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Obligated to Care:

Rural Chinese Families, Migration,
and the Changing Intergenerational Contract

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Anthropology

by

Erin Elizabeth Thomason

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Obligated to Care:

Rural Chinese Families, Migration,
and the Changing Intergenerational Contract

by

Erin Elizabeth Thomason

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Yunxiang Yan, Chair

Based on eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork in rural Henan province, this dissertation fleshes out the multiple ways that families have reorganized their emotional and economic resources in response to rural development and internal migration. I consider how traditional gender and age-based hierarchies are transformed and reworked within village life. Each chapter in this work focuses on a different intergenerational problem of care. In particular, I investigate family efforts of identity formation, socialization, marriage arrangements, filial piety, and the everyday deployment of painful, collective-era memories. Attending to how families respond to change, and particularly changes in economic and emotional roles within the household, is a critical and important question that adds to our understanding of how development impacts subjectivity and experience.

The dissertation of Erin Elizabeth Thomason is approved.

Douglas W. Hollan

Christopher J. Throop

Chi-Fun Cindy Fan

Yunxiang Yan, Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

To Finnian
and his generation

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Introduction:

Everything has Changed

我们的解放前，大部分都作难
women de jifang qian, da bu fen dou zuo nan
报作难还不算，部门去还要饭
bao zuo nan hai bu suan, dou men qu hai yao fan
包要饭还不算，部分区农村所管
bao yao fan hai bu suan, bufenqu nongcun suo guan
改革开始三十年，现在什么变化完
gai ge kaishi sanshi nian, xianzai shenme bian hua wan
以前就是难关女，现在就是女管男
Yiqian jiushi nan guan nü, xian zai jiushi nü guan nan
女管男还不算，现在所有的西服都出去打工完
nü guan nan hai bu suan, xian zai suo you de xifu dou quchu dagong wan
打工完还不算，孙子都交给奶奶看
dagong wan hai bu suan, cunzi dou jiao gei nainai kan
奶奶看不好了，一切的事情都给奶奶惯
nainai kan buhao liao, yiqie de shiqing dou gei nainai guan
现在改革开放三十年，什么都改变
xianzai gaige kaifang sanshi nian, shen me dou gaibian

Before our revolution, everything was difficult
But reporting difficulty comes short, went to the department and they still wanted food
But wanting food comes short, now the entire countryside becomes managed
It's been thirty years since reform and opening, right now everything has changed
Before it was "man commands woman", now it's "woman commands man"
Women commands man comes short, right now all the daughters-in-law go out for work
Going out for work comes up short, grandsons all are given to grandmothers for care
Grandmother care is not bad enough, grandmother is blamed for every single thing
It's been thirty years since reform and opening, everything has changed

--Tang Chunrong, aged 55

Tang Chunrong wrote this poem while she tended to her four grandchildren. She recited it to me while she broke sticks and twigs for her stove, preparing the evening meal for her family of six. When she delivers the poem, her pacing is rapid and the lyrics take on a rhythm of their own. Everything has changed, the poem's refrain laments. It is as if no one can keep up with the

vast number of changes in rural China. The poem is also a platform of complaint, illuminating the contours of transformation that affect her everyday life. While gender roles have flipped, giving Auntie Tang more authority within the household, “everything is now under the responsibility of grandmothers” including raising, feeding, and clothing grandchildren while the parental generation—Tang’s sons and daughters-in-law—migrate in search of employment. This significant change in household responsibility shifts not only the power dynamics within the family, but the very expectations of family ideology, causing ripples in how family is imagined, invoked, and implemented in daily life.

Auntie Tang’s family situation illustrates new living arrangements and family obligations in rural China well. Her two sons and their wives both migrated to different urban areas to work in factories. Her own husband has part-time employment in the township, and Auntie Tang cares for the four grandchildren almost single-handedly. The oldest two boys live at a boarding school for most of the year; every two weeks, they come home for four days. The youngest two, a girl aged 3 years and a toddler boy aged 18-months, live full-time with the older couple. Auntie Tang takes the girl to kindergarten and looks after the toddler. Auntie Tang herself began looking after children at the age of 10, when her own parents divorced and left her in the care of an aunt. She cared for her cousins and was forced to drop out of school in the 5th grade. This kind of extended child care as a result of parental migration describe the arrangements of approximately 8 million rural families in China (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2016b).

When sorting through my data from the field, Auntie Tang’s words came to the forefront of my mind, “Everything has changed. Everything.” For older rural women, the central feature of “everything” is the family—the relationship between husband and wife, mother and son, and grandparent and grandchild. This dissertation investigates the changing family dynamics in the

wake of “everything changing.” In particular, I consider how migration has reconfigured obligational ideals of care between traditional gender and age-based hierarchies within village life in rural Henan. I ask the question of how internal migration and human movement has changed expectations of family roles, responsibilities, and affectual connections. Each chapter in this work focuses on a different intergenerational problem of care.

Research on Chinese kinship has a long and rich history. Much of this excellent scholarship has focused on how kinship is operationalized in daily life, exploring the intersections between family and society. This dissertation takes two departures from the previous literature on the Chinese family. First, I take intergenerational relationships as a central focus, attending to the vicissitudes of intergenerational life as distinct from a Western nuclear model. Second, I pay particular attention to migration and the ways in which it shapes contemporary family life.

The Chinese family has long been described as “extended” or “variable” (H. Baker 1979; Freedman 1970; Wolf 1972) and several ethnographic accounts notice the ways in which intergenerational relationships impact the daily life of the family and are changing in response to new trends of migration, urbanization, and nuclearization. For instance, Marjorie Wolf records the complaints of an older woman worrying about her unfilial son (1972). Concerns over how to support aging parents in light of new residence patterns and new assumptions of privacy shape the apprehensions of many adult children (Jing 2004; S. Li 2017; Shi 2009; Y. Yan 2003; H. Han 2008). Several authors record the changing practices of marriage formation in the wake of new Party interventions which reduce the authority of the older generation (Potter and Potter 1990; Y. Yan 1996; Friedman 2005; Diamant 2000). Even more record new fertility practices as a result of the One-Child Policy (Greenhalgh 1993, 2008; Fong 2006; Shi 2017; H. Zhang 2007).

However, only recently have ethnographers paid attention to the practices of grandparenting, the shared practice of child raising, and the conflicts and collaborations that have arisen as a result of migration's impact on family structure.

Two recent examples of this examination is Gonçalo Santos' chapter "Multiple Mothering and Labor Migration in Rural South China" (2016) and Yunxiang Yan's article "Intergenerational Intimacy and Descending Familism in Rural North China" (2016a). Both attune to the rise of skipped-generation households as a product of migration and both explore the shifting values of authority within the family. Santos' chapter points to the importance of grandparent care and argues for a recognition of gendered hierarchies. Yan's research records new practices that encourage intergenerational intimacy, highlighting the continual concern for intergenerational happiness and harmony. Drawing both grandparents and parents into a shared goal is the "centripetal force" of the youngest generation.

This dissertation takes both of these arguments a step further. I examine not only the ways that a third generation is a centripetal force, but also the ways in which grandchildren disrupt relationships between adult children and their parents. Since the rise of popular parenting advice (Kuan 2015), parents and grandparents may have very different views on what it means to be a good parent. In Chapter 4 and Chapter 6, I highlight some of these tensions. In addition to calling for a recognition of grandparenting and drawing attention to the gendered labor of care, I also locate the shifts to normative grandmothering within the transformations of gendered labor in the collective era in Chapter 3. I explore the techniques utilized by mothers of adult sons to prevent heavy childcare burdens in their late-age in Chapter 5, thusly linking the anxiety over split-households to middle-aged women who are not yet grandparents.

Internal migration in China has received much scholarly attention. Anthropologists consider how migrants impact cities (Jacka 2005; L. Zhang 2002; C. C. Fan 2008), reformulate traditional roles of women (Gaetano 2015; Gaetano and Jacka 2004), circulate value (Anagnost 2004; H. Yan 2008), and reconfigure rural livelihoods (Murphy 2002). This scholarship has also been informed by the larger consideration of transnational migration. In particular, the attention to transnational families help to clarify the techniques of parenting across geographic distances (Fresnoza-Flot 2009; Uy-Tioco 2007; Baldassar 2007; Carrasco 2010; Dreby 2010). This literature has just recently begun to attend to the family outside the nuclear parent-child dyad (Yarris 2017; Coe 2013).

The literature on migration helps to crystalize a central problem of intergenerational life: How to maintain a family across distance? How to maintain feelings of obligation which inspires children and grandchildren to contribute to the economic viability of the household? These questions will be explored throughout the dissertation.

This project was originally framed as an investigation of “left-behind children,” and I thought that I would understand novel forms of parenting and socialization in the wake of migration. However, as ethnographic experience is apt to do (D. Miller 2017), I found something that expanded my idea of what “left-behind children” were in the first place. I discovered ordinary rural families who deal with separation and reunion as a normal part of rural life. While the families I interviewed were profoundly affected by rural to urban migration, they were affected in ways which did not always fit with the categories and definitions available in the demographic and psychological literature. I struggled therefore with how to label these families. In this dissertation, I alternate between terms which still remain awkward: “families affected by migration,” “children with migrant parents,” or simply “rural families.” In some cases, I also use

the term “left-behind children” because the title captures a prevailing sentiment found within popular media and demographic studies.

What is a Family?

Kinship has been a traditional focus for anthropologists, beginning as early as Radcliffe-Brown (1941) and Malinowski (1930b, 1930a). And like many classical concepts, kinship has been fraught with intellectual conflicts. As many theorists attempt to define what kinship is as what it does, leading to a myriad of fruitful theoretical forays. For example: what is the cultural baseline definition of kinship that can take into account cultural variation (K. Gough 1973)? Why do all societies, both patrilineal and matrilineal, trace descent (Bronisław Malinowski 1930a)? How can we conceptualize fictive kin and affinal ties within kinship systems (Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Carsten 2004)? How can we understand women’s agentive roles in patrilineal kinship systems (Judd 2008)? How do concepts of kinship change in relation to changing social and economic organization? And if we appreciate what kinship is, can we actually answer what it does—as the structural functionalists and Lévi-Strauss (1969) would affirm—or can we only understand kinship as a psychic system of symbols salient for its public presence and internalized influence (Schneider 1984)? These questions help to clarify the contested nature of family and kinship. At once a “mutuality of being” (Sahlins 2013) impacting our individual sense of belonging and an institutionalized structure imposing regularity and moral codes to our attachments and obligations, kinship is implicated in our most basic experiences of sociality.

In this dissertation, I propose to understand family as a set of interpersonal expectations which shape individual ideals for practical and emotional life. Understanding family this way

allows us to see the ways in which conflicts and negotiations take place between members with different histories and experiences. At the forefront of such conflicts are the differences between generational cohorts who have disparate educational levels and divergent expectations for household contributions. To further complicate matters, traditional gendered divisions of labor impact the household as men are expected to engage in wage-labor while the women's domain is still the home and childcare. These idealizations of family roles have real effects both in terms of practical daily behavior and negotiations between family members. Kinship ideals also affect how individuals assess their role and obligations to their family. By viewing the family as a set of interpersonal expectations and obligations, we can see the intertwined nature of emotional and economic life. By expectations, I refer to the ideas and ideologies that each family member has about his or her role in labor, economic provision, and emotional closeness, as well as the standards that he or she holds for the other people within the family. By obligations, I refer to a way of feeling indebted to the family. I will show that feelings of obligation are intertwined with moral ideas.

In terms of the terminology used by my interlocutors, expectations are expressed through the verbs *xuyao* (require), *dei* (must), *yinggai* (should)—all of which indicate a moral compulsion towards a certain behavior or action. Expectations are also articulated more subtly in the idea of *xiguan* (to be used to) utilized to express not desire or idealism, but a kind of peaceful resignation. Foreign researchers will certainly not be able to *xiguan* the food and environment in the countryside at first, but will eventually *xiguan* depending on her ability to endure hardship. Migrants *xiguan* the unfamiliar environments of the urban factories; most grandparents will not be able to *xiguan* the differences in lifeways in the city. Likewise, children *xiguan* their parents absence and grow attached to their grandparent caregivers or their lives at the boarding school.

In Yunxiang Yan's now classic study, *Private Life Under Socialism* (2003), he notes that studies on Chinese kinship have all utilized what he titles "the corporate model" (2003, 3) which interprets the Chinese family as a unit of economic cooperation, notable for its flexibility to expand, contract, and diversify in response to economic need. In contrast, Yan's study directed attention to the individualized lives of rural Chinese who were increasingly focused on horizontal relationships of conjugality and their own personal satisfaction. Along this vein, Yan highlighted the ways that individual's personal feelings were increasingly thought of as legitimate for social action, noting changes in private space, marital partnerships, and fertility cultures. This thesis stood against prominent scholars who had attempted to characterize Chinese emotional life as socially insignificant (Potter 1988; Potter and Potter 1990, 181–95) or hidden under a language of somatization (Kleinman 1988b). Yan's work prompted attention to the individualization of Chinese life and society (Hansen and Svarverud 2010).

Yan's perspective, draws from a larger theory influenced by Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002). Titled "the individualization thesis," this idea posits that shifts in economic and social orders lead to an increasing emphasis on emotional satisfaction and personal life choices as determinants of social institutions in modernity. In particular, they point out that marriage, once arranged by older members of the family, is largely decided by individual feelings of love and affection (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Beck-Gernsheim 2002, see also Goode 1970; Thornton and Fricke 1987). Likewise, fertility preferences are delinked from economic considerations and increasingly made on the basis of individual desires for happiness and fulfillment (c.f. G. Becker 1973; Senior 2014). Individualization has radically changed the subjective experience of family from a taken-for-granted obligation to an emotionally valuable source of pleasure. This has great resonance with Western conceptualizations of kinship because

it allows us to understand the draw of affectual bonds and answers the questions about why “the families we choose” (Weston 1997) are often more emotionally comfortable than blood lines or cultural prescribed kin relations (Carsten 2004).

However, if we take this to its logical conclusion, we might assume that an increasing amount of attention to emotional states would lead to a decline of economic organization as a salient feature of family life. And likewise, the more a society becomes individualized, the less a family is organized simply on the basis of economic collaborations and shared labor. Contrarily, the more emotive expressions of closeness will count towards family satisfaction. In other words, if we follow the theory progressively, individual conceptions of happiness and emotional closeness will all have increasing salience towards individual evaluations of family satisfaction, while at the same time, previous moral norms and obligations for collaborative work within the family will wane. The more Chinese society becomes influenced by Westernization, the less traditional family values—such as provision of elder care, the honoring of old over young, and the emphasis of gendered divisions of labor—will factor into evaluations of family moral life (Shek 2006). A precursory review of the ethnographic data on contemporary families provide an important corrective to this generalization.

A number of scholars, including Yan’s more recent work, have attended to the cultural specificities of individualization within the Confucian-inspired contexts of East Asia. This research has shown that in tandem to the increasing value of emotional satisfaction, moral obligations to the hierarchical family continue to exert a weighty pressure on individuals, impacting their decisions on divorce (Y. Yan 2013), intergenerational provision (Ikels 2004a), fertility decisions (Shi 2017), education (Bregnbæk 2016a), and marriage (Obendiek 2016b). Instead of the obliteration of previous moral and ethical systems, researchers have called for a

consideration of how patriarchy and age-based authority has been rearranged and reimagined (G. D. Santos and Harrell 2016b).

My scholarship calls for a renewed attention to the felt necessity of intergenerational provision as an emotionally and economically salient act within the family. I explore the interconnections of emotions and economics through intergenerational obligations. The themes that I address in this dissertation implicate both emotional and economic sacrifices between older and younger generations and attempt to flush out how such obligations of exchange affect assessments of wellbeing.

Economics, Emotions, and Ethics in Intergenerational Family Life

There is a vivid moment in Kristin Yarris' (2017) *Care Across the Generations*, when she intends to repay her interlocutors for their care with cash after she fell unexpectedly ill while completing her interview. The offer of monetary compensation threatens to disrupt the moral value of sacrificial care—a central ethic of Nicaraguan grandmothers caring for their grandchildren in the absence of migrant mothers. She returns to the central tension between moral and emotional sacrifice and monetary provision throughout the volume. Yarris' rich ethnography draws attention to the ways in which intergenerational families both utilize and eschew economic provision as a meaningful exchange of care.

Yarris' account crystalizes a central tension between money and emotion. How are both forms of care? Furthermore, how are they used differently by different generations to express connection with the youngest generation of children? Cati Coe's (2008, 2013) analysis of generational structures of feeling in Ghanaian transnational families is significant in understanding emotions as a product of lived experience. Drawing from William Reddy (2001)

and Raymond Williams (2001), she investigates the particular emotional comportment of migrant parents. In using the terms “structures of feeling” or “structures of experience,” Raymond Williams attempts to describe the unfolding of beliefs and values as they operate in daily life. Structures of feeling are “lived in” in that while emotional sentiments, beliefs and values maybe explicitly expressed in art or literature, they cannot be contained by them (Williams 2001, 133). Coe argues against understanding transnational migration as a singular kind of experience giving rise to a new structure of feeling. Instead Coe contends that transnational migrants draw from already existing emotional regimes “drawn on from their communities of origin, social networks of migrants, and the communities to which they migrate” (2008, 224).

Coe’s insight that not all family members share the same family ideology, and therefore experience separation differently is a point that I will return to in different forms throughout this dissertation. Through examining different generational and gendered expectations of the family, I will also argue that emotional experiences are shaped by discursive understandings of what individuals imagine to be an ideal family. I argue that specific, historical experiences, and arrangements of the social and economic system radically impact one’s foundational understanding of morality, and therefore how one can and will subjectively engage with the world. Factoring into assessments of wellbeing is that sticky question of how money does or does not disrupt affectual bonds of care.¹

The families portrayed in this dissertation are composed of multiple generations and each generation has a unique perspective on how and why to live a meaningful life. Within the context

¹ Comparison may also be drawn from other kinds of intimate relationships. For instance, the categories of affective and instrumental friendships, which characterize relationships established either by pure emotions or mutual financial aid and support. However, the division of the two are not so easily parsed as explored by Michael Strickland in his (2010) article.

of the family, these different viewpoints lead to cooperation and dissent as family members struggle to engage on shared goals— How to maintain a rural identity in the face of discursive devaluation of rural spaces? How to raise the next generation in a way that will result in a secure economic and emotional future? How to foster intergenerational solidarity despite different ideas about what constitutes meaning? How to maintain a relationship with one’s son despite eroding power of one’s generational position?

By looking at the intergenerational perspectives in each one of these questions, we can come to a deeper understanding of the ways in which Chinese contemporary rural families are not a simply a holdover of tradition or a sacrificial arrangement of modernity, but rather a conglomeration of kinship traditions, ideals, arranged in response to economic and affectual bonds which are sometimes mutually supportive, and sometimes at odds.

The study

My field research in a corner of northeast rural Henan in a township I call Pear Branch Township was conducted over the period of eleven months starting in June 2013 and followed by ten months of consecutive residence from October 2014 to August 2015. My residence in China, however traces back much longer and includes two three-month long language intensive courses—the first in Shanghai and the second in Harbin. In total, I have lived in China for more than 22 months. My M.A. level research includes two different projects—the first a study of rural-to-urban female migrants working as sex workers in Changsha and the second, an investigation of the rise of elite consumption of foreign-brand bicycles and sporting communities of urban cyclists. Both of these projects serve as important background to this dissertation

project, in particular my interviews with sex workers drew my attention to the phenomenon of separated rural families and began my interest in the topic.



Figure 1 Pear Branch Township is outside of Shangqiu, Henan

I selected Pear Branch Township using personal connections—it was the hometown of a colleagues’ friend. I settled on the township after visiting several other rural areas in a neighboring province. Selected for its concentration of many left-behind children, during 2013, the middle school in Pear Branch Township had also partnered with a local university to provide psychological training for returned migrant parents and had collected a large-scale demographic survey. The research and project was discontinued in the year of my fieldwork with the conclusion that most of the left-behind children had entered private boarding schools (three had been built in the township, and even more in the county-seat).

