



## Chinese Single Women: Negotiating a “Free” Self within Natal Families

Yue Liu

### Abstract

Although the practices of marriage resistance and non-marital intimacies have been increasingly common since the 1980s, monogamous heterosexual marriage is still a near-universal practice in contemporary mainland China. Well-educated, professional women in their late 20s and over who have not married are labelled as “leftover women” in China. They are subjected to enormous marriage pressure from natal families, workplaces and wider society. This study aims to explore how single Chinese women negotiate individual autonomy with parents through a variety of strategies, with a focus on their pressure to marry from natal families. Based on my data, I argue that single women who manage to bargain for individual autonomy through deploying various strategies with their natal families are more likely to practise marriage resistance and their preferred intimacies.

### Keywords

Chinese Single Women;  
Marriage;  
Intimacy;  
Autonomy;  
Negotiation

---

The 1950 Marriage Law, issued soon after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, established heterosexual monogamous marriage as the only legitimate form of intimacy (Kam, 2012, p.60). Since the 1980s, the development of a market economy, population mobility and reduced governmental surveillance of private lives have led to a “sexual revolution” in China; it has separated love, sex and marriage (Pan, 2006, p.21) and “redefined the character of intimate relationships inside and outside of marriage” (Davis, 2014, p.556). Hence the public, particularly the younger generation who were born in the post-reform era, are increasingly involved in a diversity of intimacies such as premarital sex and cohabitation, extramarital relationships and same-sex relationships. Even though the marriage rate is gradually declining, China is still witnessing a high marriage rate in contrast to its East Asian counterparts. In 2012, 34 % of women remained single in the 30 to 34-year-old range in Japan; this proportion was 39% in Hong Kong. In Shanghai, by contrast, the proportion of unmarried women between 30 and 34 years old was 4.5% in 2010 (Nakano, 2014).

Since September 2020, I conducted interviews with 28 single Chinese women between 23 to 38 years old in mainland China. Born under the One-Child Policy, all of them live, work,

or study in urban cities, though some come from rural China. 26 of them have obtained at least a Bachelor's degree and the majority have promising career prospects. Since the implementation of the One-Child Policy in the 1980s, only daughters have received full parental attention and financial investment and become the 'only hope' in the family because they no longer have to compete with their brothers for such resources (Fong, 2004; Ho, et al., 2018). They are expected to be well-educated and professional, and to fulfil marriage and childbearing obligations, in order to live up to the expectations set for loyal, filial daughters (Tu and Xie, 2020). Based on my data, I discovered that most single women have experienced the pressure to marry from their natal families to varying degrees; some have even faced stigmatisation and discrimination due to their singlehood. However, those who manage to deploy strategies to negotiate with parents are more likely to gain individual autonomy over their preferred non-normative intimacies and lifestyles.

My father said (to my sister): "I don't have any other requirements. I just want you to spend a normal life as a normal person!" I hope I could marry... The main reason is that (I hope) my parents can tell their friends that they have at least one daughter married, married 'normally' (Forced Smile). (Fei, aged 28)

To make their daughters marry as soon as possible, Fei's parents "crazily" arranged matchmaking meetings for Fei and her elder sister. Since heterosexual monogamous marriage is the only legitimate and normative intimacy in China, those who do not fit into this marriage institution are deemed as "deviants" or "abnormal women" (Kam, 2012, p.65). Well-educated, professional women above 27 years old who have not married are labelled as 'leftover women' and stigmatised as 'abnormal'. "Parents will also be affected by the social stigma if they have an unmarried but 'over-age' daughter" (Kam, 2010, p.92), so many parents are anxious to push their single daughters into marriage. One reason for this is to avoid such stigmas and to enable their daughters to live a 'normal' life as a 'normal' person; another reason is to protect the reputation of the family or avoid 'losing face'. Marriage, "understood as an individual's duty to satisfy her/his family's expectation", is about the *mianzi*/face of a Chinese family (Kam, 2012, p.63). Hence many single daughters like Fei and her sister are pressured to marry early and well in order to avoid their parents being the object of others' ridicule, which will contribute to their emotional well-being and to the protection of the family reputation.

Most participants like Fei have complained that the natal family is the biggest source of pressure to marry. Even so, single Chinese women have not given up active resistance against gender norms in domestic spaces, hence many have made full use of individual resources and abilities to bargain for the autonomy over their preferred intimacies and lifestyles. Women's struggle for empowerment and autonomy has been a long process of bargaining with patriarchy, which includes diverse forms of compromise, exchange of interests and resistance. As Kandiyoti (1988, p.274) states, "different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct 'rules of the game' and call for different strategies to maximise security and optimise life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression". In my fieldwork, I discovered that single Chinese women deploy multiple strategies to negotiate autonomy with their families, and those who are financially independent are more likely to practise their preferred intimacies.

