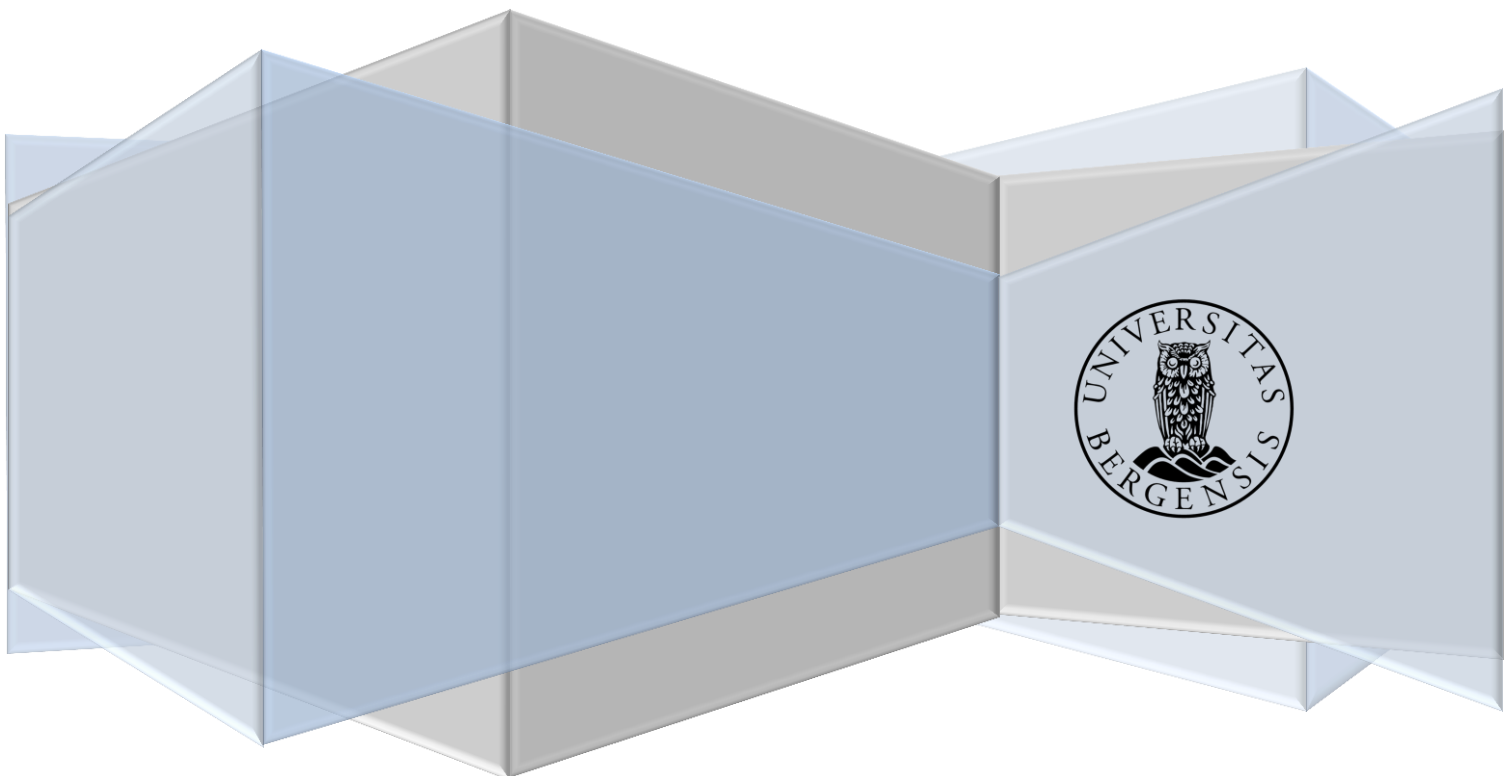Camilla Aasen Bøe

Women and Family in Contemporary Urban China

Contested Female Individualisation

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the M.A. degree
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Abstract

This thesis describes the lived experience of women in their 20s and 30s in Beijing in 2012 with relation to their families. Family is applied in a broad sense, including both natal and marital families. Through this ethnographic lens I discuss theories of individualisation and the claim that Chinese society is undergoing an individualisation transformation as understood by Ulrich Beck and Yan Yunxiang. Unmarried women and their age peers, the "80ers", are seen to demonstrate a rise of the Chinese individual and ongoing changes in the Chinese subject, as they embody historical change. They are children of the reform era who have enjoyed the benefits of rapid economic growth and a broadening scope of alternative biographies, increasing their freedoms of self-expression. Simultaneously, as the first generation of single children they are under immense pressure to perform and fulfil their parents' expectations under the moral obligations of filial piety, leaving them ambivalent with regard to the prospect of marriage and family life. Married women and mothers in their 30s are managing everyday family lives where there is a fragile balance between dependents and providers, in both practical and economic terms. This highlights the centrality of relationships of interdependencies and mutual obligations between individuals and between generations in the family that strengthen familial ties also in the context of institutional individualisation. Dominant discourses on gender continue to emphasise women's normative dedication to the collective interests of family life and label women's individual endeavours and career ambitions as selfish and unnatural, in sharp contrast to the way male ambition is evaluated. This is a potent demonstration of the importance of evaluating gender as well as age and other central features of each individual's subject position in considerations of individualisation, because although institutional individualisation is an overarching condition of contemporary Chinese urban society, the impact of this societal state on each individual differs. In sum, my findings support the notion that recent changes in Chinese urban society and the family can be seen to display a Chinese mode of individualisation. Within this overarching process of change, female individualisation in contemporary urban China is contested and by no means a simple, unidirectional process.

Acknowledgements

Contents

Individualisation in China

The overarching aim of this thesis is to grasp crucial aspects of the lived experience of the women in their 20s and 30s whom I came to know during my fieldwork in Beijing in 2012. I approach this matter by a discussion of processes of individualisation in China[1] from the point of view of these women and their families. For women in contemporary urban China the family is a significant collective group that plays a major role in subject formation and life management choices. In the family individual aspirations are coupled with practical and economic concerns and culturally embedded moral values such as filial piety that influence relationships between individuals and between generations. Gender discourses, social norms and familial expectations hold formative power over women's lives, yet are simultaneously under negotiation as Chinese urban society undergoes rapid change that in turn changes the Chinese family and subject. What becomes evident through the discussion of the ethnographic material presented is that individualisation is not a unified experience, but must be understood from a perspective sensitive of gender and life stage specific experiences.

What is individualisation?

German sociologist Ulrich Beck has contributed to the formation of an individualisation thesis based on 'second modernity' in Western European societies. Beck describes the second modernity as a risk society of precarious freedoms, unintended consequences and unpredictability due to the withdrawal of the state and welfare systems and the growth of a neoliberal economic system that leave people with the responsibility for their own well-being, resulting finally in an institutional individualisation (2002). He claims that

> Modernization (…) leads (…) to a triple 'individualization': disembedding, removal from historically prescribed social forms and commitments in the sense of traditional contexts of dominance and support (…); the loss of traditional security with respect to practical knowledge, faith and guiding norms (…); and (…) re-embedding, a new type of social commitment (…) (Beck 1992, 127-8).

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[1] China in this thesis refers to the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Beck makes a clear distinction between his concept of individualisation and the neoliberal understanding of individualisation that emphasises an increase in the autonomy and freedoms of the individual. Beck's concept of individualisation deals sociologically with the conditions for life under second modernity, not with the possessive individualism of free-market liberalism or the ethical and altruistic individualism of the enlightenment (Lash 2002). This is an important distinction to make and, as Beck points out, the association of individualisation to individuation, understood as personalisation, uniqueness and emancipation, may or may not be true (Beck 1992, 128). Beck borrows the term "institutionalised individualism" from Parsons (1978, 321), explaining it as follows:

> *Freely translated, this means that in modern life the individual is confronted on many levels with the following challenge: you may and you must lead your own independent life, outside the old bonds of family, tribe, religion, origin and class; and you must do this within the new guidelines and rules which the state, the job market, the bureaucracy etc. lay down* (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 11).

In this perspective, individualisation is not a choice, but a compulsory condition of modernity, as "modernity replaces determination of social standing with compulsive and obligatory self-determination" (Bauman 2002, xv). Central to this understanding of individualisation is the notion of individual responsibility for one's own life situation and self-reflexive identity management (Giddens 1991). The modern society forces the individual person to make choices and hence places the responsibility for the outcome, for success or failure, on the individual. Events and conditions that were preciously attributed to blows of fate are now ascribed to personal failure.

> *"Individualization in this sense means that each person's biography is removed from given determinants and placed in his or her own hands, open and dependent on decisions. The proportion of life opportunities which are fundamentally closed to decision-making is decreasing and the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally is increasing. (…) Decisions on education, profession, job, place of residence, spouse, number of children and so forth, with all the secondary decisions implied, no longer can be, they must be made"* (Beck 1992, 135).

The individual in this individualisation thesis is not self-sufficient, isolated from social networks or free from constrains, but is subject to an institutional dependency under the new conditions of second modernity.

> *The individual is indeed removed from traditional commitments and support relationships, but exchanges them for the constraints of existence in the labour market as a consumer, with*

the standardizations and controls they contain. (…) Individualization thus takes effect precisely under general social conditions which allow an individual autonomous private existence even less than before (Beck 1992, 131).

This institutional dependency forces individuals to live "a life of one's own through conformity" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:151).

Because the dependence on social institutions determines that the contemporary individual cannot float free in the search for and construction of a unique self, men and women must construct their biographies through guidelines and regulations; thus they end up with a life of individual conformity (Yan 2009, 275).

The result of this is a social condition of increased risks that are shouldered by the individual and increased diversification and differentiation of society. This implies not only an increase in risks in general, but the emergence of new types of risks which highlight the unpredictability and precarious freedoms in second modernity. It does not imply an isolation of the individual, both due to institutional dependency and the fact that traditions and social groups may still be important resources to the individual (Yan 2010b, 4).

In summary, Beck's concept of individualisation is not to be confused with the neoliberal, egocentric individualisation often associated with the word in English, but is rather an institutional individualisation that arises as a result of late capitalism in second modernity. Relevant features of this modernity is the retreat of traditional or state-sponsored roles, leading to a disembedding of the individual and subjecting the individual to new constraints and controls in a world of change, risks, competition and precarious freedoms. In this context the individual is forced to make constant choices, willingly or not, and take responsibility for his or her own success and failure. The individual is not isolated from the social, but the very terms for interaction between the individual and the social or the state have changed. Individualisation thus understood does not necessarily benefit the individual person in terms of freedom or empowerment, as is the presumption of neoliberal individualisation, but makes the individual responsible for her or his own life.

An immediate challenge when considering the application of this individualisation thesis to China is its close connection to the historical condition of second modernity, since China's historical development has moved along different trajectories from Western Europe and only partially can be said to match Beck's second modernity. China is only recently beginning to experiment with universal welfare benefits, and the economic development in the last few decades has been highly uneven,

leaving huge socioeconomic gaps in Chinese society. The question, then, is whether there still can be individualisation by Beck's terms in China.

Yan is at the forefront of analysing processes of individualisation in contemporary Chinese society by means of the concepts of the rise of the individual and individualisation of society. He claims that

> *First, the rise of the individual and the consequential individualization of society should be viewed as a reflexive part of China's state-sponsored quest for modernity since 1949. Second, the rich meanings and implications of this social transformation can be better understood in light of Ulrich Beck's theory of second modernity and individualization* (Yan 2010a, 489).

Yan thus claims that Beck's theory is useful in the Chinese context. For an evaluation of this statement a historical approach is necessary.

Overview of Chinese History

Recent Chinese history can be divided into three main periods: pre-revolution until 1949, the Maoist era from 1949 to 1976 and the post-Mao era from 1976 until today. Within these three periods there are many different events and phases which in themselves deserve more detailed attention, the most significant of which might be the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Yet here for the sake of convenience and clarity I will only refer to the three main epochs of recent history to outline their general characteristics with particular emphasis on the family, as I see the family as the main collective group that my consultants relate to, and thus developments in the family as the most revealing aspect of historical change in terms of individualisation of Chinese society.

Pre-Revolution China – The Traditional Chinese Family

Much has been written about the traditional Chinese family, and this normally refers to the family as it was or is imagined to have been in pre-revolution (or imperial) China. The traditional Chinese family is renowned for being a unit of great organizing force in society (Eastman 1988, Hsu 1967, Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013). Its members would be held together by affinal and agnatic ties as well as practical, economic, moral and religious factors. "In imperial China, Confucianists took the harmonious patriarchal, patrilineal family as both the model for, and the most basic constitutive element of, the sociopolitical order, and identified filial piety (obedience to, and care and respect of, family elders) as the "foundation of virtue and the root of civilization""(The Xiao jing (Hsiao ching) [Classic of filial piety], cited in Stacey 1983, p 30, cited in Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013, 27-8). The common living situation was in a household of several nuclear family units organized around a patrilineal descent line, either as a stem family or as an extended family all under the authority of a male head of the family. The control over property by the male head of the family made all other

family members economically dependent on staying under the blessing and physical roof of the joint family group. Traditional Chinese society is commonly said to be a collectivist society where one would not be viewed as individually responsible, but as a representative of one's house and family. In case of legal breaches one would not only punish the person responsible, but the punishment could be extended to the family and household concerned. The solidarity and loyalty that mattered most was to one's family and kin group because they were the ones who could provide care in case of illness and assistance in times of need, where resources could be pooled for both sustenance and investment. In sum, one's family and kin group was one's network of social security, and living individually outside this form of social organization in family groups would be an anomaly, if at all viable.

Morally and ideologically, the traditional Chinese family was informed by the practice of ancestor worship that rendered the continuation of the paternal descent line of paramount importance (Hsu 1967). Confucian ethics led to a clear hierarchy of relationships as well as an unquestionable distribution of authority where younger should defer to elder and women should submit to the authority of men (Stockman 2000, 94). Based on the writings of Hsu (1967) and Fei (1992), both originally published in 1948, Yan presents the following summary of traditional Chinese society:

> *More than six decades ago, Francis L.K. Hsu (1948) stated that five core elements of Chinese culture constitute the Chinese individual: the central importance of the father–son relationship, the estrangement between the two sexes, the ideal of the large family, an education system that teaches children as if they are adults, and parental authority and power. Hsu's synthesis reflected a received wisdom that remains influential today, both inside and outside of China; that is, Chinese culture places group interest over individual interest and the individual belongs and remains secondary to the group or the collective. At least at the level of ideology, the group (be it the family or the state) does not exist to support the individual; it is the other way around – the individual exists to continue the group. In this sense, there was no individual identity in traditional China as the individual only existed in relationship to and on behalf of the social groups, such as the family, lineage, or a network of ranked social relations (Fei 1948). Therefore, the individual was born into, grew up with, and remained living under their ancestors' shadows, as suggested by the title of Hsu's volume.*
> (Yan 2010a, 493)

This collectivism described by Yan is also evident in the way children were regarded in the traditional Chinese family, as Eastman notes that "in China, children were not cherished as individuals whose destiny was to fulfil their own unique potentials, but were valued because they - and especially sons -

would help with work on the fields, produce sons who would carry on the family name, and provide for their parents in their old age *and* after death" (1988, 15). This collectivist mode of social organisation is the backdrop against which recent changes in Chinese society must be understood. For the following discussion it is also worth noting that in the present the traditional Chinese family represents an imagined history informed in part by the expectations of the present, and may serve as either contrast or model for different aspects of contemporary family life and what defines being modern as opposed to traditional. Hence, when discussing the traditional Chinese family we should simultaneously recognize that we are dealing with a simplification and sometimes even a stereotype.

The Chinese Family under Mao

Maoist communism collectivised the economy and politics of Chinese society, yet Yan claims that even in the context of this collectivisation "The rise of the individual in the private sphere began as early as in the 1950s" (2009, xxiii). In order to mould the new communist subject the CCP[2] introduced policies and campaigns aimed at weakening familial ties and loyalties in favour of loyalties to the communist agenda and the new form of government in China after the revolution in 1949. Ideologically there was a shift to new communist ideals which were seen as in direct opposition to previous systems of thought and value. Confucianism, ancestor worship and patriarchal authority were all labelled feudal remnants that citizens of the People's Republic of China should reject, and rather adhere to the new ideals of Maoist communism (Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013). Practically, the family and kin group as a dominant form of social organization was replaced by the structuring of society into farming communes and urban work units called *danwei*[3] (Lü and Perry 1997, 3, for further reading see Potter and Potter 1990, Henderson and Cohen 1984) . The state, through these urban *danweis*, took over the functions of the traditional Chinese family and provided education, employment, living space, childcare, pensions and other benefits, in sum offering its subjects an "iron rice bowl"[4], guaranteeing provision from cradle to grave in exchange for the loyalty and dedicated labour force of its subjects. The rural peasants, on the other hand, were completely reliant on their own abilities as well as the support and resources of the family and kin group as no pensions or other social benefits were provided to peasants. To curb internal migration a system of residential registration called *hukou*[5] was introduced which effectively differentiated rural and urban citizen and tied each person to his or her locality, and limiting one's rights and benefits to the place of one's *hukou* (Liu 2005). Under Mao privilege became dependent on one's position in the bureaucratic system. This position was, however, dependent on one's class label in the Chinese Marxist sense

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[2] Chinese Communist Party.
[3] 单位.
[4] *tie fan wan* 铁饭碗
[5] 户口.

which in turn was determined based on one's family background (Stockman 2000, 134). Hence we see that Mao's campaigns and restructuring of Chinese society weakened the position of the family and kin group and transferred many of its functions to the institutions of the state(Yan 2010a). This does not imply that family became insignificant or that individuals were seen as separate from their family belonging. The welfare benefits provided by the state did not relieve the family of all responsibility, since care for the elderly remained a duty of their children.

According to Yan, Maoist Communism led to a partial individualisation through its socialist transformation project which "penetrated the private life sphere through the women's liberation movement, new laws and regulations on sex and marriage, and new patterns of consumption and lifestyle" (Yan 2010a, 492).

> *At the surface level, Maoist China was a highly developed collectivist society where the individual almost entirely had lost her/his freedom and autonomy as she/he could not even choose where to work or to reside, much less to which social or political group she/he would belong. At a deeper level, however, the Chinese individual was also disembedded, in many cases forcefully, from the traditional networks of family, kinship, and community and the constraints of the traditional, mostly Confucian and patriarchal, values and behavioural norms. More importantly, the individual was called upon to participate in party-state-sponsored political, economic, and social campaigns in public life and to reinvent herself/himself as a citizen of the nation-state instead of merely as a member of the family. For generations of youth and women, this was particularly liberating as they had been on the margin in traditional society where the individual lived under the shadow of her ancestors throughout her entire life course* (Yan 2010a, 492-3).

Seen in the light of Beck's analytical terms, collectivisation disembedded individuals from traditional constraints and standard biographies and placed them firmly embedded in a new system of rules and guidelines. This can as Yan points out be understood as a partial individualisation, because it entails a de-traditionalisation, disembedment and re-embedment of the individual that shifts the individual from the shadow of the ancestors to that of the state. (Yan 2010a, 493).

The Post-Mao Era – Reform
If collectivisation replaced the shadow of the ancestors with that of the party-state, the question that begs an answer, then, is what currently overshadows the lives of urban citizens in China. After the death of Chairman Mao in 1976 Deng Xiaoping and other political leaders at the time launched several political and economic reforms aimed at modernising Chinese economy and society, the sum

of which is called "Opening and Reform"[6]. This decollectivized China's agriculture, scaled down China's state-owned sector, allowed and stimulated the emergence of a private sector of the economy, opened China to international trade and reformed the Chinese economy with neoliberal policies in many sectors of the economy combined with authoritarian government and continued state control over central resources and industries. The *hukou* system was gradually loosened to allow some internal migration and state-run welfare provisions were withdrawn or privatized and are now based on a system of individual insurances that are normally organized through one's employer or otherwise can be bought privately. The result as experienced by urban Chinese is a system characterized by capitalism, increased socioeconomic differentiation and stratification of society and more acute pressure to achieve and perform in competition with everyone else. In Yan's view, the introduction of the private labour market

> *constitutes the most radical shift that led to the individualization of Chinese society. The direct impact of the rise of the private sector on Chinese society was the ending of the party-state monopoly over resource allocations and life chances.* (Yan 2010a, 496)

Moreover, and crucial to this thesis:

> *The three major reform projects since the late 1990s, namely, the privatization of housing, the marketization of education, and the marketization of medical care, are all institutional changes launched by the state to force individuals to shoulder more responsibility, to more actively engage in market-based competition, and to assume more risks and to become more reflexive* (Yan 2010a, 499).

The speed, scale and pervasiveness of the radical changes that Chinese society has undergone in the era of reform can hardly be overestimated. The combined withdrawal of state-provided benefits and social security combined with marketization and neoliberal economic policies have launched the individual into a new state of personal responsibility for one's life chances. Now more than previously success and failure depends on individual efforts and merits, and one has to work hard to create a sense of security for oneself and one's family amid ever changing conditions and precarious freedoms.

A Chinese model of individualisation

Based on these recent historical transformations in Chinese society Yan concludes that "Chinese society is undergoing an individualization transformation. Detraditionalization, disembedment, the

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[6] *Kaifang Gaige* 开放改革.

creation of a life of one's own by DIY biographic work, and the irresistible pressure to be more independent and individualistic are all indicators of individualization in Western Europe that have also occurred to Chinese individuals (Yan 2009, 287). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim support this view, claiming that the reform era in China "has led to a kind of limited, state-sanctioned individualization in which individuals are condemned to take their own initiatives, while the social safety nets of Chinese state socialism have disappeared. This opens the door to the individual assignment of responsibility which is one of the general features of individualization" (2010, xviii). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim find "proof of the fact that the individual has become a basic social category in China" (2010, xiii) and see a development "that permeates all areas of social life and determines not just the private sphere, family structures and relations between the sexes, but also the organization of the economy and flexible employment and, last but not least, the relation between individuals and the authoritarian state" (*ibid.*, xiii). Yet, based on the historical and contextual summary above we are already starting to perceive a process of individualisation in China that is in significant ways different from individualisation as observed in Western Europe. As Yan summarises:

> *it is possible for a society to undergo the individualization process without political liberalism and classic individualism because this reconfiguration of social relations can be carried out by other mechanisms, as revealed in the Chinese case* (Yan 2010a, 508-9).

Individualisation in the Chinese context is "characterized by the management of the party-state and the absence of cultural democracy, a welfare state regime and classic individualism" (Yan 2009, 290). Chinese modernity is characterised by "state-regulated capitalism; post-traditional authoritarian government; truncated institutionalized individualization and plural-religious society" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010, xvi), because "In China the neoliberal deregulation of the economy and the labour market of everyday culture and consumerism is being initiated *before* and *without* the constitutional anchoring of individualization as we know it in Europe" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010, xix). In sum,

> *What is presented in the European context as the 'universalistic logic' of individualization (…) is in fact a historically and culturally limited special form, the result of a particular amalgamation of modernization and individualization. As the Chinese example shows, these two developments can also be uncoupled from one another or can combine to form different paths towards individualization* (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010, xvii).