The basic demographic and income data of the township and village where I lived serves as important background data to my study as it informs the socioeconomic realities of my informants. I also want to confront the idea that rural China is necessarily empty or poor. These data show that the township was actually a diverse and growing place.

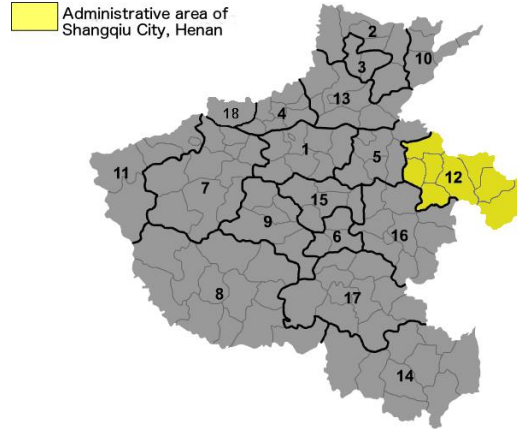


Figure 2 Henan divided into Administrative Units

Pear Branch Township comprised 32 villages sharing a central hospital, market district, and school system. About an hour outside of Shangqiu city, Pear Branch Township has a population of 53,500, divided into urban and rural households. While income data was unavailable, the entire county and the township had been labeled one of China’s 592 “*pinkunxian*” or impoverished counties marked for poverty alleviation, urbanization, and development as part of a national campaign in 2012. The county records that 730,000 of its 1.18 million residents qualify for poverty benefits cards, meaning their income per person is below 2,300 RMB per year (around \$300 US, which averages to around 80 cents per day). In Pear Branch Township, 19 of the 32 villages had been categorized as impoverished villages in need of economic revitalization.

As a result of these development programs, an increasingly widening diversity of economic options have grown up in Pear Branch Township, including market-based buying and selling, a thread factory, a brick factory, agricultural distribution, and construction. When I first visited the township in 2013, there was only 4 restaurants; that number has more than tripled in a space of a year. During that time, two chain grocery stores also opened their doors as a testament

to the increasing consumer options within the township. One major source of commerce is that the township boasts the county's only hospital and therefore draws a large number of residents in the surrounding areas for medical treatment. Commercial activity thrives adjacent to the hospital; food stalls, medical supplies, and other consumer goods are all offered to families visiting the hospital. The township celebrates several "market festival days" (*fenghui*) per year following particular dates on the Chinese calendar. During these festival days, a large number of merchants would come to hawk wares selling trinkets, blankets, clothing, food, and fortune telling.

Growth within the township has meant that residents in villages in the immediate vicinity have begun to pursue economic opportunities locally instead of migrating to urban areas. This has implications for the basic economic and material organization of families within my study and is likely responsible for the movement back and forth of parents between rural and urban areas. Some of the most successful families were able to open shops within the township. For example, my host sister ran a clothing shop which turned over more than 1,000 RMB of inventory every week. My other host sister ran a photography shop and was able to earn a comfortable 20,000 RMB per year. Families with less education set up food vending stands selling bread, fruit, or tofu. Individuals who had less skills or investment capital would usually work as construction hands to support other villagers in the construction of two storied houses built in preparation for son's wedding. Additionally, many families that I met were involved in sideline work. The oldest women would work on beading or piecework, or undertake part-time plywood gluing. Some would also hire themselves out as laborers during peak agricultural times, spraying fields with pesticides, cutting the sides of fields where the harvesters could not reach.



Figure 3 Pear Branch Township during a market festival.

For the duration of my field research I lived in one of Pear Branch Township's smallest villages, which I will call Jiatian village, that was less than a mile east outside the township. Most of my study participants lived in single surname village, but three of my central informants lived in neighboring villages. I rented a typical village house constructed in the 1990s. It had a courtyard garden, a central electric well, and had been wired (though precariously) into the electrical grid. There were two major development projects underway during my fieldwork. The first was an upgrade to the village's electric system and the second was a running water project which brought tap water to all the houses in the village. Since rural taxes had been eliminated in 2006, the money for these projects was raised by a village committee and each family was asked to contribute several hundred RMB for each project.

Jiatian village consisted of about 150 households. Using a convenience sample, I surveyed about half these households, recording their ages, primary sources of income, and

migratory status. The total population surveyed is 193 people. Out of the total population surveyed, there were 22 men and 6 women who migrated for more than 10 months of the year, accounting for approximately 56 percent of those between the ages of 20 and 50 [I did not include teenagers in this sample or families who had migrated more permanently], 10 of 43 (23%) children under 12 were living primarily with their grandparents without their parents and 18 (42%) children lived with their mothers while their fathers migrated for work, 5 (11%) children lived with their fathers and grandparents after a divorce. As I record in Chapter 2, migratory status is likely to shift in response to the market, economic need of the family, or other factors. Consequently, while I hesitate to give a static representation of migratory status, the sheer frequency of migration is represented in this statistic.

Other than migratory remittances, which were a significant portion of income for families within the village, most family income was derived from sideline activities and agriculture. Families maintained active courtyard gardens and small scale animal husbandry. In the village, there was one chicken industry, one small store which sold children's snacks and alcohol.

The most major celebration in the village was the New Year's holiday which occurred following the Lunar Calendar in early February. Almost all migrants would return home during that time, as it marked a significant period of family reunion. In addition, weddings, funerals, and baby showers were also a momentous part of village life. These marked out momentous events in the life course in the lives of my informants. During my fieldwork, I participated in three different families New Year's reunions, I attended 2 baby showers (*juxi*), 4 weddings, and one funeral (there was one more funeral that occurred while I was there, I did not attend).



Figure 4 A Courtyard Garden and Harvest of Wheat

Methods

In a recent debate featured in *HAU: The Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Giovanni de Col edited a collection of essays titled: “Two or three things I love or hate about ethnography.” The contributors all discussed the conflicts between the collection of data in participant observation and the representation of the data in academic writing. Tim Ingold (2017) writes that participant observation is not a method of data collection, but is an ontological commitment to attuning to the lifeways of diverse others. In particular, Ingold argues against the collection of “ethnographic case studies” instead, he argues ethnography is a particular way of learning.

I like Ingold’s approach for two reasons. First, he draws out the ethical slippage that exists in anthropology. To wit, the potential for utilizing human relationships only for the

purposes of knowledge extraction. Second, Ingold highlights how ethnographic engagement inevitably involves transformation; transformation of the researcher-self in how she sees the world. But I am also drawn to Ingold's idea that participant observation is an ontological commitment because it also describes my own field experience. I moved to a village house and became more or less adopted by a rural family (or several). While I had a "research-question" in mind, most of my actual research held less than an agentive schedule. Because I lived in the village, my daily life consisted of long walks around the village and bike rides to three neighboring villages where my other informants lived. I struck up conversations with people on the road. I shared meals with families. I spent many afternoons sitting and watching in courtyards. The ethnographic data that I came away with was frustratingly broad. The challenge of turning such an experience into a product has been incredibly humbling. I'm not sure if I got it "right."

Viewed alternately, however, this dissertation could be—as Ingold proposes—a kind of reality-grounded exercise in philosophy. The questions that frame my philosophical inquiry are recorded above but perhaps they bear repeating since they were extensively formed through the experiences of living with my informants. How does cultural change impact family life? How do new obligations within the family shape senses of well-being and ethical self-making? These questions arose in part because of my earlier experience interviewing female migrants in Changsha. I came to the village looking for these questions. But they also presented themselves because they reflected the actions of my informants—not just the reflective statements of individuals in interviews. Interpreting actions have proved to be more difficult than discursive analysis of an interview transcription.

In more direct terms, this dissertation makes use of two central research methods: participant observation (Bernard 2006) and person-centered interviewing (Levy and Hollan 2015; Hollan 2005). In my field research, I combine these two techniques in what might be called “person-centered observation” to follow participants during the course of their everyday lives. I met regularly with seven key informants over a period of 9 months and recorded our conversations. Following classical person-centered interviewing, my goal was to understand what was “at stake” for rural grandmothers in a way which captured their concerns without professionalizing them or stigmatizing their worries (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991). Yet unlike other person-centered approaches, I often interviewed women as they were going about their normal everyday tasks, such as preparing food, caring for children, sewing piecework, or doing sideline work. My interviews were punctuated with asides from other family members and long interruptions for whatever task was at hand. There was little privacy during my interviews and often my purposeful conversation ended up being derailed by another neighbor.

My research participants were mainly recruited by village proximity. Since I participated fully in village life, my daily walks around the village were some of the most productive in terms of learning about other people’s lives. In general, because of my gender, I spoke with older women and my research reflects this population bias. Older women, unlike their younger counterparts were frequently not occupied with wage labor or intensive infant care and consequently were more than willing to tell me stories. Often these women would try to feed me enormous amounts of food and were delighted when at the end of my fieldwork, not only had I gained weight, I was also pregnant.

In addition to village based ethnography, I also participated in two different Christian church activities. The first church was located just south of the township. As an officially

sanctioned church (*sanzihui*), it had a large network of speakers from all over China and a team of traveling pastors of both genders. This church also held a weekly, and sometimes twice weekly, Bible study in the village where I lived. At over 75 years old, Grandmother Fong (Chapter 6) and Grandmother Chen (Chapter 3) were the eldest Christians in the village and would often remind me to attend the Bible study, often hours before it started. The friendships that these women developed with each other were supportive and kin-like. Many of the younger women were solo parents, their husbands had migrated for work. The second Christian church I participated in was technically a house church, or an underground church (*fuzihui*). Yujie, a central informant (see Chapter 5), introduced me to the church. This church also had a substantial network of support from Pentecostal-like international and national Christian movements. These two churches often fought over spiritual authority.



Figure 5 A Christian Service at the Township Church

Christianity in rural China and the ways in which it impacts the family and familial sentiments will be the focus of some of my later publications, yet in this dissertation Christianity

appears as background to some of the data that I present. In particular, Grandmother Fong featured in Chapter 6, converts a Buddhist folktale to a Christian moral proverb. The Christian church proved to be an excellent place in which to recruit participants, since most of the attendees were older women caring for their grandchildren. All but one of my central informants attended a Christian church. I also participated in the Christian gatherings because of my own spiritual commitments and beliefs. Consequently, since I was the most educated and the only literate member of the village Bible study, I often ended up reading passages of scriptures to the group and explaining biblical history.

I moved into the village with my husband of 5 years, Ben Thomason. Having a spouse in the field opened up many research doors and no doubt the families found me to be more “normal” because of his presence. Ben was also a competent research partner and he accompanied me on many of my preliminary research interviews. Since he speaks excellent Mandarin, is an accomplished violinist, and fortunately can hold liquor quite well, he received a hearty welcome by all the men. Once when I attended a *juxi* (baby shower) without him, the men in the group, who were already quite drunk, lamented that they would much prefer if he were there instead of me.

While in the village, Ben was granted an English teaching job at a boarding school in the neighboring township. This allowed me access to the school and I distributed a written survey and held several oral interviews with the students and staff. The school paid very little, but they gave us a motorcycle to borrow while he worked there, which also allowed us to travel around the county more freely than we had on our bicycles. I am now planning a second research project around rural boarding schools based on the preliminary data that I collected.

Many of my ethnographic methods actually feel embarrassingly “old fashioned,” including the presence of a non-academic spouse (though my spouse was male). Living conditions found in the village were also more similar to conditions of other anthropologists who have undertaken research in remote places. With no sewage and limited electricity, I more or less lived as closely as possible to my informants. The rise of urban anthropology and increasing living standards of the world has allowed so many of us to continue living with the comforts of flush toilets, air conditioning, or Western foods. Not that it is wrong to enjoy these things during fieldwork. I would have taken advantage if these were available to me. However, I did find that living in the village afforded a sense of embodied experience otherwise unavailable to me had I stayed in more comfortable quarters. I awoke to the cries of roosters, children, and in the summer, the noise cicadas hurt my ears. I had the added labor burden of managing the household trash, sewage, and water. I dealt with rolling blackouts of electricity. I contracted giardia twice and was violently ill with food poisoning several times. I experienced the extreme bodily discomfort of high humidity in the summer and the near-freezing of the winter.

While I will always be marked as foreign and white, my discussions about rural China while visiting wealthy urban friends in Zhengzhou, Shanghai, and Beijing allowed me to witness first-hand the labeling and stigma that rural people undergo in urban China. I also noted the embodied experience of traveling between spaces of development. In one instance after a week-long power outage drove me to seek out a coffee-shop in the city an hour away, I had the strangest sense of not noticing the usually-familiar smell of coffee as comforting, but rather odd and out-of-place. This impacted the way I saw statements of my rural informants about urban places and helped me to see that urban development or cleanliness might not be as comfortable for everyone.

The careful reader will note that throughout my writing I have intentionally (and unintentionally) revealed some of my emotional experiences during my fieldwork. I had many emotions in the field including ambivalence, anger, frustration, as well as a deep and profound sense of care and friendship. While this is not an auto-ethnography, I do recognize the role of my own individual emotional experience as a significant source of my data. I try to be honest, but I'm sure that the anxieties have colored not only my ability to analyze my fieldwork experience but also shaped the very project itself (Devereux 1967).

Notes on Language and Translation

I am (mostly) fluent in standard Mandarin, the official language of the People's Republic of China. My interlocutors spoke a derivative of Mandarin which involved the changing of tones, consonants, and vowel sounds. The Henan dialect shares commonalities with Anhui and Shandong provinces but likely has some of its own unique features. I am not a linguist and I cannot assess the formal aspects of the dialect. Despite my attempts at hiring a tutor to teach me the dialect, locals had little sense for the formal or informal linguistic features that made the dialect different from Mandarin.

Since it is the official language, most broadcasts and television channels use standard Mandarin, so most of my informants could understand my speech even if they responded with dialect. Overtime, my language did more closely resemble local dialect and overtime, most of my close informants also got used to my way of speaking. A few abandoned trying to comprehend my questions and just simply talked about whatever was on their mind; I was happy to listen their monologues. The recorded interviews often betray the gaps in our mutual understanding.

Dialect has complicated the data analysis for this research in several ways. In my fieldnotes, I recorded conversations in either *pinyin* or English depending on my memory and understanding of the subject at hand. For several key recordings, I recruited two college students from neighboring areas who were able to transcribe the recordings into Mandarin. In many instances, the student's transcriptions are better understood as translations because some dialect phrases could not be written in characters—they translated their meaning into standard Mandarin. Student's transcriptions helped me to hear phrases or words that I had otherwise missed. I went back through the transcripts and tapes and clarified with my own transcription. Notably, there were several places where I and the student had different interpretations of how to translate the dialect phrase into Mandarin. In this dissertation, I have used my own understanding of the informant's speech.

Though my informants did not pronounce words following the standardized *pinyin*, I have still chosen to represent their speech with *pinyin* to render their language intelligible to the speaker of standard Chinese.

To more adequately represent the actual speech of my informants, I have chosen to represent quotations reconstructed through my fieldnotes with a 'single quotation mark.' All speech occurring within "double quotation marks" in addition to quotes offset from the text are transcribed from audio recordings.

Outline of the dissertation

In the first two chapters of this dissertation, I provide a portrait of the political and economic background to my fieldsite and rural China. In **Chapter 1**, I investigate the historical, political, and geographic boundaries which inscribe rural China as a symbolic space of

backwardness. I do this by first outlining the history of China's residency system, or *Hukou*, which has divided urban and rural China since the 1950s. Next, I turn to the ways in which rural people's understanding of space contest the prevailing ideas of development established by the national narratives of migration and poverty relief. This chapter outlines a critical background to the ways in which my informants understand themselves and the land that they inhabit.

In **Chapter 2**, I examine the state's investment in family ideology from a Chinese perspective using theoretical insights from Donzelot and Foucault. I argue that contemporary legislative concern over left-behind children can be seen as an extension of policies which target the formation, policing, and inculcation of families as a central national concern of modernity and development. In utilizing three case examples of rural families separated by migration, I point out how these ordinary families disrupt and confront both the modern nuclear and traditional Confucian family ideal. In doing so, I make the case for ethnographic analysis.

Chapter 3 turns to the reconfigurations of women's labor and the impacts upon the intergenerational contract for rural Chinese families. This chapter draws from feminist economic approaches to understand the invisibility of unpaid care as central to the management of family economy. I also offer a suggestion about the ways in which new focus on labor has factored into individual self-evaluations of value.

I offer four portraits which illuminate the family as a space of intergenerational cooperation in **Chapter 4**, paying special attention to the ways in which moral socialization takes place in rural families. In this chapter I argue that socialization takes place with the involvement of a number of social actors and extended kin. While intergenerational conflicts exist, socialization is actually a shared project of moral education, including contributions from older grandparents who are often thought to be unintentional with their parenting.

Chapter 5 describes the impact of young women's increased power in bridal negotiations on mothers of adult sons. In this chapter, I propose that rising power of the daughter-in-law in marital choices have created a new period of vulnerability for older women. I analyze ethnographic data which suggests that mothers of adult sons offer astronomical amounts of bride wealth as a strategy for bringing in a local girl and maintaining a relationship with their son.

In **Chapter 6** I survey the ways that older adults puzzle through new expectations of filial piety and I lay out a case for understanding filial care as a moral and ethical system which is implicated within several different and sometimes competing spheres of moral influence. I explore two instances where older adults are dealing with feelings of ambivalence towards their adult children and are trying to think in new ways about their expectations of filial piety.

I take a person-centered look at a grandmother's memories in **Chapter 7** in order to puzzle through the weight of history in everyday life. By linguistically analyzing Grandmother Zhu's narratives of poverty and pain, I consider how memories resist national and cultural narratives which seek to erase or simplify human suffering.

Finally, in the **Conclusion**, I provide some thoughts about how changing family expectations under novel economic conditions implicate both emotional and economic labor, tying together the twin analytical pursuits of this dissertation.

I title the dissertation "Obligated to Care" invoking the sense of obligation that family members feel towards caring for one another. I also want to recall a sense of thankfulness towards care, because care, and particularly the care of children by grandmothers, is due attention and gratitude. The caretaking arrangements of the intergenerational family in rural

China have enabled the movement of millions of migrants and allowed for an economic transformation throughout China.

Interlude:

Everyday Life in Pear Branch Township

In June of 2013, my partner and I awkwardly loaded our enormous hiking packs onto our laps in a small Chinese bus. Already too tall for the seats, we careened haphazardly along the flat, bucolic scenery. Our knees pressing into the seat backs, each one of the drivers turns threatened to pitch us into the aisle. We drove through what seemed like endless fruit and vegetable stands and small clusters of buildings. The peach orchards soon gave way to a long expanse of corn fields. When we boarded the bus, we had asked the driver to tell us when we arrived at Pear Branch Township since we ourselves had never been there. But the driver never mentioned anything and I became simultaneously anxious and sleepy. Suddenly, I caught sight of two women, both dressed in short black skirts and lace-frilled shirts, waving frantically at us and shouting indistinctly. I remember the stop feeling awkward and sudden, but I now know it more fondly as one of the most distinctive landmarks of Pear Branch Township—“the big TV” (*da dianshi*)—a 10 foot LED billboard that ran advertisements 24-7 in the center of the township. The two women were the sisters of my friend, thankfully they had spotted us, the tall, pale-faced foreigners hunched awkwardly over our bags, since the driver had neglected to call out our stop.

Stepping off the bus, I was blasted with the heat of the summer day, rich with humidity and the smell of diesel fuel, fried dough, rotting fruit and the faint sulfuric smell of untreated sewage. The township was bustling with people—families riding electric three wheeled carts, single men in motorcycles, and several cars even blasted through at high speeds. Everywhere I looked there was movement and excitement. Buildings were pasted with posters featuring pastel scripts and milky-looking photoshopped images advertising medical and beauty services, food, and newly constructed apartments. The township was a blast of colors, sounds and smells.

This was the third and last stop in my search to find an appropriate fieldsite. I had already visited three other rural areas which had each in turn presented major barriers to my research project on left-behind children. I found dialects that were impenetrable, a complex web of interpersonal drama which would prevent my research, and in one case, a thriving firework factory industry which prevented most out-migration, rendering the phenomenon of separated families mute. Exhausted, I finally had added the visit to Pear Branch Township with the hope that a friend's, friend's family would support my research.