Money is the best weapon, which is to shut them up. At every festival, you buy something for your parents, and then your parents will brag like 'my daughter gave me a red envelope containing 2000 CNY during the festival!' Other people will also be envious. (Tao, aged 33)

Her (my mother's) first trip abroad was to the Philippines because I worked there... She was like 'Wow, (people) could live like this!' (Lulu, aged 29)

A *hongbao*/red envelope containing cash, an important form of gift in the Chinese context, is generally exchanged on birthdays, at weddings and on important Chinese festivals such as New Year, symbolising good luck and well-wishing (Jackson and Ho, 2020). Through giving cash and gifts regularly, Tao, who firmly resists marriage and childbearing, has managed to make her parents support her decision to remain single. Sometimes, her open-minded parents even help her share the external pressure to marry, such as changing the topic of conversation when her marriage status is questioned by relatives. Lulu, who prefers long-term cohabitation with her British boyfriend to marriage, often took her mother on overseas holidays while she worked and studied abroad. A daughter taking her mother on trips is one of the ways of showing closeness and companionship (Jackson and Ho, 2020). Lulu's mother used to hope that Lulu would marry early and to a successful man, but due to these inspiring trips, her mother's opinions on life and marriage unexpectedly changed, hence she tended to support Lulu's preferred lifestyles and intimacy.

Jackson and Ho (2020) present a few ways that Hong Kong daughters handle intimate practices to maintain good relationships with mothers, including companionship, reciprocal practical support and gift-giving. Based on a similar cultural context, Chinese women also employed such methods of being a 'filial' daughter. The practices of cash-giving and companionship by Tao and Lulu are displays of filial piety and closeness, which is showing affection and care and giving face to elders, thus contributing to their emotional well-being (Jackson and Liu, 2017; Jackson and Ho, 2020). When parents obtain substantial financial, emotional and spiritual benefits from daughters, they tend to refrain from intervening in their children's personal lives and choices. For Chinese single women, therefore, practising filial obligation is an effective strategy to 'purchase' individual autonomy from their parents.

One of the significant reasons I wanted to stay in Beijing was I wanted to get away from the complicated relationships at home, where my family interfered in anything I was doing. (Fang, aged 30)

Fang, who graduated from a prestigious university and now lives in Beijing, comes from a disadvantaged family in Northeast China. Due to the imbalanced development between urban and rural areas, many rural parents make every effort to "support their children in leaving the village and migrating to the cities, hoping that this will secure better life chances for their children and even the whole family" (Zheng and Ho, 2016, p.457). When Fang's parents expected their only daughter to secure a better livelihood through 'marrying up' to a rich urban man, Fang was in a relationship with a man from a poor,

divorced family, which caused dissatisfaction and criticism in her family. However, the distance of over a thousand kilometres between Beijing and her hometown had freed Fang from practical parental sanction, so her parents had stopped expressing their disapproval about her relationship when I interviewed Fang. Although the freedom for unmarried women “to move out of their parents’ home before marriage or to relocate to another city is relatively restricted” in China (Kam, 2012, p.61), it is more possible for rural women to achieve geographical mobility, which provides a space for them to practise intimacies without unwelcome intervention of natal families.

Wenyin, a Beijing native, failed to move out of her natal family home because she did not gain parental consent. In contrast to women from rural areas, urban women face more restrictions on mobility because “they have fewer reasons to convince their families to let them relocate to other parts of the country” (Kam, 2012, p.62) or within the same city. Although Wenyin’s every move is under parental surveillance, she discovered that concealing individual affairs or hiding the details of her relationships from parents is a useful strategy to gain autonomy. When asked about her parents’ attitudes towards her relationship with a married man, she said:

I’ve (only) told my mother...I didn’t tell her the details...She only knows I would still want this man even if he is divorced and has a child...but she doesn’t know I think it’s quite good if we aren’t married.

In most cases, young single women conceal their sexual intimacy or dating relationships from their natal families, which helps them avoid unnecessary inter-generational disputes. Therefore, ‘many parents just assume that their daughters are behaving “respectably”, occasionally turning a blind eye to what daughters actually do’ (Zavoretti, 2017, p.134).

When discussing strategies for dealing with inter-generational divergence or conflicts, most participants mentioned the word ‘*goutong*/communication’. Evans researched the experience of mother-daughter relationships among urban women born between the 1950s and 1980s, and argues that “desire for recognition of the independent emotional self through communicative practice is replacing ‘traditional’ expectation of the younger generation’s obedience to parental authority”, which “has its part to play in explaining daughters’ attempts to renegotiate their sense of filial responsibility to their parents alongside rather than in contradiction to their own desires for self-fulfilment” (Evans, 2010, p.986). Some participants have actively communicated their views on dating relationships, marriage and individual issues with their parents, although the degrees and forms of communication varied greatly.