Thus they establish that there is an ongoing process of individualisation in Chinese society, but that this individualisation is not a copy of that seen in Western Europe.

No longer taking the form of communist revolution and socialist transformation, the individualization process since the late 1970s speaks mostly the language of market economy and privatization, yet it remains under the management of the party-state. By the turn of the new century, it had developed into a twofold social transformation, namely, the rise of the individual on the one hand and the individualization of the social structure on the other. Whereas the rise of the individual is primarily reflected in the changing patterns of individual biographies, the structural changes mostly result from institutional reforms, policy changes, and the impact of the market economy (Yan 2010a, 494-5).

The aim of this thesis is to contribute ethnographic material to further develop the understanding of individualisation in China with particular emphasis on family relationships as it is experienced by a selection of women in this specific context.

Contemporary Beijing

Beijing is the political and cultural capital of the world's most populous country, a megacity with 20 million permanent residents (ChinaDaily.com.cn 2013) and a total population believed to be about twice this figure. Common for every inhabitant in Beijing is the overarching system of social institutions, social security and welfare, the real estate market, education and employment. These constitute a framework that shapes many major concerns and influences people's lived experience in Beijing. These concerns each have economic, social, historic and cultural aspects to them, influencing the way various issues are dealt with under the current circumstances of life. The economic growth that China has seen over the last three decades has benefited mainly the urban citizens of China and created a growing urban population in the middle income level whose lifestyles are influenced by cultural images of a modern way of life from abroad and who in many respects are very similar to their western counterparts, referred to as the new or emerging middle class in urban China (Zhang 2010). Most of my consultants fall within the brackets of a middle class in Beijing. To my knowledge the total monthly incomes of the families in my research range from about 10 000 RMB[7] to about 30 000 RMB per month. This income places these families within the bracket of middle income, as the Beijing average monthly wage in Beijing in 2012 was 5223 RMB (ChinaAbout.net 2013). In Chinese the term for class, *jieceng*[8]*,* is politicised by Maoist rhetoric and rarely used nowadays. The preferred term to describe middle class society in Chinese today is *xiaokang shehui*[9]. *Xiaokang* means a comparatively good living standard or a period of peace and prosperity; hence the concept in

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[7] RMB is an abbreviation for Renmin Bi, the Chinese currency also known as Chinese Yuan or CNY. 100 RMB equals about 13 EUR, 10,5 GBP or 100 NOK.
[8] 阶层.
[9] 小康社会.

Chinese is descriptive of the standards of living currently seen as ideal. This implies that they are part of a segment of the population who even though outnumbered by the less privileged are perceived to represent a normal lifestyle according to expectations in Beijing in 2012. This middle class lifestyle is closely connected to "the notion of a Chinese dream, i.e. a belief that one could change one's fate through intelligence and hard work" (Yan 2009, xvii). "By the mid-1980s, the pursuit of a life of one's own had become a forceful trend and the politics of lifestyle began to play a role in Chinese social life"(Yan 2010a, 502). The party-state is still a forceful actor in individual lives in what Yan calls a party-state-managed individualisation (Yan 2010a, 509). Individualisation can be understood as a part of the state's project of modernisation of China, as "modernity in China is understood as the realization of three dreams: a strong state, a wealthy nation, and a prosperous individual – exactly in that order" (Yan 2010a, 507).

With the downsizing of the state-owned enterprises during reform, the system of allocation of real estate was also reduced, parallel to the establishment of a private real estate market in the 1980s and 90s.[10] There has been massive inflation of real estate prices in Beijing due to the pressures of migration to Beijing and speculation in real estate by out-of town investors. According to my consultants, real estate prices have multiplied several times over in the last ten years, and the average price per square meter within the fourth ring road is currently said to be about 40 000 RMB. To curb this inflation the Beijing municipality has introduced several measures, including increasing the amount of down payment needed when buying real estate. Previously the down payment on an apartment purchase was 20%. Today a person with Beijing *hukou* must pay 30% in down payment when buying their first apartment. Those who do not have a Beijing *hukou* and those buying their second or third apartment must pay 60% in down payment (GlobalPropertyGuide.com 2012). Today the *hukou* system is very complex and has many exceptions, but in general Chinese citizens are free to move, yet rights to education and health care to a large extent remain limited to the place of their *hukou* registration. As the home of some of China's most prestigious universities and a wide range of employment opportunities Beijing attracts both skilled and unskilled migrants from all over China as well as the world. Some universities and employers can provide their employees a Beijing *hukou*, mainly in the state and public sectors.

The most radical example of state-led modernisation is the family planning policies popularly called "the one child policy" introduced gradually from the mid-1970s. As we will see, many Chinese see these policies as a major driving force in individualisation of Chinese society, understood as a corrosion of collective values and surge in competitive egotistic behaviour. These policies limit most

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[10] Real estate in China is not so much being sold as leased for a long period of time. The government still owns all land, but the rights to the land are leased for a given period of time, normally 70 years.

families to one child. Exceptions include ethnic minorities, rural families where the first child is a girl and families where both parents are single children. Where more than one child is allowed there is still a requirement of 4 years between the first and the second child. These family planning policies have successfully limited China's population growth, created an extremely rapid demographic transition as well as transformed the Chinese family structure. Unintended consequences include a heavier investment in a child's education irrespective of gender (Fong 2004) as well as a female deficit in certain, mainly rural areas due to female infanticide and abortion of female foetuses (Huang 2012, Croll 2000). Those who give birth to a child without granted permission have to pay a fine set according to average annual wages in their region to get *hukou* for the child. Here the *hukou* can be understood as the formal registration as a citizen without which a person would be a stateless person within the state without access to basic services.

In contemporary Beijing competition is felt most acutely in the education system aimed at cultivating Chinese citizens of high quality[11] (Stornes 2012, Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013, 164-5) because "When power and the market together control education, education becomes an area of fierce competition" (Tan 2010, 420). The education system is organised through entry exams on every level of education, the most important of which is the University Entry Exam (*gaokao*[12]). The *gaokao* effectively determines the life chances of the individual student as well as his or her family's chances for social mobility, causing families to invest heavily in their single child's education (Kim 2012, 3, Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013, 169). Once you yourself have got an education, a job, and are married the possibilities for socio-economic mobility are very limited, because to rise in the system either you get a good education that leads to a good job, or you can hope to marry someone who did. According to Yan, out of 9,5 million students taking the *gaokao* in a given year, only 2,6 million would be accepted to colleges or universities (2006). "In China today, the intensity of competition for *gaokao* success is extreme, thanks to the combined effects of the psychology of hoping one's child becomes a "dragon", the meritocratic policies and discourses of the state, and the growing employment competition that has followed market reforms since the 1980s" (Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013, 167). Writing about Asia in general, Kim notes that "there is greater gender equality in education and the expansion of educational opportunities for urban middle-class women" (Kim 2012, 3). University entry exams are not unique to China, but due to the sheer number of hardworking students striving to get into the best universities the pressure is intense. It must be said that outside of this blind meritocracy of education there are back doors for those with the economic

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[11] *suzhi* 素质.
[12] 高考.

means or *guanxi*[13] (social capital) to open them. *Guanxi* is a term referring to a broad array of social relations, from a general social network to utilitarian relations of mutual benefit, and those with good *guanxi* can surpass the meritocratic system through their social connections (Bøe in press). The families I know are not in the bracket of great wealth and influence and parents can therefore not rely on their own abilities to open back doors for their children, but have to invest in the child and hope that the child's abilities will be enough to get ahead in the race. In summary, the safest ways to success in China is either to be an excellent student or have parents who are wealthy or well-connected or both. Either way, success and wealth have become crucial in this fiercely competitive capitalist system where failure to perform and acquire sufficient purchasing power through education and employment has dire consequences not only for oneself but also for one's family.

Bystander's clarity[14] and the researcher's role

Anthropological methods of qualitative research are founded in the belief that we as humans are able to relate to other humans by means of intersubjectivity, that we by living close to others will be able to understand some of their experience of living in the world, yet as an outsider and bystander we will be able to verbalise this experience to a greater extent than the subject him or herself. My husband and I lived in Beijing from February 2012 until March 2013, first as students of Mandarin Chinese, then doing fieldwork for our respective theses from August 2012. In my experience, fieldwork is an exercise in sociability, likability, flexibility as well as a first attempt at an independent scientific endeavour. When doing fieldwork one as a researcher is forced to use oneself to gain access to insights and understandings about a social situation and play on the strings available. The starting point for my fieldwork in August 2012 was a handful of previous contacts, and the majority of my contacts were introduced to me through these already existing relationships, also known as snowballing. This form of establishing relationships through introduction is very common in China and was a major advantage to me as it quickly establishes a basic trust. Contact was eased by the fact that I had gained sufficient language skills in Mandarin Chinese to carry out this fieldwork without the help of an interpreter or local assistant as well as by my ability to offer assistance in improving their English language skills. There are of course occasions where my language skills have impeded a complete understanding of social interactions, especially interactions where I myself was witness, more than participant. My imperfect language skills have sometimes worked to my benefit, as my consultants readily offer their assistance by writing and explaining words, expressions and sayings, simultaneously providing me with their interpretation and understanding of the matter at hand. My obvious linguistic and cultural outsider-ness also legitimises silly questions and makes the need to

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[13] 关系.

[14] *pangguanzhe qing* 旁观者清 – a Chinese expression.

verbalise the culturally implicit evident, an advantage an insider to the cultural context would not have.

During fieldwork I realised how in different interactions I would assume and be given different roles and social statuses according to the positioning of myself in relation to my consultant, the history of our relationship and how we chose to approach the situation. The relationship between researcher and consultant is an unfamiliar and alien social relationship with an undeniably instrumental aspect on the researcher's part that unless shrouded in a familiar relationship is socially uncomfortable. The roles of language tutor, socio-cultural student and friend were the main roles I could assume or be ascribed which would make it easier for others to relate to me in a familiar social pattern of interaction. The methods of qualitative research commonly applied in social anthropology, participant observation and unstructured interviews, was not recognisable as a "proper" scientific method in my consultants' eyes. Despite my repeated efforts to clarify my endeavour I am not sure whether they all realised that our informal interactions what was constituted my actual fieldwork or if some of them saw it as a break from whatever research I might be doing the rest of my time.

Consultants

My main consultants can be divided into two categories based on their age and life stage. The first of these categories is unmarried women in their mid-20s to early 30s, mainly single children born at the dawn of the reform area. The second category is women in their 30s who are born in the 1970s before the strict implementation of the family planning policies that restrict most families to one child, are married and are managing a family life situation with ageing parents and children of less than 12 years of age. The majority of my consultants are of the *Han*-Chinese ethnic majority. I observed no significant difference between this majority and the few of my consultants with ethnic minority background with regard to the current subject matter.

The unmarried women either live with their parents, live by themselves or live with their boyfriend or girlfriend. They would hardly ever invite me to their home, but meet me at restaurants, bars or cafes. This corresponds to how they normally interact with friends. The married women would normally invite me to visit them in their home more or less regularly, either by myself or with my husband. When visiting them in their home I would at first be treated cordially as a guest, but later my presence would be met by a more relaxed behaviour and I would in their words no longer be treated as an outsider, a *wairen*[15]. A third research situation arose when a consultant, a mother in her 30s, invited me to join her to one of her son's afterschool activities. During these activities a parent would accompany the child and wait in a lounge area along with the other parents. The

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[15] 外人.

parents in this group were mostly mothers in their late 30s and early 40s, from the same area of Beijing, had children of similar age and hence shared many concerns and circumstances of life. After gaining the other parents' approval I was able to join this group on several occasions and conduct group interviews. This research situation was by far the most challenging to manage and offered the greatest challenge in terms of Chinese language competency, yet also yielded very interesting perspectives and insights.

In Chinese *bendiren* denotes a local person, someone not only born and raised locally, but whose family on the paternal side also originates from the place in question. A person who himself or whose family has come from some other place is termed a *waidiren* and some ambiguities are attached to his or her status at the place in question. Most of my consultants are *waidiren* who through education and employment have secured a change in their *hukou* registration to Beijing, thus guaranteeing their rights as citizens of Beijing. A few of my consultants are *waidiren* who have come to Beijing hoping to make it in private or small-scale business, without being able to change their residency registration to a Beijing *hukou*. The least fortunate kind of rural-urban migrant, the floating population of migrant workers, does not feature among my consultants, but are part of the urban socioscape that my consultants manoeuvre in.

I have chosen to use the term consultant to refer to those involved in my research. Consultant as used here is thought to describe this relationship of exchange of insights and knowledge from a person of deeper understanding to a person in need of such insights, and should not be confused with connotations to business relationships. For the benefit of the reader I use English first names and Chinese family names as pseudonyms for my consultants. This is common practice by Chinese people interacting with English-speaking foreigners. Women do not change their surname upon marriage in China, but the children take their father's surname which is then also considered the family name. Thus I will refer to each family, wife included, by a common family name. I use the term 'family' to refer to the Chinese term *jia*[16], which is a broader term than 'family' in English. In normal use it may refer to co-residing members of the household, but may also be understood as close family members who do not necessarily reside together. *Jia* is normally restricted to one's closest agnatic or affinal relatives of spouse, parents, siblings and children, but may in some cases also include more distant kin who are involved with the everyday life of the nuclear family under the term *jiaren*[17], literally meaning 'people of the family/household'. In general 'family' as applied here is a very broad term that in each case incorporates a different combination of people and relationships, just as the families of my consultants do.

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[16] 家.

[17] 家人.

Thesis outline

Chapter 1 discusses the rise of the individual in Chinese society by focusing on the unmarried women's attitudes to parents, family and the prospect of marriage, highlighting their own self-perception and identity construction and raising the question of the new Chinese subject. Chapter 2 takes the practical and economic aspects of everyday family life as a starting point for analysing roles, relationships and interdependencies in the contemporary urban Chinese family showing the continuing strength of family as a part of the individualisation process of Chinese society. Chapter 3 outlines dominant discourses on gender and women in China as a way to understand women's identity management with relation to individualisation, demonstrating the continued expectation of women to be family-oriented in their life choices and limiting their motivation for individual aspirations outside the family. Lastly, Chapter 4 summarises the preceding chapters in a discussion revealing the contested nature of female individualisation in contemporary urban China.

Chapter 1:

The '80ers' and the Rising Individual

In this chapter I will approaching the discussion of individualisation from an age or life stage specific point of view through describing the lived experiences of the unmarried women in their mid-20s to early 30s among my consultants and their peers, the '80ers'[18], born in the 1980s. Coming from different geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, they are predominantly single children, have all graduated and are earning their own money, yet they are not necessarily economically independent. As children of the reform era they have been socialised under radically different conditions from preceding generations, and can be seen to embody historical change through their socialisation in a specific sociocultural and historical context. Real or perceived characteristics of the '80ers' thus to some extent reflect changes in Chinese society. I will place special emphasis on close and familial relationships, as Yan argues that "The family (…) plays a more influential role than society in fostering individual identity" (Yan 2010b, 15). I will deal specifically with the theories of the rising individual in Chinese societies presented by Yan (2009), as I find that the '80ers' are a demonstration of this trend, along with its complexities and contradictions as they relate to their natal families and the prospect of establishing a family of their own. Through this I will reveal how the changing conditions of Chinese urban society during the last couple of decades have affected the Chinese self and subject, leading, as Yan claims, to a rise of the individual and individualisation of society in an ongoing dialectical process of change.

The rise of the Chinese individual

According to Yan, the processes of disembedment described in the introduction lead to a rise of the individual which in turn causes an individualisation of society (2009). Disembedment of the individual does not involve an isolation of the individual from social groups, since the family and other collectives are still important resources to the individual, and new collectives are formed as individuals re-embed under new circumstances. Traditionally, the Chinese self has been seen as fundamentally different from the Western self, due to the collectivist orientation perceived to dominate Chinese traditional society. The Chinese self has been viewed as a relational self, more than an independent individual (Fei, Hamilton, and Wang 1992, Hsu 1967) and hence guided by the

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[18] *baling hou* 80 后.

ethics of *renqing*[19] (human emotion) and *guanxi* (social relationships) as social norms for human interaction (Yan 1996, 98-146). Yan claims that in recent decades the Chinese self has emerged as "an important and independent social category for policy making and cultural reasoning alike" (Yan 2009, 280). On a deeper level, Yan claims that

> *While experiencing the radical changes in her/his life situation and biographic pattern over the last three decades, the Chinese individual has also gone through an equally radical breakthrough in the subjective domain, that is, a re-formation of the self and a search for individual identity* (Yan 2010a, 504).

Changes in society thus have led to a change in the Chinese self and subject where the individual is on the rise. This rising individual emphasises an enterprising, desiring self as well as emotionality, personal happiness and romantic love (Yan 2010a, 504). Focusing on the changing Chinese subject is by extension an attempt at understanding changes in Chinese society, because " the rising individual in China acts within the parameters set by both the state and the market, and the exercise of individual agency in turn reshapes the dynamisms between the individual, the state, and the market" (Yan 2010b, 14). The Chinese subject thus changes under the influence of a changing society, and in return contributes to further changes in society through a process of feedback loops, to apply Lash's term (2002). At no point in this process can the Chinese individual be seen to be independent of social institutions and, as Beck claims, "institutionally dependent individual situations bring about generation-specific disadvantages or privileges in the corresponding *peer group situations* along economic and labor market cycles" (1992, 133-4). The specific age group in question, born in the late 70s and 80s, can be seen to embody historical change and reflect the specific historical conditions under which they have been socialised, creating a specific peer group situation. Their privileges include economic growth that has provided many of their families and themselves with improved living standards and the opportunity of increased individual consumption. Among their disadvantages are the pressures of the only child (Fong 2004) and the responsibility to manage their own biographies and identity politics. As Yan notes: "the pressure to remake the self in one way or another created not only an additional responsibility but also a new psychological burden for the Chinese individual" (2010a, 505). Modernity as experienced in China, with neoliberal economic policies and absence of a social safety net, has reinforced the Chinese understanding of individual rights and privileges as earned through individual efforts, and not universally gained from birth (Yan 2010b, 13), thus magnifying the individualisation of responsibility and risk in Chinese society.

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[19] 人情.

Individualism and egotism

In China, individualism is strongly associated with egotism. In Chinese the concept of "the private," *si,*[20] can be translated as personal, private and selfish and is a term with negative connotations as opposed to "the public"[21]. Private, individually spent money withheld from the collective household budget exemplify the negative quality of the private, understood as an opposition to and negation of the collective good.

> *A close look at the introduction and dissemination of individualism from the West to China, however, reveals that individualism has always been understood, among both the elite and the populace, as a form or egotism, involving selfish, anti-sociable and utilitarian interests, without any consideration of other individuals' rights and interests. Other elements in Western individualism, such as liberty, equality, freedom and self-reliance, have largely been overlooked* (Yan 2009, xxxiii).

 "This incomplete or unbalanced understanding of individualism not only makes the individual egotistic and uncivil, but also amplifies the negative aspects of individualization, such as the relentless individual competition and the decline of social trust" (Yan 2009, 289). These negative aspects of individualisation include the emergence of what Yan calls the "uncivil individual", seen as a rupture with the collective ethics of *renqing* which govern the local moral world. *Renqing* translates to human emotions and by extension to a social relationship and means "the norms and values that regulate interpersonal relationships" (Yan 2009, xxxiv). Yan further reveals that the concepts of individuality and individualism are viewed differently by different age groups. He observes that the younger generation in several instances lack consideration of the elder generation and fail to fulfil their filial duties of economic, practical and emotional support. This is in Yan's view a development of individualism in a negative, egocentric sense, not previously observed in Chinese village society. Individuality[22] and individualism[23] are used by young villagers justify their actions as being modern, whereas elder villagers maintain a negative view of these concepts (Yan 2009).

The process of disintegration of the Maoist social safety net and its replacement by the new free market and neoliberal policies leave the populace to fend for themselves in a highly competitive system. This is also referred to as a source of egoistic behaviour where nobody cares about others, as all have to elbow their way to the front in order to not be elbowed to the back of the line. Helping others can also be seen as a potential risk, as several incidents of traffic accidents have demonstrated.

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[20] 私.
[21] *gong* 公.
[22] *Gexing* 个性.
[23] *gerenzhuyi* 个人主义.

In one case a passer-by helped a woman who had been injured in an accident and took her to the hospital. In his benevolence he even paid some of her expenses. Later she claimed that he was the perpetrator in order to demand compensation and the issue came before the court. The judge rules that he must be the perpetrator, otherwise he would never have helped her, a complete unrelated stranger, and the man was found guilty. After this incident the fear of getting involved in others' accidents has increased and the extreme case is a little girl who was hit by a car and left in the road for several hours while people passed by, not lifting a finger to help her. The surveillance tapes from this incident went all over Chinese and foreign media as a horrific example of the collapse of virtue, morality, community or altruism in Chinese society.

The "80ers"

The "80ers" are seen as another example of the negative trends of change in Chinese society, where utilitarian individualism erodes collective concerns. "80er" is a term for those born in the 1980s which can be applied to individuals, groups and categories. This terminology is commonly used in everyday conversation and media alike and can be applied to any age bracket to describe a person's age group belonging. The division of Chinese society and my consultants into categories based on decade of birth is an arbitrary division that conceals many nuances. This notwithstanding, these categories based on decade of birth are actively used by my consultants, in media and the general public to discuss perceived changes in the Chinese subject. These age categories incorporate a perceived embodiment of historical change in the changing Chinese subject, because as the conditions for socialisation and subject formation change, so does the subject.

What makes the "80ers" an especially interesting category is their unique position in Chinese history as the first generation of single children and the first Chinese who have been socialised in the era of post-Maoist economic reform. They have experienced greater economic freedom than any generation of Chinese before them and to some extent also a greater freedom of expression of both opinion and personal identity. They have been faced with an increasingly competitive educational system and pressures to perform and achieve in an increasingly meritorious economic system, for the benefit of not only themselves but also their family. They have been the focus of a family group accustomed to many children per family, with both the benefits and responsibilities that entails, being raised as first-world children in a society undergoing rapid and uneven development (Fong 2004). Media and public discourse hold a negative view of the 80er generation, because they have not been socialized to adjust to others and hence are thought to be poorly equipped to do so. The 80ers are found to be more prone to egotism and an exaggerated individualism, since they have

grown up as the centre of everybody's attention with only their own well-being to consider and find this state natural.