Pear Branch Township, I would come to find out, was a middle-sized township in the process of economic reform. Several initiatives had brought in national grocery chain stores, a rash of new restaurants and new construction. As testimony to the area's growth, migrants were starting to come from other areas around China, a Hui family opened up a pulled noodle shop in the township center and a medical practitioner from Anhui opened up an acupuncture treatment center. Throughout the day, small vendor's carts lined the main road, a heavy concentration of vendors surrounded the medical hospital across from a well-designed but mostly neglected park. I later discovered that in many Henan counties, each township was assigned a "specialty industry." Pear Branch Township's "specialty industry" was the hospital, drawing in a constant stream of medical visitors. Most people I knew in the village visited the hospital at the faintest sign of even minor illness. "*Da zhen*," or a saline IV mixed with antibiotics and pain relievers, was a popular method of curing headaches, colds, and the flu. Resultantly, the townships commercial activities were boosted by the steady stream of visitors who also bought food, clothing, and other consumer goods.

While many families immediately surrounding the township had benefited from the new construction and a recent land-buyout program which had granted cash and an urban style

apartment in exchange for their farmland, most rural families, especially in villages with less easy proximity to the township suffered financially. The economic prosperity now emerging was recent and the area had experienced the harshness of collectivization era. In the last twenty years, living conditions slowly increased through migrant remittances. In the year of my fieldwork, wages from township jobs were still considerably less than what could be earned through urban employment. Consequently, almost every family that I encountered had a history of migration and were either presently separated from a migrant family member or had been in the past.

After several weeks of searching for a house to rent, my husband and I moved into a single-story brick courtyard building in Jiatian Village. One mile away from the township, connected by a narrow cement path, Jiatian Village was a single-surname village, meaning that all the families were connected through patrilineal descent. The names were inscribed on a tablet in the north end of town, though on a daily basis this tablet received little notice or attention. The village had a small temple that was mostly abandoned, only on New Year's did Grandmother Yu sweep it out and burned new incense, while Teacher Jia called out to her that she was only perpetuating superstitious behavior.

In relation to other villages in the township, Jiatian Village was on the smaller side. During collectivization, it had been combined with the two neighboring villages for a “*dadui*” or a large work team. The vestiges of this economic and political partnership were felt in the present day. Even now, the village lacked a village head. The younger men were too busy with business projects to maintain a political presence and administration was taken on by the heads of the neighboring village through partnerships formed during the collectivization period. Several abandoned chicken and pig barns stood, like empty monuments to the collectivization experiment, between Jiatian village and its neighboring work teams, faded political slogans just

readable on the brick surface. Because of its smaller size, Jiatian Village did not have a village store like so many other neighboring villages which had a shop selling ice creams, cold drinks, and snacks. Instead Grandmother Ren, a woman of about 75, sold candy, alcohol, and cigarettes out of her living room. Her most frequent clients were the village children and families who found themselves with unexpected guests.



Figure 6 Jiatian Village during Harvest

The landscape Pear Branch Township was flat and unrelenting. Miles after miles of fields held corn and wheat and other than burial mounds, there was no elevation change at all. Most of the paths were lined with cottonwood trees, a cash crop that was harvested periodically. The township was comprised of 32 different villages, spaced out about 2-3 km from each other evenly throughout the area. Each village had a different organization and since much of the

infrastructure was organized locally by the village heads, different villages had different access to paved roads and upgraded electrical grids. Indoor plumbing was not available anywhere outside the township

Houses were clumped together in the center of Jiatian Village and farm plots surrounded the living areas. There were a mix of housing styles, cement two-storied buildings of newer construction and brick single-stories (like the one that I rented) from the 1990s, a few mud houses with dirt floors still remained, occupied by the villages oldest residents. Most houses had a several roomed main-structure, a walled courtyard, and several other rooms: used for cooking, storing food and equipment, and sometimes living quarters for extended family. These courtyards were distinct from the street through large metal doors. Families set up garden plots in these courtyards or other usable lands and garden produce made up a considerable bulk of family's food consumption. They supplemented what they grew with occasional purchases from the market. My host uncle was a competent gardener and the family was well stocked with napa cabbage, pole beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, wild lettuces, persimmons, and pomegranates, in addition to eggs and chicken, the family also raised a goose whose slaughter was scheduled for the New Year's holiday.

My life in Jiatian Village soon came to a predicable routine. I wrote fieldnotes in the morning and then went on a long walk around the village. Most families had finished the morning chores of feeding livestock and sat outside together. Sometimes bringing piecework or household task like drying peanuts or sorting seeds to the cement path. Young children and babies, too small for school would be led by their guardians, either a mother or grandmother, and sometimes a grandfather, to play along the village path. In the morning, some agricultural work would also be undertaken, such as applying fertilizer or pesticides, but other than harvest and

planting time, the actual routine farm work was light. Around noon, families returned home to cook lunch and most stayed inside during the heat of the day, napping, watching television or resting. Around 2pm, families began readying for the afternoon. Many people went into town making small purchases or visiting friends. Children were released from school at 3pm and while some biked or walked home themselves, most of the required an adult pick up. The afternoon was often a social time, children played games in the street, parents returned from work, stopping to chat on their way. Dinner time was scheduled around the setting sun. In winter, most families returned home to cook dinner and eat together as early as 5pm, whereas in the summer, they would stay late on the path, socializing or working until past 8pm.

Cooking and childcare took the bulk of older women's time. Food preparation was intensive and included fermenting dough for steamed buns, preserving crops like green beans and garlic, and washing, chopping, and cooking vegetables. Most families with whom I ate regularly, often used small amounts of pork fat in cooking, but their predominant type of protein came from eggs and peanuts. Families with a major source of migrant remittances ate more meat, and more varied dishes, including packaged food and snacks like cakes and crackers purchased from the new chain groceries in the township.

Laundry was a major chore. While many families had a semi-automatic machine, which agitated the clothes and spun them to remove water, the clothes still needed to be hung to dry. Shoes and blankets could not be washed in the small machine and I often saw women washing these items by hand, bent over water pans in their courtyards. Because of the dirt and mud in daily village life, many younger women complained that it was impossible to keep things clean. Most children had 2-3 changes of clothing and most adults owned a bit more. It was not uncommon to wear the same clothes repeatedly until they became too dirty.

In the winter, because the majority families did not have indoor heating, many children had chilblains—a mild form of frostbite—on their hands and faces. Adults sensitive to the cold and who worked outside also developed the painful, red rash. Nevertheless because of its location south of the Yellow River, historically marked as more temperate than the harsher north, families avoided indoor heating and cited several reasons why central heat could compromise one's health. Without heating, many families also did not bathe all winter, or else occasionally visited a public bathhouse in the township. The average temperature was between to 40-50 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and dropped to the 20s at night.

Summers were quite warm with averages between 80-95 degrees and a high percentage of humidity. Families stayed inside during the heat, sitting near fans, or finding shade. Older residents seemed to mind the cold more than the heat, but almost everyone seemed relatively unbothered by seasonal temperatures. From my own perspective, while the weather was more mild than other areas of China where I had spent time, I was still uncomfortable for much of the summer and winter months because I had spent most of my life with access to central heating and air.

While daily life included heavy labor, the general mood of the village was sociable and lively. Complaints often punctuated conversations, but the attitude of most villagers was positive. Two fist-fights broke out during my tenure in the village which were violent and disturbing to me, but were looked upon as normal and unremarkable to my informants. The anger between the two disputing parties dissipated after several days or weeks and was not mentioned again.

The most active and social times were spring and fall when milder temperatures allowed more socialization. Yet daily life was also punctuated with regular events, weddings, funerals, and baby showers (held after the baby reached one month of age). These were large banquets

where families hired catered meal services, rented tables and chairs, and gathered together with alcohol and entertainment. Ritualized performances framed the purpose of the event, but the socializing afterwards was a great enjoyment to the entire village. Weddings were scheduled according to the Chinese calendar and auspicious dates were chosen based on a fortune teller's guidance. Funerals and baby showers were scheduled following a prescribed period of time between the death or birth and the event. Because the work week was very flexible, events, which began in the early mornings, did not usually fall on the weekends. Coming from a Western sense of time where community events were scheduled based on a 5-day work week, it often felt a bit odd to celebrate a wedding or baby shower on a school day, especially since these events involved consuming large amounts of food and alcohol. In the afternoon following such an event, the entire village would go quiet because everyone would sleep off the consumption. Only children, unaffected by the gluttony, would play outside.

In order to give a more in depth look at some of the families I interviewed, I paint here a portrait of several of my informants, chosen to represent the diversity of experiences within the township and village. Several of these stories appear in different forms in the pages of this dissertation, but a description here serves to anchor what daily life was like for many families.

My host family: Auntie Cong is from a village just 3 miles away, and she regularly visits her natal family. In addition, she performs a large amount of labor; cleaning, cooking, and sewing. She also performs regular domestic labor in service to her children, such as washing blankets (which involved deconstructing and resewing the material) for her daughter-in-law, sending shoes to her grandchildren in Xinjiang, and cooking Chinese medicine for her daughter. The

couple has four children: two sons and two daughters. The first son runs a very successful agricultural company which distributes grain internationally. He is married to a local woman who runs a photography studio in the township. Together they have two children. The second son is a police officer in Xinjiang with one son. The eldest daughter runs a clothing store in the township. She had married as a young migrant and is now divorced; she is the sole provider of her one son. The youngest daughter is a farmer in Xinjiang, taking advantage of a land-policy which offered Han migrants benefits for moving to the region. The three local grandchildren often stay with the Auntie Cong and Uncle Jia. The couple also adopted a girl during the height of the One Child Policy and she lives in a spare room in the courtyard when she is not boarding at her residential high school during the year.

Uncle Jia's mother is still living and his two other brothers are close. One brother lives in the neighboring village where he raises ducks and geese; he purchased a large piece of property after the closing of the village school in the mid-1990s. One brother, whose house is next to Jia and Cong's, worked as a migrant through the 1990s and early 2000s but now is primarily engaged in agricultural labor of the family land. Uncle Jia was in the army during the 1980s and as a result receives a very small check (around 20 RMB) each month.

Cong and Jia are well respected members of the village. While Auntie Cong is quiet and does not often socialize with the other village women, she is known as a hard worker and she has several very close and loyal friends with whom she regularly visits. Uncle Jia served for some time as the village head and the accountant for the work brigade. During the Cultural Revolution, he joined the Red Army and walked by foot from Henan to Beijing to see Chairman Mao, a journey of more than 700 km.

Auntie Tang: 55 years of age. She has two married sons and one daughter. Her sons and her daughters-in-law both work in Wuhan, several hours away, while her daughter lives only several km away and regularly visits. The oldest two grandsons attend a boarding school in the county-seat and live with Auntie Tang and her husband for two weekends per month and during the summers. During these breaks from school, Auntie Tang's husband sets up an informal study hall for the children and they are assigned supplementary math and Chinese work.

In her daily life, Auntie Tang cooks for her family, gathers and breaks firewood, gathers wild edible plants, and tends a garden patch. The youngest grandson is 18-months-old and when he doesn't take his afternoon nap, she takes him on a bicycle ride through the village, the rhythmic pedaling lulls him to sleep. Her husband works regularly doing construction in the township, but also takes the youngest grandson on bike rides and walks, relieving Auntie Tang and sharing his grandson with his friends in the village. For odd jobs, Tang gathers cicadas in the summer to sell, sprays pesticide on others farm plots, and tends the planting of some of her neighbor's fields. She has several good friends in the village who visit each other regularly.

Grandmother Yu: Grandmother Yu has a total of four children, three of whom are deaf. Her youngest son had access to special education deaf school, but the older three have no education at all and communicate only through facial expressions and gestures. The youngest son can write and will sometimes communicate through writing words in the dirt. At over 70, Grandmother Yu cooks daily for her three grandchildren and her two oldest sons, both of whom work in a nearby brick factory. Since her grandchildren are now all entering junior high, she doesn't have to supervise them all the time, and the youngest, Lijian, travels home from school by herself on a bicycle. When she is not cooking or doing laundry and her health is good, the Grandmother Yu

does piecework at a factory, gluing together plywood sheets for 1 yuan each. Her oldest two grandchildren have migrated part of the year for work.

In March of 2015, Grandmother Yu's youngest daughter attempted suicide after enduring repeated domestic violence. She was checked into a mental hospital in the city and released to Grandmother Yu where she lived for several tumultuous weeks. Each morning, the daughter began screaming and yelling around 4am. She tried to hit anyone who approached her and because she was deaf, it was very difficult to communicate with her. She eventually returned to her husband's family. When I left the field, Yu's youngest granddaughter was entering middle school and her grandson had returned for his second attempt at the seventh grade.

Yujie: Yujie and her husband run a small food stand in the township. She is divorced and remarried, a fact which she recounted to me in hushed tones for fear of community gossip. In total, she has five children, the first two are from her first marriage and grew up with her ex-husband in Anhui. Her daughter was married and also living in Pear Branch Township. She was in the midst of arranging a marriage for her son during my fieldwork (I feature her dilemma in Chapter 5). The youngest three children, twin girls in kindergarten and a boy in first grade live with Yujie and her husband in a large cement house that while newly constructed, is cluttered with clothing and tools for the food business. She is a regular member of the underground house church, but she told me that sometimes she feels excluded because she does not have as much money as other women in the church, many of whom were granted urban apartments in the township as part of the latest development project in the area.

Just before I left from the field, Yujie's husband migrated to Zhengzhou in order to earn more income for her son's bridewealth. Her mother-in-law also left for an urban area in order to

care for Yujie's father-in-law, a migrant who injured his leg. Yujie works long hours, rolling and needing dough for the food stand and undertaking piecework. While the food stand earns more money, it is less flexible and she cannot watch her children at the same time. During the summer, she sews fleece coats by hand. She is paid 16 yuan for each coat and she can complete two coats per day.

Auntie Yu: Auntie Yu preferred not to be recorded, but gave me permission to use her situation as background to my research. She was intelligent, sharp witted, and insightful, so I was disappointed when I could not convince her to record our conversations. Auntie Yu attended school until the 7th grade. Now in her 50s, she was one of the most literate women of her generation. She had one son and one daughter. Because her daughter had migrated for work, Auntie Yu was one of the only women I met who cared for her daughter's child (in contrast, most grandmothering was to the son's family). The situation was temporary and her daughter, pregnant with a second child, reunited with the 7-year-old during the summer and brought her to live in Suzhou with the rest of the family.

The granddaughter attended a private boarding school, but her residence remained with her grandparents. The benefits to the school, Auntie Yu recounted, was that the food was of higher quality and the school provided transportation so that Auntie Yu did not have to drive her into the township. Auntie Yu made sure her granddaughter completed her homework and I saw the pair reciting poetry and math in fun and engaging ways. Also during the summer months, Auntie Yu's son and daughter-in-law returned from migrant labor and gave birth to the couple's first child, a girl. During that time, Yu became very ill and needed to go to the hospital in the capital city. A collection was taken up for her medical expenses by her female friends, and she

told me that the bill was mostly paid for by her son, though her daughter also contributed. When her son and daughter-in-law returned, Auntie Yu and her husband began sleeping and taking meals in the inferior brick building behind the two-story courtyard house. The better house, she gave to her son's new family.

Chapter One

Return to the Soil: Backwardness, Dirt, and Rural Spaces of Home

One afternoon, I visited with Yujie, a villager who operated a small vendor's cart in the township and her sister-in-law Changying, a migrant returned for the summer. We sat in the high-ceilinged space of Yujie's recently-constructed house, munching on watermelon and spitting the seeds in between sentences. Both sisters had young children enrolled in the township's summer school enrichment program and while we gossiped about village politics, their two oldest boys sat huddled on a bench studying English. When they asked me to correct the boys' work, I pointed out a few errors that they had made in their notebooks. Changying clicked her tongue and began blaming herself for not being able to catch the mistakes herself.

'We haven't been educated here. The countryside is all the same,' she said with resignation. Yujie chimed in with a phrase that sounded like it came straight from a public service announcement, 'Right! To have no culture is truly terrifying (*mei wenhua, zhen kepa*).'

Cuifen was a temporary migrant, who had just returned from the city for Chinese New Year. Assuming that she worked a factory job, I asked when the factory expected her to return. She returned my question with laughter saying, 'I don't work at a factory. I am a *xiapao*.' I didn't understand the joke and looked it up in my dictionary—"xia pao" a firework that fails to go off, or a "dud." After comprehending her meaning more fully and half-laughing and half assuring her that she couldn't be a dud, I asked her to explain what she meant. Her meaning was that she wasn't very educated, and that she performed menial labor within the neighboring city—collecting recycling or doing unregulated odd jobs like selling trinkets or construction.

She stated that she did these jobs because she was too old to work in factories and she didn't have the education to work in other service level employment. But she also said that she enjoyed the flexibility which these odd-jobs had, she could return to her mother, for example, and she could care for her sons, 17 and 9, who, while mostly at boarding school, still returned home for long weekends twice a month.² If she was permanently working in a factory or other type of contracted labor, she would have to find alternate care for her son, since her mother, Grandmother Zhu (featured in Chapter 7) already cared for Cuifen's brother's 13-year old daughter.

I portray with these two experiences of rural women decrying their education and economic success to introduce how ordinary villagers and returned migrants might think of themselves in relation to larger discourses which undervalue rural spaces. These two stories open up fruitful discussions of rural identity and allow us to press into anthropological questions of how self-concept is shaped in light of predetermined social categories such as rural/urban, educated/laborer and success/failure. The idea that the countryside lacks civilization, education, and culture—all meanings contained in the phrase *wenhua* used by Yujie and the sentiments of *xiapao*—was the overwhelming characterization given to rural China by both rural and urban residents. Other terms I encountered regularly during my fieldwork were similarly disparaging of both the landscape and population; dirty (*zang*), backwards (*luohou*), or low quality (*suzhi di*), were all terms that rural people regularly used to describe themselves.

In this chapter, I'd like to take these terms as a starting point to understand the background and landscape for my entire dissertation project. In *Writing Culture*, Marie Louise

² boarding schools typically meet for 14 days straight and then have four days off, meaning that once a month students go home for 4 days

Pratt (1986) remarks that setting the stage by using descriptions of landscape and travel are utilized in classic ethnographies to give the reader a sense of authenticity. In this chapter, I take a different approach to describe my place of fieldwork, following after critical geographies that attempt to understand the embedded nature of space and place, where space is also a metaphorical construction of values, emotions, and moral geographies (c.f. Feld and Basso 1999; Garcia 2010). How is it that local people understand their homes to be spaces without culture or modernity even while occupying them? In what ways are their negative descriptions of their homes recapitulations of larger narratives and in what ways might they be using these terms as positive markers of identity, adopting, and repurposing slurs for their own linguistic intentions?

My goal in this chapter is to describe my fieldsite in such a way that also captures the historical, political, and geographical circumstances that inform the lives of families in rural China. This entire dissertation takes the rural as a starting point, following Toyota, Yoeh, and Nguyen's call to "bring the 'left-behind' back into view" (2007) and in particular, this chapter seeks to lay a framework for what I mean when invoking "rural China" as both a physical place and a symbolic space. I complete this task through twin analytics: first, I ask what is the role of economic development in places of rural poverty, attuning to the specific histories that have shaped migration, movement, and lack of movement in rural China. Second, I ask how local people who refuse or cannot migrate challenge the paradigm of development and migration through practical and sentimental means. I argue that rurality becomes a central pillar of personhood for local people, both inscribing their options and distinguishing them in an increasingly cosmopolitan society.



Figure 7 Village Temple on New Year's

Throughout my research, I have struggled to make sense of how to characterize the real material constraints of rural residents, while also seeking to try and understand the ways in which they construct meaningful spaces of home within these limits. Sarah Willen's (2007) work on transnational migrants is instructive here. Willen documents the search for "inhabitable spaces of welcome" which, depend on migrant's cultural senses of safety, comfort, and understanding. Willen argues that while spaces may shift over time, different institutions can provide a "meaningful social, material and existential matrix that can ground everyday lives fraught with challenges, hostilities, and dangers" (Willen 2007, 167). In this chapter I will document the various legal and cultural fields that attempt to transform the rural from a space of home into a space of death. At the same time, I will offer the experiences of rural people to push back upon this very concept. This chapter seeks to find the small ways in which local people confront and

contest urban superiority to create their own “inhabitable spaces of welcome” within the rural landscape.