Muqing, Lily and Ting have always attempted to persuade their parents with arguments when they have disagreements; Tao often gives her parents examples of other elders getting sick due to looking after grandchildren, in order to make her parents accept the idea of celibacy; Chun prefers to communicate a comfortable private space for herself with her parents:

I draw a very clear line with them, which is don't ask too much and don't try to pry into my dating relationships... I show a determined attitude every time, but the premise is I will let them know I'm dating someone.

Small chats, interesting gossips, serious discussions or even fierce quarrels offer a good opportunity for unmarried daughters and their parents to exchange opinions, increase mutual understanding and negotiate differences. As Evans (2008, p.96) demonstrates, "goutong provided an avenue for exploring feelings and articulations of sameness and differences, identification and recognition, as well as connectedness, separateness, and autonomy".

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

## Conclusion

The single daughters' struggle for autonomy mirrors how inter-generational intimacy has transformed from unconditional obedience and submission to "xiaoer bushun/caring and supportive but not obedient" (Wang, 2019, p.29), which redefines filial piety in contemporary China. By investing emotional care, financial support and communication time in natal families, financially independent single women gain the freedom to practise their preferred intimacies such as cohabitation, premarital sex, celibacy, cross-border relationships or same-sex relationships. However, not every single woman has the equal opportunity to live as they want, particularly those who lack sufficient financial resources. In other words, pursuing a single life is only possible for those who earn enough to sustain a single personal household (Nakano, 2014), but their resistance to marital norms implies that marriage as the only normative form of intimacy is being undermined in mainland China.

## References

- Davis, D.S, 2014. Privatization of marriage in post-socialist China. *Modern China*, 40 (6), pp. 551-577.
- Evans, H., 2008. *The subject of gender: Daughters and mothers in urban China*. United States: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Evans, H., 2010. The gender of communication: changing expectations of mothers and daughters in urban China. *The China Quarterly*, 204 (204), pp. 980-1000.
- Fong, V.L., 2004. *Only hope: Coming of age under China's One-Child Policy*. California: Stanford University Press.

- Ho, P.S.Y., Jackson, S., Cao, S. and Kwok, C., 2018. Sex with Chinese characteristics: Sexuality research in/on 21st-century China. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 55(4-5), pp.486-521.
- Jackson, S. and Ho, P.S.Y., 2020. *Women doing intimacy: Gender, family and modernity in Britain and Hong Kong*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Jackson, S. and Liu, J., 2017. The social context of ageing and intergenerational relationships in Chinese families. *The Journal of Chinese Sociology*, 4 (2), pp.1-5.
- Kam, L. Y. L., 2010. Opening up marriage: married lalas in Shanghai. In: C. Yau, ed. *As normal as possible: Negotiating sexuality and gender in mainland China and Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press. pp. 87-102.
- Kam, L. Y. L., 2012. *Shanghai lalas: Female Tongzhi communities and politics in urban China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Kandiyoti, D., 1988. Bargaining with patriarchy. *Gender & Society*, 2(3), pp. 274-290.
- Nakano, L. Y., 2014. Single women and cosmopolitan re-imaginings of gendered citizenship in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Tokyo. In: Y. N. Soysal, ed. 2014. *Transnational trajectories in East Asia: Nation, citizenship and region*. London: Routledge. pp.167-178.
- Pan, S., 2006. Transformations in the primary life cycle: the origins and the nature of China's sexual revolution. In: E. Jeffreys, ed. 2006. *Sex and sexuality in China*. London and New York: Routledge. pp. 21-42.
- Tu, M. and Xie, K., 2020. Privileged daughters? Gendered mobility among highly educated Chinese female migrants in the UK. *Social Inclusion*, 8(2), pp.68-76.
- Wang, S. Y., 2019. When tongzhi marry: experiments of cooperative marriage between lalas and gay men in urban China. *Feminist Studies*, 45 (1), pp. 13-35.
- Zavoretti, R., 2017. Being the right woman for "Mr. Right": Marriage and Household Politics in Present-Day Nanjing. In: G.S and S.H, ed. 2017. *Transforming patriarchy: Chinese families in the twenty-first century*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press. pp.129-145.
- Zheng, J. and Ho, P.S.Y., 2016. Contextualising transformed intergenerational relationships in China: using adult daughters' mate selection as an example. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 6 (3), pp.447-462.