Yan (2006) describes the situation of the "80er" generation in China, comparing it to "generation Y" in the USA, born between 1980 and 1995. Both "are indeed individualistic fun-seekers who want to go beyond social norms and create their own brave new world of cool" (Yan 2006, 255). Specific to the Chinese youth is a strong emphasis on materialism and extensive pragmatism in how to reach the standards of living they aspire to, as they are "determined to achieve instant individual gratification in terms of a pleasurable and comfortable material life" (Yan 2006, 255). Their attitudes to premarital sex is liberal, they see social relationships primarily as a means to an end through the development of a network of social capital known in the Chinese context as *guanxi*, they study hard under their parent's pressure in order to get a fulfilling job, all the while keeping their individualistic endeavours under the control of self-censorship and outside of the public and political sphere. This generates conflicting images of this generation as they on the one hand have been the centre of attention as only children and pampered with material goods as spoilt "little emperors" turning into adults who fail to provide for but rather depend on their parents, termed *kenlaozu*, and on the other hand are under enormous pressure to perform in the fiercely competitive education system, as Fong also notes (2004). Yan calls the "80ers" frail pragmatists. Pragmatic due to their impressively pragmatic approach to life as a means to gain material comforts, and frail as their physical and mental health suffer under the pressure, making suicide the leading cause of death among this age cohort (Yan 2006).

The "80ers" are seen by themselves to be both open[24] and traditional, especially when compared to the "90ers". This is certainly attested to by my consultans: Ellen (28) works for an international company in Beijing. In her experience the "80ers" are under a lot of pressure to work hard. She also finds that there is a generational gap between herself as an "80er" and the "90ers". According to her the "80ers" are dreamy and have not yet found a logical approach to the matters of love. The "90ers" are more confident in what they want and like, they are more mature and realistic. She thinks this might be because they were given greater freedoms growing up than were the "80ers" and because the parents of the "90ers" were better off than the parents of the "80ers" ten years earlier. She says it also has to do with the fact that China is changing rapidly with Internet, TV and access to real information that, in her words, leaves the "90ers" less "brainwashed" than the "80ers". The "90ers" are more experienced with computers and are better at finding information and they challenge more than the "80ers" dare to do.

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[24] *kaifang* 开放.

Joe Yin and Cathy Wang are a couple in their late 20s who are planning to get married. According to Joe and Cathy there used to be talk of a generational divide every five years, then every three years, now people say there's a generational gap every two years because the economic and cultural developments are speeding up. Cultural influences from abroad, the internet, the access to information is different now from ten years ago. "You suddenly discover so much. So people change. Young people in particular. They imitate others, imitate what they see. They make new choices, not like their parents who just jot a job and worked until they retired", Cathy explains. Joe and Cathy see themselves as different from their parents, who are born in the 50s and 60s, in terms of habits, values and attitudes to life, society and family. Unlike themselves, they see their parents as "tamed" and brainwashed by their background from the Cultural Revolution so that they always seek to blend in, conform and be like everybody else. Their parents fear standing out, fear being different. To Joe and Cathy, standing out and expressing their individual identity and personality through taste in clothes and music, opinions, leisure activities and choice of friends is important. They define themselves as cynics and critics, not blinded or dumbstruck, but alert to the realities of their time, in explicit contrast to how they view their parents' generation. As others confirmed, being markedly different from previous generations is an active pursuit for many young adults.

"They are used to eating the best without sharing"

A generally held view among my married consultants is that the "70ers" have received more traditional influences and embody more traditional Chinese values than their counterparts of the following decade. Belle and her husband Mark Liang are both "70ers" and in their eyes, there are big differences between "70ers" and "80ers" because of the major changes that have occurred in China in the decade that separates them. They feel that they have much more in common with the "60ers". The "70ers" grew up with siblings under difficult economic conditions when the living standard for the vast majority of the population was low. They find that this has led the "70ers" to primarily consider others' feelings. "80ers" are seen to emphasize their own self and be ego-centric, since they are privileged as singletons, not used to sharing food, toys or even attention with others, because, according to Mark, the parents of the "80ers" didn't let them "eat bitterness"[25] or endure any hardships growing up. The observed differences between the two age categories of "70ers" and "80ers" can be attributed to two factors: on the one hand the changing historical circumstances may have a caused a change in the Chinese subject, on the other hand different life stages may cause differences which will even out once the "80ers" get to the current life stage of the "70ers". Yan points out that the "70ers" were also seen as more individualistic than preceding generations: "The customary usage of the plural "we" gradually disappeared in the 1990s and, by the late 1990s, a new

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[25] *chi ku* 吃苦.

Chinese phrase, ""*wo yi dai*" (the I generation or the me-generation), was coined to describe those who were born in the 1970s and who had grown up during the reform era because of their proud usage of the first person" (Yan 2009, 280-1). This indicates that the rupture between the "70ers" and the "80ers" is not as dramatic as one might think, and that the individual has been on the rise even before the "80ers", as Yan also shows (Yan 2009). However, the experience of the Chinese subject undergoing change in recent decades that favours individualistic tendencies remains.

One area that Belle finds particularly disturbing is the differing understandings of morality and politeness. In her view "80ers" and "90ers" lack a proper education in polite behaviour[26]. They have helped Mark's younger cousin, Josh, settle down in Beijing and even helped him secure a good job there, and in their view he fails to reciprocate because he doesn't treat them as politely as he should. Josh currently lives with his girlfriend, a situation Belle finds morally challenging. What surprises her is that the girl's parents do not oppose them living together without being married since her image in terms of sexual purity would be damaged along with the face[27] of the family and her likelihood of securing a good spouse. In her own time it would have been unthinkable to live with someone you might not marry. According to Josh the parents reacted to it, but not so strongly that there was any consequence, and in his view they are generally not particularly open or liberal either, to which Belle shook her head in resignation. After Belle and Mark visited Josh's girlfriends' parents, her parents refused to come to Beijing and reciprocate the visit and, worse, they didn't even see them off when they left, just shut the door behind them. On another occasion Josh refused an invitation to come and welcome Belle back from a journey abroad because he had to study for an exam. Being his elder cousin[28] who in addition has helped him, they both found this treatment intolerable. Josh is at a loss when they express their dismay to him, as he cannot fathom what he has done to offend them. Belle and Mark conclude that it all comes down to the fact that the "80ers" place themselves at the centre stage[29], and it's not only Josh as a person who is impolite; his whole environment and his peers are all like that. They find that ego-centrism is an attitude[30] characteristic of the "80ers". Belle and Mark believe that this affects their relationships, as the divorce rate is high among "80ers". Previously divorce was unthinkable, now, for "80ers" they claim that it occurs regularly. They claim that the "90ers" are even more extreme than "80ers", exemplified by a relative who is a "90er", is ego-centric and fails to consider other people's emotions, only caring about what is the most advantageous for himself. Mark adds that on the bright side, there are examples of "80ers" who have grown up to be

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[26] *limao* 礼貌.
[27] *mianzi* 面子.
[28] *xiongzhang* 兄长.
[29] *yi wo wei zhongxin* 以我为中心.
[30] *siwei fangshi* 思维方式.

decent people, like a model soldier he saw on TV, so there is still hope that at least some of them will come around. Belle and Mark emphasise traditional moral virtues and decorum that includes the understanding of differential treatment depending on specific statuses, roles and relationships. Josh and other single children have not been taught to manoeuvre in this social-moral landscape, but have been busy studying and taking care of their own business. Hence there are significant differences in what is understood as "normal" or polite behaviour.

Parental authority - Being a good person or not

From the above it would appear that there is a significant generational divide between young adults and their parents where young adults are viewed as a new kind of subject, perceived to be in some way fundamentally different from older generations of Chinese. Part of what characterises this new element is the emphasis on the self both in perceived ego-centrism and in the expression of personal identity. If it is so, however, that the "80ers" are both traditional and modern, what is the traditional influence over their lives and relationships? The interplay between modern and traditional influences is conspicuous in the relations between the "80ers" and their parents.

Young adults' relationship with their parents is informed by the cultural and moral value of filial piety, which obliges the child to show respect to the parent through obedience and, once grown up, through material, emotional and practical support, even after the death of the parents (Ikels 2004). In traditional Chinese society being unfilial was a serious offence. Now "the ceremonious expression of filial piety is gone, but most young people still seem to have a strong sense of being in their parents' debt for the simple act of bearing or begetting them" (Wolf 1987, 208). Filial piety still matters for young adults in contemporary Beijing, despite attitudes described by Parish and Farrer that "the younger generations are described as increasingly selfish and unwilling to take care of their elderly parents" (2000, 232). Parents exert a great deal of influence over their child, also when the child reaches adulthood, as I witnessed on several occasions. Young adults deal with this influence either by avoiding it through finding spaces to act outside the parents' sphere of influence, by negotiating or contesting it directly or by submitting to it. In the words of Cathy, "In China you are always your parents' child, no matter how old you are. They always want to control you." Cathy has recently returned from studies abroad and has started working in Beijing. She lives with her parents until she and her boyfriend Joe get married. According to her, being filial determines whether you are a good person or not[31] and what kind of person you are,[32] "If you don't respect your parents you are a bad person, no matter what." Cathy expresses her filial piety in her everyday life through acts

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[31] *ren de haohuai* 人的好坏.
[32] *ren de xingge* 人的性格.

such as respecting her parents' wishes that she should not be out too late at night, accompanying her mother to the dentist and greeting her mother with a smile and a glass of hot water as she gets home.

CAB: So are you always filial?

Joe: I'm filial at heart.

Cathy: We don't have the opportunity to support our parents financially (*shanyang*)[33], like you are supposed to do to be filial. My mother thinks that in terms of filial piety being obedient[34] is more important than *shanyang*. I always pretend I'm listening to what she says, but I have my own ideas.

Evidently, filial piety is a moral value that still holds force, but one that simultaneously is undergoing redefinition. The demand for economic support is downplayed according to the limited abilities of the children and needs of the parents, while an emphasis is placed on obedience, emphasising attitudes over clearly defined acts as expression of filial piety. There is also an apparent contradiction in these statements, because while on the one hand placing filial piety at the centre stage for defining whether one is a good person or not, and obedience at the heart of filial piety, Joe and Cathy simultaneously refuse to obey their parents' line of thinking. They seek to establish themselves and their own identity in contrast to that of their parents through their emphasis on critical thinking and "having their own ideas". Thus it is evident that being a "good person" for young adults in Beijing turns on striking a balance between showing obedience to one's parents and defining oneself as an independent critical thinker.

The prospect of marriage

To the parents, the child's marriage is a very important matter, and an unmarried child, especially an unmarried daughter, is problematic. The successes of the child constitute the pride and joy of their parents, and the failures of the child can be felt as a loss of face for the parents. Not getting married when one is supposed to get married is one such failure on which many parents place a heavy emphasis. Young women are encouraged to focus all their attention on education (Fong 2004), but once they reach a certain age they are warned against overachieving, as it could deter potential husbands. Some parents don't allow their daughters to date until they reach their early twenties, at which time the pressure to find a spouse sets in. A Chinese friend of mine in her mid-20s commented on the irony of this. Having been a good, obedient girl she had not dated but done well in her studies,

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[33] 赡养.

[34] tinghua 听话.

and suddenly her parents wanted her to date and establish a life-long relationship as soon as possible. She found that her lacking experience deprived her of the basic skills of establishing such a relationship and thus found her parents' demands for her to quickly secure a man unreasonable and unrealistic. This exemplifies the double message young women receive where their merits and marriage become competing aspects in their lives. The question of marriage reaffirms the dependency of the child and authority of the parents, as most young adults value their parent's opinions and need their parents' approval of a potential spouse and are economically dependent on their parents to pay for the wedding and provide living arrangements. Marriage is also a personal desire for many young adults and an emphasis on the conjugal relationship can also be understood as a desire to limit parental controls (Yan 2003). As Fang shows from the lives of young female migrant workers in south-eastern China, marriage is a major life goal to secure a good life and independence from their parents, whereas failure to marry is a failure to make the transition from a girl to a woman (Fang 2012). Women who pass their marriageable age without getting married are derogatively termed "leftover women"[35] (Gaetano 2010). In urban China many of the women who are 'left over' are highly educated women who, given the norm of hypergamy, find it hard to find a suitable man. The situation is summarised in the popular saying that A men marry B women, B men marry C women etc until only A women and Z men are left. In what follows, I will outline the processes and pressures faced by my unmarried consultants concerning their marital status and aspirations.

Spouse selection

It is not uncommon for parents to set up dates for their children in order to introduce them to potential partners, hire a matchmaker or go to meetings in parks where parents come looking for a potential spouse on behalf of their busy, working children. After the contact is established in this way, the potential couple date and see if they wish to establish a more serious relationship. Whereas some tell me that they go to such dates, mainly to appease their parents, many also accept this way as a way of meeting potential spouses. As Josh (26) demonstrates, many young adults trust their parents to make introductions to potential spouses: "Many introductions are not reliable, especially if the person who makes the introduction doesn't know you or the other person very well. My parents know me and their introduction would be reliable. I trust their judgement," he says.

Joe and Cathy have been together for almost a year and have taken their relationship to the next level by introducing each other to their parents. Meeting the parents is a clear statement that the young couple is serious about the relationship and wish to take it further towards marriage. For

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[35] shengnü 剩女.

many it is not an option to marry somebody of whom the parents do not approve. Therefore the first meeting with the potential parents-in-law is crucial. To Joe this meeting induced enough anxiety to give him nightmares during the preceding night. He dreamt that Cathy's parents did not approve of their union and hence their breakup was inevitable. Luckily for Joe, this was not the case. Had their parents disapproved, however, they found it likely that they would actually break up in spite of their personal feelings towards each other. Recently I have been told that Joe and Cathy's parents have met for dinner, a strong statement that they are all in favour of the union and that marriage is the next step.

Not all parents take as active a stand in this matter. Julia (25) belongs to the Muslim *hui* minority[36] of China and claims that even though her whole family is *hui* her parents do not demand that she marry a *hui*. According to her, they love her and hence will love the one she loves, even if he were to be a foreigner. Her mother told her that finding Mr. Right is hard enough as it is, so they don't want to make even harder for her by adding demands of their own. Whether this open attitude is really held by her parents when it comes down to actual potential spouses remains to be seen, what matters is that Julia finds herself and her own heart to be completely free to choose whomever she likes.

The Economic Conditions of Early Adulthood

In Beijing early economic independence is near impossible and "the exercise of individual agency has not necessarily led to youth independence; rather it has led to an increased dependence on parental support for their marriage" (Yan 2009, xxxii). University fees and students' money for sustenance all come from the parents. Student loans are not available and studies leave no time for part-time jobs and if time could be found these jobs would only pay enough to cover some pocket money. Young *bendiren* normally live with their parents also after graduation until they get married, *waidiren* rent shared accommodation. Upon marriage the ideal is to establish neolocal residency, and "in urban areas neolocal residences are mainly paid for by his parents showing some continued patrilineal thinking and heavier investment in the new family and future offspring by his parents than hers" (Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013, 37). Traditionally this would be part of the bride wealth whereas the gifts from the woman's family of furniture and other equipment would constitute the dowry. Men who are unable to secure a neolocal residency will often be deemed undesirable for marriage by potential spouses. Whether it is through money or connections young couples are dependent on their parents' help in establishing a neolocal household.

In Chinese popular media there are many negative remarks on the emergence of "material girls" who consider money more important than love when looking for a spouse (see for example

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[36] 回族.

Chinasmack.com 2011). As a language exercise during my language studies in Beijing we were asked to interview five Chinese students on their views on marriage. One of these questions we asked was whether love or economy is most important factor when considering a potential spouse. The five Chinese students I asked were four girls and a boy of about 19-20 years of age. Only the boy and one girl answered that love is most important. One girl answered that money is most important and two girls found the two factors, love and money, equally important. Their own justification for this view was that money is the foundation of everything, and without money there can be no good life and no love. Without the right economic conditions to constitute the foundation of the marriage, the marriage is doomed from the start. Kim Li, a single woman in her late 20s and only child, lives with her parents in a single-room apartment in the traditional Beijing *hutongs*. Her parents are retired, but still work as much as they can to make ends meet. Kim has had various jobs, and currently she works in an office and makes about 2500 RMB a month. She told me that because of her experience of an economically deprived life money is very important to her. For her, money is a determining factor when considering a spouse. Kim's last boyfriend came from a poor family and shared an apartment with his mother and brother. Because there was only one apartment and two brothers Kim broke up with him because she refuses to live with parents-in-law and saw no way that he could provide them with other living arrangements. This limits her choice of partners greatly, as living spaces are hard to come by for the average bachelor. She claimed that unless she is able to establish better living arrangements for herself through marrying someone better off she will not have children. Kim's somewhat better off friend, Beth, rejects the notion of money as a determining factor in relationships as materialistic, but Kim insists that without money even their friendship wouldn't be viable, as there would be nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to eat or drink together. Beth's income as a graphic designer is only slightly better than Kim's, but her family is better off than Kim's. Beth depends on her parents for money, "so I'm a *kenlaozu*[37], a vampire" she tells me with a conflicted grin. For Nora and Beth the main hope for a brighter future is to marry someone with means. The step from where they are now, in the lower economic segment of the Beijing population, up into the comfortable middle class in their own apartments is one that they are incapable of making themselves. Their professions do not provide them with any major possibilities for upward mobility, and they do not have the connections to climb the social ladder through back doors. Hence the only way to do so is through marriage, in direct parallel to the aspirations to marriage of the female migrant workers interviewed by Fang (2012). Parish and Farrer also observe that "claims abound that people, especially young women, have become more mercenary in their marriage choices, but also – in an apparent contradiction – that people have become more romantic, with

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[37] 啃老祖.

higher emotional expectations of both courtship and marriage" (2000, 232). This contradiction was noted and discussed by the "80ers" themselves as well. Pragmatically, in a society where socioeconomic gaps are widening and social safety nets are melting away, economic concerns necessarily become significant in every person's life. The only ones who can escape the need to be an overt materialist are those with sufficient means in terms of a wealthy and well-connected family.

I asked Cathy and Joe about their view on marriage among young people in China today. According to them, people have different attitudes to marriage. The "80ers" are both open and traditional and want to marry for love, but break up over money. If the man doesn't have money the woman's mother would refuse and she would break up with him. Joe and Cathy find that many of their peers want to believe in love, but are unable to do so in real life. "Love and marriage will die without money. It's not possible to get married if he doesn't have money. This is a very common problem in people's relationships," they concluded. "What about the 'naked marriages'[38] where people get married irrespective of their economic situation?" I wondered. "It's just a dream[39]. People don't have the guts to do it. They care too much about what others might think, they fear their parents' disapproval and they don't trust their own emotions", Cathy claims. Joe and Cathy think that this attitude comes from the fact that some people got rich too fast and everyone else look to them for a definition of happiness and success where the material aspects feature centrally. There's a general view that first you need material safety, then you can have happiness and a good life. "Society and media have affected people's lifestyles, making everybody chase luxuries and live high pressure lives, thinking that it has to be this way. The life of my dreams. Actually it's not" Cathy concludes.

The economic concern related to marriage is not only an individual concern. The ascent to wealth or descent to poverty is a family matter, especially since other family members are likely to at least partially depend on the person in question in the future. If a child is unable to succeed and ends up in the lower economic segments of the population, the family will most likely follow, something that for many would be shameful and a significant loss of face in addition to causing major insecurities in terms of access to quality education and healthcare. In the case of many siblings the fate of each child is less crucial; one child might be less successful than the rest without the parents having to feel the consequences. In the age of single children much more rests on the success or failure of that child, as young and old alike are painfully aware (Fong 2004).

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[38] *luohun* 裸婚.
[39] *yuanwang* 愿望.

Pressure and resistance through mobility

Rebecca (32) is single. She lives and works in Beijing, and avoids spending too much time at her home place with her mother and the extended family an hour outside Beijing because they readily criticize her for her perceived failures and compare her to her married and much praised cousin. As a single woman she is under a lot of pressure to get married, especially from her family. She is not disinterested in marriage, but finds that she is not at a place in her life where she is ready to commit to another person. Instead she wants to continue her studies and develop herself further. She told me that if she were living in her home town, she would probably have "cracked" under pressure, given in and simply married someone just to get some peace, but living in Beijing she is able to withstand the pressure and do what she thinks is right for her now. She thinks that if asked, many would admit that pressure from parents and in-laws motivated their decision to marry and get pregnant, even though their spouse might not be what they originally hoped for. As long as she is able to withstand the pressure, Rebecca will not accept this for herself and hopes to marry a man she loves when she herself feels ready for it. Allison (28) is a freelance makeup-artist who is making a living on her own in Beijing. She is a lesbian and has been together with her girlfriend for six years, most of this time living in their shared, rented apartment in Beijing. Homosexuality is only partially accepted in Chinese society, and Allison is "out" in Beijing where her friends and peers accept and support her and her girlfriend, but in her hometown in another province, and where her family is concerned, she is still "in the closet" with no plans of coming out of it. She is under a lot of pressure from her mother to get married and her plan is to find a gay man who also needs someone to appease his parents[40] and have a fake marriage within the next year, a potent example of the significance of parental pressures on young people's life management choices. Such fake marriages are according to her not uncommon, as she knows of many who have married for reasons other than love, often economic concerns, for fear of becoming a "leftover woman," or due to pressure from parents. Rebecca and Allison exemplify Yan's claim that

> the first and foremost feature of the individualizing Chinese social structure in China is that, due to the increased opportunities for mobility in both physical and social terms, the individual can now break away from the constraints of social groups and find her or his own ways of self-development (2009, 276).

These women are able to maintain a lifestyle outside the constraints of social norm and parental expectations through use of the mobility available to them, literally placing themselves outside their parents' sphere of influence. This does not imply a complete freedom from parental influence, as

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[40] *jiaodai fumu* 交待父母.

they frequently connect on the phone and through visits. Rebecca tells me that Chinese New year is the worst. Then she has to stay with her family for several days, listening to the criticisms of her whole extended family. As Chinese New Year drew close Jokes and cartoons depicting the stressful experience of facing the extended family's explicit expectation toward marriage, having a child and showing off the abilities of the child with corresponding remarks on the failure to do so surfaced on Chinese websites, as Rebecca is not the only one facing such pressures. Allison and Rebecca also highlight the presence of personal choice and an active negotiation of parental pressures as evident in their statements and life choices. Choosing to live in ways other than what is expected, asserting an alternative norm for successful living or finding an alternative meaningful explanation for not living according to a standardised ideal are all powerful demonstrations that individual young women in China do perceive of themselves as the primary decision-makers in their own lives. They are neither independent nor disconnected, but the prime mover of their own life is themselves.[41]

Self-development and independence from parental controls through mobility is also the central concern of rural youth depicted in both Fang's (2012) and Hansen and Pang's (2008, 2010) research. Hansen and Pang analyse the situation of rural youth with nine years of education or less whose options are limited, yet their attitude is one of individual responsibility for their own success and failure as they travel as migrant workers to various cities. They emphasise freedom and free love in relation to their families and actively use their mobility as a source of self-definition and liberation from familial constraints through which they experience a disembedding from the family, "but at the same time they respond to the social and personal uncertainties and risks that accompany individualisation by employing and engaging in a discourse on the family as the individual's main, and often only, collective unit of direct importance" (Hansen and Pang 2008, 79), revealing some of the complex and contested nature of processes of individualisation in contemporary China.