The Hukou and Rural-Urban Divide

Any examination of rural Chinese families necessitates an analysis of the rural-urban divide and an investigation into the ideological and infrastructural tools which set the boundaries between rural/urban, uncivilized/civilized, and dirty/clean in place. In contrast to a number of other divisions between rural and urban societies (J. Baker 1990; Banerjee 1981; K. V. Gough 2016), Chinese rural persons are marked not only by physical status markers of language, skin color, educational level, or cultural practices, but also by an institutional policy, the Household Registration System, or *Hukou*, which intentionally limits human movement from the countryside to urban areas, curbing exploding urbanization and protecting agricultural labor sources. The Household Registration System (hereafter simply *Hukou*) has broad reaching effects on families economic, educational, and migrant status. In this section, I offer a brief sketch of the policies history and recent revisions as it affects rural populations. A number of other excellent analysis have gone into more detail about the *Hukou* (J. Xu 2015; F.-L. Wang 2004; Young 2013), here I only offer a short analysis. In tracing the history of the policy, I argue that rural and urban divide has been sharply demarcated and established through the bureaucratic logics of the Chinese party-state which remain as enduring boundaries of exclusion.

The *Hukou* was originally designed by the newly established Chinese Communist Party in the 1950’s. The new government sought to establish and maintain control over the population to swiftly organize and rearrange families and individual in localities in order to spring board development, production, and industrialization (F.-L. Wang 2005, 61). The system was based on

an urban-benefit system which subsidized grain, supplied housing allotments, and provided health care for urban residents. Rural residents, on the other hand were not included in urban support, but were tied to their collective work units, which distributed food and a few other benefits. One's *Hukou* status would be marked as agricultural or non-agricultural and up until the most recent reforms in 2014, individuals with an agricultural status were not entitled to urban settlement, education, or social welfare.

The *Hukou* system prohibited migration by working in tandem with urban work units and rural collectives. These administrative units were responsible for handing out goods, services and employment. Without bureaucratic approval, individuals could not move outside of their assigned tasks. During the 1950s-1980s there was still some amount of human migration, but this was undertaken without institutional support and at great personal cost, for without a local *Hukou*, a migrant would be without access to food and other essentials and would be forced to rely on social networks or the black market (Unger 2016). While there was a formal process for changing *Hukou* status from non-urban to urban (*nongzhuanfei*), it was bound by a quota system and was excessively complicated (K. W. Chan and Zhang 1999, 821–23). Because *Hukou* counted only individuals, not families together—some families were divided within different work units across geographical regions. Family separation within the planned economy became a normative economic strategy lasting into the present day (Chan and Zhang 1999, 827; Cheng and Selden 1994).

Despite *Hukou* policy checking migration, urbanization continued to threaten the urban-benefit system. Several strategies were employed to curb urban populations including reassigning many urban youth to rural areas in order to “study peasant life” (Wang 2005, 64). Three different factors finally led to a crisis in *Hukou* management in the 1980s. First, the de-

collectivization of farmlands in the early 1980s led to the surplus of agricultural laborers who were without assigned jobs and sources of income (Unger 1985). Second, cities had increasing marketization as goods and services were incrementally decoupled from the planned socialist economy. Third, specific areas—namely the southern coastal cities—were targeted for economic growth which increased the need for low-skill laborers (Young 2013, 281).

The *Hukou* was loosened in response to these pressures and in the late 1980s-1990s it became possible to obtain a “temporary residence permit” which allowed people to stay for up to a year (and two years in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone), but withheld housing and healthcare benefits. The effect of residency liberalization is hard to understate. While informal migration had already occurred in large numbers, the new policy meant that employers could officially hire migrants, finding a ready workforce willing to work for lower wages than urbanites. Since factories and large companies could now hire non-*Hukou* holders, the floodgates were now open to the millions of low-skilled agricultural workers from rural areas who were desperate for work. Rural-to-urban migrants became a new kind of “floating labor population” (*liudongrenkou*), creating a new underclass and supplying the labor for construction, domestic support and assembly line work.

By the early 2000s, numbers of rural to urban migrants had reached 85-200 million people (C. C. Fan 2008). The *Hukou* system was the target of increasing public criticism as migrants underwent unfair treatment, rural children were denied access into urban schools causing an exploding population of separated families, and sometimes migrants would be without legal recourse for abuse. Even from within the government, the *Hukou* received complaint. *Hukou* structures unfairly benefited urban communities at the cost of underdeveloped sending areas. Because of the structures of taxation and urban-benefits, rural migrants were

paying urban taxes, yet not using urban services. Instead, millions of migrants continued to need social security for old age and health care in their sending communities. The economic toll on rural development is self-evident—urban infrastructure and education continued to improve at the cost of rural areas (F.-L. Wang 2004, 139–47; Kipnis 2011).

Hukou reform, however, was slow. The last two decades there have been increasing options for *Hukou* transfers, effectively implementing a slow lifting of *Hukou* restrictions on migration. In 1998, *Hukou* residency for children was modified so that *Hukou* status could be traced through either parent. Prior to 1998, *Hukou* status was tied to one's mother. The new policy allowed for hypergamy as a strategy for many rural women to achieve a higher social position for their children (see Y. Yan 2006; Obendiek 2016b). In one central district in Beijing, cross-regional marriages increased from 11% 1997 to 22% in 1998 (Wang 2005, 112). Cities began a ranking system of openness to migrants, with Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin—major areas of metropolitan wealth—being the most tightly controlled, and smaller cities being more open to rural residents. Some urban areas like Chengdu, in Sichuan province, began undergoing residency experiments where rural residents could trade their land holdings for an urban *Hukou*, granting them improved benefits in exchange for their property. Educated and skilled migrants with investments were invited to apply for formal *Hukou* changes. The ranking system for *Hukou* applicants made it easier for college educated elites to transfer their residency, but for majority of migrant workers, urban residency remained unreachable.

In 2014, shortly before I arrived to the field, the Bureau of Civil Affairs announced a new urbanization policy which would phase out *nongmin* (peasant) and *feinong* (non-peasant) label on *Hukou* documents (B. Li 2015). Meant to reduce the differences between rural and urban *Hukou* services, rural-to-urban migrants would now only be marked by locality. The new

urbanization stance also liberalized *Hukou* changes for migrants moving to smaller-tiered cities and further solidified the point-merit system for migrants seeking residency in larger cities.

Though this new policy in fact has made it harder for entering desirable spaces such as Beijing or Shanghai, and the effects upon land-rights have been unclear, the new policy was broadly welcomed by more-wealthy ruralites who lived in the township or had made their homes in Shangqiu city. These individuals did not rely on their land for subsistence like other poorer farmers in the village and consequently they were hopeful for a more equitable retirement future and improved education access for their children.

The 2014 policy also was issued in tandem with new urbanization projects, revitalizing townships into more urban centers by offering tax incentives for developers and land-trades in exchange for apartment-style dwellings. The official report states that Pear Branch Township had increased its urban area to 9.33 km², building 12 streets, establishing 7360 families in business and building 20,000 apartment-style dwellings. Still, the majority of the luxury apartments I saw were empty and the majority of local people could not afford to buy them. Nevertheless, the overall mood towards development in rural areas was quite positive, which I explore further below.

The emotional and discursive search for meaning amongst migrants

Even without labels of peasant status directly on identity documents, the *Hukou* policy remains deeply intertwined with local systems of value where urban is ranked higher than rural, and urbanites enjoy special social privileges with identities tied to modernity and development. The word, *suzhi*, or human quality has become a key-word associated with *Hukou* boundaries (Anagnost 2004; Hairong 2003; Kipnis 2006; Jacka 2009). “High quality” characteristics are

inscribed to urban spaces and low-quality behaviors are attributed to rural people. Policing the boundaries of urban areas to exclude “low-quality” individuals becomes one of the chief goals of *Hukou* policy. In the words of one of Feiling Wang’s informants, a *Hukou* official:

[We should] make it easier for high-quality people to relocate, harder for low-quality people; easier for professionals to relocate, harder for general labor; ... [We should] work especially to *prevent national blind floating of low-quality people*. (Wang 2005, 108)

When looking at the *Hukou* as a system of values, an alternative narrative of migration emerges. Under this narrative a migrant is one that subverts the biopolitics of state control (Young 2013, 3), eschews the traditional value of Confucian rootedness (L. Zhang 2002), and undergoes an interior quest for ethical personhood denied them by the confines of *Hukou*. There are several authors which take this approach. Yan Hairong (2008), Tiantian Zheng (2009), Ariane Geatano (2015), Pun Ngai (2005) and Tamara Jacka (2005) all argue that young women’s search for success in migration can also be traced back to the discursive fields of value which paint the rural as “unequivocal” (Jacka 2006), a “space of death” (H. Yan 2008), separated by “rural-urban apartheid” (Zheng 2009). Following this line of thinking, migrants are those who virtuously confront this system by remaking themselves and their own communities by utilizing consumption (Zheng 2003), fashion (Hartley and Montgomery 2009), motherhood (Riley 2012), and economic opportunities (L. Zhang 2002).

Migrants have no doubt changed the cultural, infrastructural, and labor composition of urban communities. Yet this scholarly attention to rural-urban migrants, and specifically young female rural-urban migrants, might also privilege a particular kind narrative—one that unintentionally recapitulates the very hierarchy which it intends to critique. In these narratives values of urbanity, cosmopolitanism, and liberal freedom of movement are all championed above the traditional, rooted, and “backwards” countryside. I argue that the perspective of ruralites is a direct challenge to this migrant narrative and the valorization of movement. Moreover, by

attending to rural spaces as rural people themselves experience them, larger discourses of development and binary hierarchies of value show themselves to be complex, fluid, and far from monolithic (Piot 1999; K. V. Gough 2016).

As an example, I examine Yan Hairong's (2003, 2008) astute research which not only adds insight into the experiences of migrants, but also holds particular theoretical weight for the consideration of the rural-urban divide. Yan argues that for young women migrating during the 1980s and 1990s conceptualized urban China as a space of freedom and possibility whereas the rural was associated with a "place of death." She explores how migration serves as part of a search for "modern personhood" for young women since post-Mao development policies have foreclosed rural spaces as significant generators of meaning and modernity. Whereas rural spaces once served as ideological examples under Mao's pro-peasant policies, urban spaces now enshrine the values of civilization (*wenming*) and modernity; "it appears that Modernity and Progress, which themselves are the ideological effects of post-Mao modernist imaginary, are given their permanent residency in the city" (Yan 2003, 585). As part of the post 1980s development plan, the systemic devaluation of rural products and agriculture has been coupled with a discursive pejoration of rural identity. Yan borrowing Spivak's term states that the 'spectralization' of the rural—or the devaluation of rural industry for urban centers—has led to a downwards spiral of depreciation. It is worth including her words here at length:

The land distributed to each household by the rural reform in the early 1980s was designed to spur agricultural productivity through privatizing production. Yet in the 1990s, production land has become welfare land absorbing ill, injured, and unemployed bodies and enabling a cheap reproduction of the next generation of migrant workers. 'Household responsibility land' thus becomes the last means of welfare and labor reproduction. The process of spectralization is a process of violence that appropriates economic, cultural, and ideological values from the countryside. The problem for rural youth is that they cannot find a path to the future in the withering countryside (2003, 586)

How then can we think of rural persons? As failed migrants as in the elderly and the injured? As future-potential migrants as children and youth? And if the “search for modern personhood” is found located within the urban, are those within the space of the rural “un-modern” or “pre-modern”?

Yan’s analysis quite accurately describes the discursive constraints of the rural-urban divide and the economic relationship which confounds the employment and educational opportunities for those living in rural China. Nevertheless, I want to push deeper into the “withering countryside” and focus on the narratives of the “ill, injured, and unemployed bodies” to question if we cannot in fact move past the rural-urban dichotomy and use the narratives of those who stay behind to critique the very construction of modernity. While Yan’s timely argument is that modernity—as it has been constructed by the development project—does violence to the rural space, my point is to investigate how such a violence might be experienced by those left-behind by modernity, to appreciate how it might be understood and even felt differently by rural villagers who refuse or who cannot migrate. That is, while Yan’s young women have seen the rural as a space of death since they construct themselves along the cosmopolitan and self-improvement trajectories of the post-Mao reform era, the villagers I met in Henan have profoundly little to say in terms of their plans for personal development, career advancement, and even individual happiness. Like the *xiapao* in my introduction, villagers regularly describe themselves in disparaging terms such as *luohou* (backwards), *pinkun* (impoverished), or *meiwenhua* (uncivilized). What is perhaps most puzzling to me was not only that they used these terms quite liberally, but that they showed little trace of shame, embarrassment or any kind negative association. In other words, rural villagers articulate radically different affective and discursive fields of value than rural-to-urban migrants.

In the remainder of this chapter, I look deeper into the uses of the terms *luohou* (backwards) and *zang* (dirty) to understand the various ways that villagers employ these terms to conceive of themselves and their rural home. Next, I attend to the sentimental and emotional attachments of rural land to returned migrants and villagers before considering how these competing discursive fields shape experiences of selfhood and belonging.

***Luohou* and food preparation**

The word *luohou* arose several times over the course of my fieldwork. Meaning “backwards,” “undeveloped,” or “to lag behind” the term is inherently comparative. To “be behind,” one must always be behind something or someone. The term *luohou*, then is utilized in conversations about modernity and development, both nationally and internationally. Local people utilize the term to point out that, in comparison to urban China—and in comparison to the United States—their technological infrastructure was undeveloped and lagged behind. While this term also came up in discussions of agricultural technologies, surprisingly the term came up most frequently in conversations about food preparation.

One conversation with a returned migrant illustrates the typical usage of *luohou* surrounding food preparation. I asked her what kind of food she liked to eat and prepare in Jujiekou, an urban area about 3-4 hours away where she lived with her only son and his family, cooking and performing childcare duties. She said with a laugh ‘I am *luohou*. I still *shaoguo*.’ *Shaoguo* is the traditional method of cooking in Henan which makes use of small twigs and agricultural waste products (cobs and dried corn and wheat stalks) to burn efficient fires under a large iron wok. Village homes have an outdoor kitchen that typically contains large counter-height cobb stove, often constructed from cement and finished with ceramic tiles. Many newer

homes also have propane stoves and a hose that has connected the outdoor well to an indoor pump (running water, or *zilaishui* pipes were installed in Jiatian village in September 2015).

While it still remains a mystery how this migrant grandmother managed to burn a cobb stove in the middle of an urban area, that she still did so speaks to the centrality of food preparation technology in the everyday culinary grammar of Henan people. The majority of rural residents in Jiatian village and the surrounding areas used *shaoguo* as a primary cooking method during my fieldwork. In the morning, fires would be lit to make a kind of soup, called *hetang* (literally, a drinking soup) made from boiled water and flour with added rice or soybeans. This soup could be salty or sweet according to individual taste and was often eaten with a steamed bread called *mo* in dialect. During the noon meal, the fires would again be lit, this time to make noodle soup (often using leftover soup from the morning). Noodles usually were paired with local vegetables grown in the garden and sometimes included bits of meat from the night before. Finally, the evening meal would also make use of the cobb stove. The fire would boil water for more *hetang* and the steam from the soup would be used to cook daily bread. Many families also fried vegetable, egg and meat dishes on propane stoves. Preparing food this way was more cumbersome, slower, and required more knowledge about how high to keep the fire. I myself was subject to teasing because I had no ability to *shaoguo* and feed the fire adequately, even though such a task was generally performed by children. I would either end up adding too much fuel, boiling the soup dry and black, or I would get side tracked in my conversation, letting the flame die away and become uselessly cold.

Though most people did have access to propane or even electric stoves, the preference for using *shaoguo* followed three central logics. First, there was the issue of taste and size. Using fire-heated stoves added smoky flavor to the otherwise bland and basic fare of flour-based soup

and steamed bread. Because the cobb stoves were quite large, they could steam more than 20 buns of *mo* at once, enough for a mid-size extended family to eat for a few days (by contrast when I tried to make *mo* in my large steamer over a propane burner, I could only fit 7 buns). Second, the large iron woks used in the method added trace minerals to food, so that local people avoided anemia. Third, the use of otherwise discarded agricultural waste was quite practical and economical. Given that a majority of residents were relatively poor and that they were often saving what money that they did have for family obligations, health care, and daily expenditures, this economical means of food preparation allowed them to save on propane and utilize what would otherwise be useless refuse.

What struck me particularly about local people's use of the word *luohou* was that while they burned cobb stoves, they also used—often in tandem—propane burners, washing machines, mechanized harvesters and soil tillers and modern-style grain-sifting and mill machines. Why use some modern devices and not others? The key in my understanding was that only certain foods, namely specifically Henan foods—*mo* and *hetang*—were made with the *shaoguo* method. Other dishes that not particularly region specific such as: fried and salted peanuts, eggs cooked with peppers or tomatoes, cucumber with garlic sauce, chicken and glass noodles—all of these were generally cooked on propane burners. *Shaoguo* held particular relevance to specific local foods—foods that were part of every Henan villager's staple diet.

Preparing food by *shaoguo* was not because other kinds of cooking technologies were foreclosed to them, but rather that continuing to *shaoguo*, despite its banal associations with peasant backwardness was a way for local people, and particularly local women who did the majority of cooking, to continually assert their belonging through a simple everyday act. *Shaoguo* and the particular foods made by the method was so profound that local people used it

as a significant marker of local place making and personhood—*what* you cooked and *how* you cooked it could reveal where you were from, not only in terms of location, but also in terms of class since cooking on cobb stoves is a distinctly rural method of cooking. Throughout my stay, I was bombarded with questions about whether or not we made or bought *mo*, whether my rural home had a cobb or propane stove, and what kind of stove I used in the United States—these questions were a central part of the way that women recognized change, difference, and belonging.

In contrast to much of China, Henan's staple food is wheat and a large culinary repertoire has grown out of wheat-based foods, particularly *hetang* and *mo*. Wheat was thought to take on the characteristics of the land on which it was grown. Locally grown flour was much better than store-bought for example as it contained the correct kinds of *shuitu* (water and soil) and its nutritional value was considered to be fresher and more diverse than rice. However, flour is fairly tasteless. I myself had difficulty drinking the thick tasteless soup as a guest and I often ate other staples when it was offered.

Once at reunion meal with a migrant family, the son had returned from the South, where the typical staple is rice. His mother and wife had prepared dishes of egg and green onion, spiced chicken, pork and peppers, and fish-flavored tofu with mushrooms. They also prepared staples of *hetang*, rice, *mo*, along with several pans of *jiaozi* (steamed dumplings). When offered a choice of rice or *hetang*, the migrant stated, 'I am home now, I want to drink *hetang*.' I took the opportunity to ask him about the flavor since we had begun to discuss our favorite regional fare from all around China. I asked him whether or not he actually enjoyed the taste of *hetang* and would choose it over other foods. He admitted: 'It's actually not that I enjoy (*xihuan*) the taste. It's that I am used to it (*xiguan*).'

By putting the bland, regional staple into the category of *xiguan*, or habit, this migrant points out the weight of everyday consumption as a marker of moral personhood, tying together the immediate act of eating to a temporal and affective connection with his own early experiences and his current kinship community of consumption. Habit implies a feeling of repetition, of practice, and of comfort. Habitual action is outside the realm of logics of desires like taste and preference, but inserted into the space of everyday gestures that have social consequences. Outside the rural area, *hetang* prepared over a cobb stove was generally unavailable. Not only was the preparation cumbersome and inconvenient in urban spaces, but very few people outside of Henan cared to eat such a humble staple. Even so, the soup held deep, habitual connections for people who had grown up eating it.

