as well as your questions?

V. What are your gains and what are your questions after you have participated in various activities, grass-changing parties, lectures, salsa parties in bars and other places to make new friends?

VI. Your summary of this three-month study. Have you achieved your goal?

Recommended Books:

Fairy Tale book, *The Little Horse Crosses the River*

John Gray, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*

Howard Halpern, *Cutting Loose: An Adult's Guide to Coming to Terms with Your Parents*

M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*

Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life*

Henry Cloud, *Boundaries in Marriage*

Takako Hasegawa, *Sketches of Love in Paris*

Zhang Defen, *Meet the Best Self*

Wu Di, *I Know How You End Up Being Left*

Wu Zhihong, *Why Does Love Hurt People, Why Does Family Hurt People*

Zhao Yongjiu, *The Five Abilities of Love*

Lin Ku-fang, *Men-Women Relationships in a Zen Mind*

Alain de Botton, *The Consolations of Philosophy*

Enrollment and Consultation Hotline: 40088-17335   Bob (10:00-22:00)/Email: salsashanghai@188.com

Love Club 3-month Private Coaching Course

Credits Sheet (full score: 100)

Contents	Time	Venue	Credits
Consultation with Wu Di (1 credit)			**1**
3-hour group dance therapy with Bob (2 credits)		Bob classroom	**2**
Theme Lecture (1 credit each time, at least 10 times, total 10 credits)	1	Bob classroom	**10**
	2	Bob classroom	
	3	Bob classroom	
	4	Bob classroom	
	5	Bob classroom	
	6	Bob classroom	
	7	Bob classroom	
	8	Bob classroom	
	9	Bob classroom	
	10	Bob classroom	
		Lecture score---	
Salsa dance class (1 credit each time, at least 12 times, total 12 credits)	1	Bob classroom	**12**
	2	Bob classroom	
	3	Bob classroom	
	4	Bob classroom	
	5	Bob classroom	
	6	Bob classroom	
	7	Bob classroom	
	8	Bob classroom	
	9	Bob classroom	
	10	Bob classroom	
	11	Bob classroom	
	12	Bob classroom	
		Salsa score---	

SALSA PARTY (4 credits each time, at least 5 times, total 20 credits)	1		**4**
	2		
	3		
	4		
	5		
		SALSA PARTY score---	
Grass-changing PARTY (5 credits each time, at least 4 times, total 20 credits)	1		**0**
	2		
	3		
	4		
		Grass-changing PARTY scores-	
Other singles parties and social activities (5 credits each time, at least 4 times, total 20 credits)	1		**20**
	2		
	3		
	4		
		Other parties scores---	
Dating the opposite sex alone (5 credits a time, at least 3 times, altogether 15 credits)	1		**15**
	2		
	3		
		Dating score---	
		TOTAL:	**64**

Appendix III

Chinese Characters for Key Terms and Titles of Works

Terms and Titles in *Pinyin*	Simplified Chinese Characters
baba qu naer	爸爸去哪儿
baizhi yundong	白纸运动
balinghou	八零后
beijing yushang xiyatu	北京遇上西雅图
buhun buyu baopingan	不婚不育保平安
chongyang meiwai	崇洋媚外
chuzhang	处长
couhe guo rizi	凑合过日子
danshen chao	单身潮
danwei	单位
datie haixu zishen ying	打铁还需自身硬
dazhong chuangye wanzhong chuangxin	大众创业万众创新
dingke	丁克
duoyuan	多元
dusheng nü	独生女
dusheng zinü zhengce	独生子女政策
dushu wuyonglun	读书无用论
fangnu	房奴
feichengwurao	非诚勿扰
funü neng ding banbiantian	妇女能顶半边天
gaige kaifang	改革开放
geren zhuyi	个人主义
gongli	功利
gongqingtuan	共青团

guanli fumu	管理父母
guoan	国安
guobao	国保
hecha	喝茶
hukou	户口
jiegui	接轨
jiti zhuyi	集体主义
jiulinghou	九零后
kao guojia	靠国家
kao ziji	靠自己
laoban	老板
lian'ai xunlianying	恋爱训练营
lianggeren hen meihao, yigeren ye zizai	两个人很美好，一个人也自在
nannü pingdeng	男女平等
nanzhuwai nüzhunei	男主外女主内
nüquan	女权
nüquan zhisheng	女权之声
nüshu	女树
nüshudian	女书店
paoxue	泡学
peixun	培训
qinglian	青联
qingnian nüquan xingdongpai	青年女权行动派
rencai	人才
shechu (*shachiku* in Japanese)	社畜
shehui xingbie pingdeng	社会性别平等
shejiao nengli	社交能力
shengnü	剩女
shoujo (Japanese)	少女
suzhi	素质

tan lian'ai	谈恋爱
teshu kunan	特殊困难
tizhi	体制
tizhinei	体制内
tizhiwai	体制外
wan, xi, shao	晚，稀，少
weiquan yundong	维权运动
woju	蜗居
women yu pingquan	我们与平权
wulinghou	五零后
wuxian yijin	五险一金
wuzhi tiaojian	物质条件
wuzhi-jingshen	物质-精神
xiandai duli nüxing	现代独立女性
xiangqin jiao	相亲角
xianqi liangmu	贤妻良母
xiaojie	小姐
xin meiti nüxing wangluo	新媒体女性网络
xingfu	性福
xinli re	心理热
yi guo, liang zhi	一国两制
yi jia, liang zhi	一家两制
zhangmuniang kan nüxu	丈母娘看女婿
zheteng	折腾
zhiqing	知青
zhonghua quanguo funü lianhehui	中华全国妇女联合会
zhonghua quanguo qingnian lianhehui	中华全国青年联合会
ziwo	自我
zuoda zuoqiang	做大做强

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