Mobility reaches beyond China's borders. Through the media an internet young adults are exposed to influences from both within and abroad which they assimilate, adapt and make their own in various ways, thereby "producing the alternative social, cultural and symbolic relations women wish to live within and define the kind of self they wish to become" (Kim 2012, 1). Additionally, an increasing number of young Chinese get the opportunity to travel abroad and even live abroad for studies or work. The precondition for this in addition to abilities is a family with the willingness and sufficient economic means to support them in such endeavours. Hence, this is only an option to those from the upper-middle economic segment of the population, but in recent decades, their

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[41] On a note of interest, I often heard young women refer to a concept of fate or destiny[41] as an explanation for their life choices and biographies. The concept is particularly applied in conjunction with the notion of romantic love and finding Mr. Right in an ocean of strangers. *Yuanfen*[41] is a Chinese term that can be translated as a predestined relationship or meeting, a match made in heaven, and was often applied in such contexts.

numbers have increased dramatically, making international travel and study an increasingly common occurrence in this socioeconomic segment. Rebecca finds that she has gone through a transformation triggered by living abroad for some years in relation to her studies. She, Cathy and others who have spent considerable time abroad express that they have been changed by the experience and are no longer able to conform to the expectations that peers, parents and social norms place upon them. Independently of each other they expressed how living abroad has affected their attitudes, expectations and aspirations and made them more critical and less likely or even able to obey and yield to the pressures exerted over them.

The prospect of becoming a wife and a mother

Once, in a conversation with some Chinese female university students, I happened to mention that I was married. "You're married?! You don't look married!" they exclaimed. "How can you tell if someone's married," I wondered. "They're not pretty anymore" was the reply. I asked Cathy Wang and Allison Zhao what they made of this exchange. With a laugh they explained that women tend to become *dama*[42] (big mother) when they marry. A *dama* is according to them old-fashioned, fat, and shabby and doesn't pay much attention to herself, only to her family. It is a gradual transformation that normally is complete within a year and a half of marriage. Married men become *dashu*[43] (big uncle), a state characterised by being bold, chubby and generally "low"[44]. Allison had seen her friends marry one after the other only to disappear from her life. They would be so absorbed in their marital life that they didn't find time to spend with friends, and when they did meet, Allison found that they had changed beyond recognition and no longer had anything in common with her. The only topics of interest to them were everyday concerns such as money, children, education and the like, topics that to Allison were meaningless. Honig and Hershatter also note this trend for married and unmarried women to move in separate circles (1988, 167). My unmarried consultants in part mock this transition from the freedom and critical thinking to no longer living a life of one's own and in part they are upset by their experience of losing friends to marriage. They insist that they, once married, will not be like that, but rather like their few cool married friends who bring their child to a café to meet friends.

Chinese men and women alike are under significant pressure from their families to get married and have a child; hence the prospect of parenthood becomes a matter of complying or suffering the consequences of the family's dismay. Cathy is preparing for marriage, but she and her boyfriend

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[42] 大妈.

[43] 大叔.

[44] Term used with English pronunciation in Chinese speech and refers to a low level of style, class and cultivation.

agree that they do not wish to parent a child under the current social circumstances of urban China. They find that the economic pressures along with the fierce educational competition, corruption, pollution and lack of political freedoms deprive them of the desire to have children. Given the opportunity to move abroad they might reconsider, but in Cathy's view, it would be cruel to bring a child into their current environment. In traditional Chinese society refusing to carry on the family line would be seen as a gravely unfilial act, an offense especially to the ancestral line and kin group of the husband. Today under the one-child policy parents, regardless of the sex of their child, wish their children to give them a grandchild and a woman's parents may exert as much pressure as her in-laws in this respect. In Cathy and Joe's view, however, the matter of having children is their choice as a couple, one that is not under the influence of their parents or others. Joe's family background is a well-established Beijing family that adheres to traditional customs; during New Year dinners men and women still eat separately. I could not imagine his parents being indifferent to whether he, a single male child, would give them a grandchild or not. When I asked him directly Joe admitted that his father would not be pleased with the idea of his not having children, to Cathy's surprise. He reassured her that she should not be concerned, he would deal with it. Rebecca has withstood her mother's many attempts to pressure her into doing what is seen as the norm – getting married and have children. She is not opposed to having children as a whole, but she , as Cathy, finds that the education in China is too harsh and not beneficial for a child's development. Therefore she does not want to have a child in China. In contemporary Beijing postponed childbirth or choosing not to have children is a controversial matter that is likely to elicit opposition, but one that is still open for consideration by individual couples, parental and peer pressures notwithstanding. Rebecca, Cathy and Joe make a point of not adhering to the social norms they find oppressive and along with their friends they demonstrate an expectation of individual freedoms beyond the dominant social norm. They are willing to take on the challenge of making life choices that are outside the range of socially acceptable options, despite opposition from their families. This defiance of social norms and familial expectations is a strong testimony of the agency of the rising individual and, although contested, evidence of changing discourses on individual decision-making power.

New arenas of social interaction

We have seen that the negotiation between filial piety and a desire to live a life of one's own outside parental control can be resolved through mobility and establishment of a space of one's own. In Beijing this is evident in the new sociality among youth and young adults centred on consumption in commercialised urban space. Yan claims that a new sociality has emerged among young adults which is characterised by interaction as individuals, not as representatives of social groups and friendship

among individuals who conceive of themselves as individuals even after marriage (2009, 284). Young adults appropriate parts of the urban space as their own, and this can be seen as a reembedment of individuals in a new social context. "In the 1990s, the gentle breeze of consumerism from the West also created a whole range of commercialized places that individual consumers were welcome to appropriate as their own social space" (Yan 2009, xxxvi). In the Chinese urban landscape living quarters are limited and often crowded, leaving little space for personal definition and use of the physical space in the home. Public parks are used actively as a social space where one can undertake those activities that the living areas do not allow. Retirees make especially active use of parks to practice *qigong*, sing, chat, and do exercise etc., either individually or in groups. Unmarried youth use parks as a place for couples to find a private place to be by themselves, but youth primarily seek other places to gather. When youth meet friends, they are not likely to meet at each other's homes, but rather at some commercialized place aimed at attracting these young consumers while excluding those without the purchasing power to participate in this new sociality. School-aged children and parents of working age, especially women, are underrepresented in these spaces for leisurely activities, as their priorities tend to be home, family and education.

Cafes, shopping malls and some trendy streets with quirky, small shops, food stalls, and bars almost exclusively attract youth, and these places are appropriated by the younger generation as a space that they can define and shape. The small shops and cafes that appeal to youth have an appropriate image, product selection and price range and are often opened and run by young entrepreneurs who themselves look for greater self-dominion over their career by engaging in contemporary trends and fashions. They display cultural and aesthetic influences from the West as well as from Japan and Korea and are thus an expression of a global, cosmopolitan modernity that many Chinese youth identify with. In the alley where we lived during our fieldwork there were a few such small cafes that attracted young people. One of these managed in a total space of about 13 square meters to fit in a tiny kitchen in the back, a counter and three tables for guests. The customers there were predominantly young women and young couples with the occasional young man stopping by for a meal. The menu consisted of pizza, sandwiches, salads as well as cakes, coffee and other soft drinks, all within an affordable price range. The decoration seemed inspired by IKEA and Korean trends in its simple and very cute style consciously bordering on the childish. The atmosphere, use and norms of this space are different from the typical Chinese local restaurant or the fast-food place around the corner. Young people would feel comfortable in this space, but elder generations would find it foreign, alienating and strange. Youth shape and use this and similar spaces actively as a space of their own, albeit not an individual space; it is a social space that is shaped to fit the preferences and on the premises of the '80ers and '90ers', as a space where they can express both their

commonalities and their individuality within a framework of specialised consumption. The restriction on independent living spaces enforced by the real estate market makes these public places a space of relative freedom and independence, although, there, as in so many respects in contemporary China, the ability to enjoy this freedom depends on economic ability. Consumption for leisure is a trend that elder Chinese who have endured hardships find wasteful, demonstrating a change in attitudes to consumption and spending.

Thornham and Feng analyse the influence of the feminine ideal as conveyed in fashion magazines in contemporary China, emphasising the merging of Western and Chinese beauty ideals and its effect on young women in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou(2012). Their study reveals many of the same observations as I have made. "The fashion model has become the ultimate archetype of beauty, dominating the iconography of women. Fashion and fashion models are essential to the manufacturing of both modern women and modern lifestyles" (Li 1998, 80, cited in Thornham and Feng 2012, 96). The women in Thornham and Feng's research are of the 80ers generation. "All were born in the post-Mao era, and for them there was an absolute historical divide between the 'now' that they inhabit and the 'then' of their mothers, with the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) forming the fault line between the two" (Thornham and Feng 2012, 98). The women they interview are university students at one of China's top universities who in the course of their education have been subject to the same expectations, investments and pressures to perform in the competitive education system as their male counterparts. Facing the employment market, however, gender biases become prominent and women are at a competitive disadvantage. The young women see fashion magazines as useful and inspirational in their quest for success, defining the goals they should be able to attain in both looks and lifestyle. They picture "a future that will be, above all, different from their mothers' lives, which are defined by sacrifice" (Thornham and Feng 2012, 100). The young women look to the fashion models for inspiration of how they should aspire to live, and motivates them to work hard to achieve their goals. Thornham and Feng write that "For many of the students we interviewed, then, the belief that they will succeed in affording the luxuries advertised as long as they work hard is bound up with a belief in the power to become 'self-made'. Consumption as success is an outcome of individual ability, character and, above all, self-determination" (2012, 101-2). Consumerism provides self-made successful individuals with the means to distinguish themselves by means of conspicuous consumption, creating a politics of lifestyle. This politics of lifestyle clearly favours those with economic capital, yet is disseminated through media such as fashion magazines as something the average girl should aspire to in order to become self-made and successful.

New times, new subjects

The ethnographical material presented in this chapter suggests that the urban Chinese subject is indeed undergoing change, as demonstrated by the many contrasts and conflicts that the '80ers' experience. The '80ers' are seen by others and see themselves as different from preceding generations. As the first generation of singletons they are forced to shoulder greater responsibilities under the pressure of expectations placed on them by their families to keep up in a highly competitive educational and employment system where merits and wealth are determining criteria for 'making it'. They place greater emphasis on expressing their unique individual identities through relating to trends in consumption and popular culture. Simultaneously, they are bound to their natal families through ties of dependence, as the economic growth disables them from economic independence in their early adult years. They maintain a focus on filial piety as a guiding principle in their dealings with their parents, yet the meaning of being filial is under negotiation as the realities they have to relate to undergo change. In sum, Yan's claim that

> *the ethics of everyday life shifted from an emphasis on self-sacrifice and hard work for a greater goal, such as building the new socialist society, to a new focus on self-realization and pursuit of personal happiness in concrete and materialistic terms. In other words, what makes one's life meaningful has changed from a collectivist ethics to an individual-centered ethics* (Yan 2009, xxxv)

accurately describes central aspects of the transformation in contemporary Chinese society. Based on the ethnographic data presented above, I would like to add that hard work remains central to the lives of urban youth, and the beneficiary of this hard work is not only the individual youth, as many maintain a consideration for their parents' wellbeing and seek to live up to their parents' expectations. The rising young adults of urban China thus are forcefully individualised through individual responsibility, yet the family remains a highly significant collective.

Chapter 2:

Contemporary Family Life in Beijing

The family is a significant collective group that influence individual lives and identities in a variety of ways. The aim of this chapter is to examine how individuals in contemporary Beijing relate to the collective of the family and how the family as a mode of social organisation is changing. In the traditional Chinese family, the individual existed to maintain the collective (Eastman 1988). According to Eastman, "The traditional Chinese family (…) is conventionally defined as an economic unit composed of persons who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption and who partake of common property and a common purse" (1988, 15) and which is characterised by the collective ideology of 'familism': "a system in which all ideas and behaviour were judged by whether or not they contributed to the well-being of the family" (Kulp 1925 cited in Eastman 1988, 15). Now, however, Yan claims that the focus has shifted so that tradition, the collective and the family all become resources the individual can use, exercising his or her agency (2010b, 20-21). According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, modernity and the individualisation it involves works against family cohesion because the individual is the recipient of welfare and other benefits, not the family, and it is the individual who is responsible for educational and employment-based attainment (2002, 3):

> [T]he family collapses as the 'penultimate' synthesis of life situations between the generations and the sexes, and individuals inside and outside the family become the agents of their livelihood mediated by the market, as well as of their biographical planning and organization (Beck 1992, 130).

From a northern Chinese village, Yan observes that private life has undergone a profound transformation "characterized by the relatively weak influence of public forces on the family, the greater control of the individual over her or his life, the centrality of companionate marriage and conjugal relationships, and an emphasis on personal well-being and affective ties (Yan 2010b, 1), leading to a shift in emphasis from collective to individual interests (Yan 2009, xxvi). The family is not simply a naturally, largely biologically given entity, it is also a network of social relationships that can take on various forms and extend to include more people, or withdraw to a core of 1-3 individuals, all depending on the social and cultural context and the life management choices made by the individuals involved. In the Chinese context "anthropologists have tended to view Chinese society through a 'lineage paradigm' (…) which assumes that in China 'the ideology of patrilineal descent takes precedence over all other principles of social organisation' (J. Watson 1986:274)", separating

Chinese kinship from the Chinese family (Stafford 2000, 37). Through a focus on everyday family life this division is broken down as we gain an insight into the production of kinship and relatedness and the active role of women and children in these processes (Carsten 2000).

In what follows I will examine these claims against the lived experiences of my married consultants and their families. This chapter deals with families where the parents are in their 30s, are born in the 1970s before the implementation of the strict family planning policies popularly termed the one-child policy, and have siblings. The children in these families are mainly under 10 years of age and the grandparents are in their 60s or 70s. Their living circumstances and consumption patterns give a general impression of a middle class lifestyle, possibly ranging from lower middle class to upper middle class. The parents in the families I have spent most time with are not local Beijingers but have all been born and raised outside Beijing and have come to Beijing for higher education and employment through which they have been able to obtain a Beijing *hukou*. Due to these commonalities in terms of overall socioeconomic positioning the general circumstances, ambitions and opportunities in life of these families to a great extent overlap. They have by many measures obtained success and are living up to the expectations of the Chinese dream; through hard work and dedication, possibly aided by social connections, they have done well in education and secured stable employment. They have found a spouse, established a neolocal household and their own nuclear family. The pressures they face in life are therefore of a very different nature than those faced by my unmarried consultants, and are mainly connected to the practicalities of everyday family life. Practicalities, along with societal circumstances and social institutions, constitute a framework that my consultants have little say in shaping but have to live their lives within. Practical issues and their solutions reveal underlying cultural logics and leave significant room for improvisations and adaptations that constitute processes of change. Significantly, practical needs also create relationships of interdependency which complicate the matter of individualisation of the Chinese family, as the following ethnographic insights will reveal.

The home-work conundrum

The economic situation of the families that I came into contact with in Beijing is comfortable in the local context, yet they depend on two incomes. Simultaneously, taking care of the home and child requires cooking, cleaning, laundry, shopping and tidying, bringing to and from school or kindergarten, accompanying to evening and weekend classes, overseeing homework and finding space for quality time and care.

The Yang household consists of Jane, Rick, their children Lily (6) and Jack (4), Jane's widowed elder sister, Sally, and her son Daniel (12). Every morning Sally gets up early to prepare breakfast for the family. Jane and Rick are the first to leave in the morning, joining the wave of commuters on the Beijing subway for more than an hour before reaching their destinations. Sally takes the children to school and returns home to clean and prepare lunch. At noon she goes to get the children for their hour-long lunch break, and escorts them back to school after lunch. Back home she tidies and starts planning and preparing dinner. Some days Jane comes home in the early afternoon and picks up the children, sometimes she has to work late. Rick gets home in the early evening when the family gathers for dinner. The children do homework, quarrel and watch TV while the adults sit around the table and chat. In the course of the week Jane, Sally and Rick all take turns in taking the children to various afternoon classes to boost their competitive edge in the education system. Jane wishes she could let the children play more and work less, but as she says, the pressure in society makes it hard. Their two-bedroom apartment feels smaller when having to accommodate three adults and three children, but Jane sees herself lucky to have her sister living with them to help them out. The grandparents live in the distant countryside and are not interested in moving, so without Sally the family would struggle to satisfy the demands of everyday life.

In Chinese home cooking there is a heavy emphasis on fresh meats and vegetables, food safety and optimal nutrition for the child. Meats and vegetables should be as fresh as possible to ensure the best quality and nourishment, and should ideally be bought on the morning of the day they are to be used. Normally about an hour of preparation time is required for the various dishes served at a Chinese home-cooked meal. Noodles and various flour products common in northern China often take longer to prepare. The quicker options of fast-foods or semi-manufactured foods are rarely found in a Chinese home and the option of eating out regularly, be it at a local restaurant or at McDonald's, is seen as expensive and unhealthy both with regards to nutrition, food safety and creating a bad habit in the child. Yet, the greatest challenge for families with children is to satisfy the need for day-care. Maternity leave is only three months, but children can only attend kindergarten after 2,5 years of age when they are able to eat independently with a spoon. The main aim of having your child attend kindergarten in Beijing is not to solve the home-work conundrum, but to have your child attend preschool classes in order to establish good studying habits from an early age. Kindergartens are becoming relatively widespread, but kindergarten coverage is low and the fees are relatively high, ranging from about 700 RMB per month in public kindergartens to about 8000 RMB in international and bilingual kindergartens, my consultants claiming that a normal price per month is about 1200 RMB. Many children only attend kindergarten part-time if at all and even when attending

kindergarten full-time this is still not enough to cover the combined working hours and commuting time of the parents. Daycare for children is further complicated by the need to bring and pick up children from school or kindergarten, including during the children's lunch break. This is called *jiesong*[45] and is seen as a necessity until the children are about 10-12 years old.

The domestic work load in Chinese urban families is considerable and fulfilling these care-taking tasks of everyday family life in Beijing is impossible next to regular full-time employment. One spouse staying home to care for the home and child would seriously affect the family's living standard and limit the family's ability to fund good education for the child, and is therefore not an option for most families. The practical needs of the family still have to be met in the absence of a stay-at-home wife, and this gives rise to a need for a person who can step in to fill the role of a care-taker at home. The "family helper" is a term I use to describe the role of the person, normally a woman, who has as her main concern to take care of a family and home other than her own nuclear family. There is no equivalent emic term for "family helper," it is an externally applied term that I use to facilitate the description and analysis of family life in Beijing. The three roles of father, mother and "family helper" are needed to fulfil the demand for adult involvement in most families in Beijing with young children. Depending on the living arrangements, economic situations and relationships in each family, various people may fill the role of "family helper". The most common "family helpers" are grandparents, either cohabiting or residing in close proximity to the family, an older female relative such as an aunt or sister, a hired housekeeper (*baomu*[46])*,* or a combination of these. The choice of "family helper" depends on the financial and residential circumstances of the family involved, the attitudes and expectations of the extended family, availability of family members to step in and the personal preferences of the parents. A *baomu* can either be full-time cohabiting or part time pay-by-the-hour. A co-residing *baomu* will charge about 5000 RMB a month and often require her own bedroom, excluding families with low incomes from buying such services. Additionally there are issues of trust when leaving your home and child in the hands of a stranger, so many consider a family member or grandparents a cheaper and better option. The official retirement age in China is 55 for men and 52 for women, varying somewhat in different industries. This low retirement age frees up a significant segment of the population to be able to step in as "family helpers" at the birth of a grandchild. For many families the primary option when looking for someone to fill the role of a "family helper" is a grandmother or grandparents, but not for all. The Zhao family represents the most independent way of living available to contemporary dual-income families with young children in Beijing. This living situation, however, requires an economic situation above average.

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[45]接送.
[46] 保姆.

Melanie is a vice-professor at a university and her husband, Sean, is a doctor and professor of Chinese Medicine. Their son, Kevin, is 3 years old and attends kindergarten. Melanie works from home most of the time, only going to the university a few times a week to give lectures. She spends a lot of time studying and preparing for her lectures, so to help her save her time for the important things she has hired a baomu *(*ayi[47]*) and also receives assistance in household chores from her son's paternal aunt,* gugu[48]. Ayi *and* gugu *are both only there part-time. Both Melanie's and Sean's parents are old and ailing and don't have the health or capacity to help them around the home. Melanie claimed that even if it were an option they still wouldn't have wanted their parents to live with them and take care of their child because they want to be in control of how Kevin is raised and educated. Grandparents have a tendency to spoil their grandchildren and hold differing views concerning the child's education, something that can easily create conflicts and tensions in the family. Hence, they prefer to raise him themselves with only the practical help of* ayi *and* gugu. *Melanie voiced her thankfulness that* ayi *is such a good person, because "many of them aren't. Coming from the countryside, they lack education, culture and a proper understanding of hygiene." She considers herself lucky to have come across a* baomu *who in spite of poor education is diligent, hardworking and good-natured. Sean's and Melanie's parents each have their separate apartments in Beijing, are on state pensions and do not depend on them for financial support. Together with their siblings they see to their parents' practical and emotional needs, frequently spending time together on the weekends.*

A family's need for a helper follows the family's development cycle (Stenning 1969) as a child is born and grows up and peaks at the birth of a child.

Karen and Paul Sun live in an apartment that his family helped fund and had a son in February of 2012. The first month after childbirth is called yuezi[49] *and during this time Chinese medicine prescribes that the mother should have complete rest and is dependent on help from others. Most mothers take the requirements of* yuezi *seriously, so during* yuezi *it is common to hire a specialised nanny, a* yuesao[50]. *The* yuesao *will stay with the family full time and take care of the child during this first month of its life. The* yuesao *is the most expensive* baomu, *normally costing about 7-8000 RMB, the most expensive charging up to 15 000 RMB for her month-long services. Other helpers might also be present, such as a grandmother or*

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[47] 阿姨, lit. aunt, but also common form of address and reference to women a generation older than the speaker.
[48] 姑姑.
[49] 月子.
[50] 月嫂.