In Luce Giard's (1998) account of women's cooking knowledge, she remarks that because of the social invisibility of cooking, women's creative value has been overlooked. Conceiving of the everyday as an arena marked with small social rebellions, cooking is one example of how individuals mix, recreate, subvert, and play with established modes of doing and being. To emphasize this, Giard calls the practices surrounding food preparation "cooking-doing" to honor the specific actions of utilizing cultural knowledge to prepare food. In the multiplicity of culinary grammars, Giard calls attention to the industrialization of the kitchen, in which standardization and machines reformulate the everyday gestures of cooking. Why to use some techniques over others and how to combine two or more pasts or traditions within food preparation is a way of everyday resistance to singular rationality (1998, 213). For example, one of her informants recalls the pleasure of an older stove which brings back memories of childhood (1998, 191). Giard invites reflection into how cooking, and particularly cooking regional foods

and using nostalgic methods can serve as an agentive everyday assertion of a deeper connection to a relational past.

By making a claim about habit over preference, the migrant is actually portraying his ideal act of consumption as a part of comfort. Comfortable practices, as Jared Zigon (2014) has argued can be conceived as a kind of moral imperative, “to continue—as best one can—to feel right in one’s world” (2014, 27). Comfort can be a subjective assessment for goodness and rightness; familiarity with food and landscape match onto early experiences and memories. A number of other anthropologists have noted the important connections between food preparation and moral personhood. For example, C. Jason Throop (2009) suggests that consuming food implies a cooperative and community-focused recognition of shared labor inputs; food is necessarily imbued with the labor of others. Consuming food is a stratified and political practice (Appadurai 1981). Foods necessitate a reflection on history, nationalism, and health (Garth 2013), revealing a profound sociality to cooking and eating (Kahn 1993; M. M. Yang 1994; Y. Yan 1996). To orient oneself to the continuation of certain foodways is a critical part of relational fidelity, upholding a connection to feelings and memories of home.

I propose that using a cobb stove serves as a kind of fidelity to one’s rural origins in light of rapid changes and the arrival of modern food preparation. In this sense, *shaoguo* can be understood as a traditional knowledge which resists, reshapes, and restructures globalizing forces like modern technologies for cooking. Food preparation, and specifically women’s use of *shaoguo* is an active contestation of modernity. By choosing to cook some foods over cobb and some over propane stoves, rural women are marking the normal kitchen as a place of decision-making. Further, by calling the practice of *shaoguo* as *luohou* (backwards), local people are

making larger assertions about their moral fidelity to rural communities in light of the discursive hierarchies of modern/backwards and urban/rural.

Food has a remarkable quality of making tangible a particular relationship with an individual to the wider world. In choosing to consume some foods and not others, individuals not only make claims to taste and preference, but also identity and belonging. While the migrant in the story above recounts his preference for drinking *hetang* as an issue of *xiguan* (habit); foodstuffs are often employed as a strategic practice of remembering and honoring which make otherwise invisible connections—such as an affinity for one’s hometown, or emotional feelings of belonging—concrete.

In his work on Indian agriculturalists, Akhil Gupta (1998) argues that the adoption of modernity does not occur evenly in every place, and that people have overlapping and often conflicting sets of practices and value sets. When claiming that they are backwards, people are also subtly choosing into the category of backwardness for a certain benefit—a claim, for example, of identity, rights to government support, or of recognition of their place within a society that might have otherwise forgotten or denied them. The ethics of development and subjective transformation often overlap with long histories of moral and ethical entanglements. As Anand Pandian (CITE) has shown, civility has resounding effects in how modern agriculturalists see themselves in larger moral discourses of economic development. In this section, I have argued that by using cobb stoves, Henan villagers are continuing to assert their own food preparation knowledge and practices even in light of other knowledges and practices that would obscure, diminish, or even obliterate their sense of belonging.

Dirtyness and Development

Another term that I frequently encountered in my research was the term *zang* (dirty) to describe rural China. This term was used in reference to the great amounts of dust and cobwebs that accumulated in people's homes and also in reference to the piles of refuse that lay along ditches and gutters throughout the village and township. Trash, refuse, and waste management has increasingly been a part of Chinese cultural "civility" campaigns. Calls for a "cleaner and tidier" rural space is directly linked to economic development and poverty relief efforts as directly outlined in China's recent "New Socialist Countryside" campaign which began in 2005. The targets of the new campaign were the three "rural problems" that is, *sannongwenti*: "agriculture, countryside, and the peasantry." The new program for development was meant to restructure and reinvigorate agriculture through modernization. The slogan for the campaign places cleanliness as central to a host of modernization issues: "create development, live comfortably, brighten the countryside, clean and tidy the village, manage the population" (*shengchan fazhan, huokuanyu, xiangming, cunrong zhengjie, guanli minzu*) (Schubert and Ahlers 2010, 2012; Long et al. 2010; Looney 2015).

While my interlocutors had never read the policy document themselves, they were familiar with the centrality of cleanliness which distinguished rural places from sterile urban environments. Villagers had a keen awareness that the height of modernization or Westernization was broad swept streets and tidy parks. Many of them had seen such spaces represented on television, or knew of friends or family who had traveled to Hong Kong. Consequently, when villagers met me for the first time they often asked, 'What do you think of the countryside?' and without waiting for my response they would interject, 'Don't you think it's dirty?' I didn't know how to respond to this question, because indeed I did find certain things about the countryside

quite dirty and the villagers, in general, did not tidy on a regular basis. But at the same time, I didn't want to cater to the already morally-loaded questions of dirt and cleanliness, so I began pointing out the nature of cleanliness as a preference. I often stated (sometimes tersely), 'Look, if you like clean, then you sweep and mop. If you don't mind dirt, then what does it matter?' I remember one conversation with my host family that ended in me explaining the trash infrastructure of urban areas and the United States. In Pear Branch Township, the only trash service which existed were hired street cleaners who swept the strewn trash into piles and incinerated them bi-monthly. Trash bins or formal garbage collection areas were unheard of and people regularly complained about the heaps of rotting fruit and household garbage that lined the street.

However, ideas about dirt and cleanliness as related to spaces of home and belonging never occurred to me until one Sunday when I listened to a sermon by one traveling pastor in the township Christian church. The pastor—a woman in her late-forties from a neighboring county began to speak on a passage of Bible where Jesus visits Simeon's house. During the visit, a woman enters the room and begins washing Jesus' feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair. When Simeon admonishes the woman, Jesus steps in and chastises Simeon for not giving him proper attention and water to wash his feet. In the U.S. I have often heard this passage used as an admonishment to be a proper host, the rural Chinese pastor, however, spoke on the difficulties of being a guest (*zuoke*). As a guest, she stated, it was often difficult to meet your needs because you might not know which pan to use for your feet or which pan to use for your hands. The pastor continued, 'In the city, being a guest is even harder. In the city, they all care about cleanliness to the extent that you don't even know where to spit your watermelon seeds.'

The pastor's statements reconstrue one of the major differences between urban and rural China to be one of cleanliness. Having been a guest in both rural and urban China, I find her statement to be particularly insightful. Watermelon is often given as a standard welcome to guests in the summer because of its cooling properties. In rural China, the watermelon seeds and all manner of bones or refuse are to be spit on the floor (which is generally an unfinished cement slab), tossed across the courtyard into the garden, or passed to dogs or chickens which sometimes freely roam in living quarters. When I first moved to rural China I had difficulty with this practice. 'Where do I put my trash?' I asked my host family. 'Just throw it anywhere!' Auntie Cong motioned casually.

In contrast, urban Chinese apartments have pristine-looking white tile floors. Guests and residents remove their shoes before entering, and food waste is carefully contained in trash receptacles. As an urbanite myself, I never considered what it must be like for a rural Chinese person to enter a space that demanded such hypervigilance. The pastor's comments argue that cleanliness might disrupt human relationships, making such habits like throwing trash in wastebaskets and refraining from spitting uncomfortable, awkward, and even unwelcoming.

When discussing migration experiences with local people, their portrayals of urban space painted a picture of discomfort, unfamiliarity, and even hostility. While some families had moved into urban spaces and had become accustomed to them, the majority of rural families within the village preferred not to migrate for a variety of reasons. Chief among them was the sense of inconvenience, pollution, and lack of human connections within urban spaces. When my partner and I encountered a difficulty in Shangqiu—I complained to my host family about the dishonest business man who had ruined my husband's expensive violin bow and refused to pay for it. Because I was so upset, I began decrying the man's lack of *suzhi* (quality) which, as I

mentioned earlier, is one of the negative characterizations of rural people who lack education. I suddenly stopped, realizing that I had just used a term which maybe insulting to my host. Following the silence, Auntie Cong gently corrected me. ‘It’s actually not an issue of quality, but rather morality. Urban people will cheat us too. They will take one look at us, our clothes, our language, and know that we are not-local. Then they will charge us more.’ In a different conversation, my neighbor, a brother of my host uncle who had spent his 30s as a migrant, also portrayed urban people as lacking morality. ‘They don’t know how to *zuoren* (perform human kindness). I prefer the countryside.’ The connections of families within the rural context was made clear to us when I first arrived. ‘We are all family here (*women doushijiaren*),’ stated my host uncle when showing me around the village.

Feelings of comfort within the countryside arose within the context of kinship connections.³ While individuals were actually connected by surname and shared forms of address, they were also connected through lifetimes of shared relational exchanges. Exchanges of favors and gifts have been widely considered to be one of the cornerstones of traditional Chinese sociality (c.f. M. M. Yang 1994; Y. Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997; Yan, Gao, and Fennell 2017). However, the scenes above also highlight the ways in which bodily practices and habits surrounding dirtiness and cleanliness might also help to inform moods of human connectedness. Though urban spaces were clean, developed, and manicured, for rural people, they lacked space in which to be relaxed and authentic. In other words, they lacked a space of home.

³ see also Zigon’s (2014) discussion of mutuality and relationships



Figure 8 The patriline offers food and burns sacrifices to ancestral burial mounds on New Year's and other ritual periods

Spiritual Spaces of Home: Burials, Kinship and Land

In rural Henan, the wide expanses of wheat and corn fields are dotted with burial mounds. These mounds have been maintained despite government efforts to stop inhumation (c.f. Oxfeld 2004; Ikels 2004), at the cost and inconvenience of agricultural work since they created obstacles for harvest and plowing machines. Local people are able to point out their families' ancestors. Even though people often had attitudes of nonchalance about tomb visitation, maintaining ancestral tombs was still a significant ritual activity which informed the daily lives of rural Chinese families.

After a funeral, there are specific times at which to honor the dead at the tomb. They are ordered on the 3rd, the 5th, and the 10th. The third, fifth, and tenth day after burial, the third, fifth, and tenth month after burial, and the third, fifth, and tenth year after burial, the sons and daughters visit the tomb offering paper and giving special fried foods and bread. The food is

prepared by hand, by the women in the family (see also Stafford 2000). Family members bow and hold the bowl aloft. Once a few minutes have passed, the family returns to the house, often eating the food themselves. During Chinese New Year and *Qingming*, or ‘tomb cleaning festival’ the male relatives also make offerings at the graves of their ancestors.

On Chinese New Year, I accompanied the male members of my host family to make offerings to their ancestor’s graves. The men chatted with each other excitedly over New Year’s plans. The young men, many who had returned from urban areas, played with fireworks, lighting them and throwing them high in the air. Uncle Jia bought a long strand of firecrackers, and arranging them near the graves, set them off in a loud series of cracks. All the men bowed and held the baskets of steamed bread and freshly fried pork aloft. The ritual seemed habitual and almost rote and while the men displayed little outwards sadness, they seemed to take the actual visit to the grave as a central part of the holiday. As we walked back from the grave, I noticed Uncle Jia put an arm around his grandson. This small gesture of affection struck me as a salient moment of intimacy which showed the emotional connection within the patriarchal line between ancestors and the next generation.

I recalled a conversation I had with another male villager, who had returned from migrant work when his wife had given birth to their third child—at last a boy. With three small children not yet in preschool, his wife’s household burden was too great and he returned home not only to help out but also to dote on his infant son. Working local construction jobs, he found that though he could not earn as much as he could as migrant labor, his whole family seemed happier. I asked him why he and his wife had exceeded the birth quota, paying fines for each successive child in order to have a son. ‘The pressure is something I feel myself. I don’t know how to explain it really. It’s not that other people will talk. It’s just something I wanted.’ When I

observed the male ritual over New Year's holiday, his sentiment and desire for a son seemed very real. Without a son, how can you honor your ancestors together?

Each ritual confirms not only the patriarchal line, but also the lineage's attachment to the land. Since ancestors are interned on family land, the land quite literally is imbued with kinship connection and meanings. The practice of honoring one's dead continues to solidify—emotionally and spiritually—the patriarchal connection and continuity within the landscape. This connection and meaning has continued despite attempts to collectivize, reform, and modernize land holdings to transform the landscape from a kinship artifact into simply an agricultural space. When looking at landscape from the view of kinship, rural land is transformed from a space of production to a place of home.

While men have explicit ritual practices that tie them into the land, women also have expressed sentiments of belonging and identity which offers insight into the multiple meanings of land as a place of home. One of the most illuminating conversations I had was with two young women who both had young children, Xiaomei and Jiayi. Jiayi could be seen as a rural success story. She had earned top marks in school and had earned a scholarship to a local technical college. After she finished her degree and worked for a while, she married her college boyfriend who was from a neighboring village. Though the couple had a furnished house in the township, her husband and his family had all migrated for work, Jiayi, lived with her own extended family with her infant daughter. Xiaomei, on the other hand, was not interested in school and didn't continue school after finishing her compulsory middle school, tried her hand at migrant labor. After just a few months, she came back. She hated the food, the people, the environment—she was homesick. She agreed to an arranged marriage and shortly after gave birth to a baby son. Both women had experienced urban migration, and both returned to the countryside.

Both women had married migrants and were now solo parents, reuniting with their spouses only a few times each year (Ye et al. 2013; Jacka 2012). Though the two women had two different educational backgrounds, they both expressed a specific desire to stay near their natal villages and live in the rural area. In a conversation about the new *Hukou* policies, I asked both women if they planned to transfer their residency to the city, since they could have better educational opportunities for their children and enjoy a higher standard of living. ‘If you go you will end up very regretful (*houhui*). You can never come back!’ Xiaomei said with resolution. ‘your house, your things; you have to leave them all behind.’ Though rural women’s lack of land ownership has been a specific concern of recent policies (Sargeson 2012), and although the patriarchal rituals during New Years and Qing Ming did not reinforce their spiritual connection to the landscape, these women, along with many other rural women I met, continually recognized the sentimental connections to the countryside as a place of home.

In contrast to the majority of scholars researching the rural to urban divide in China, political scientist, Dongping Han (1999) sees the *Hukou* system as having a potential benefit for rural residents. Calling on the recognition of Confucian values of rootedness and connection to the land, Han argues that rural *Hukou* can also be conceived of as a land-benefit system. While in the years following his research, the *Hukou* has undergone significant changes and the effects of these revisions have yet to be seen on the rights of rural residents to land ownership (H. Yan and Chen 2013; Andreas and Zhan 2016), I find his argument particularly illuminating after the many conversations I’ve had with returned migrants and villagers. In almost all of my conversations, rural people continue to see themselves as part of rural space, even if that space has been painted as backwards, impoverished, or dirty.

Conclusion

‘Actually, I am satisfied with what my nation has done for the countryside,’ says Jia Bolin, the eldest son in my host family. We were sitting on the roof of his wife’s parents house, a two-story cement home in a neighboring township. The house contained a shop front for the older couple’s small noodle making industry on the first floor. The second story and roof had been comfortably remodeled with white tile, leather couches, and modern-style clear glass tables. He continued: ‘you see how we have changed from dirt buildings (*tufang*) to cement (*loufang*)? We will soon develop more and it will become common even to have three storied houses.’

Later, Jia Bolin, his father Uncle Jia, and I continued to talk about agricultural development. ‘Even though we are still *luohou*, we are actually much better now. Before agriculture was all performed by hand and will soon have completely industrialized agriculture. Large corporate farms (*nongchan*) will ultimately change the countryside.’

In Xin Liu’s (2000) research in rural Shaanxi, he argues that national projects for economic advancement have meant that rural Chinese people are perpetually within the shadow of development, left behind by infrastructural projects and global movements of money and cosmopolitan ideals into the urban areas. Rural people understand their status as undervalued and underdeveloped within an increasingly globalized and capitalistic market. More than 15 years later, my research in rural Henan has also illuminated the ways that average rural families understand and operationalize the concepts of development in everyday practices. Although becoming an increasing part of global flows of capital and ideologies, rural people continue to be circumscribed by larger valuations of space.

The conversations about development that I recounted above also note the remarkably upbeat characterization of agricultural change and development which has occurred over the last

two decades. Not only did every farmer I spoke with mention increased yields of wheat and corn, but also they mention the improved health, life expectancies, and additional leisure time now enjoyed because of migrant remittances, establishment of the Rural Health Insurance Cooperative, the abolishment of agricultural taxes, and arrival of mechanized harvesters and tractors. The end result is that while rural areas continue to lack certain infrastructural and educational benefits of urban areas, many residents—especially elderly men—now enjoy a comparably comfortable life.

In spite of all the modernization and poverty alleviation, migration continues to be the main source of income for the majority of families within my fieldsite. Migration not only has changed urban China, but it has also impacted rural China in a multitude of ways. In this chapter I have highlighted the ways that both men and women have continued to perform rituals and everyday practices which create meaning and a sense of belonging as local, rural people. In spite of discursive fields which paint them as “backwards,” “low cultural quality,” “dirty,” or “uncivilized,” rural people continue to claim the landscape as a central site of meaning-making.

Anthropologists have increasingly questioned dichotomies, and this chapter joins a host of works to argue that while dichotomous boundaries between rural and urban, modern and backward, developed and impoverished exist within a discursive frame, the reality is much more complicated (Barth 1998; Piot 1999; Lamont and Molnár 2002). Rural people make use of both modernity and backwardness towards their own ends, crafting selves and communities that resist and withstand the encroachment of unwelcome life-ways, while also celebrating, and sometimes decrying the arrival of development, improved life-chances, and opportunities.

Celebrated China anthropologist, Fei Xiaotong characterized Chinese people as “from the soil” (1992). By this, Fei mean that that the foundations of Chinese society were rooted in

agricultural organization. He wrote “only those who make a living from the soil can understand the value of soil” (1992, 38), “only those who depend on soil for their livelihood would root themselves in one place like a plant” (1992, 43). In the more than 75 years that have passed since Fei Xiaotong wrote these words, rural spaces have been “hallowed out” by migratory flows (Ye et al. 2013). Agricultural livelihoods have been gradually squeezed by the rising cost of living, increasing demands for consumer goods, and devaluation of agricultural products. Nevertheless, rural people continue to find themselves returning “to the soil” even after laboring in the city.

Chapter Two

Governmentality and the Confucian Family, or Why Families Matter to the Chinese Party-State

“The family is to promote children’s development and guarantee a fair starting place for each child. Family education is the cornerstone of all other education”

--All China Women’s Federation National Report on The Situation of Left Behind and Migrant Children, 2013

In June 2015, in rural Guizhou, four siblings, the youngest just 5-years-old and the oldest 13, committed suicide by drinking poison leaving behind a note which read, “thanks for your kindness, but it is time for us to go...” The four children lived by themselves using the remittances sent by their migrant father. Their mother, who had divorced and left the children about 6 months earlier, expressed her remorse when she returned to bury her four children. “I did not shoulder my responsibility for them,” she said to Xinhua news (Xinhua News Agency 2015).

The suicide of the siblings caused public outrage and renewed attention to a contemporary social problem—children who are “left-behind” by their migrant parents. “Even though it was a poor area, the four siblings did not want for food or clothes. The main cause of their tragedy was lack of care (*guanxin*) and love (*aihu*)” summarized one journalist (Xinhua Wang Guizhou Pindao 2015, para 10). “The *hukou* system is only part of the problem. Do you really think that a family who has so seriously broken the One Child Policy (*chaosheng yanzhongde jiating*) will be capable of having a good life in the city? The tendency of some parents to care about birth but not care to raise their own children (*guansheng buguan yang*) should be condemned” wrote another journalist (Jiang 2015, para 2).

I was living in Henan during this period and I received a text message from my friend in Beijing. “I’m sure you have seen the news” he wrote. I had seen the news, but surprisingly it had sparked little conversation in Pear Branch Township or Jitian Village, though most people

admitted that the area had many such “left-behind children.” The tragedy was perhaps too far removed. Guizhou— a province known for its poverty—was of course a different situation, most local families were enjoying the various benefits of agricultural development. In Henan, grandparents caring for grandchildren had long ago become an accepted part of modern life. Besides, as it seemed to most migrant parents, children left in the care of grandparents did not suffer from a *lack* of care, but rather *too much* care—children were simultaneously spoiled (*ni'ai*) and neglected (*guanbuliao*).

How to understand the simultaneous moral outrage at the plight of left-behind children and the widespread acceptance of such a phenomenon? This chapter seeks to understand the public discourse on left-behind children as a part of a long history of Chinese-state interventions into the family. In this chapter, I argue that as a central Confucian institution, the family has long held significant political concern and reforming the errant family has been a central anxiety of the state. To complete this inquiry, I first turn to a historical analysis of the family, and then I offer a summary of the current scholarship on left-behind children in China, before looking at the most current policy document which prioritizes state-attention and funds to left-behind children. Finally, I offer portraits of three families which confront and complicate the existing demographic and survey-driven literature.

Throughout this chapter, I continue to use the term “left-behind children” although I find the term to be simultaneously disparaging and obscuring. I do so for two reasons; first, I want to capture the original sense of the Chinese term, *liushouertong*, though this term translates more accurately to “stay-behind children” and, second and more primarily, I seek to engage with the already existing literature on the topic, which uses the term “left-behind” to refer to children, women, and elders who remain in rural and sending areas while a family member migrates.

State Interventions and the Confucian Family

This chapter engages with the theoretical concept of “governmentality” that was first coined by Foucault (1991; 2011). By governmentality, Foucault refers to the operation of power on a number of intertwined levels—self, society, and institutional—and the complex relationships between them, including the self’s relationship to the self (i.e. self-care) and internal institutional improvement and monitoring. Questions of governmentality center on how political organizations operate to police and control society. Theoretically, Foucault’s analytic of governmentality helped make certain political and ethical practices “thinkable”—by outlining a framework for the operation of otherwise taken-for-granted ways of moving and being within a society or nation (Gordon 1991, 8). Thanks to Foucault, we now conceptualize new practices surrounding the management of populations—through birth control, therapeutic rehabilitation, or the check of crime and social ills—as techniques of governing that have permanent and resonant effects within the field of ethics.

Foucault’s main concern in his examination of the histories of sexuality (1988), psychiatry (2013), and the prison system (1977) is how power shifts from external to increasingly internalized, moralized ways of self-policing. In European contexts, governmentality targets the individual, shaping ethical norms governing the self. Circulations of new psychological and political regimes of understanding the self have led to, in Nikolas Rose’s words, “the obligation to be free” (Rose 1999, 261). Reconfiguring the individual’s rights and responsibilities has broad implications for the ways in which the state and institutions are seen in relation to individuals, raising questions like—who is responsible for individual health, well-being, and success? In this way, Gordon points out, Foucault’s work “re-poses the conjunction of

the history of politics and the history of ethics”—affording an understanding of how ethical reasoning and statecraft are implicated within each other (1991, 6).

Jacques Donzelot, who was Foucault’s contemporary wrote *The Policing of Families* (1997) to explore the intersections of legal, moral, and cultural influences that operate to transform families. Donzelot argues that the foundations of modern philanthropy merged the conflicting ideologies of liberalism and family authority: “the family became at the same time the point where criticism of the established order stopped and the point of support for demands for more social equality” (1979, 53). Donzelot defines the modern family as an institution “recentered on the primacy of the educative function” (1979, 45). He traces this ethical shift—from a family primarily concerned with economic and political management where children were relatively unimportant—to a family occupied and caught up with the primary task of socializing children through three intertwined legal and political campaigns: (1) the anxiety over the polluting influence of the female house servant in middle-class families (2) the rise of philanthropic education for poor and working-class families and (3) the integration of psychoanalysis into everyday institutions.

Donzelot states that children in upper middle-class houses were imagined to be at risk from too many restrictions, whereas poor children were thought of as too free. Therefore, interventions focused at providing the appropriate amounts of supervision. For Donzelot, a critical intervention that changed the function of working-class families was the provision of low-income public housing which had two rooms—where children could be surveilled at a distance.⁴ Along with a moral education about what makes a good family, these institutional

⁴ As an interesting point of comparison see the discussion of housing and privacy-encouraging architecture in Yan’s (2003) volume, *Private Life Under Socialism*.

changes helped to reformulate the popular sentiments surrounding parenting—remaking the family into an institution focused on the socialization of moral citizens.

Donzelot’s analysis has many overlaps within the contemporary Chinese concern over quality education and modernizing the family. Known as the *suzhi jiaoyu* movement (education quality), there has been a recent explosion in popular advice and governmental interventions designed to improve child training through parenting and schooling. This concern over child training, as Teresa Kuan in her (2015) volume explores, is part and parcel of a national project to restore Chinese honor on a global scale. She writes “good parenting attends to the inner life of children, cultivating personality, self-confidence, a sense of initiative, creative thinking, and overall ‘quality’ (*suzhi*)” (2015, 9). The Chinese attempt at inspiring good parents is part of a larger political move to develop citizens that contribute to the economic and intellectual productivity of the nation. Additionally, political attention to quality ties into a kind of neoliberal attempt at regulating the self, playing on anxieties of educational and economic competition (Kipnis 2007).

In this chapter, my goal is to use Donzelot’s points to turn our attention to the ways in which controlling the family, specifically through legislating marriage and childbirth, has specific effects for the state’s policing project. In this chapter, I argue that China is a fruitful place to understand how governmentality works within the realm of the family and its ideal ethical and moral configurations. Yet policing the family has also longer and deeper roots within Chinese society since conceiving the family as a central political and social institution traces back to more than 1,500 years with to the philosophical treaties of Confucius. This chapter expands Donzelot’s analysis to consider how interventions into families can be spaces of

policing and control, confirming new kinds of ethical demands on different members of society and changing individual's relationship to the state and to each other.

A wide number of authors have applied Foucault's theory of governmentalities to think about how the state has reconfigured individual's relationships to themselves and social institutions. In this chapter, I point out that, in the Chinese case, it may be more theoretically fruitful to look at the family, as opposed to the individual, as a key institution of political, ethical, and social concern. Anxieties over the modern family reveal larger state apprehensions over population quality and in particular a post-colonial concern about China's global position in the world order.

The Confucian Family

Confucianism is, in essence, a political and religious and philosophical system which dominated China and East Asian public morality and discourse well into the present day. Confucius (550 BC) was a political reformer and philosopher and his ideas were integrated within the fabric of East Asian governments, slowly influencing daily life of all of East Asia. In the words of Wei-Ming Tu, distinguished China scholar and philosopher, "East Asians may profess themselves to be Shintoists, Taoists, Buddhist, Muslims, or Christians, but rarely, if ever, do they cease to be Confucians" (Tu 1998, 5).

Confucianism became integrated into the fabric of Chinese society by the merging of the educational and the political systems through the appointment of scholars to government posts after demonstrated mastery over Confucian scriptures. In China, these imperial scholars were thought to hold the moral ideals of society. For everyday life, this has profound implications. It means that unlike a religious institution where goodness is taught and reckoned inside a church,

Confucianism contended that the true space of ethical life was the everyday—and the foundation to this realm of action lay within the family.

One of the central virtues within Confucianism is filial piety. Filial piety is enacted, as written in the Doctrine of the Mean, “in the skillful carrying out of the wishes of our forefathers, and the skillful carrying forward of their undertakings” (Legge, V:3 2013). Filiality involves a host of attitudinal and material obligations: sacrificial honoring of ancestors, provision of old-age support to one’s parents, continuity of the paternal lineage through the birth of sons, and granting of medical decision-making to other kin (Nie 2013). Yet also, filial piety can be understood more broadly as a kind of dispositional attitude which can be understood as an “obligation-towards.” Confucius and his contemporary, Mencius, emphasized the demonstration of respect within five central relationships (*wulun*): 1. Ruler and minister 2. Father and son, 3. Husband and wife, 4. Elder and younger brother, 5. Friend and friend (see Baker 1979, 10; Confucius 2013, 403). Within these five relationships a hierarchy of authority emerges, confirming a generational, age, and gender-based nexus of power defined within the family.

The ethics of family relationships were best demonstrated within the extended family—an ideal type consisting of four generations that shared economic and political resources in common. Scholars of Chinese kinship have described the ways in which the extended family met material and psychological needs in addition to confirming political stability and social conservatism (Slote and Vos 1998; Sangren 2013). While Hugh Baker notes that in reality a good number of families divided into nuclear (consisting of parents and children) or stem families (grandparents, parents, and children), the extended family which included several brothers in the same generation was the ideal model of political and social stability (H. Baker 1979, 15). The extended family allowed the family to expand and contract based on economic

need, continuing “in the face of both the physical and economic disengagement of its members” (Cohen 1970, 24).

The description of the lineage-based family as an emotional and economic group helps to clarify the nature of the family as a unit of social and political control. Understanding the family in this way has ramifications for the ethical structuring of everyday society. If kinship is an essential part of social control, defining family roles becomes a central issue for the state concerned with policing individuals. In addition to biopolitical power influencing reproductive and sexual decisions within the family, family reorganization is a primary way that the state reorganizes private life (Y. Yan 2003; Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005).

I sort state movements attempts at reforming the family under two categories. The first category, is a policy of controlling individuals who moved outside the sphere of patriarchal family influence. This kind of policy can be seen in the Qing Dynasty legislation on sexual morality as well as more recent policies in the post-socialist era targeting migrant workers. Second, is capturing the authority ascribed to traditional kinship structure and consolidating the authority of the state. Both these reforms can be considered as governmental techniques which shape ethical and private concerns in the home. Looking at family interventions is a critical way of understanding the connections between public and private life. Below I outline state interventions in three time periods, though my focus will be on the more recent Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policies.

During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), imperial China faced a new social problem: countless bachelor men migrating in search of work. Without the authoritative demands of a family patriarch, these men were described as “bare sticks” and were perceived as a danger to the moral sexual order of the family. In response to these migrants, new legislation sprang up which

reveal the nature of public fears. These laws attempted to eliminate prostitution, restrict sexual encounters to legally married couples, change the statute of rape to include *mean*-status (servant) women, and award exemplary acts of feminine chastity. In short, the policies reevaluated who was eligible for participation within legally and ethically sanctioned sexual practices (Sommer 2000; Theiss 2004). While simultaneously including commoner status women and men, and excluding “rootless rascals” from other communities, these laws served to redefine the local and moral family, expanding the ideal family from a status-based position of nobility, to one defined by ethical practices of chastity and sexual purity.

This new moral definition of the ordinary family became established within Confucian cultural and religious order and was largely maintained until political reformers of the early 1900s began to evaluate China’s global position. In an intellectual movement that shares a surprising amount of overlap with eugenics and cultural evolutionist perspectives, cultural elites of early 1900s tried to identify the central problem of Chinese culture in order to overcome the crippling yoke of colonialism and military defeats of the past century (Y. C. Wang 1966). “Studying the West” became a principal way for reform thinkers to re-imagine a more advanced Chinese society. They saw patriarchy, the subjugation of women, and the conservative authority of kinship as crucial barriers to modernization (Glosser 2003, 27; D. Ko 2005). Elites and intellectuals (primarily men) eschewed traditional concepts of masculinity to promote a new kind of family—one based on companionate marriage that endorsed love as an ethical discourse of self-determination (Lean 2007, 82; Lee 2007, 15–16).

During this time period, not only was new legislation passed which reconfigured traditional patriarchal rights, but a significant corpus of literature and journalism circulated that began to change public sentiment surrounding romantic attachments and subverted the long-

established model of arranged marriages. While the nationalist government may have been short-lived in mainland China, by the time the Chinese Communist Party was established in 1949, the groundwork had been foundationally shifted towards ideologies eschewing patriarchal authority (Glosser 2003, 170).

The Chinese Communist Party almost immediately identified the family as a target of reform. One of the first large-scale legislation it implemented with the Marriage Law of 1950 which, building on the earlier reforms of the former regime, outlawed a series of arrangements that they titled “feudal”—child marriage, polygamy, and arranged marriages. The law established an option of immediate divorce for individuals in marriages that had been arranged. Notably the new policy also made an official statement about gender equality and women’s property rights and provided guidelines for seeking divorce. Additionally, the law codified marriages by requiring couples to register their marriage and divorce.

However, the implementation of the Marriage Law was radically shaped by individual and community willingness to open private lives to public scrutiny. As Neil Diamant points out “redefining family matters as ‘public’ was a new departure” (Diamant 2000, 45), consequently, lower-levels of state institutions struggled with how precisely to implement the new sets of laws (2000, 48-49). Not only were many officials actually engaged in behavior considered illegal under the new marriage law (such as arranging marriages for their children), but most urban citizens faced practical difficulties if they divorced or left feudal arrangements (2000, 60). In contrast, it seems that industrial working class, suburban farmers, and ethnic groups in Yunnan readily made use of the divorce provisions. Many of the new divorcees were women who used the new law to their advantage by finding new marriage partners with higher social standing (2000, 122, 169).

But state authority rearranges patriarchal authority in many more ways than direct interventions into marriage and divorce laws. For example, land reform policies have wide reaching effects for the kinship system. Traditionally, land was one of the most basic familial resources passed down from heir to heir (H. Baker 1979). Division of land was according to birth-order and sons inherit the property of the father, while brothers are supposed equals in the maintenance of the estate. Under land collectivization which began in the 1950s, land ownership was done away with and particularly wealthy landlords were expelled (H. Baker 1979, 184–89). This meant that the basis of livelihood and continued wealth was no longer the simple fate of birth-right, nor was it determined by a patriarch (Y. Yan 1997). Rather, the continued subsistence of the individual was reckoned by community and national participation.

For urban populations, the factory system offered something akin to collectivization, that is, a shift from family-owned capital firms to state work units (*danwei*) which provided housing, food, training, and even entertainment. In some cases, the *danwei* could determine marriage and procreative decisions, playing the role of patriarch and match-maker. Notably, the formation of the pension system, while notably inconsistent through the Great Leap and Cultural Revolution, meant that urban elders were no longer destitute or financially dependent persons (Davis 1991, 22–25). While this does not break down patriarchy, per se, it does decrease the practical necessity of an intergenerational family, and reduces the burden of the younger generation for elder care.

The state also had more subtle ways for encouraging the break of hierarchal vertical ties. Fred Blake (1979) presents a compelling snapshot into the ways that romance was reformulated by the Communist party by investigating love songs during the Great Leap Forward. Blake argues that Communist leaders encouraged songs that would spur young people to meet the

production goals of the Great Leap, often blurring the metaphors between sexual love and revolutionary values. These songs recount that the best way to get a spouse is by working hard towards the Revolution. Innuendos blur sexuality with productive labor: marriages are consummated by “plowing fields”; love is won by digging “until the stars set and the sun rises” (1979, 46). For Blake, the significance of these songs are not only that they spurred on youthful involvement and provided a kind of erotic motivation to do additional work, but also that they encouraged courtship as a useful kind of cultural paradigm. Courtship is designed to move the young outside the guidelines of the patriarchal family. “Courtship symbolizes the creative, experimental, expressive and impulsive power of youth manifest in the struggle to form new and permanent social relationships—the quintessence of revolutionary reconstruction” (1979, 53). Utilizing love songs as revolutionary fervor attempts to create new kinds of political persons, motivated by internal desires of love, for both spouse and nation.

The family reforms of the Mao-era, including the Marriage Law of 1950, land reform, and the subtler discursive practices encouraging companionate marriage can all be understood as attempts to redirect loyalties from the patriarchal family to the party-state. Steven Harrell makes this point well. He writes that the Communist Party leaders sought to “change the group to which people are oriented but maintain the willingness to work hard for the benefit of that group, they will be able to harness the Chinese entrepreneurial ethic to their own purposes” (Harrell 1985, 221).

Along with policies that diminished patriarchal kinship power, the party-state promoted modern ideology as a balm for the military failures of the last century—birth planning, fully implemented in the 1980s was a central feature of the plan to improve China’s technological standing in the world. By freeing up women’s labor, increasing educational investments in

children, and limiting population growth, the One Child Policy hoped to radically alter gender relationships within the family and “catch up” to the developed world—though the policy was applied unevenly starting in the mid-1970s. Susan Greenhalgh’s analysis of Shaanxi shows that many of the enforcements and incentives for the state-policy was undermined by the dissolution of the collective system and the opening of the free market (1993). Not only so but villagers often did not readily acquiesce to state demands and mid-level cadres were largely responsible as the negotiating party between the state and populace. As a result, both the state and the villagers have changed their original viewpoints.

The ideal family size is now two children in most rural areas, provided there is a gender balance. The state has allowed second-order births while often preventing third and fourth children. This can be seen in my research in Pear Branch Township, where most families had two children and preferred a gender balance between a girl and boy. The policy was implemented very harshly during the 1990s in Henan and I heard of several women who had “hidden” children with their maternal grandmothers, abandoned children to the street, or who were forced to undergo abortion and sterilization. My host family had adopted one such abandoned child, now seventeen years old. She lived most of her time at a boarding high school in the city and did not participate in family holidays (whether this was her choice or the family’s decision, I’m not sure), but she was supported financially and was now entering a voluntary fourth-year of intensive (and expensive) high school to cram for the college entrance exam.

The One Child Policy shifted the traditional worldview of rural Chinese, creating a “new fertility culture” which delinked former sentiments of fate and passivity regarding offspring into one of conscious decision making (Y. Yan 2003). As Yunxiang Yan’s Xiajia data show that there is surprising economic similarities across families with similar birth decisions, and it seems

that satisfaction with only one daughter is intimately tied to socioeconomic standing (see also Gates 1993 for an analysis of capital as it relates to birth-decisions). Moreover, there are emergent factors in child-birth decisions, such as the rising cost of childhood (Jing 2000), the role of women in fertility decisions (H. Zhang 2007), the increasing cost of bridewealth (see chapter 5), and the changing ideologies of gender preference (Shi 2017).

At this point in my argument, I've laid out the ways in which the Chinese state has historically utilized a vision of the family that has its roots in Confucian ideology. Throughout policy changes, a central guiding ideology was that reforming the family was an essential part of restructuring the social system. Yet it is also important to note that though policies attempted to change cultural understandings of family and kinship, this did not mean that Chinese citizens simply went along with the modifications. Rather, as the data on both the Marriage Law implementation and the One Child Policy, there was still a profound negotiation within and through policy implementation. The state's reach cannot penetrate entirely and the population effected by these legislations often pushed their own agendas just as thoroughly.

Another point must be drawn out here as well. Chinese modernity not only an issue of how to police population, but also how to change the Chinese global position. The circulation of the nuclear family ideal as a political and educational structure is foundational in this approach as reformers and academics alike see the confluence of the nuclear family model as synonymous to industrialization, modernization, and development (c.f. Goode 1970, 1982). The emphasis on breaking up the patriarchal extended family within reform movements is aimed not only at transforming the nature of power and authority—redirecting loyalties from family to nation—but also at reconfiguring the internal dynamics of the family itself—transforming the family into a

more productive unit with a singular aim of raising population quality. In this way, the national project of population quality (Greenhalgh and Winckler 2005) merges with the new family ethic of descending familism (Y. Yan 2016) in a unique mobilization of governmentality targeting the family.

What do the family reform movements mean for public sentiments and political interventions for left-behind children and the rural Chinese family? And specifically, what impact do new ideas about nuclear and modern family formation have on extended families with left-behind children living in rural China? In the next section, I return to the issue of left-behind children as a continuation of previous family reforms and increasing emphasis on the nuclear family as a modern model of ethical kinship.