*other close female relatives. For the first three months of a child's life no outsiders should be allowed into the home, so we were first able to visit Karen and her family in early June of 2012. At that time the maternal grandmother (*laolao[51]*) and the father's paternal aunt (*gugu*) were both there to help them with the home and baby.* Gugu *had travelled from the father's native place in the distant north-east and was living with them for a period of time.* Laolao, *Karen's mother, lives in relative proximity to Karen's home and would spend the days at Karen's place and the nights at her own home. As a teacher Karen was able to get a longer maternity leave than the three months granted by most employers and stayed at home until the start of the next semester in September. When Karen went back to work,* laolao *would live with them to take care of the home and child, occasionally returning to her own home for the night. Later, in November the paternal grandmother (*nainai[52]*) came by and stayed with the family for a while to give* laolao *some relief. During all my visits to their home the elder women did the bulk of the childcare, cooking and housework. Only later, in February of 2013 when the child was one year old, did the parents seem to have taken over the main responsibility for the child. At this time* laolao *was still there to take care of the child when the parents were at work, but she would return to her own home more often to get some time off, leaving the nuclear family to fend for themselves. Karen and Paul are both single children and Paul is the only male descendant of his grandparents and comes from a family that still venerate ancestral tablets[53] on ceremonial occasions. His parents see their son as the one carrying on the lineage and family name and therefore provide considerable economic support to the family. Karen's mother is on state pensions, but these are not enough to cover her expenses, hence she depends on the support of Karen and her family.*

The Yang, Sun and Zhao families illustrate the interlinked nature of pragmatic and cultural logics in everyday family life and highlight the fact that although the nuclear family may be the modern ideal, it is not an attainable living situation, as dual-income families with children in Beijing depend on the presence of a "family helper". This dependency of families in contemporary Beijing must be taken into consideration when attempting to understand the dynamics of the relationships in these families and hence the way individuals relate to the collectives these families constitute.

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[51]姥姥.
[52]奶奶.
[53] during the Cultural Revolution Paul's family resisted the ban on ancestral worship by burying these tablets, unearthing them after the post-Mao reforms.

Family helpers

The serving position of the "family helper" involves a status that can simultaneously be elevated through self-sacrifice for the sake of the family while yet implying a sense of inferiority to the other members of the family through its serving role. On several occasions I visited the Yang family to cook with Sally, the widowed elder sister, because I had expressed a wish to learn Chinese home-style cooking. After a while this caused joking remarks that I was becoming their *gan huor de*[54]*,* literally meaning "the one who works," referring to someone in a serving position. By entering conflicting roles of foreign guest and serving woman in the kitchen, I gave rise to these joking remarks which hint at the ambiguity attached to the status of the "family helper" in relation to the family.

In the Zhao family, *Ayi,* the *baomu* and *gugu,* the paternal aunt, were both in the role of "family helper". *Ayi's* relationship to the rest of the family was obvious and understandable to me, the outsider eye. Like most of the *baomu* in Beijing she has migrated from the countryside to make a living. She is an employee who is paid an agreed amount to cook, clean and do whatever other tasks she and her employer might agree upon and functions as a servant to the family. With *gugu* it was different. At first I had a hard time understanding the nuances of *gugu's* relationship to the family. *Gugu* is the child's paternal aunt and the husband's elder sister with whom the family have a respectful and affectionate relationship. At first I found it strange that *gugu* would cook for us and never join us for the meal, but sit in a sofa across the room and return to her own home for dinner. At the same time her expression and demeanour was dignified and never one of inferiority. Despite Melanie's efforts to tell him otherwise, Kevin explained to me the hierarchical difference between those who do work in the home and those who do not. Melanie was frustrated over the fact that he even saw *gugu* in the role of a servant to the family, as Melanie insisted that this was not the case. According to Melanie *gugu* is part of the family, demonstrated by the fact that she does not receive any payment for the help she provides the family. In Melanie's words, "we are all one family[55], therefore our relationship is not of the kind where you pay or give gifts. Sometimes we can give her some good things, some good foods, that's all." The family members who step in as "family helpers" tend to be women older than the parents in the family, normally of retirement age. As family members there is an inherent sense of fellowship in these relationships. Close relationships of this kind do not allow for direct economic or material exchanges, but demand a delayed return of gifts and favours. Payment indicates a remote and hierarchical relationship between employer and employee, whereas delayed reciprocity is a part of close, familial relationships. Hence the family member in the role of "family helper" creates a very different relationship than that of employer and

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[54] 干活儿的.
[55] *yi jia ren* 一家人.

employee. Direct payment would place *gugu*, who is older, in the inferior position of the employed and elevate the younger Melanie to the higher status of employer, hence breaking with the logics of age-based status and respect in a family. Melanie told me about a family where they pay an aunt to help them, but quickly added that "their relationship is not very close, not like ours." The economic and material aspect of a relationship reflects its proximity and intimacy. Therefore the difference in the relationships to *ayi* and *gugu* are not coincidental, but are dealt with according to separate logics and cultural norms – one as employee and the other as close kin.

Intergenerational relations

Intergenerational relations are directed through shifting dependencies, obligations and the ethics of filial piety throughout the life course. As the previous chapter shows, children continue to depend economically on their parents into adulthood and rely on their assistance in marriage and establishment of a neolocal residency. The Sun family exemplifies how grandparents are called on to take care of their grandchild on behalf of the working parents, and when grandparents retire and age they depend on their children for practical and sometimes also economic support. Given that the grandparents see themselves as future dependents on their children, be it materially, practically or emotionally, their investment of their time and energy into the family is a gift that expects a return. These relations of interdependency and reciprocity are crucial to an understanding of the relationship between the individual and the family in contemporary urban China.

There are no widespread public welfare institutions that take care of the old in China, so when parents age and become grandparents it is the responsibility of their children to see to their care. It used to be the responsibility of sons to take care of their parents since married daughters married out of their natal family and had little or no obligation toward their parents. That situation, crucially, has changed over the last decades, and the ties between a woman and her natal family have been strengthened by the implementation of the one-child policy that renders the child responsible for his or her parents in old age, regardless of gender. The responsibility of children toward their parents in old age is established by both law and custom in China. The extent to which the ageing parents rely economically on their children varies a lot, and the provision of pensions and health insurance depends entirely on the ageing person's previous employment situation. Some are self-sufficient and able to contribute to their children's economies, while others are completely dependent on their children for their everyday sustenance, as we see in the Sun family. The presence or absence of siblings determines the weight of the burden of this responsibility. Migration to the cities means that it is not uncommon for a couple in Beijing to have parents who are peasants in the Chinese countryside and who are completely dependent on their children for provision in old age.

Jane and her husband Rick have both grown up in villages in the countryside where their parents still live. The parents are peasants, receive no retirement benefits and are not covered by any health insurance scheme; hence the entire burden of support of the ageing parents falls on Jane, Rick and their siblings. Rick has a brother who lives close to his parents and assists them in their everyday lives, but when Jane's father-in-law fell ill during the course of last year, she and Rick had to travel from Beijing to his native place to take care of his medical treatment. In theory Rick and his brother should split the cost evenly, but since Jane and Rick are better off than Rick's brother they covered most of the bill.

In intergenerational relations, ongoing renegotiations of the relations of authority between the elder and younger generations are evident. Yan describes the social changes that have occurred in a Northern Chinese village highlighting the shifting relations of power between the generations where Communist rule weakened the position of the male head of the extended family and by extension the power of the older generation over the lives of the younger generation (2003).

Intra-family power relations have shifted in the 20th and 21st centuries, with young adults gaining power and autonomy and increasingly carving out lives and identities independently from parents. This shift in power relations has both contributed to, and been bolstered by, a weakening in the premium placed on filial piety, ancestor worship and the maintenance of patrilineages, and in the growing strength of individualism and expectations of gender equality (Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013, 41).

The continued expectation of the parents of obedience and superiority into their children's adulthood, justified through filial piety, is a source of tension and conflict where grandparents are involved in managing their child's household. Compared to hiring a *baomu*, the grandparents' assistance saves the family a considerable amount of money that can be saved for the child's education and care for the elderly in the future. When living together the grandparents sometimes take charge of grocery shopping and spend their own pensions on the daily expenses of the household. Whereas parents on the one hand are grateful for the practical help and economic relief the grandparents can offer, many of my consultants told me about the challenges of intergenerational cohabitation, the majority of which were related to the distribution of authority in the home. Areas of conflict that were often mentioned concern how best to raise and educate[56] the child, spending and consumption and differing life habits. Communication was almost always mentioned as a difficult area due to the fact that the grandparents take expressions of disagreement

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[56] *Jiaoyu* 教育.

as signs of disrespect. As a mother told me, when you live with your parents there is a dilemma between being filial and voicing your own opinion.

> *Vanessa, a single mother in her late 20s whose mother has moved to Beijing to care for her home and daughter, complained to me that she and her mother had a hard time getting along. In case of disagreement between them her mother would take any declaration from Vanessa of this disagreement as a personal offense, her feelings hurt from what she took as a lack of respect from her daughter. Vanessa's mother insisted that she, being the elder, should be in charge of how money was spent and how her grandchild was raised. Vanessa, on the other hand, was of the opinion that because she was the one earning the money and paying the rent, she was the main decision-maker in the household, and her mother was in no right to dictate how she should spend her hard-earned money and raise her child.*

In the traditional Chinese family the wife served the mother-in-law through her work, but today the tables have turned, demanding that the elder generation serve the younger in housework and childcare (Ikels 2004, 6), a reversal of roles that influence the status and authority if those involved. Similarly, in contrast to previous stem family arrangements, today when a child is born "family helpers" and other family members convene at this neolocal residence, turning it into the point of assembly around the child. If grandparents move in to stay, establishing a stem family, the parents still feel entitled to authority in their own home to a greater extent than if they were to establish a stem family upon marriage in either set of parents' home, even if the grandparents contributed to the purchase of the neolocal home. Whereas the grandparents apply the moral logic of filial piety, parents are likely to also assert their authority by virtue of their status as homeowners and providers, thus resulting in tension and conflict. The majority of my consultants found that the preferred living arrangement for those married with children is not to live with, but reside in close proximity to the grandparents. From the parents' point of view, this living arrangement is seen to provide the best of two worlds – proximity to the larger family for mutual practical and emotional support, and a space of one's own outside parental control. For various reasons many do not live according to this ideal, either because grandparents are not available, or because the family cannot afford such a living situation. The economic and practical constraints of everyday life force many families into joint intergenerational living arrangements, despite the fact that many young and old alike would prefer living with more space of one's own (Thøgersen and Ni 2010). The ideal of the independent conjugal family is in Yan's view an expression of individualisation of the family because it breaks up the patrilial stem family according to the desires of the younger generation (2003, 2009). This can be seen as an extension of a shift from the traditional emphasis on the parent-child relationship, specifically the father-son relationship, which was at the core of traditional Chinese domestic units

(Eastman 1988), to the conjugal relationship becoming the most central relationship, reaffirming the increased authority of the conjugal couple (Yan 2003, Wolf 1987). A group of mothers in their 30s confirmed this view to me, claiming that they see the conjugal relationship as the most important relationship in their families; this is the relationship other relationships in the family, and thus the family itself, depend on. In summary, living arrangements and intergenerational relationships are not simply a matter of personal desire or preference, as Jankowiak (2009) claims, but depend on available solutions to practical needs and relationships of obligation and dependency as well as personal sentiment and choice.

New child-centric families

As I have sought to show, the practical needs of a family influence household composition and the character of the relationships between the members of the family. Interdependencies between members of a family over time, moreover, create ties that bind members of a family together and continue to constitute the urban Chinese family as a practical and economic unit. Another characteristic of the contemporary urban family that cannot be missed is the predominance of single-child families. In the course of a couple of decades the demographic pyramid of a normal Chinese family has been turned upside-down as the focus shifted: following the introduction of strict family planning policies the typical urban family has taken on the shape of 4-2-1, consisting of 4 grandparents, 2 parents and one child. This has given rise to a highly child-centric contemporary family in Beijing which has affected the way family and kinship is understood and dealt with, favouring a bilateral approach to kinship over the traditional patrilineal kinship ideology. According to Jankowiak, "the contemporary Chinese urban family combines aspects of the conjugal and intergenerational family to produce a more modified family type - the dual multigenerational family" (2009, 82), emphasising what he refers to as a de facto bilateral kinship system with remnants of patrilineal descent ideology in contemporary urban China (2009, 80). In line with the patrilineal tradition, the father's mother (*nainai*) or father's parents have the main responsibility to step in as "family helpers" to take care of their grandchild through the male line, the one carrying forth their family name, since the child is the newest addition to the male descent line and the patrilineal kin group. Interestingly, this logic applies irrespective of the gender of the grandchild. To Karen's husband, Paul Sun, and several others, this line of thinking still holds force.

> *Margaret Xu, a grandmother in her 60s described the situation of her family, a situation not uncommon in China today. She is the mother of a boy and a girl, now both in their 30s and raising children. According to her, those in her situation are most likely to move in with their son to take care of his child, especially if this child is a boy. Margaret's daughter is under the*

wings of her mother-in-law who helps take care of their child just as Margaret does for her son and daughter-in-law.

The obligation to care for the grandchild is often, as in Margaret's case, stronger vis-à-vis the patrilineal grandparents than vis-à-vis the maternal grandparents. Currently, however, it is not uncommon for young mothers like Vanessa to turn to their mothers for assistance, rather than their mothers-in-law, with whom they are less likely to have a harmonious relationship. As the first generation of single children are not only coming of age, but starting to establish their own families, the emphasis on the male line is becoming significantly reduced and there is an increased flexibility with regard to how things are done depending on circumstance, convenience and personal feelings. In The Sun family's case, there is a continuing investment by the patrilineal family of both practical and economic support to the young family, yet Karen's mother is more involved in the everyday family life and childcare and receives economic support from the family.

In my view, the contemporary urban family demonstrates overlapping models for family and kinship reasoning. One is the hierarchical and patrilineal model based on the traditional family and kinship structures, similar to Watson's lineage paradigm (Watson 1982), the other can be conceptualised as a concentric model centred on the child with the parents in the first ring and grandparents and other "family helpers" in the second ring. In the concentric paradigm, the conjugal relationship is essential in enabling the family to exist in the first place, and provide its basic sustenance. The family helpers may vary and may play different roles in the dynamics of the family, socially as well as economically and practically, but they are to a larger extent replaceable. In the imagery of the house, the parents are the beam that carries the weight of the structure. The concentric model has a bilateral focus demonstrating the equal investment and devotion of all adults, including both sets of grandparents in their single grandchild, and originates in the prevalence of single-child families where many families are unable to maintain a lineage emphasis, but rather invest in the single child and grandchild regardless of gender and descent.

The child-centric nature of contemporary Chinese families is especially visible in the emphasis placed on education. As mentioned, the Chinese education system has undergone transformations that resulted in a highly competitive system where the pressures on the individual child to perform are immense. Parental investment in the child's education is considerable in both time and money, despite the fact that primary education is free. From the age of 2 or 3 it is not uncommon for children of the mid-income bracket of the population to start attending extracurricular classes several times a week. Kindergartens are mainly evaluated based on the quality of education and private tutors are not uncommon. In addition the parents, like Melanie and Sean, will invest in

resources such as shelves full of flashcards of everything from road signs to characters in famous Chinese novels. Parents I spoke to were quick to state that their main concern, the most important thing in their life was their child, and that their life concerns were child-centric[57] and education and how best to encourage the child to be fond of studying and learning good studying habits from an early age is a major concern and an ever returning topic of conversation among the mothers I met. The ambition of parents on behalf of their children is coined in the phrase 'wishing the child becomes a dragon'[58] (Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013, 165), and results in a child-centric organisation of the family where consumption, activities and even living situation is structured for the benefit of the child's education.

> *Many mothers report feeling strongly ambivalent about their role as "education moms". On the one hand they long for a relatively easygoing relationship with their child, and want to help them to be happy and well rounded rather than just a "study machine". On the other hand, they strongly feel the responsibility for helping their child become a "dragon" and that success in educational endeavours is the only way to ensure this outcome* (Kuan 2011 in Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013, 174).

The investment of economic and human capital needed to provide the best available education for the child is so large that parents who could have another child often choose not to (ibid.). Given that the social mobility and 'face' of the family depends on the child's success, the collective emphasis by all adults in the family on the educational attainment of the child is a demonstration of individualisation of responsibility for the sake of not only oneself, but for a collective group.

Kipnis examines the role of education and child-centred relatedness in Zuoping in rural Shandong (2009). He finds that parents invest heavily in their children's education to the extent of forsaking their own needs for food and housing. "Some parents explicitly state that as they have only one or two children, they purposefully devote much 'human feeling' (*ganqing*) to each one so that the child will be filial (*xiao*) when they are older. (…) it is a matter of sacrificing (*xisheng*) one's own life or happiness for that of the child and making sure that the child knows this sacrifice has taken place" (Kipnis 2009, 214). Kipnis claims that the notion of self-sacrifice of parents for their children has a long history in China, and that, "In sacrificing themselves for their children, Zuoping parents are rising above bare life, giving their bare life meaning" (Kipnis 2009, 216). Along similar lines, several mothers I talked to emphasised their self-sacrifice for the sake of their children. A group of mothers in their 30s agreed that the transition from living as a single person to being a part of a two persons

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[57] *yi haizi wei zhu* 以孩子为主.
[58] *wang zi cheng long* 望子成龙.

world[59] is less dramatic than when your world becomes a 3-persons world[60] at the birth of a child, because when a child is born other people enter your home and family life as well as others partake in the collective efforts of raising the child. The parents are no longer able to live independent of outside help and everybody feels entitled to an opinion about how things should be done. They also found that their life priorities changed. Their consumption patterns, how they spent their time and who they spent time with are all dramatically changed when becoming a mother. They claimed that to a great extent they sacrificed themselves to the extent where they no longer have their own world[61] – "even my own self is gone[62]!" This contrasts with Yan's observation that

> *The modernity of the contemporary family lies in the rising importance of individual desires, emotions, and agencies in family life, on the one hand, and the centrality of the individual in family relations, on the other hand. In other words, no longer willing to sacrifice oneself for the collective interests and for the perpetuation of the extended family, the individual in modern society seeks her or his interest and happiness through the working of the family.* (2009, xxiii-xxiv).

This view is only partially congruent with what I found to be the case for my consultants. Family planning policies, competitive education and lack of social security all amount to a reorientation, a shift of the focal point of the family, from honouring the elder generation to providing in the most comprehensive way possible for the child, with an implicit expectation of delayed reciprocity. The emphasis on the child should not be understood, however, as a negation of the family line, but an adaptation of traditional family values to the conditions of contemporary urban Chinese society. Mothers and grandmothers I interacted with frequently displayed attitudes of self-sacrifice for the benefit of the child as a virtue and something that was to be expected, the involvement of other female relatives as family helpers, especially in child-care, reinforces the notion of the investment of the extended family's human and economic resources in the child. Hence, Yan's statements concerning the pursuit of one's own happiness, intimacy, independence and choice holds true when considering the relationship between the conjugal couple and their parents, yet it fails to account for the attitudes displayed in the child-centric family where all efforts and resources are directed at the child to the extent of what mothers I met describe as self-sacrifice and a loss of one's own space and even one's own self. Yan juxtaposes the ancestor-centred kinship practices to those aimed at benefiting the individual (ibid, xxvi), yet my observations make me inclined to rather juxtapose

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[59] *er ren shijie* 2 人世界.
[60] *san ren shijie* 3 人世界.
[61] *ziji de shijie* 自己的世界.
[62] *ziwo dou meiyou le* 自我都没有了.

ancestor-centred to child-centred attitudes and practices in family and kinship. The child-centric family still demands self-sacrifice and subjugation of the individual will to the benefit of the common good, in this context understood as the child. Parallel to a triumph of conjugality one might say that the valued relation in Chinese family and kinship remains vertical, but has shifted from an upward focus on one's antecedents to an emphasis on the child that carries the weight of two families into the future.

Displays of kinship – Chinese New Year

The overlapping paradigms of kinship reasoning result in increased space for improvisations and adaptations as one can choose how to emphasise these two paradigms in different contexts, and thus a reinterpretation of family and kinship follows. These paradigms are also partially contradictory, as highlighted in the difference between everyday family relations and holidays that traditionally are strongly focused on kinship relations and the patrilineal family, such as Chinese New Year. The celebration of Chinese New year, also known as the Spring Festival[63], is a ceremonial occasion filled with symbolic acts where traditional patrilineal kinship and hierarchical family values resurface. Spring Festival is a family-oriented holiday when the relationships in the extended family and kin group are reaffirmed through exchanges, shared meals, visits and other ritual acts. It is the main holiday in the Chinese year and stretches over the first two weeks of the lunar calendar, the first week being the most important. Practically everybody have at least the first five days of the holiday off work to spend time with their extended family. For many Chinese city-dwellers this means travelling to one's place of origin in the Chinese countryside.

Chinese New Year starts with the celebration of New Year's Eve, known as *chuxi*[64]. On *chuxi* it is the norm to celebrate with one's patrilineal family, share a big meal and fire fireworks. In Karen and Paul Sun's family, Paul's father and uncle with families would gather at his paternal grandfather's house for New Year's Eve. As a part of the celebration they would light incense for their ancestral tablets to honour their ancestors in the lineage, a strong symbolic act. My husband and I celebrated *chuxi* with Belle and Mark Liang. Mark's parents are deceased and he is an only child, so he and Belle celebrate New Year with her parents, elder sister, brother-in-law and niece aged 15. At dusk Mark burned paper money as an offering to his parents. Burning paper money is a demonstration of honouring the deceased and fulfilling one's filial duties of provision even beyond death. At midnight Belle's niece kowtowed first to her grandparents, then her parents, then Belle and Mark and at last to my husband and me who were the youngest adults present. Kowtowing is a strong demonstration of the

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[63] *chunjie* 春节.
[64] 除夕.

subordination of the younger to the honoured elder and only performed on special occasions that highlight the hierarchy of kinship relations. Most of my consultants claimed they did not normally kowtow in their family and that it is a rural thing to do. In the Yang family, Jane is not used to kowtowing, but it is expected in Rick's family. Jane finds kowtowing very uncomfortable, and avoids it as much as possible. In the days following *chuxi* the younger generation have to visit the elder generation and pay their respect, called *bainian*[65]. Y*asuiqian*[66] is a gift of money in a red envelope given to children under the age of 16 or 18 by economically independent adults during the holiday. *Bainian* and *yasuiqian* reaffirm the relationships of respect and reciprocity between the younger and elder generation in the family. Family members and some friends would also exchange a kind of gift called *nianhuo*[67], literally meaning New-Year goods. Characteristic of *nianhuo* is that it is edible and meant to be consumed during the holidays. Snacks such as dried fruits and nuts, baskets of fruit, local specialties, wine and spirits were all common *nianhuo,* and their exchange reaffirms the relationship between the parties. These few examples demonstrate how notions of kinship in the traditional sense are upheld through ceremonial acts, a point also made by Jankowiak (2009). These acts of display of kinship support Brandtstädter and Santos' claim that kinship is a result of transformations of 'ideals' and 'materialities' in a broad sense, exploring "kinship as a constructive process by drawing attention to the various materialities involved in its making" (2009, 10). In line with my observations of acts demonstrating family and kin relations during Chinese New Year, Brandtstädter places special emphasis on the role of work in the establishment of kinship relations, as "to make a relationship, or to honour an existing one, a Chinese person is typically expected to *materially do something* (to work for, share, host or give) in a form that represents the nature of the relationship" (Smart 1993 cited in Brandtstädter 2009, 156. Original italics).