Left Behind Children—Families “out of time”

Shortly after I arrived in the village, I sat down with my host aunt, Auntie Cong and described my research to her. I remember distinctly saying that I was interested in left-behind children. She waved her hand around and stated, ‘here we all take care of our grandchildren. Yes. This is common. Even I care for my grandchildren.’ I remember beginning to protest and describe the distinctions of “left-behind children” as a specific category of demographics—“children under the age of 18 who had one or more parents out for work for more than 6 months of the year.” I could recite the definition in fluid Mandarin since I had just spent a three-and-a-half months in a language-intensive course aimed at improving my Mandarin around the topic of family migration. Since I knew that Auntie Cong’s own grandchildren did not fit this definition—yes, the three grandchildren often spent weekends with their grandparents, and often

came over after school while Cong's eldest son and middle daughter worked in the township, but the parents and children were not separated by migration. Nevertheless, I stilled my tongue letting the disconnect between the official definition and the on-the ground reality take hold.

Later, I had a conversation with a new mother, Xiaomei about family composition which revealed this same assumption. 'You Westerners are so independent,' she said. 'We always have the maternal grandmother [*nainai*] care for the baby.' Grandparenting has become a regular practice in rural and urban China. Most families I spoke with did not in fact see the novelty in grandparental care. For them, temporary and long-term migration was a common-sense arrangement, even if it actually represented a considerable departure from both the traditional Confucian and modern nuclear norms.

A look at residency data from the 1980s and 1990s reveal that, despite the government-led push towards encouraging nuclear families and breaking up patriarchal authority, many families continued to live in stem families with grandparents. For example, in their 1980 study, Parish and White found that in urban households, 22% lived in stem families, while 68% lived in conjugal units. In 1994 Baoding, a study revealed that 30-40% of older adults live with a married adult child (Treas and Chen 2000) and in the mid-1980s, Ikels reported that upwards of 60% of elderly live with an adult child (Ikels 1993). Rural data shows more prevalence of stem families. In 1986, Graham Johnson found that stem families accounted for 35.6 percent of all families in five villages within the Pearl River Delta and conjugal families made up 48.8 of the total (Johnson 1993, 115).

Of course, living together does not always translate into shared childcare responsibilities, yet demographic studies indicate that grandparents, and particularly grandmothers, take on a lion's share of childcare. Stem families often share childcare tasks, for example from 1994-2001

co-resident grandmothers total time in direct contact with children is nearly equal to mothers after the first year (F. Chen, Liu, and Mair 2011). Additionally, a 2014 study showed the non-co-resident grandparents actually spent more hours performing childcare tasks than co-resident grandparents, indicating that despite residency patterns, grandparenting is an enduring strategy for childcare (F. Chen 2014). Increasing numbers of “split households,” that is, households without the parental generation, show that grandparenting is a rising issue for both urban and rural grandparents. A survey of the census data show that skipped generation household jumped from .50% in 1990 to 3.89% in 2005, a seven-fold increase; about 69% of these households are in rural China (J. Zhang, n.d.)

As a result of my conversations in my fieldsite, I began to try and imagine that instead of a separate demographic category, left-behind children were simply living in a new kind of family composition that has arisen in response to the specific economic and geographic constraints of rural to urban migration. From the perspective of rural grandmothers and mothers, the situation of these children was in fact not much different than the care arrangements which were common throughout the rest of the nation.

However, imagining a new kind of family arrangement as normal and accepted brings up another question, if grandparenting is so common throughout China, why then are there specific policies and research programs which identify so many social problems for this demographic? What are the psychodynamic realities that distinguish these children from children living with their parents? Below I offer a review of the research that characterizes these children’s experiences before offering the ethnographic portraits of three different families which complicate these studies.

However, it is important to mention first, that there is a considerable disagreement and debate over the size, scope, and definition of left-behind population throughout the last 15 years. Left-behind children began to be recognized as a social problem in late 1990s. The first wave of migrants leaving rural areas in search of employment had no practical way to resettle the family in urban factories, and so left their children in the care of grandparents. Since the 2000s, the attention towards left-behind children both in terms of public media attention and specific research interventions have been growing.

Three different studies have led to three distinct approaches to the study of left-behind children. In 2004, a team headed by Chinese Agricultural University pioneered some of the first studies about left-behind children and other left-behind populations. Their study covered 20 villages in 9 provinces. Their research team produced 6 books and close to 30 articles (Ye et al 2013, 1120). Most of this team's research has been impact-oriented—that is distilling how and to what extent the state of being “left-behind” impacted the psychological health and physical well-being of children, women, and the elderly. More recently, the team published a position paper disparaging the relevance of impact studies: “We increasingly realize that migration studies need to go back to the very fundamental questions of ‘who wins, who loses?’ and what factors are playing a role in this process, and more importantly, how to change it?” (2013, 1138). They encourage a move towards macro-political analysis to advocate for the rights of migrant workers and their families.

In 2006, the Working Team for Left-Behind Children, headed by the All-China Women's Federation was established by the Chinese State Department in order to mobilize resources and strategize interventions for children separated from their migrant parents. In partnership with Renmin University's Department of China Population and Development, they published the first

large-scale demographic survey of left-behind children in 2013 (All China Women’s Federation 2013). They defined “left-behind children” as minors under the age of 18 who are separated from one or both of their parents for more than 6 months. Using samples from the 2010 census, the study team estimated the population of left-behind children to be 61,025,500 children accounting for 37.7% of all rural children and 21.88% of all children nationally. They estimated that for 46.74% of these children, both parents have migrated, 36.39% of children’s fathers have migrated and 16.87% of children’s mothers. Of all 61 million children, about 57% live with their grandparents, 3% live by themselves, 10.7% live with other relatives, and 29% live with a single parent.

The most recent demographic study, issued by the Civic Affairs Bureau and Renmin University in November of 2016, cut the number of recorded left-behind children from 61 million to 9 million—a reduction of more than 6 times. Officials were quick to explain the reduction—they stopped counting minors between the ages of 16 and 18, for example, to reflect the common occurrence of these older teenagers working and caring for themselves (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2016b). Economic and emotional considerations had also changed in the 6 years between the 2016 Government-led survey and the 2010 Women’s Federation Survey and the new governing body claimed that many families had reunited. The new survey also used a larger sample size and a more exhaustive door-to-door census approach (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2016a). Undoubtable, however, most of the reduction came from the clarification of status since in the 2016 study, demographers changed the definition from “a child under 18 who has *at least one migrant parent* for at least six continuous months,” to “a child under 16 who has *both parents working out* at least six continuous months.”

The 2016 demographic survey showed that 89.3% of all left-behind children live with their grandparents, 3.3% live with other relatives or friends, and 4% are orphaned or abandoned and 3.4% are left by a migrant parent without a guardian. Additionally, the survey showed that 320,000 left-behind children are living in substandard conditions—including dropping out of school or without a household-registration (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2016b). As a result of the survey, the Bureau of Civil Affairs set an ambitious target to appoint guardians for all left-behind children by the end of 2017 (Cai and Wang 2016).

In addition to these three large-scale demographic studies, a number of survey-based research has described the multitude of problems faced by left-behind children in the areas of education, nutrition, mental health, and moral socialization. Almost all of these studies recommend increasing services to left-behind children, their caretakers, and eventually improving or reforming the profound urban-rural inequalities which shape the realities of rural families.

Educational studies have shown a wide disparity of rural children in comparison to their urban peers and give a particularly bleak outlook for rural left-behind children. For example, a study of school readiness showed that approximately half of all rural preschoolers were “not ready” for kindergarten as measured by a standardized test measuring dimensions of cognition, language, gross and fine motor skills, and independence. The same study showed the existing early childhood education opportunities for rural children were lacking in quality, accessibility, and affordability (R. Luo et al. 2012). While early research showed that returns in wage labor for advanced schooling is unexpectedly low in rural China, more recent studies (T. Li and Zhang 1998), show that the long-term returns to schooling maybe much higher than before. Alan De Brauw and Scott Rozelle (2007) argue that since rural areas still face a paucity of educated and

skilled labor, returns may even be higher than recorded, yet rural areas still face critical issues such as the movement of highly skilled workers to urban areas and the poor conditions of rural primary and secondary schools. Emily Hannum (2003) found that that rural school enrollment and drop-out rates correlated to the general economic conditions of the village. While rural areas face higher drop-out rates in general (Yi et al. 2012), Hannum's study linked poverty within the village to poor schooling outcomes, strengthening the tie to economic vibrancy and school success. In a recent study, Lü Lidan found that left-behind children were more likely than children without migrant parents to drop out of high school because of the early exposure to migrant labor and family pressure to earn a higher income (2014). Likewise, Hu Feng (2012) found that an increase in remittances from migrant labor did not translate to higher high school attendance. Both of these studies point to the probability in the creation of a second-generation of migrant workers.

In terms of health, studies show that left-behind children are behind their rural peers in measurements of non-fatal injuries (Shen et al. 2009) and of overall health (Yang Gao et al. 2010; Jia et al. 2010; N. Zhang, Becares, and Chandola 2015). Additionally, rural boarding schools which have been established as a solution to both the problems of left-behind children and the lack of rural quality rural education (F. Liu 2004; Murphy 2004; Liang, Hou, and Chen 2008; C. Liu et al. 2010) have been shown to be considerably lacking in providing nutrition to children (R. Luo et al. 2009; N. Zhang 2016). Rural left-behind children are also shown to be more vulnerable to victimization, especially multiple incidences of victimization including sexual assault and abuse which has long-term effects for mental health and self-concept (M. Chen and Chan 2016).

The mental health of left-behind children has been a long-standing concern. In their exploratory research in 10 villages, Ye, Murray, and Wang found that up to 91 percent of all left-behind children wished for their parents to return and many expressed feelings of loneliness, depression, and loss of parental care (2010, 86). A 2009 study showed higher incidence of shyness and sensitivity for left-behind children in comparison to other rural children (X. Chen, Wang, and Wang 2009). Jia and Tian (2010) found that left-behind children were 2.5 times likely to be lonely and 6.4 times likely to be very lonely than their non-left-behind peers. The mental health of children has also been tied to drop out rates in middle school (H. Wang et al. 2015). In J. Luo, Wang and Gao's (2009) more nuanced study, they argue that while left-behind children have psychological resources of maturity and independence, they also suffer from more depression.

Finally, left-behind children are shown to have more behavioral problems than their rural peers (F. Fan et al. 2010). A recent study showed that 17 % of 1,200 criminals surveyed were left-behind children. The Beijing researcher who authored the study pointed at the failure of these youth to "build a proper moral conscious" without their parents (Ren 2016, para 6). Recent research also has exposed an "invisible crisis" of modern parenting skills within rural China, and specifically among caretakers of left behind children (Yue et al. 2017). Researchers worry that without modern parenting styles, rural children are more at risk for behavioral problems and poor educational attainment.

In response to this more than a decade of intensive social research into left-behind children, the Chinese Bureau of Civic Affairs issued a policy statement in February of 2016 which declared their intentions for targeted interventions and research areas. The new guidelines feature the nuclear family norm by affirming the responsibility of parents in the emotional and

physical support of their children and make leaving a child younger than 16 without an adult a crime. Local governments, the guidelines encourage, should develop ways to track and collect information about left-behind children within their districts, visiting these children and ensuring their care, establishing a “professional system of reporting, intervention and assessment” (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2016b).

The interventions that have sprung up in response to increased attention to left-behind children are both therapeutic for children and punitive for abandoning adults. The establishment of counseling centers, telecommunications resources to foster parent-child communication, and for-profit boarding schools, for example, are attempts replace the parental care with the care of educators or the state (Ye and Yang 2008). Additionally, new legislation encourages parents to increase the care that they give—framing this in terms of responsibility and ethical obligation. For example, the resolution calls for the “rational delegation and division of responsibilities for caring persons,” recommending that individual townships and villages educate residents on the legal responsibilities of guardianship of children, and maintain files and report when local left-behind children are in trouble (*kunjing*) (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2016b).

The central theme through all the research and intervention is a problem of the nuclear family. A quote from an activist whose work advocates for left-behind children sums this quite well: “after many years of services, I really think that we can’t replace parents after all... the absence of parents not only means a lack of caring for their daily life, but also a lack of fundamental education, about telling them what’s right and what’s wrong” (Zuo 2016, para 15). She went on to say that only parents can provide “normal family love” (Zuo 2016, para 17).

I began this chapter with a quote from the All-China Women's Federation which issued the first country-wide demographic survey of left-behind children in 2013. The report urges policy solutions to address the family as a foundational starting point of children's social, moral, and emotional education. The nuclear-family bias inherent within the long-term policies which target the family, both target errant migrants—blaming them for their heartless abandonment or inability to care—and ignore the multitude of caring acts by grandmothers and grandfathers—instead conceiving of grandparental care as a liability not an asset. Thusly, migrant parents and grandparent caretakers are implicated outside of a moral hierarchy of what constitutes a “good,” “modern,” and “developed” family. I argue that what is being lost in these policies is attention towards the actual intergenerational families which neither conform to traditional ideals of the Confucian family or the modern ideals of a nuclear household.

Mary Douglas makes the point that matter “out of place” is often understood as dirt or pollution (1966), that is, when things fail to fit preconceived categories they are perceived as threatening or taboo. This concept is useful here to think about the ways that the rural extended family is a family form “out of time.” Since the Republican reform movement of the early 1900's, the Chinese reformers have conceived of the family as part of economic and social development, from traditional extended family to a more nuclearized form, with each successive generation gaining more autonomy, authority, and independence. The rural Chinese family, which is neither nuclear nor extended, disrupts the neat folk-theory of development, troubling the very modernizing project of the Party itself.

While the rural community has more or less accepted this reality as a normal part of modern life, the figure of the left-behind child continues to be highlighted in the media as a troubling problem. The extended rural Chinese family is “troubling”—in the sense of disruption

and break by the extension of the mother-migrants failure to fit neatly into categories of virtuous mother or modern individualist. For rural Chinese families are neither the bastions of tradition or the heralds of the modern nuclear family, but exist in a type of third category. By continuing to heavily utilize extended kin for childcare, rural Chinese families actually continue the “traditional” values of intergenerational cooperation, albeit for novel care-arrangements. The contemporary rural extended family is one characterized by movement and economic interdependency. In this way, a very modern problem—how to balance the twin demands of income generation and household tasks, is solved with a very traditional solution—the extended kin network. Yet, the extended kin network actually subverts the traditional ideal of age-based hierarchy.

Contemporary arrangements of intergenerational care no longer conform to traditional ethics of filial authority where the older generation is supposed to be the recipient of respect and veneration. Instead, in rural Chinese families, the older women put in long hours tending to children, doing the housework, and even earning small amounts of income while the younger generation of women works outside the community. This disrupts the traditional ideal of the “mother-at-home”; outsourcing care to older women undermines the expected *nü zhu nei* (women control the inside) gendered category (for more on gendered expectations see Barlow 2004; Hershatter 2007; Evans 2008). While urban women also make use of the older generation for childcare, they continue to conform to cultural ideals of continuity, family unity and preservation of traditional kinship structures. Mother-migrants, on the other hand utilize split-generation care pushes the social norm of grandparenting past the cultural standard. Because they return home on average once per year, migrant mothers fail to meet the traditional expectations of female care, even while fulfilling the rural value of hard work and income generation.

Legislative concern over left-behind children can be seen as an extension of policies which target the formation, policing, and inculcation of families as a central national concern of modernity and development. This is not to say that the suffering, depression, and inequalities of left-behind children are not real, pressing, and in need of intervention, but rather that the ways in which the reform of the family comes about has long-term effects in terms of how the state relates to individuals and families. How the ideological family is reformed and transformed into a more modern, socialization-focused institution has wide implications for how parents and grandparents assess their efficacy and well-being, how children understand their family situation, and how generations and extended family members work together to cooperatively (or discordantly) socialize the next generation. In short, changing the family, and specifically changing the idea of the family has real effects for the ways in which individual members expect themselves and other family members to behave within relationships.

What is at stake for Left-Behind Families?

Up until this point, I have described left-behind children only in terms of demographic and policy terms while making some claims about the theoretical implications of such policies. I also stated at the beginning of this chapter, that I find demographic studies and portrayals limiting because I believe the simple counting of left-behind children is both obscuring and over-generalizing. Understanding “what is at stake” (Kleinman 2006) for families living with the realities of migration takes more than a simple questionnaire, but requires a fined grained ethnographic analysis.

I begin this analysis by offering several portraits of families who can be classified as containing left-behind children. For my dissertation, I interviewed and engaged in participant

ethnography with eight families that dealt with migration in some way throughout the course of my research, I've selected three here because they demonstrate a complicated picture of the left-behind migrant family. Instead of static, these families are characterized by movement and migration. Instead of cold or heartless, these families acts of care are complex and caught up in realities of multiple interests, displaying the conflicts between economic provision, mental illness and attempts to plan for future economic markets, and future risk to children's dispositional education. Writing about only their arrangements of care flattens the complicated daily life that I seek to portray and here I have struggled to try and offer a picture of what family life might be like for rural extended families. With this in mind, I have intentionally recorded selections from my fieldnotes and only offer an analysis at the conclusion of these portraits.

Family One

When I first came to Jiatian Village, Keyu was living with his grandfather—who was prone to arguing and drinking since his wife divorced him some 15 years earlier—and his great-grandmother who was over 80 years old. Both guardians spoke with heavy dialects and both were functionally illiterate having never gone to school. 'He doesn't eat,' his grandfather described his greatest concern for Keyu. Indeed, when I ate with the family, I also observed that the 8-year old preferred to watch television (a cartoon which featured a mute bear was his favorite) or play with his second-cousin (my host-family's grandson). They only had one pair of roller blades, so the boys split the pair apart—each boy using one skate-less foot to propel themselves around. When his grandfather called him to eat, Keyu came inside to reluctantly join us at the low table in front of the sofa where several dishes of vegetables and meat, steamed bread and flour-paste soup (*hetang*) were already laid out. He picked heartlessly at the chicken

until his great-grandmother said, 'I have also made you rice.' At this, he brightened and followed her into the kitchen to get a bowl of rice. Grandfather looked at us and explained that since Keyu's mother was a southerner that he had gotten "used to" (*xiguan*) eating rice instead of Henan staples. 'So maybe he is homesick?' I offered. Grandfather nodded without further comment.

Later, Keyu's mother and father returned just before the New Year. We all ate a meal of dumpling soup together with their extended family. Keyu's mother, a petite woman from Guandong province and I talked about the family's new plan to open a remodeling shop in the township. The shop would be rented from a cousin and the entire family would move into the apartment above the shop. "And then," she sighed and looked at Keyu, "I will go back out (*huichuqu*). Keyu, do you hear? I will go back out." I tried to look at any change in Keyu's emotional comportment, but he turned away, squirming under his mother's gaze.

Family Two

It was rumored that Jiawei's mother had run away from the village after his grandfather—a notoriously short tempered man—had threatened to cut off her ear. She had been a purchased bride from Yunnan. Jiawei's father was described as "a bit stupid" (*laoshi*) but, to me he presented as generally amiable—if a bit broody—when I met him during his 2 month return during the New Year's holiday. The entire time he stayed in the village he refused to say more than a few words to me and often left the room if he saw me chatting with Jiawei's grandmother—Grandmother Fong (featured in Chapter 6). I often found Fong making bread or dumplings and I would stay with her trying to study the cooking methods and listening to her stories. Fong had converted to Christianity some 20 years earlier and, already burdened with

some mental health problems, she often blurred the narrative accounts within the Bible with her own life—claiming that she had seen visions of heaven and hell. She could be seen walking around the village singing or praying. Most of the village thought she was crazy and often laughed at her.

Jiawei was 13 but still in the 5th grade—about 2 or 3 years behind in school. His grandparents planned to enter him in the local public junior high the next year. He snubbed studying and had some behavioral problems. Once he set fire to some paper in my house. He refused to put out the blaze and in response I had grabbed his most valuable possession—a small early-generation cell phone brought home by his father. I presented this phone to his Grandmother with the idea that she could punish him for setting fire to my things. Grandmother Fong, however did not want to take possession the phone. “Nei,” she put her hands up in protest. “I don’t know how to work that thing!” When Jiawei caught up to me on the village road, he was crying and shouting so that I couldn’t comprehend his rapid dialect. I think that he was asking that I return the phone and not tell his grandfather. I’m not sure how this incident was resolved since I left the crying boy and Grandmother Fong when I became too overwhelmed and frustrated, so that my ability to understand slipped away from me. A few weeks later, when the trees began to bloom, Jiawei harvested a long branch of blossoms from a high tree and brought them to me—a kind of peace offering. We never brought up the fire or the cell-phone again.