Alternative approaches to kinship are also established through the improvisations and the active 'doing' of kinship that takes place during Chinese New Year. Young couples of single children face a dilemma on *chuxi*. Tradition requires that they celebrate with the paternal family, yet many feel that they cannot leave their parents alone and lonely on New Year's Eve, so they feel obliged to celebrate with both sets of parents. Some solve this problem by eating dinner twice, once at each parent's house. Others invite both sets of parents to the neolocal home to celebrate New Year together. This is mainly an option after the birth of a child, which reaffirms the new concentric paradigm of kinship reasoning. This is a clear break with the patrilineal tradition and a case that highlight the conflicting paradigms of kinship and the adaptations that are required to resolve this contradiction. This demonstrates clearly that Chinese family and kinship relations have to be understood less as a

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[65] 拜年.
[66] 压岁钱.
[67] 年货.

biologically given fact, but rather as socially malleable relationships with reference to biological connections (Stafford 2000, 52), which similarly to other social relationships such as *guanxi* have to be established and maintained through demonstrations such as work, favours and material exchanges (see for example Smart 1993, Yang 1994, Chang 2010). Yan's observations support this perspective:

> *My major finding is the fluid and flexible nature of kinship resulting from the exercise of individual agency in practice. Individuals define and redefine the kinship distance between two parties in accordance with practical needs, changing sides back and forth in forming kinship alliances and not necessarily siding with the closer kin against more distant ones. Individuals invest heavily in emotional bonding with kin and close friends, and increasingly place more emphasis on relatives of the same generation or age group, a shift that parallels the increasing importance of the personal network, known as* guanxi *in Chinese. By practicing kinship this way, the individual is also redefining, and in a certain sense, remaking her or his identity* (Yan 2009, xxv).

The redefinition of kinship is thus also a redefinition of the individual's identity and relations to the collective of the family, and in Yan's view this redefinition has favoured the individual over collective interests, granting the individual greater freedoms from the constraints of familial obligations (Yan 2009). Whereas this to some extent also applies for my consultants discussed here, it is equally evident that familial obligations continue to play a central role in their lived experiences.

Individualisation and the family

The above descriptions illustrate how the Chinese family functions as a provider of welfare services that is dependent upon equilibrium between providers and dependents, an equilibrium that is in a rapid process of change as a consequence of strict family planning policies and an inverted demographic pyramid. Due to the current insufficiency in public welfare services the burden of the dependents on the providers of the family is overwhelmingly heavy, as they are demanded both to invest heavily in the child's education and guarantee their ageing parents' wellbeing. What should be a matter of concern for observers of Chinese society is the fact that future providers will have to shoulder an even heavier burden in the absence of siblings.

A shift in authority means that some gain agency and influence whereas others give up some. Hence, the understanding of this shift as a process of individualisation depends on whose perspective one places emphasis. Whereas the younger generation experience an increase in their agency and decision-making powers in the household that can be seen as a process of individualisation, the elder generation simultaneously lose the same agency and are hence made dependent on the younger

generation. Given that the elder generation are economically dependent on the younger, the overall picture is not necessarily one of individualisation. Seen from the perspective of the elder generation, the development is one of disempowerment and increased dependency, not individualisation. This illustrates that the matter of individualisation must be understood in relation to the positioning of the subject from whose perspective one considers the question of individualisation. Individualisation may consist of the rise of some individuals but not others. This perspective matters when considering individualisation in terms of agency, freedoms and the developments commonly associated with the rise of the individual. In the matter of the individualisation of society this, according to Beck's concept of institutionalised individualisation, affects every member of society in that everybody will be subject to the same obligation to manoeuver precarious freedoms and continuous choices. Whereas institutional individualisation may, if Beck's theory is given credence, be a universal social condition in modernity, the effect of this is surely not evenly felt among the population. Differences such as socioeconomic, generational and gender differences matter in this context, as the experience of processes of individualisation affect different individuals in different ways.

Beck sees institutional dependency as a prominent feature of advanced modernity and part of the same societal conditions that enforce individualisation. In the Chinese case the absence of certain of the social institutions that Beck refers to, such as the welfare state, leads to an increased interpersonal dependence, as the social safety net available to most urban Chinese consists of family and personal networks (Yan 2010b, 22).

> *The individualization process in China does give the individual more mobility, choice and freedom, but it does so with little institutional protection and support from the state. To seek a new safety net, or to re-embed, the Chinese individual is forced to fall back on the family and personal network of guanxi, the same point where disembedment begins.* (Yan 2009, 288-9)

Therefore, as few other social institutions are available for the individual to reembed in, the family remains the main safety net and significant collective group to individuals in Beijing. Under the conditions of the neoliberal economy in China there is ambiguity and tension as the individual is simultaneously more responsible for his/her own success, yet also increasingly dependent on others to handle the economic and practical aspects of life as well as responsible for providing for others. The resulting image is one of contradictions. On the one hand the absence of a social safety net makes the lives of individual Chinese highly precarious, as success and failure depend on individual efforts. Simultaneously, this very insecurity increases the need to rely on others for support and thus strengthen ties of interdependence in the family. Economic ability reduces the need to rely on others

and promotes independence, whereas continuing moral values such as filial piety counteract this tendency. Therefore, seen in relation to the family in China, modernity can be seen not only to cause individualisation, but also to strengthen the collective through relationships of need. Shim and Han's concept of 'family-oriented individualisation' is useful here, as they claim that

> *The major characteristics of family-oriented individualization in Asia are quite different from those offered by Beck and beck-Gernsheim (2002, 96), when they referred to a "post-familial family", "patchwork families" or "elective family relationship", as the Western characteristics of individualization. Instead, a selective recombination of tradition and modernity to strengthen both individualization and affectionate community networks is a significant characteristic to East Asian second modernity* (Shim and Han 2010, 238).

Thus, changing family structures and individualisation of society does not in the Chinese case necessarily mean a weakening of familial ties, as bonds of interdependence and mutual obligations reinforce the contemporary urban Chinese family. In fact, the increased risks of a rapidly modernising society can be seen to make the individual rely heavier on her or his family while simultaneously providing more space to redefine and reshape the family according to the rapidly changing conditions of Chinese society.

Chapter 3:

The modern Chinese woman

In this chapter I will examile the influence of dominant gender discourses in Chinese society on my consultants' life management choices and identity construction. "The modern Chinese woman" is an idea, not a person, and as an idea it features at the centre of contemporary discourses on gender. Raising the question of "the modern Chinese woman" is not an attempt at identifying a universal female gendered identity. Rather, it aims to unravel some of the various elements that feature in dominant discourses of gender difference in contemporary urban Chinese society, and which women regardless of self-identification have to relate to somehow, and which influence the way women construct themselves as female selves, providing a new perspective on processes of individualisation.

The study of "the modern Chinese woman"

As feminist anthropology has made abundantly clear, gender is an aspect of any person's subjectivity, social identity and how this person deals with the world[68]. Gender identities in anthropological writings are often understood to be sociocultural constructs related to sexed physical bodies. All social identities are a product of a relational interplay between ascription, self-identification, recognition and negotiation of a person's identity (Jenkins 2008), and this remains true for gendered identities. Identities and self-perception are defined through a process of distinguishing sameness and difference, where, in the case of gendered identities, the male and female identities are constructed with reference to one another, and often based on assumed naturally given and contrasting qualities of the two (Moore 1994, 1). Jankowiak states that, "Depending on the social context, men and women often assert, modify, or reject different aspects of gender identity" (1993, 165). Gender constitutes a range of discourses that have various degrees of influence over a person's identity or subjectivity in different social contexts.

> *Thus, gendered subjectivity does not have to be conceived of as a fixed and singular identity, but can be seen instead as one based on a series of subject positions, some conflicting or mutually contradictory, that are offered by different discourses. (…)the existing discourses on gender in any given context are hierarchically organized, that is, some are more powerful and have greater social sanction than others* (Moore 1994, 4).

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[68] See for example Howell and Melhuus (1993) who stress this point with particular reference to anthropological analyses of kinship.

Moore's analytical perspective reveals how varying subject positions result in different discourses of gender. In other words, gendered subjectivity, that is, a person's sense of his or her gendered self, is complex, multifaceted and open for negotiations as the person concerned moves between different social interactions, roles and subject positions in social space.

There is some discussion among Chinese scholars regarding the usefulness and applicability of Western feminist theories on Chinese women (Gilmartin 1994, 4). One of the criticisms is the Eurocentric nature of western feminist theories that takes western women as the standard for understanding women's lives and the tendency to universalize its subject – women (Gilmartin 1994, 7). According to Barlow, *nüxing*[69] is a relatively new term for the generic category "woman" in China, originating in the 1920s (1994, 255). Under Mao a range of new social and political categories were introduced, such as *qingnian*[70] for "youth", *gongren*[71] for "worker" and *funü* [72]for "woman" (ibid.). In post-Mao popular discourse, *funü* with its connotations to the gender sameness of revolution is again replaced by *nüxing* as the preferred term for "woman", and "*nüxing* promises a return to 'femininity' equated with modernity but constructed as essentialized sexual difference" (Thornham and Feng 2012, 107). Thornam and Feng further write that "Chinese women (…) are discriminated against as a group, but the individualized and individualizing strategies that function to authorize them as subjects (as *nüxing* rather than *funü*) can offer neither an explanation nor a solution" (Thornham and Feng 2012, 107). According to their analysis, feminism has become unavailable to young urban women of China, as the corresponding term *nüquan zhuyi* (doctrine of women's rights) was politicised under Mao and carries negative connotations from the times of their mothers, whereas the term of their time, *nüxing zhuyi,* simply translated to the doctrine of the female gender, a doctrine and a dream that involves ideas of consumerism and individualism, and fails to deal with historical and political aspects of gender relations and unequal power relations. They claim that contemporary young urban women are subject to a loss of "historical and political 'space' and the subject position that might inhabit it" (Thornham and Feng 2012, 109). Feminism is thus not understood to be simply lost, but erased through the active workings of various forces such as global capitalism. "For the young women we interviewed, a specifically Chinese feminism was inaccessible, while its Western counterpart was compromised by its entanglement with femininity and consumerism" (Thornham and Feng 2012, 109). Thus, what it means to be a woman in China cannot be taken for granted as the same as elsewhere, nor is being 'modern' to be mistaken for a universal category, but a matter that must be understood in the context of specific socio-economic

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[69] 女性.
[70] 青年.
[71] 工人.
[72] 妇女.

circumstances, historical background and cultural logics that have a great impact on the life management choices made by individual women and how their identities as women are constructed. Croll has observed changes in women's roles in China over several decared and notes that in the era of reform

> *Much of the new debate has centred around what 'being a woman' or 'a modern woman' mean; definitions of female as opposed to male and what are the female images and sources of self-esteem appropriate to the new woman in China today. In the absence of a well-defined rhetoric and role models, there is also some confusion of cue and norm, and a plurality of images and patterns of female living has emerged* (Croll 1995, 8).

In what follows I will examine this plurality of images and patterns of female living against dominant discourses on gender in China based on the experiences of my consultants, as presented in the previous chapters.

History of Chinese women

Gender roles in China have been subject to comprehensive renegotiation in the course of the last 70 years, first orchestrated by the state, and then by market forces, information technology, global influences and more. Gendered identities in the present are constructed with reference to contemporary society as well as the recent past under Mao (1949-1976) and the more distant pre-revolutionary past commonly seen as a representation of the 'traditional' Chinese.

"A married daughter is like poured out water"[73]

As a result of exogamy in the traditional Chinese family, girls and women were outsiders both to their natal and marital family. Women married out of their natal families and into their marital family where their primary duty was to work for the current and future welfare of the parents-in-law through domestic labour and childbearing, specifically by giving birth to sons to carry on the family line (Eastman 1988, Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013). In their new living situation women were in a disadvantaged and disempowered position, living under the authority of their mother-in-laws and husbands, and isolated from their own social support network (Honig and Hershatter 1988, 167). Girls were not considered to be worth much investment of resources from the natal family, especially in terms of education (Eastman 1988, Fong 2004). Women in the traditional Chinese family still should not be understood as passive or utterly powerless. Some have suggested that women held alternative views of the family which might be seen as subversive to the doctrine of patriliny and

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[73] *Jiachuqu de guniang pochuqu de shui* 嫁出去的姑娘泼出去的水.

male supremacy, emphasising the uterine family of themselves and their sons, both for emotional support and to secure old-age support (Wolf 1987, 1972, Eastman 1988, Jacka, Kipnis, and Sargeson 2013). Stafford claims that a dogmatic perspective on Chinese kinship has blinded researchers to the fact that women in imperial China played a central role as producers of relatedness and kinship in the domestic sphere and held real authority in the family (2000, 2009). Few question the claim, however, that in imperial China the spheres of male and female productive activities were clearly demarcated – men provided for the family through labour outside the home whereas women were fully occupied with domestic, caretaking and reproductive work, as expressed in the saying that men rule the outside, women rule the inside[74].

Mao and the "iron girl"

Between the traditional family and the era of reform are three highly formative decades of Maoist communist rule in China that permeated practically all aspects of its citizens' lives, including gender discourses. Marxist theory on women found that exclusion from production was a main reason for women's oppression, thus Maoist rhetoric understood the liberation of women as full participation in production claiming that "everything a man can do a woman can do" and "women hold up half the sky" (Tan 2010, 381). However, there was no expressed expectation of men taking part in the domestic labour of reproduction, resulting in a double burden of expectations of both productive and reproductive work for Chinese women (ibid., 389).The ideology of equality of all men and women was at the forefront of the rhetoric, but in practice the equality of women was deemed a less pressing matter than the general class struggle, leaving a gap between women's experience of reality and the political rhetoric (Croll 1995). The Cultural Revolution was the most radical attempt under Mao to redefine previously established cultural logics, including those related to gender, and images of the revolutionary heroine such as the "iron girl" became the female role model (Tan 2010, 382) . Effectively, the Maoist rhetoric defined women by male standards both in terms of work, attire and general demeanour, presenting as 'de-gendered' what in fact was a type of "masculinity" (ibid, 382).

Chinese women in the era of reform

The Reform era restructured the Chinese economy and state-governed social organisation and opened the country to foreign influence that made various expressions of gendered identity available to Chinese women. Consequently a counter-reaction emerged against the forced and masculinised gender sameness of the Maoist era, characterised by a surge in interest in gender differentiation and the 'feminine' (Zheng 1998, 18).

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[74] *nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei* 男主外，女主内.

Feminization of Chinese women therefore became a progressive stance, suggesting a negation of the Maoist politics as well as recovery of human nature. The Cultural Revolution "iron girl" was ridiculed in both academia and popular culture; women of the generation brought up on Maoist gender equality found themselves pitied by women of the younger generation, for they had not lived a feminine life; some had even become repulsively masculinized as a result (Zheng 1998, 19)

The era of reform has been characterized by an attempt by women to regain the power of definition over feminine identities, reforming their desexed image and demeanour through consumption and personal adornment in order to reclaim a sense of their unique female self as distinctly different from the male other (Croll 1995, 153). Market forces have substituted the state in the role of provider of images of the female and femininity, combining images of the 'modern' sexually attractive woman and traditional feminine virtues (Zheng 1998, 23).

Such an association of ideals of self-actualization and a Westernized consumer lifestyle is relatively new in China – a result of what Li calls 'the national need for modernization' that accompanied the adoption of market economy in the 1990s (…). It is a development, argues Li, in which 'the refashioned "modern woman"' performs a central symbolic role, creating 'the illusion of an affluent modern china and women's emancipation' (Li 1998, 87, cited in Thornham and Feng 2012, 101)

Among the traditional images that hold force in the present is the Confucian ideal of 'virtuous wife and good mother'[75]. Along with other Confucian ideals it was discredited under Mao, but revived in the 1980s as an ideal for the modern Chinese woman (Honig and Hershatter 1988, 173). In general, Confucian ethics have seen a new revival under reform, both as a conscious political strategy to maintain a harmonious society, and as a part of people's search for something to fill the moral and ideological vacuum left by the decline of Maoist ethics.

The pulls of regulative traditions still operate in the competing regime of signifiers, of dialectic relations between gender, work, sexuality and family that are being reconstituted in ambiguous and sometimes contradictory ways that simultaneously de-traditionalize and re-traditionalize contemporary female subject formation (Kim 2012, 18).

The contemporary ideal for a woman, then, is composed of several different elements, some of which are contradictory. These mixed messages and ongoing negotiations about criteria by which a

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[75] *xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母.

woman can claim success in the reform era provides space for a variety of feminine identities, yet simultaneously complicating the role model of the 'modern Chinese woman'.

Gender ideals in contemporary urban China

Jankowiak did prolonged anthropological fieldwork in Hohhot, the capital of the Chinese region Inner Mongolia between 1981 and 1987. He summarises gender attributes as follows:

> *"Men are seen as embodying attributes that make for worldly success and are characterized as work-oriented, adventurous, ambitious, self-confident, knowledgeable, quiet, intelligent, aggressive, emotionally tight-lipped, dominant and secure. On the other hand, the attributes or words associated with women are home-oriented, timid, gentle, passionate, anxious, fussy, dependent, sentimental, and tender"* (Jankowiak 1993, 168).

To further illustrate values attached to the feminine and the masculine in contemporary China Li presents the following table:

Table 1: Positive and Negative Characteristics as Defined by Men and Women

Men's Group	
Positive characteristics of men:	**Positive characteristics of women:**
Strong, mighty and diligent; successful in career, able to bear hardship; vigorous in action; good manager of the house, conqueror of the world, smoking, macho (*da nanzi zhuyi* 大男子主义)	Gentle and kind-hearted, slender and graceful, not talkative, quiet and content, honest, considerate, hardworking, diligent in study, industrious and thrifty in managing the home, bearing children, neat and tidy
Negative characteristics of men:	**Negative characteristics of women:**
Talkative, stingy, no goal in life, runs amuck, narrow-minded, not straight forward, mucks around, plays mah-jong, drug abuser, cunning and false	Fussy, not honest and upright, lazy, talks dirty words and likes to curse, not knowing and keeping her proper place, chattering and gossipy
Women's Group	
Positive characteristics of women:	**Positive characteristics of men:**
Managing the house, shopping, cooking and taking care of children; wearing make-up and looking smart, gentle, considerate, attentive, bearing children, virtuous wife and good mother.	Not fussy, healthy, having social status, strong, doing heavy work, broad-minded, leader, (in domination), capable, knowledgeable, protector

Negative characteristics of women:	Negative characteristics of men:
too softhearted, cares too much about her appearance, submissive, fastidious about cleanliness, hesitant, obedient, physically weak, forbearance	Selfish, ill-mannered, arbitrary, narrow-minded and male chauvinism

(ibid, 67).

Li notes that "men's criteria for appraising both men and women followed traditional gender norms, disliking men who have "no goals in life", who are "not straight forward," and women who "do not know and keep their place." In contrast, women's views on gender relations revealed a position that challenged such norms. They do not like the traditional image of powerful men and weak women, or characteristics such as "selfish, ill-mannered, and arbitrary" men, macho men, and a "helpless, obedient and submissive" woman" (ibid, 67).

The perceptions of gender I have encountered often lend themselves to explanations based on old sayings with an air of ancient wisdom and elevated truth, or to differences based on biological facts. These gendered qualities attributed to the masculine and the feminine are reinforced by the cosmology of the Chinese body. Perceptions of the body are connected to gendered identities, as gendered attributes as defined by both men and women are based on their bodily differences. In the context of Chinese medicine and philosophy, the gendered nature of the physical body is highlighted. A doctor and professor of Chinese Medicine explained to me that in the Chinese context notions of gender and the body are informed by Chinese medicine and cosmology, a complex world view where the relationship of *yin* and *yang* features centrally along with elements such as blood and life energy – *qi*[76]. The relationship between *yin* and *yang* are in essence a relationship of opposition, motion and complementarity such as that perceived to exist between the sun and the moon, man and woman. Certain qualities are seen as common characteristics of *yin* and *yang* in these relationships of opposition. For example, where *yang* is associated with the active, the bright and the masculine, yin is associated with the passive, the dim and the feminine. In terms of the body *qi* and breath represent qualities of *yang* and the masculine; while fluids, especially blood, represent *yin* and the feminine (Furth 1986). Health and harmony in the body, as well as in social relationships and society as a whole come from complementarity, opposition and balance between the different elements and relationships. Harmony depends on every element being in its right place in relation to other elements. This interconnection between conceptualisations of the human body with the 'social body' of society is not unique to China, as other researchers have shown (see for example Taylor 1999,

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[76] 气.

Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). In our current context, this cosmological understanding of gender based on Chinese medicine and philosophy is part of the underlying world view which informs the way gendered identities are naturalised in dominant discourses by attributing intrinsic properties to sexed bodies and hence also to gendered persons. It is a paradigm that serves as a mode of explanation to rank and naturalise gendered differences, concretely the notions of what is "natural" for men and women to be and do (Chen 2002). Jankowiak observes from Huhhot that "the Chinese believe that a profound gulf or "wall" (…) separates men and women. This gulf is thought to be a byproduct of biological and cultural forces that engender attributes of male and female essence, an essence that contributes to profound behavioural differences in the male and female personality" (1993, 166). Women are thus identified and identify themselves as embodied, gendered persons through the interconnection of physical and other gendered qualities. The implications of this for each individual woman is subject to negotiation of conflicting discourses from varying subject positions, but those positions are always somehow connected to the physical sexed body as understood in the Chinese context.

Male superiority, female inferiority

The dichotomous relationships envisioned between *yin* and *yang* and between men and women in China are reminiscent of Ortner's analysis of the comparability of the relationships between men and women, and culture and nature in discourses of gender difference that naturalise women's subaltern status through perspectives on gender attributes as a naturally, or essentially given (Ortner 1974). The Chinese case supports this line of thinking, as naturalised gender attributes are coupled with Confucian ethics in sayings such as 'the man is superior, and the woman is inferior'[77] expressing that the wife should submit to her husband for a home and a family to function harmoniously and orderly. This domestic hierarchy is visible in matters of domestic violence where men are seen as legitimate enforcers of domestic harmony through physical domination, and as the head of the family it is in his right to discipline his wife (Li 2006). Attitudes are divided about the legitimacy of violence of men against women. Li analyses the attitudes to domestic power relations between based on interviews with separate groups of male and female respondents. She states that

> "Responses from the two groups were amazingly similar: women should be "virtuous wives and good mothers" (…) while men should be "mighty" (…) and "strong persons conquering the world" (…). This accords to the norms for men and women set by traditional society, reflecting

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[77] *nan zun nü bei* 男尊女卑.

> *stereotypical gender relations in which "men are in charge of the external and women of the internal affairs" (…) and "men are strong and women weak"(…)"* (Li 2006, 66-7).

In real-life situations the expectations of men to be strong and mighty can be seen in the centrality of Chinese masculine identity of being a provider and protector. From an early age girls are socialised to being nice and sweet while boys are socialised to being tough and strong. As a kindergarten teacher told me, it is not uncommon for young boys to be taught to see themselves as protectors of the women in their family, regardless of age. A boy of 4 was told that he has to finish his food and grow big and strong so that he could protect his sister aged 6. Another boy of 3 insisted on walking outside the women on the pavement to shield them from the cars because his mother always told him that he had to be the man of the family in his father's absence and protect his elder sister and herself. As I have witnessed, women in the role of mothers often reinforce these gender roles in their children. When discussing these matters of Chinese masculinity with two female consultants in their late 20s they were frustrated with this because when a man is socialised to protect women he will also need to control women, giving rise to a form of masculinity called 'big man-ism'[78]. This form of masculinity is to my understanding comparable to machismo as seen in the Latin American context (see for example Lancaster 1992, Stevens 1973) and entails the supremacy of men over women and men's right to rule the family, by force if necessary. Interestingly, the men in Li's study found "big man-ism" to be a positive trait in men (Li 2006, 67), yet my consultants in their late 20s evaluated "big man-ism" as a negative trait that they would avoid when looking for a potential husband.

Some of my consultants claimed that domestic violence is a rural problem and evidence of the rural areas' uncivilised state, others insisted it was equally an urban problem, but one that was rarely discussed openly. For many, violence is an extreme case to which they cannot relate in their everyday lives. What they on the other hand can relate to is the expression of hierarchical gender relations in the economic sphere.

Employment, income and domestic power relations

Maoist Communism made a real contribution to boost women's participation in the paid work force, but paid no attention to the division of labour in the domestic sphere (Tan 2010). Currently, most families are dependent on two incomes, and most women of working age are in full-time employment. Simultaneously, gender roles in the contemporary Chinese family to a great extent continue along the lines of the traditional Chinese family, where the man is the primary breadwinner and the woman the primary caretaker. Today the wife is still seen as mainly responsible for the home

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[78]*da nanzi zhuyi* 大男子主义.

and family and there is still a general trend that women take on the bulk of the housework in addition to full employment. Zuo interviewed 39 married couples in Beijing in 1998 and claims that men and women alike support the notion of men being the main provider and women being primarily committed to family, yet also seeking a career (Zuo 2003). When asked, my consultants gave varying opinions about the state of gender equality in China today, often supporting their argument by statements regarding employment. Some would claim that gender equality is far from being reached in the countryside, but that gender equality has been attained in the cities, citing names of prominent women in high positions. Other disagreed, referring to the fact that men and women are not treated equally in the employment market. In the competitive capitalist economy of "socialism with market economy" women find that they are at a greater disadvantage in employment than under Maoist communism due to their dual role in social production and biological reproduction (Gilmartin 1994, 361). This is in part due to the inconveniences of maternity leave, but also has to do with the fact that women are seen as the primary caretakers at home. Employers see them as likely to be more devoted to their family than their work and thus prefer to hire men. According to my consultants, a profession suitable for a woman should be stable and secure, flexible to allow for maternity leave, not too demanding, and provide social security benefits, in sum one that can be combined family life. However, I only met a couple of women who were stay-at-home mothers, and all my main consultants were fully employed outside the home and expressed no wish to be housewives, but found satisfaction in their employment and freedom and safety in having an income of their own. Simultaneously, their stable, mid-level professions were predominantly of the kind that would be deemed appropriate for women, while their husbands were more invested in their careers. According to Zuo and Bian, the satisfaction and perceived fairness of the conjugal relationship is for many Chinese based on what they term 'gendered resources', that is, each spouse contributing what is expected based on their gender (2001)[79]. In their own words, "husband's breadwinning role and wife's housekeeper role retain their primary place in the family and that gender-role expectations produce gendered resources to both wives and husbands" (ibid., 1122). Wolf writes that "For the majority of Chinese women it is still within the context of the family and in their performance of familial roles that they are judged. A fine worker who neglects her husband and beats her children is a bad woman" (1987, 182) and established that despite the changes that have occurred in China since the 1949 revolution, "[the family] remains the unit of consumption, the primary caring unit for the weak, ill, or elderly, and its proper functioning is still seen as a women's responsibility" (ibid, 183).

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[79] For a comparative research on this matter, see Busby (2000).

There is also a continuing expectation that the husband should be the main provider in the family and earn more than their wives, as the one who earns more also is seen to hold the highest authority. A wife who earns more than her husband can be felt as a humiliation to him and threaten his masculinity enough to legitimize a divorce. I was told of marriages where this had occurred and there seemed to be a general understanding of this threat among my consultants. Honig and Hershatter make a similar observation:

> "While a wife was expected to assume responsibility for preserving a stable marital relationship, she was not supposed to become more powerful than the husband in the home. In fact, failure to handle domestic power relationships sensitively could result in marital problems. A wife's independent income, for example, sometimes inadvertently put her in a seemingly more powerful position" (Honig and Hershatter 1988, 179).

Wives are likely to lie about their income if their real income is higher than their husband out of fear that their husband should lose face and leave them. A Chinese-Malaysian friend of mine told me about a Chinese couple that she knows where the woman after marriage had great success in real estate and started earning more money than her husband. Allegedly, this role reversal rendered him sexually impotent. When I later told other consultants this story, expecting laughter and surprise, they showed no such reaction, but added similar stories of their own acquaintances: "yes, I've heard about that, it's a common problem!" The central concern is not economic, per se, but one of authority, because, as my consultant said, the one who earns more has the most authority in the home and family and therefore the male breadwinning role is an expression of male superiority. One young couple I know, however, rejects this line of thinking. In their case, the woman has the highest education and best paid job, and they both insist that they don't care. Thornham and Feng document attitudes among '80ers' in contemporary China. One student they cite emphasises the importance of maintaining her financial independence, because if she were a housewife she would lose herself and her husband would look down on her, a condition she finds horrible (Thornham and Feng 2012, 103). This indicates a shift in attitudes among the younger segment of the urban population.

On the one hand there is the aspect of economy that is simply economical – the basic relationships of needs, provisions and production. Upon closer examination, however, economic transactions have a social and cultural side where the directions of flows of resources are not neutral or random but follow certain patterns according to the social and relational identities of the persons involved in what Moore terms a system of redistribution (1994, 101). When discussing household economy with a group of mothers they asked me how we manage in Norway. I described an economy that is partially shared yet partially private and where there is an emphasis on fairness; that ideally the two

parties should contribute equally to shared expenses and have an equal amount of money left to spend at his or her desire. I also explained that this fairness was counterbalanced by shifting economic abilities; that sometimes I would contribute more toward our shared expenses, sometimes my husband would. They found this emphasis on fairness and equality in married life strange. In their view, once you are a family you become a collective and a joint economic entity where personal interests such as fairness and equality don't fit in. They claimed that Westerners have a stronger individual consciousness[80] whereas the Chinese have a stronger concept of the collective group[81] and don't emphasise equality [82] in the same way. This emphasis on the collective quality of the conjugal relationship as a negation of individualism is interesting as it demonstrates the point made by Yan that amid processes of change that favour the individual over the collective "there is also a counter trend, that is, individuals who want to hang on to the protective collectives and exercise their agency to resist the changes of individualisation" (Yan 2010b, 15).

Shu et al. claim that the differentiated gender roles in productive and reproductive spheres bestow authority over mundane and child-related matters on the wife, and over economic concerns on the husband (Shu, Zhu, and Zhang 2013). This claim is only partially congruent with my observations, as several of my consultants claimed that the woman is normally in charge of the household economy, supporting the view that wives have greater domestic decision-making power than their husbands (Zuo and Bian 2005). Several mothers I talked to claimed that whereas they took care of the mundane everyday concerns, bigger decisions concerning major expenditures or the child's education were made by mutual agreement[83]. I often heard that women decide the small matters whereas men decide the big matters. Deciding who then holds greater authority will be a question of perspective, as the small matters are much more frequent and influential in everyday life. My consultants often referred to their mother as the one wielding power and influence over their lives and the one exerting pressure over them in their life management choices, illustrating the very real power held by women in the family. Honig and Hershatter's observations support this view, as "Being a virtuous wife required responsibility and skill, but not direct exercise of power" (1988, 180).

I would like to point out that the influence of "family helpers" on the domestic power balance is a matter that seems largely overlooked. This domestic sphere of authority that involves household spending and such everyday decisions central to the management of the household are traditionally a female sphere of authority. Having a family helper present makes the wife give up some of her

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[80] *geren yishi* 个体意识.
[81] *jiti gainian* 集体概念.
[82] *pingdeng* 平等.
[83] *shangliang* 商量.

authority over domestic matters to another woman, separating the traditional female role into several female roles. This in itself is not a new phenomenon, as several women were involved with the domestic tasks of the traditional Chinese family, yet in contemporary Chinese urban society it takes on new forms and meanings, as discussed in chapter 2. When during a visit to my consultant Karen's home I praised her cooking skills, she hushed me with a giggle and pointed at the kitchen where her mother and husband's *gugu* were working on our upcoming meal. "They are doing the cooking now, so don't say anything about my cooking skills!" This hushing at the mention of cooking and other events made me consider the emergence of two different female roles; women who are said to know how to cook[84] and those who do not, simply put, the working woman and the cooking woman. Let me illustrate:

> *On the eve of Chinese New Year my husband Dag and I celebrated together with the Liang family of Belle and Mark, her parents, elder sister, brother-in-law and niece. As part of the customary celebration we prepared* jiaozi[85] *, Chinese dumplings. Belle's mother and sister were in the kitchen preparing the dough and filling, without any expressed wish or expectation of Belle or the rest of us to join them. The mother later told me in front of both her daughters that the elder one can cook, but this one, Belle, she can't cook. Belle smiled and nodded in confirmation. It appeared that not knowing how to cook was seen as a fault that is outweighed by Belle's other merits and does not make her any less of a successful woman. Belle is married to a man in a high position in a state owned enterprise, has through her abilities secured good, stable employment with social security benefits and has skin of a vibrant, fair complexion, all of which are significant merits. Her sister who knows how to cook is a stay-at-home mother with darker, tanned skin and a stronger build of the kind that a woman who kneads her own dough and washes clothes by hand might get.*

In Chinese the two verbs *hui*[86] and *neng*[87] both refer to being able to do something, but they have different uses. *Hui* can be used to denote a skill of some quality, so in the phrase "to be able to cook" *hui zuo fan, hui* denotes not only the capability as such, but that the action, here cooking, can be executed with some level of skill. In the situations described below it is the verb *hui* that is being used, hence denoting some level of skill, not actual ability. Hence, being said to have or lack the ability to cook does not only mean the actual ability to prepare a meal, but to be adept at cooking and skilfully doing so on a regular basis.

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[84]*hui zuo fan* 会做饭.
[85]饺子.
[86]会.
[87]能.

I got the general impression that although cooking skills were a praiseworthy feature in a woman, they were valued less than other achievements such as beauty, education and employment.

> *Cathy Wang, a woman in her late twenties, has never been taught to cook by her parents and hardly been allowed in the kitchen due to the dangers of gas flames and sharp-edged knives. She and her boyfriend are planning to get married in a year or so and will then live in an apartment across the hallway from his parents. She told me that she is looking forward to this living arrangement where they can conveniently share in the meals cooked by his mother. In her case her parents have clearly not seen cooking as an important part of her general education, but focused on investing in her formal education to equip her for life in the best possible way. She, as an educated, cultured woman with a well-established Beijing family background, is not a woman who in her own and her parents view, needs to know how to cook in order to "make it" in life.*

In summary, the impression that I am left with is this: The majority of women who cook on an everyday basis and are said to be skilled at cooking are women who don't work outside the home, but have the home, their own or someone else's, as their main area of responsibility. The majority of them are either grandmothers, hired housekeepers or other female relatives who might function as a "family helper". The women who are said "not to know how to cook" are the working women who have someone else to help them with the everyday chores around the house. What struck me about this was the disconnection of the feminine from the act of cooking and that the act of cooking is not expressed to be a central part of these working women's sense of femininity or what it means to be a successful woman. With the exception of Jane, who in some ways often presented a different and more nostalgic view than most, the women who don't cook express no regret or wish to change this situation, even if they were able to do so. The working women who are said "not to know how to cook" are at the same time successful and yet dependent on the cooking women who can to run their home and family in a smooth manner.

My general impression is that the male and female spheres of influence remain largely intact, as the wife delegates domestic work to other women. Hence, the contemporary working woman is taking a position in the household that embodies elements of both traditionally male and female as she in part steps out of the female domestic sphere of authority and into the male sphere in wage-earning and providing financially for the family. This results in potential tensions when a woman earns as much as or more than her husband, as the criteria of gendered resources are not upheld, presenting a threat to the husband's authority in the family and creating expectations of greater gender equality

in domestic chores. Parish and Farrer note how changes in the domestic power balance give rise to tensions:

> *"There are sharp increases in freedom of choice in marriage, more emphasis on husband-wife companionship, and more equality in decision making between husband and wife. Simultaneously, there is an increase in conflicts over chores. Men become less useful to women, and marital satisfaction for some women declines. Rates of divorce increase"* (2000, 233).

Thus it would seem that the matter of domestic power balance is under negotiation, as dominant discourses of male superiority are challenged and questioned by ideals of a modern and equal conjugal relationship and a blurring of male and female spheres of influence. Some of my consultants exemplify this negotiation, as some claimed to share housework evenly; others stated that they didn't care who made the most money and others yet told me that the husband was the main cook in the family. The Zhao family's neighbouring family allegedly consisted of a child, a stay-at-home father and a working wife. Melanie claimed this was perfectly normal and evidence of gender equality in contemporary urban China. The evident discrepancy between her claim and my observations of what is generally thought to be the norm – women having the main responsibility of the home – is interesting. My impression is that her response is motivated primarily by an attempt to influence my impression of urban Chinese society, rather than her actual knowledge of the gendered division of labour in urban Chinese households.

In sum, gendered expectations play a significant role in the identity formation and life management choices of men and women in Beijing. Although there are ongoing negotiations and increasing room for variations, the connection of women to the domestic sphere and men's superiority to their providing role remain among dominant discourses on gender in contemporary urban China.

Anomalies: Overambitious women and non-ambitious men

Discourses on gender become even more obvious when dealing with perceived anomalies. This perception of gendered differences as essential accounts for the strong gendered expectations placed on individuals, as well as the fact that anomalies can be seen to represent a threat to one's personhood or even humanity.

> *The terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable. And sometimes the very terms that confer "humanness" on some individuals are those that deprive*

certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human (Butler 2004, 2).

Failure to live up to gendered expectations can thus translate into a failure to be recognised as fully human. This dynamic is most evident in the case of stereotypes of women with a PhD. On several occasions I heard a popular saying that there are three kinds of people: men, women and women with a PhD. This saying is used as a joke but still reveals how women with a PhD somehow challenge gender boundaries to the extent of being jokingly treated as 'less-than-human'. Women with a PhD are anomalies due to their failure to conform to gendered expectations in a cultural environment where dominant discourses portray gender as a naturally given of human nature, and consequently, their humanness becomes exposed to doubt in popular joking remarks. Their failure highlights the criteria for recognition as a successful woman and for women with a PhD this circles around their choice to prioritize education and academic endeavours over marriage and family.

I asked Cathy Wang to explain why this saying has come about and she humorously explained to me that the general stereotype of a woman with a PhD is composed of various elements, none of which are in favour of her marriageability. She is seen as an unattractive woman who is not wanted by any man and hence has nothing better to do than to get a PhD. "Many in China who are this are neither men nor women. They are their own sex. It's perverted and scary. It's really like that; I have met several of them." Cathy goes on to explain the stereotype as someone who's ugly, short, fat, not from a rich family and who has few friends. Although Cathy doesn't agree with the negative judgement of women with a PhD in general, she estimates that about half of the women with a PhD she has met fit this stereotype.

A PhD becomes a negation of womanhood through its incompatibility with marriage and family, which are central criteria of a full attainment of womanhood. Given the social norm of women marrying 'up', a woman can find herself being too highly educated to find a spouse and end up as a 'leftover woman' (see chapter 1). Women I talked to were generally discouraged by their families from studying on after a Master's degree, out of fear that they would end up unmarriageable. Hence, the choice to do a PhD demonstrates that a woman is more interested in academic endeavour than family, a sharp denial of the qualities seen as natural to a woman. They are no longer seen as normal women, but someone extraordinary who does not fit the category of simply woman, but is, rather, an anomaly. The stereotype of women with a PhD is mocked in part for their failure to be attractive women and consequent dedication to the academe as a form of refuge, a second best when family life is unattainable. This stereotype demonstrates a complete lack of positive acknowledgement of the effort and ambition needed to achieve a PhD. This contrasts sharply with positive characteristics

of men and demonstrates the very discrepant criteria by which men and women come to be recognised as successful. Gendered identities are understood through sexed bodies, to the extent where a woman performing male gendered roles such as taking a PhD is unable to free herself from the expectations placed upon her as a result of her physical sex.

Rebecca is a single woman in her early 30s. She told me that she would like to continue her studies and to a PhD, but she still hasn't told anyone. Her family would be devastated if they knew, as her mother begged her to stop studying after her Master's degree. Even reading books makes her mother nervous, and Rebecca is warned against asking too many questions, but rather try to come off as naïve and ignorant, so as not to scare away potential suitors. "If your education is too high, no one will want you," she concludes. "It takes a lot of courage for a man to find a woman of high education. Men should be in charge of things, feel superior." Women who choose to pursue an academic career thus risk posing a threat to the superiority of their potential spouse, leaving them undesirable as wives. Wolf makes a similar observation:

> "A woman whose son had just married told me, "Men don't want to marry women who have more education or better jobs than they do. They fear these women will ruin their lives. They also worry that sooner or later they will meet someone of their own status and then will want to divorce them." A woman cadre, to my surprise, said, "Men don't want to marry women who are better educated than they are. They want women who are xun fu [docile and obedient], and they fear these women wouldn't be"" (1987, 155).

Similarly, career women are viewed with some ambiguity and scepticism, as men fear being 'henpecked' by their career wives (Parish and Farrer 2000, 232). As Zuo and Bian observe, "Like a man of "failed aspiration," a woman who has an "excessive" career ambition without assuming much household responsibility would be critizised as "selfish," "nonfeminine," and "irresponsible to household needs" and are mocked as *nu qiang ren* (career-oriented women)" (2001, 1128). Some observers connect women's career ambition to the changes in Chinese family: "Increasingly, educated women are choosing to invest their resources into their career, rather than into marriage and family. The effects of the choices they are making can be seen in the growth of singles, delayed marriage, low fertility and high divorce rates" (Kim 2012, 5). Men who don't live up to the expectations of providing for their family are equally scorned and said to be "eating soft rice[88]," meaning that they depend on their wives for financial support, not the other way around (Zuo and Bian 2001). These men are said to lack ambition and be men of failed aspirations, failures men and women alike criticise (Li 2006). As Rebecca summarised, "women are expected to be needy,

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[88] *chi ruan fan* 吃软饭.

dependent. Men need to take care of women", once again reinforcing the dominant discourse that men are superior, and women are inferior. Physical reproductive functions are thus influential in how women are considered in education and employment situations, regardless of how well they may perform, and performing outside one's ascribed gender boundaries does not free a woman from the emphasis on her role in the home and family.

"To be a woman means you must always be doing things for other people"[89]

Wolf finds it difficult to get her consultants to answer her direct questions about qualities a woman should possess, since they rather describe the qualities of a good mother, wife or daughter, that is, the fulfilment of expectations in various relationships, instead of qualities of 'women' per se (Wolf 1987, 112). This illustrates a tendency for women to see their identity as relational, rather than removed from its various social roles, such as that of being a mother. In the lives of my consultants, motherhood was an inescapable matter. Whether a married mother, single mother, unmarried childless, married childless, lesbian or determined never to have children, the meaning of motherhood in contemporary urban China cannot be overlooked in the identity construction of my consultants. A woman who is either single or childless in marriage is not seen as having fulfilled her role and capacities as a woman. The connection between womanhood and motherhood is exemplified by a campaign Cathy Wang told me about for impoverished children that ran about a decade ago. The campaign had posters with the image of a poor girl and appealed to the wealthier onlooker not with reference to the girl herself, that the girl should be helped in her own right, but that she should be helped for the sake of her future children. Cathy found this perspective on gender symptomatic of what she found to be characteristic of Chinese society – a missing awareness of gender issues and gendered categories that are taken for granted without a second thought. Her boyfriend Joe showed no understanding of her criticism, something she took as evidence for her statement.

For many women motherhood brings on many changes of living circumstance, and in many social contexts, in status. Whereas the young woman, even when married, is subject to discourses ascertaining her inferiority to her male peers, the mother enjoys a position of domestic authority. In traditional Chinese society as described by Eastman, a woman's status as a member of her marital family is reaffirmed by the birth of a child, especially the birth of a son, as the most important role of the daughter-in-law was to produce offspring to carry on the family line (Eastman 1988). Giving birth

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[89] quote by consultant in (Wolf 1987, 112).

to a son was thus an important part of completing her duties to her marital family. This way of thinking is still found in some contemporary families. Upon the birth of her son, Karen's husband's grandmother praised her for having completed her task of producing a male offspring to carry on the family name.

According to Gottschang (2001) the meaning of being a modern Chinese mother is made up by a combination of influences by state policies and capitalist market forces. The ideal of 'virtuous wife and good mother' requires a scientific and modern approach by which to master the skills of raising a child and acquire emotional management skills to protect the conjugal relationship from tensions (ibid., 173).The 'virtuous wife and good mother' displays her devotion to her family through a rejection of potential sources of distraction. As Melanie Zhao repeatedly emphasised, the main thing is always the main thing. She as a mother could not afford to waste her valuable time and efforts. Melanie's case is especially telling, because her economic freedom and flexible timetable provide real alternatives concerning how she spends her time and money (for a description of the Zhao family see chapter 1). She still works because the family depends on it, but her main concern is the home and family. She no longer wastes money shopping for herself or wastes time on 'selfish' leisurely activities such as spending time with her friends or pampering herself with massages, as she could before the birth of her now 3 years old son, Kevin. She complained to me that she was unable to stay in shape and I suggested that she could exercise while he was in kindergarten or even do yoga at home, but even this was not an option for her, as it would steal energy and attention away from her domestic duties, many of which in reality are handled by *gugu* and *ayi*, her 'family helpers'. She recommended that my husband and I should go to several good restaurants that she and her husband used to frequent before they had Kevin, which they have never been to since. I suggested we go there together, but she found it unlikely that she would be able to get a babysitter for Kevin and made little attempt at pursuing the idea. I interpreted the motivation behind her priorities in everyday life as an expression of the desire to be a 'virtuous wife and good mother' through self-denial and self-sacrifice. Similarly, a group of mothers discussed the curious case of an American woman who every year went on holiday with her friends, leaving her husband to take care of the home and children for a week or two. The women found this amusing, and jokingly made plans of their own to travel together, leaving their children and husbands at home, yet leaving no doubt that this was not an option for devoted mothers such as themselves.

Thus, the mothers among my consultants demonstrate a devotion to their family and children that is not merely motivated by the practical and economic needs, but is reinforced by the self-denying ideal of the 'virtuous wife and modern woman' as reinterpreted in contemporary urban China. Providing for their family and child requires their first priority and leaves little space in their lives to

'individualistic' concerns, whether in terms of consumption, leisure or career ambitions, leading to a highly family-centric lifestyle. To married women, especially mothers, the negative connotations of individualism and individual aspirations in China are especially noteworthy due to the gender norms that place the main responsibility of the family's collective wellbeing on the woman and the strong relations of interdependency in family life. These women therefore counterweigh the individualising trend in Chinese society, and maintain an emphasis on collective values as reinterpreted in the present. In sum, dominant discourses on gender in contemporary China attach a great importance to women's role in home and family, thus limiting the scope of socially acclaimed alternatives of life management choices to the collective values of the family. This limits women's motivation and justification of individual endeavours and still holds force despite ongoing negotiations of what it means to be a "modern Chinese woman".

Chapter 4:

Contested Female Individualisation

In this thesis I have described the lived experiences of women in their 20s and 30s in Beijing in 2012 in relation to their families as a point of entry to a discussion of female individualization in contemporary urban China. Unmarried women, married women and others glimpsed in this thesis show significant variety in their relation to the significant collective of the family and how their roles and identities are negotiated with reference to the family. The experience of individualisation is therefore unique to each of these women, though some commonalities emerge.

Positioned individualisation

The younger women in my research show greater expectations of personal freedoms and agency in their life management and are openly critical of those who fail to 'stand their ground' in the face of pressures to conform. They challenge social norms that oppose their personal convictions and emphasise self-realisation through self-expression and by attaining their aspired goals in life. They seek rewarding employment and, under the right emotional and financial conditions, marriage. If not politically indifferent as Yan (2006) claims, they can be said to be politically resigned, displaying resistance by longing to go abroad or by refusing to have children under the current conditions. These individualist attitudes are simultaneously countered by a deep respect for their parents that they explain as filial piety, a moral value that for many Chinese still holds force. As singletons they are aware of their parents' efforts on their behalf which oblige them to shoulder a great burden of responsibility to reciprocate, although they are currently unable to do so in economic terms. In order to reciprocate they have to work hard, hoping to elevate and uphold the family in the future through their achievements in a highly competitive system of education and employment. Their relationship to their parents is also one of need, as the ability to marry in many cases depends on the parents' approval and financial support. As the first generation of children of Reform, they are subject to contradictory forces as traditional familial and modern individual pressures convene and force them to make choices defining their own biographies through "compulsive and obligatory self-determination" (Bauman 2000, 32). Their freedom of choice is limited by available options as well as pressures and expectations from peers and family, exemplifying that "agency is regulated by structure, operating within broader systems of constraint. The social and cultural fields are not totally restrictive but dialectically positioned; the complexity neither closes the avenue for change for women nor holds it wide open for any kind of empowerment" (Kim 2012, 10). Still, the necessity to

make active choices that define who one is as well as one's life chances remains, limitations notwithstanding. The unmarried segment of my consultants thus demonstrates that there is a considerable rise of the individual in Chinese society responding to and fuelling the individualisation of society.

Married women and mothers are influenced by a combination of practical and ideological constraints as the practicalities of everyday life combine with entrenched understandings of gender roles and ideals to shape the criteria of their successes, individual freedoms and identity management. Practically, the workings of a dual-income family with children in Beijing necessitate a greater contribution in domestic work than that commonly provided by the working parents, hence making the family dependent on relationships to others and making the independent nuclear family an unattainable ideal. As providers they are responsible for the well-being of their children and their parents, a responsibility they take seriously. Dominant discourses on gender roles that emphasise a continued expectation for women to have the family as their main concern are evident in the lived experiences of the married women through their choice of appropriate employment and aspiration to live up to the ideal of the "virtuous wife and good mother" who denies herself individualist, antisocial pleasures, but rather devotes all her energy to family and work, in that order. The emphasis on self-denial and self-sacrifice in motherhood is contrary to Yan's findings that personal interest and individual happiness are the main concerns in contemporary family life (Yan 2009, xxiii-xxiv). While there are unequal power relations between men and women in Chinese society and the dominant discourses may be established under male hegemony, the women who dedicated themselves to their roles as mothers through self-denial assert personal choice in their priorities and life management, they never expressed feeling as though it were forced onto them. This can on the one hand be understood as a resistance towards individualization and what they perceive as a negative trend of utilitarian and egotistic individualism seen to be on the rise in contemporary Chinese society. On the other hand, the emphasis on choice and the assertion of these women of their status as virtuous wives, good mothers and heads of the domestic department are acts of agency which highlight that they assume domestic authority and personal responsibility for the family. It is my impression that being a 'virtuous wife and good mother' is treated by these women as an achievement and a measure of success through an internalisation of dominant discourses on gender.

In the Chinese context the continuing association of the female identity and gender role to the collectivist interests of the family group render individualisation a different matter for female subjects than for male subjects. In the Chinese language, individualism is deemed a general negative trait, associated with egotism at the expense of the welfare of the group. Individualism as

understood in Chinese is especially negative in women, given the traditional virtues and collectivist qualities ascribed to the female identity. Li (2006) shows that there are significantly different attitudes to traits that can be seen as individualist in men and women. In men individualist traits such as a pursuit for a career is seen as positive, but women who display characteristics seen as individualist or careerist will be seen in a negative light. Over-ambitiousness is discouraged in women because it is seen as unnatural and individualist –contrary to the female nature which should be concerns for family. The normative discourse of the virtuous woman as a woman who places the love of others before the love of her own self has undeniable impact on the extent to which female Chinese individuals can see themselves and act as individuals free from the constraints of a group, in this case their family. Success in men and women differs in relation to their employment and economic success. Men are seen as successful through their success in the labour market and the pressure is on them to provide economically for their families. This requires them to be hard-working and have the right amount of ambition. Being non-ambitious is a decidedly negative trait in a man (Li 2006). Women on the other hand are seen as successful through a balancing of work and marriage, motherhood and successful management of the home and family. "The constant balancing of work and home renders processes of female individualization much more complex and conflictual, not easily resulting in a shift from 'being there for others' to 'living one's own life'" (Kim 2012, 11). Beck makes particular note of how the processes he describes affect women, recognising a gendered aspect of differential experience of individualisation:

> *"While men remain essentially untouched by family events in their biographies, women lead a contradictory double life shaped equally by family and by organizations. For them the family rhythm still applies, and in the majority of cases the rhythm of education and career already do as well, which results in conflictual crises and continuing incompatible demands"* (Beck 1992, 132).

In sum we see that the success criteria of men and women depends on what Zuo and Bian refer to as their "gendered resource" – living up to the expectations placed on someone based on the gender of this individual (2001). Understanding this view of individualism as a definitive negative trait provides some of the explanation for why women emphasise their devotion to the family and downplay their individual pursuits in interactions. On the one hand, women's double burden of obligations at work and at home leave them very busy and with little time, money or energy to spend on themselves. However, even those who do have time and resources to split their focus between the good of the family and their own personal satisfaction may still not do so, possibly out of fear of not being taken to be a virtuous wife and good mother, but rather as a selfish woman who neglects her family.

What, then of the family helpers? Socioeconomically, they are at a disadvantage, regardless of whether they are grandparents, female relatives or hired housekeepers. The hired housekeepers are normally from the countryside, have little education and no better employment options. They are without urban *hukou* registration and social security benefits and are responsible for providing for themselves, their children and most likely also their ageing parents in the countryside. This makes them dependent on any income they can generate, leaving them little time or space to consider self-realization by other means. To them, the effect of institutional individualization is undoubtedly felt acutely, as there is no social benefits that might alleviate the increased individual responsibility to "make it" in the world, resulting in a highly precarious condition riddled with risk. Their experience is thus likely to be one of great risk and responsibility, but few good options to choose from in how to deal with it. The female relatives or grandparents acting as family helpers are in a similar, yet different position. They are likely to at least partially depend financially on the family they help, but they also have a kin-based and emotional bond to the family, enabling the traditional family logic of pooling and sharing of resources. They are protected by the collective values of the Chinese family: that one shall provide and care for one's own. Filial piety and family law oblige children to provide and care for their parents, thus creating a familial protection against the risks of the precarious freedoms of the rapidly changing society. This is not to say that they are safeguarded from risk as such, because they are unable to secure their own future and depend on the continuing functioning of the family which in turn depends on the maintained conjugal relationship and the achievements of the child as a return on the family's human and economic investment in its education. What is experienced as a gain of agency by the younger generation may be complemented by a loss of agency and authority of the elder generation, increasing their dependency and reducing their scope of actions. Therefore, as some experience increased individual freedoms, others might experience the opposite. Institutional individualisation and the risks it entails thus serve to reinforce familial ties as interdependencies and the family as the only available source social security is reinforced.

Common for all these lived experiences is the given backdrop of a rapidly changing Chinese urban society driven by a state-managed process of modernisation. The most significant outcome is the primacy of material wealth as a source of both social security in the absence of welfare services and successful identity politics. Compared to the forms of government of the Chinese population through organisation in the *danwei* system, the individual freedoms granted each Chinese person in the era of reform is remarkable. The condition for many of these freedoms, however, is the capacity to pay their price, often in literal financial terms, but sometimes also in other respects. The new opportunities open to the individual leave the individual responsible for his or her own success or failure based on personal merits and social capital. Money rules now more than before, even in

interpersonal relations, as demonstrated by the economic criteria for considering a potential spouse. This increased significance of money creates an environment where all must do their utmost to secure their piece of the pie for themselves and their present and future dependents. The shrinking of the family and weakening ties to the extended family in urban China mean that those who fail to make it in material terms have fewer to rely on for support and face a real risk of plummeting on the socioeconomic ladder. This individualisation of responsibility and compulsory risks is a central feature of contemporary urban Chinese society and at the heart of individualisation as understood by Beck (2002). Thus, what we see is that there is considerable evidence of institutional individualisation in contemporary urban Chinese society, a process that in many cases is not coupled with individualisation in neoliberal terms, where the freedom and independence of the individual is highlighted. Equally evident is that the process of individualisation in China is not a copy of the Western European model of individualisation, but follows its own trajectories in its own complex context.

> To summarize, individualization in China is characterized by the management of the party-state and the absence of cultural democracy, the absence of a welfare state regime, and the absence of classic individualism and political liberalism. In this sense, the Chinese individualization process remains at the stage of emancipation politics of first modernity. Yet individuals in China also live in an environment where a fluid labour market, flexible employment, increasing risks, a culture of intimacy and self-expression, and a greater emphasis on individual responsibility and self-reliance have been created by the globalization of the market economy and an ideology of consumerism. The Chinese case simultaneously demonstrates pre-modern, modern, and latemodern conditions, and the Chinese individual must deal with all of these conditions simultaneously (Yan 2010a, 510).

I would like to add to this summary the observation that the ethnographic material presented here clearly demonstrates that different positions of age, gender and socioeconomic background have to be accounted for in studies of social change such as individualisation.

> Individualization is not an all-encompassing trend or a radically sweeping process that shares different developments in social structures and cultural domains, as well as the levels of agency and reflexivity operating within. It is necessary to recognize the partial nature of agency and reflexivity in relation to the relative openness of the social world and the different restraints on agency in contemporary Asian societies (Kim 2008, cited in Kim 2012, 9-10).

Whereas the institutional individualisation as described by Beck is a societal state of disembedment, risk and individual responsibility which affects all, irrespective of individual choices, the effect of this condition is not felt equally by differently positioned individuals in society, as individuals have

unequal access to resources with which to deal with the new conditions of life and are under differing practical and cultural constraints. This is especially relevant when considering the reembedment of previously disembedded individuals in new contexts. Shim and Han (2010) highlight the need to consider the specific context for reembedment in the context of individualisation. In contemporary China the state-managed processes of modernisation have left its citizens disembedded and under the shadow of market forces, creating a marketization of life chances. Reembedment is possible either in the family or by economic means that establish some safe ground for the individual in the new context. Thus, individualisation does not necessarily entail an opposition between individualism and collectivism, understood here as the collective of the family, as summarised in Shim and Han's claim that there is in East Asia a family-oriented version of individualisation (2010). "Individualization, or family-oriented individualization, encompasses a much more complex and delicate, culture-bounded balance between individual and family (Shim and Han 2010), whose values and practices differ significantly from the individualizing trend of the West" (Kim 2012, 12). This family-oriented individualisation can be understood in connection to the lack of social safety nets in Chinese society, forcing the disembedded individual to reembed back into the family (Yan 2009, 288-9). Reembedding in the family one was disembedded from is not a process that leaves the family unchanged, but as we have seen, the structure and division of authority in the family has changed dramatically as new models of thinking about family have emerged through this process. Disembedment from the family does neither necessarily mean a removal from family ties and relationships, but rather a reduction in the power of the family to control individual members' lives. Compared to Norwegian families, the Chinese family exerts significant power over the individual, yet, compared to traditional Chinese families, the transformation is one in favour of the younger over the older and the individual over the collective as primary decision-makers. The family no longer has absolute control over the individual, but its influence remains strong for several reasons including the culturally embedded value of filial piety, economic and practical interdependency and the strong emphasis on marriage and establishing one's own family as a significant life goal and criterion of success for both men and women. The intergenerational relationships of practical and economic interdependencies shift during the life course and the development cycle of the family, and in sum constitute potent ties that bind members of a family together in relations of mutual obligations and benefits. Therefore Kim makes the claim that "The family, not the individual, is still the basic unit of social reproduction in Asia" (Kim 2012, 12-13). Given the specific character of individualisation in China and East Asia she is able to maintain this view without contradicting her own discussion of individualisation in Asian societies.

Feminism and female individualisation

A discussion of individualisation is simply put a discussion of processes of change that favour the individual over the collective, granting the individual powers, responsibilities, freedoms and roles not previously attributed to the individual, or at least to a lesser extent. Given male subjects this analysis looks unproblematic, yet, given female subjects the discussion of individualisation overlaps with discussions of feminism and gender constructs. Hence, when referring to a 'universal', male subject one might get away with referring only to individualisation, but when dealing with such changes with regard to a female subject individualisation quickly becomes a matter of gender relations and feminism. The obvious critique inherent in this statement is that the male subject is naturally not less gendered than the female subject, and that discussions of individualisation should also deal with gender, age and other aspects relevant to each individual's subject position (Moore 1994).

Bringing theories of gender and identity construction to bear on theories of individualization in Chinese society reveals nuances of individual lived experienced of agency, power and negotiations that would otherwise not come to the surface. Focusing on gendered individualisation is an attempt on my part at de-compartmentalising theories on individualisation and gender because they deal with aspects of the same reality and hence should be complementary to one another. Yet, when combining the theoretical approaches of individualisation and gender theory some discrepancies appear that make a discussion difficult. These discrepancies are mainly concerned with the premises for understanding the central concepts under discussion. For example, Bauman states that "To put it in a nutshell, 'individualization' consists in transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task' and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (…) of their performance" (Bauman 2002, xv). To a reader familiar with recent theories on identity construction, particularly the sociocultural construction of gender, this definition of individualization does not seem to add up because identities are understood to be constantly and in all circumstances an object of negotiation and performance, in other words, identity was never a 'given', but always a 'task' (see for example Jenkins 2008).

There is also some disagreement concerning what is to be termed individualisation and what is not, as neoliberal understandings of individualisation play a greater role in some analyses, while others emphasise the institutional individualisation as outlined by Beck (2002). Feminist writings place emphasis on gender equality, often in terms of equality of opportunity. This is often discussed in terms of empowerment, agency and freedom of the female person to make decisions and choices according to her own will. This overlaps to a great extent with the neoliberal understanding of individualisation, but is not consistent with Beck's view. In Beck's understanding of institutionalized individualisation, the social condition of modernity obliges the individual to make choices, but this

does not necessarily imply either empowerment or equality, and individualisation as a whole is something that happens *to* individuals, not a result of their wilful actions (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The relationship between individualisation and feminism is another area of disagreement. McRobbie claims that "feminist and postcolonial analyses can be rendered 'obsolete' through the celebration of a self-produced feminine individuality" (McRobbie 2009, cited in Thornham and Feng 2012, 101). What McRobbie suggests is that as an analytical approach, individualisation has taken the place of feminism, and that given the emphasis on DIY female biographies where women themselves define their own identities and biographies, feminism becomes an obsolete theoretical approach. The result of this is a loss of feminism – post-feminism. The logic in this statement is found in the consideration of power relations, because the fundamental argument of feminist theories is the domination of men over women and the need for emancipation and empowerment of women. Given that women design their own identities, uneven power relations have been evened out as a consequence of individualisation that leaves each individual responsible for creating her or his own life and self. While logical in argument, such a line of thinking seems to underestimate the continuing presence of uneven power relations also under a modern condition that makes the individual responsible.

> *The language of choice obscures the ongoing existence of gender inequalities, the highly exclusionary and regulatory function of the labour market in structuring the opportunities and identities available to women (…) Educated and skilled women are not necessarily mobile or upward in the labour market, which is still profoundly gendered, nor are they likely to achieve full economic individualization as a free female subject. Enduring inequalities in the labour market intimately linked to family and care work further impede the logics and possibilities of female individualization* (Kim 2012, 10).

The language of choice might be especially obscuring in the Chinese case, where the terms for feminism (*nüquan zhuyi*) that were applied under Mao are now obsolete along with other politicised terms such as class (*jieceng*) and the discourse of gender sameness, leaving Chinese women under reform without discursive means to express any feminist ideals they might have. The revival of the feminine identity at the dawn of reform provided women with the freedom to be feminine, but simultaneously makes it difficult to discern this freedom from an obligation to be feminine. Outwardly, it might look the same, but at its core are uneven power relations and power of definition, where, given the dominant discourse of male superiority, women might not have the discursive power to define themselves after all. This observation supports Kim's analysis that

The achievement of a reflexive self-identity – female individualization in this social context – can be understood as a precarious process, not simply flexible but much more complex, constantly being reconstituted through, and simultaneously competing with, normatively directed constraints and available discursive resources as well as capacities to reduce inequalities in the life trajectories of women of rapidly changing Asia (2012, 24).

Kim's application of the term female individualisation is closely related to women's emancipation and independence, the classical concerns of feminism. She analyses the effect of popular media culture on women's subject formation in Asian societies claiming that higher levels of education creates expectations and aspirations of independence and self-fulfilment that are not met in a labour market that continues to treat men and women unequally (Kim 2012, 1). Higher levels of education make a difference for women's lives, but do not guarantee a corresponding socio-economic status, as unequal power relations, gender ideologies and structural constraints continue to shape women's lived experience (Jayaweera 1997). This creates new inequality, insecurity and precarious self for women in Asia and China (Kim 2012, 3-4).

With reference to Beck (1992), Giddens (1991), Bauman (2001) and Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002), Kim writes that "the notion of individualization in Western theory of reflexive modernization is seen as an ongoing shift from a traditional gender role-oriented, collective, normal biography to a labour market-steered, elective, do-it-yourself biography, or an extended, Others-related, reflexive project of self", summarising that "individualization is characterized by a growing emphasis on individual autonomy and independence from traditions and social institutions" (Kim 2012, 9). Beck on the other hand does not define independence as a necessary result of individualisation, but rather highlights that institutional dependency is a part of institutional individualisation, as the individual is forced to find alternative sources for reembedment (1992, 131). Kim further claims that "It is the educational achievement that engenders a fundamental shift towards the choice of individualization departing from a normative female biography" (Kim 2012, 10). This statement is in my view problematic both due to the claim that individualization is a choice, and in the assumption that individualisation necessarily entails a departure from normative female biographies. In Beck's terms individualization is not something that is chosen, it is a state of modernity that forces itself onto individual lives as a demand of the second modernity(Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Additionally, choosing to assume a traditional role, what Kim calls a normative female biography, should not be excluded as an available option for women exercising their agency, as my consultants demonstrate. Yan's understanding of the changes in private life in China and the processes of individualization inherent in this process emphasises that the nuclearisation of the family is a process of individualisation in the Chinese context (2009). "By the late 1990s, the primary concerns of young women had shifted to

femininity, beauty, cuteness and material comforts, and the young women fought a constant battle to gain the power to manage their conjugal family" (Yan 2009, xxx-xxxi). The normative female biography of the "virtuous wife and good mother" can thus be assumed by women without rendering them less individualised or deprived of agency as individuals and certainly without negating an overarching process of individualisation of society. This is a significant distinction, because individualisation is not equal to individualism, neither in the classic Western sense nor in the Chinese understanding of utilitarian, egotistic individualism. Especially in the Chinese context where the family remains a significant collective group, individualisation thus does not necessarily negate collective values, and choosing to devote oneself to family is also a choice made in a context of having to make an active choice.

Concluding remarks

In this thesis I have attempted to portray the lived experience of women in their 20s and 30s in contemporary Beijing and how these women and their families respond to the changing conditions of a modernising Chinese urban society. Through this lens I have discussed theoretical approaches to individualisation and found evidence that supports Yan's claim that Chinese society is indeed undergoing an individualisation transformation through the dual processes of the rise of the individual and the individualisation of society (2009). This individualisation has characteristics specific to China that sets it apart from individualisation as observed in Western Europe (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010), demonstrating that a society where conditions of both first and second modernity are present can also experience individualisation (Yan 2010a). By adding the perspective of gendered individualisation I have demonstrated the importance of considering each person's subject position and the influence of gender discourses to grasp the way institutional individualisation affects individual lives. The outcome reveals that the process of individualisation is complex and contested, even more so for women whose life management choices and priorities are under the influence of dominant discourses of gender that emphasise women's dedication to collective family values.

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