Jiawei could be classically described as a left-behind child, and I’m sure that if asked in a survey about his parents—he would answer that both were out working, since he often told me directly that his mother was simply out working. But the reality was more complicated. Once, at the village candy shop, I overheard him arguing with Junqiang, whose family I describe below. “Your mother is never coming back!” accused Junqiang. Jiawei retorted, “My mother is working!

And anyway, *both* your parents are never coming back!” The shopkeeper had looked at Jiawei and matter of factly asked, “Has your mother called recently?” Jiawei shook his head. I felt an incredible amount of shame and pity for him, because, as the entire village knew, Junqiang’s parents were coming back the following week, and they would stay for the remainder of my fieldwork. But Jiawei’s mother would most likely not return. His father would stay for several months, overlapping with the New Year’s holiday. In March, he left to work construction in Guizhou, leaving Jiawei with his mentally-ill grandmother and quick-tempered grandfather.



Figure 9 The act of grandmothing includes countless acts of care to maintain the intergenerational family

Family Three

Junqiang and Junli were siblings living in the care of their grandmother and grandfather. Their house was next to their two uncles and the three families shared food, labor, and childcare. The grandfather worked locally performing construction. The grandmother cared for the five

children while all three of her sons, and two of her daughters-in-law were out working.⁵ Junqiang often got into trouble at school and while his test scores were average, his parents worried that he did not apply himself adequately. Junli—as her father described her—had a problem with memory and even though she tried to study, she consistently performed below 30th percentile. Junli was shy and preferred to play with one of her neighbors in one of the family courtyard. She was entering junior high the next year.

Junqiang and Junli’s parents returned from Shenzhen in February. ‘It’s not that we have enough money,’ her mother explained why they had returned. ‘It’s that my mother-in-law is too burdened with the kids.’ As Junqiang and Junli had gotten older, they had been increasingly difficult to control. Indeed, Junqiang had recently ran into our house, despite my desperate attempts to control him; he broke Uncle Jia’s Buddhist figurines, jumped in his garden plot, and peed into the road from the roof. While Junli had never displayed any of the naughtiness of her brother, her mother still worried that in middle school she would *xue huai*, or “study bad” meaning that she would stop following gendered norms of politeness and behavior. Since the mother reported this to me as they were building a separate in-room shower, I also assume that she was also referring to trying to protect her daughter’s sexual reputation.

Junqiang and Junli’s parents opened a *bing* stand (a kind of savory fried dough with tomato sauce and sesame seeds) in April and they worked 7 days a week—for about 10 hours per day—selling food across from the bus station. They started saving all of their money, in hopes to send both children to a boarding school in the county seat. After they sent them to the boarding school, so relieving the older grandparents care duties, the pair planned to migrate once again.

⁵ One of her daughters-in-law was still local and lived three houses away. The grandmother complained that this daughter-in-law was “very lazy” because she didn’t help to care for the children or cook. To be fair, she was also pregnant and probably suffered from severe morning sickness as a result of the pregnancy.

Conclusion and Analysis

The portraits above represent just one year of migration change for three families. Similar stories of migration will be seen throughout this dissertation. These cases are far from unique, most families I spoke to moved in and out of urban jobs—returning for some time, going out, working at home, working in factories. As few migrant jobs were permanent or contracted, migrants were “floating” not only in the sense that they did not have documentation or urban residency, but also in the sense that they returned home in response to the markets, or personal reasons such as domestic violence or unhappy marriages. The year of my field work (2014-2015) was an especially difficult one for low-wage workers and country-wide layoffs sent many workers home (Kessel 2016). Many migrants were disgruntled at the employment options available, and since many already felt pressure to care for their children and relieve the burden they placed on their older parents, they returned home to cobble together self-employment or more local contract work. From these portraits, two arguments can be drawn: the first about the failure of demography to capture the contours of experience and second about the strategies that migrant parents utilize in maintaining connections with their children.

The definition of who is left-behind and who is not obscures the frequent movement between categories. Three of the seven families with dual-parent migrants I followed during my dissertation changed from full “left-behind” status to a reunited rural family as the parents found work more locally. Yet in four other families, one parent migrated out for work during the course of my residence in the village. Because of the new definition of “left-behind children” as both parents working as migrants, these families no longer count within the official demographic, yet the experience of separation and reunion following the profound instability of the uncontracted employment marks these families’ experiences nevertheless.

While the demographic category of left-behind children hopes to capture a certain life-experience, the full messiness of family dynamics can hardly be captured by such a definition. The numbers may mask important features such as undiagnosed mental illnesses, disability, or divorce—all of which can be seen within the family portraits above. Ye Jingzhong and the research team at China Agricultural University have labeled this problem, the “endogeneity problem” meaning that such a multitude of factors shape families lives that no amount of research can ever fully compress life experience into a conclusion—it is almost impossible to arrive at a judgment on the impacts of migration on children and their caretakers (2013, 1125, 1138).

To the anthropologist, the endogeneity problem, actually presents an opportunity for attuning to the intricacies of intergenerational family life after migration in rural China. The ethnographic lens can add insight into the contradictions and complexities of the left-behind experience. While demographic and survey-based questions seek to define and characterize children’s experience to better manage and improve services, ethnography has no such agenda. Consequently, my research will document the more elusive practices of care and the forms of ethical self-cultivation they entail. These practices are evident in the portraits above. For example, Keyu’s mother repeated and early warning to him of her eventual departure, preparing him for the eventual separation. The gift of a cell phone to a son, which was held so dear that when I took it, Jiawei burst into tears. The building of an enclosed shower for a pre-pubescent daughter. The making of rice for a grandson who missed home. The foregoing of a stable factory wage for the arduous entrepreneurial life to save one’s aging mother the burden of caring for her grandchildren. In these countless small ways, families who use migration as an economic resource are also considering and attempting to care for one another.

My dissertation is in part, an attempt to document these small acts of care and the small ways in which families negotiate new economic obligations of migration with traditional ethical and emotional demands of kinship. This recognition of the small acts of care in rural families leads me back into my original theoretical question which guided this chapter—that is how does the political and legal interventions that attempt to modernize the left-behind family impact real rural families? How do condemnations of migrant mothers and fathers effect the well-being of parents? And further, who benefits from such interventions and who is even further left-behind?

The Chinese party-state is not alone in its attempt to build model families to solve political anxieties. As a central institution for education and socialization, states have a vested interest in shaping families into particular models which conform to ethical and moral ideals that have resonance for national progress and development. Anthropologists have documented the ways in which the family holds significant religious and political anxieties in diverse societies. For example, in Egypt, Hasso argues that the codification of gender inequality into the legal code has led to the rise of polygamy and secret marriages, which in turn has encouraged a national anxiety over the family (Hasso 2011). In Marianne Bloch's chapter on family and child welfare she documents the moves of Senegal, Hungary, and the United States to create social programming and insert state power over women and children (Bloch 2003).

In the Chinese context, a number of recent research studies have also drawn attention to the confluence of state influence over moral decisions within the family. For example, Yunxiang Yan has shown that increased attention towards personal happiness and privacy have been influenced by changes in land ownership (2003). Gonçalo Santos has argued that a “techno-politics of intimacy” put into place by the various reform movements I outline above affect individual assessments of moral family comportment in rural South China. Santos convincingly

traces the contours of fertility and marriage decisions to shifts in economic and social policy which he argues are “civilizing missions” aimed at encouraging “modern” understandings of the self (2006, 1322). Yet he points out that instead of top-down transformations, real shifts occur from a variety of “frictions” taking place at the intersections of policy and experience (2006, 1326).

Family reform is almost always rooted in the belief a particular vision of what makes a good, proper, and modern family. This legislative concern remakes ethical demands on family roles, throwing previously held expectations of how one should or shouldn’t act within the family into question. Policies targeting the family reveals how the family is considered a critical ethical arena. Left-behind children and the families they are of part are then not only a matter of social concern, but of political relevance, revealing how state governments attempt to reform and police ethical education.

In this chapter, I have reviewed the historical and political context for Chinese party-state interventions into the family, in part to distil “what is at stake” for the recognition of extended families as a place of care. I point out that the vast number of studies which describe left-behind children have maintained a distinct nuclear family bias. This bias color not only sentiments towards migrant parents—blaming them for their heartless abandonment—but also masks the care of millions of grandparents. In contrast to the prevailing focus on nuclear family, my intention throughout these chapters is to call attention to the family as it is: extended variable and dynamic. In so doing, I explore the confluence of intergenerational influence on key areas of the family responsibilities—socialization, old age care, and arranging marriage—revealing the overlaps between traditional family structure and modern economic arrangements.

Chapter Three

“Give him to his Grandmother, don’t call a *baomu*.” Maternal labor and the shifting intergenerational contract

One afternoon, I stopped by Teacher Jia’s house. As the oldest teacher in the village, he and his wife were well respected and both readily told me stories of their past. On that day, the conversation turned to childcare practices.

“In the past, other places had specialized childcare or that kind of job, but this place—we had nothing. Everyone goes to labor, but no one wants to care (*buxiang zhaogu*) for the children... that job, you would give that person money,” Grandmother Chen explained.

“You mean *baomu*?” I asked.

Teacher Jia chimed in, “in the city—but here there is no *baomu*. In the countryside, there is none.”

“There is only grandfathers and grandmothers!” I said with a chuckle.

“*Buya buya*, [no, no]” Teacher Jia negated my joke with a softening particle. Correcting me mildly. “It’s actually, we just give to the grandmother. Don’t call a *baomu*.”

“That’s right. We just give to the grandmother for care.” Grandmother Chen agreed.

“Don’t give to a *baomu*, [and there is no?] father...—be at ease” chimed in another grandmother whose missing teeth and heavy slur thwarted my efforts at understanding her fully.

“If their parents both have jobs, they cannot care [for the child]. Then you have to help. There is no *baomu* in our place. Also [they?] must work.” Teacher Jia emphasized.

“What if the grandparents are not willing to take care of the child?” I ask after a short pause.

“Willing or not, you still must (*dei*) care” asserted Teacher Jia.

Baomu, as utilized in the dialogue above, refer to a nanny or specialized childcare provider which are employed by urban upper middle class families. In stating that the countryside has no *baomu*, this older couple is also highlighting the difference in paid and unpaid labor. *Baomu* are paid for childcare, while grandmothers—note the gendered difference that Grandfather Jia points out—must care for the child whether they are willing or not.

This conversation reveals the gendered and age-based obligations now prevalent in rural Chinese families. Labeled “left-behind children,” kids left in the care of their grandparents as a result of their parents’ migration represent a significant political and popular concern. Teacher Jia and Grandmother Chen knew this concern well. When their grandchildren were in preschool, their daughter-in-law had an affair. Rather than face the shame of her infidelity, Grandmother Chen told her to leave the family. She left that afternoon on the back of the other man’s motorcycle. I’m not sure of all the details—the family was evasive about the son’s behaviors after his wife left with such fanfare. He may have migrated or he may have simply been crippled by grief. Grandmother Chen ended up raising the children: “If there is no *niang* (mother), then there is no one to care for them.” The school fees for the children were burdensome and somehow the older couple scraped together enough for school and exam fees and all three children graduated from college. The children were told that their mother had died and their maternal aunt, ridden with the guilt of her sister’s action, sent money each year.

All of this was before it was common for migrant laborers to separate from their children. Mingyan, the oldest daughter who is now getting her master’s degree in social work at a university in Shanghai, remembers being the target of other children’s teasing at school since she

was raised by her grandparents. Now, she told me, the number of children left behind by their parents are so many, she would probably fit right in.

As this family's situation highlights, the now ubiquitous care and household arrangement which is so prevalent across the countryside is not a historical norm. Indeed, it arose from a constellation of changes that occurred in the ideological and economic space between state policy and individual action. This chapter examines the ways in which these various forces—state feminism, a rearrangement of family labor, and a cleavage of the rural and urban economies led to the reinvention of the gendered intergenerational contract.

Many authors have pointed at the *Hukou* as a cause for left-behind children (Y. Li and Lu 2014; F.-L. Wang 2005; Jacka 2012; Ye 2011). While I do think that *Hukou* policies intentionally benefited urban spaces at the cost of rural people, in this chapter, I look to the broader reconfigurations of the economic arrangements of the family a special attention to the ways in which women's increased workforce participation led to a distinct shift in the expectations for women's labor both inside and outside the home.

I argue that changes in women's workforce participation ultimately affect the intergenerational contract, that is, the ideal contributions of older and younger generations to the continuation of a viable family unit (Croll 2006; Y. Yan 2003; Ikels 1993, 2006). This chapter contributes to the scholarship on the intergenerational contract by investigating how gendered and age-based divisions of labor change in response to larger economic development. In particular, the cases I examine here are rooted in the rural experience of collective agriculture and the widespread instances of rural to urban migration. The second part of the chapter considers the effects of these new expectations on older women's self-assessment and raises the questions of a gendered moral personhood.



Figure 10 Cleaning Blankets

Women's Labor

In this chapter, I will review three different historical periods which each defined women's roles within society. I examine the ideology which establish beliefs about gender to also investigate the practical and economic implications of these gendered models. A word of caution should be stated first, however, since ideology is often different than actual practices. Even in traditional China, when divisions between men's and women's labor was quite specific, women worked in a variety of laboring contexts (Hershatter 2000, 83). In contemporary times, even though most families report caretaking as primarily a woman's job, men are also active inside the home, taking grandchildren on outings and sometimes even cooking and cleaning. While a diversity of actions and behaviors disrupt a unified dogma, ideology still has ramifications for practical arrangements of family organization with firm influence on what kind of work men and women undertake and how this work is understood. Ideologies have profound impacts on the ways in which individuals assess themselves within a system of moral goodness

and thusly has implications for self-concept and well-being, a point which I will return in the final section.

Traditional China

Women's and men's labor was divided between home and paid laboring spheres. The ideal gendered divide in Confucian teaching and Ban Zhao's first century, *Instructions for Women* was strict—expressed by the Chinese idiom, *nanzhuwai, nüzhunei*, or “men manage the outside, women manage the inside.” Men worked the “outside” in farming or the trades, while women worked the “inside” in spinning, weaving, and sewing (Mann 2000, 15). In practice, it was probably economic need that dictated laboring roles and tasks, and the wealthier the family was, the more the family followed the gendered and age-based division of labor. This principle meant that young women were in charge of the domestic sphere, cooking, cleaning, hosting, and childcare, while men did more culturally recognized forms of work—laboring, establishing political alliances, and business ventures. Older women were the recipients of the younger generation's labor and women in general were thought to contribute “help” to the household economy, while not necessarily recognized as major economic players (Gates 2001, 132; Brown 2016). The responsibility of childcare and child raising fell to mothers, though fathers did contribute towards discipline, especially for sons (Wolf 1972). In families that were more strapped financially, many women crossed over into sidelining work—selling items at market or even working as laborers. In the Song dynasty (960-1279), for instance, women were recorded as engaging in all kind of market activities in urban areas including restaurant and tea shop owners, merchants and tailors.

In economic terms, even ideal women's work in gentry families—specifically the sericulture industries, weaving, sewing and embroidery—held significance for the production of cotton and silk cloths during the profitable and thriving Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and beyond (Mann 2000, 26; Gates 2001). The household labor that women undertook in traditional China was extensive and time consuming—accounting for a wide array of extra economic activities, such as managing silk and cotton production. All sewing was completed by hand and women made shoes, clothing, and blankets for the entire household. Cooking and preparing food was also a major undertaking, butchering, and gardening was a major time investment.⁶ As my interviews with rural Chinese women remembering the collective era reveal (see Chapter 7), most of these time-intensive practices were continued until marketization and industrialization made clothes and shoes more commercially available about 20-30 years ago. Notably, these household tasks also provided the household with valuable labor, even when female produced cloths were not sold at market, the household utilized childcare and sericulture production at an economic benefit.

Simultaneously, age was considered an advantage during this time period. Idealized versions of grandparenting are characterized by the receipt of filial acts of care and the enjoyment of the extended family. For example, consider the 6th Century B.C.E. tale, of one filial man, Lao Laizi, who, wanting to humor his parents, performs infantile actions in order to sacrifice his own identity. Lao Laizi not only wore children's clothing, but also spilled tea and threw tantrums in the style of a child because it brought humor and delight to his aging parents (see also Stafford 1995; Bregnbæk 2016). Or consider the Chinese idiom expressing idealized

⁶ Relatedly, see a discussion of footbinding and the economic benefits to households because of female confinement due to footbinding in Blake's (1994) analysis.

old age: *hanyinongsun*, or “to play with one’s grandchildren with candy in your mouth;” in other words, to enjoy a sweet old age is to be idle.

In her analysis on the Chinese family, Marjorie Wolf argues that the goal of young women’s marriage arrangements was to become a mother-in-law and therefore receive the benefits of the patriarchal system later in life as repayment for the sacrifices of a patrilocal displacement. Mother-in-laws were thought to be the beneficiaries of the patrilocal system. In this classic constellation, value came by simple virtue of age and position within the family.

Yet as Susan Mann (1997, 2000) and others have noted (c.f. Ebrey 1993), gendered and age-based labor holds a significant moral and emotional valence. Gentry families throughout pre-revolutionary China were concerned with managing household labor in order to conform to traditional ideals of work as respectable calling—fitting into a Confucian social order that was elaborated by the third century B.C.E. philosopher, Mencius; “some labor with their minds and some labor with their strength” (see Mann 2000, 16-20 for further discussion). The gendered and age-based divisions of labor allowed for a strict labor management system and led to a productive household unit.

Twentieth-Century Shifts

While there were significant discursive changes in ideal women’s roles in Republican China (1911-1948), in my discussion, I focus on the economic and ideological shifts during the revolutionary and collectivization period (1950-1979). From the very early foundations of the Party, Mao and other communist leaders saw women’s participation in the work force as essential to national development. In a 1931 speech, Mao tied the economic independence of women to a companionate and free marriage system, “the first step toward the economic

emancipation of men and women, brings with it a change in the marriage relationship and makes it free” (Mao 1931). The Marriage Law and the establishment of the All China Women’s Federation in 1951 were meant to support the cultural transition from the patriarchal family to a more egalitarian kinship. New policies outlawed a series of arrangements that they titled “feudal”—child marriage (*tongyangxi*), polygamy, and arranged marriages. The law codified marriages by requiring couples to register their marriage, made an official statement about gender equality, women’s property rights, and provided guidelines for seeking divorce.,

Following Marxist ideology, the traditional divisions of labor were turned on its head with the idea that equality between men and women was a foundational part of communist revolution. A host of campaigns to encourage women’s labor participation sprung up in the public sphere. Women were conscripted to work through both political and economic means. For example, a series of female model worker awards featured hardworking industrious women (Hershatter 2000), hiring quotas in urban factories raised women’s employment (M. M. Yang 1999a), broadcasts and propaganda campaigns heralding the importance of women’s participation in remaking the nation. In study sessions and assemblies, older women were invited to speak against the feudal family and praise the current and ostensibly more fair arrangements of gendered labor. Femininity was eschewed and women were depicted in the popular culture as equivalent to men (M. M. Yang 1999a; Honig 2000). All these attempts restructured the ideal version of female roles within the family and helped to create a sea-change in the general cultural expectations for women’s labor participation.

However, perhaps the most salient campaign to the reorganization of both gendered and age-based labor was the establishment of the work point system as part of the collectivization of agriculture. Collectivization was a large-scale initiative designed to transform rural food

production from a tenancy-based system which favored a few wealthy landlords, to an egalitarian peasantry. By establishing state-owned farms and amassing the previously individually-owned land into collective units, the idea was that villagers would work together to farm for the collective good. Technological and infrastructural improvements, such as application of fertilizers and the sharing of draft animals, led to a modest annual agricultural growth rate of 3.2% between 1952 and 1974 (Hsing 1990, 82). While a lengthy discussion about the costs and benefits of the system lays outside the scope of this chapter, it is worth mentioning that a number of substantial studies have pointed out that the collective organization of agricultural labor increased grain yields and improved agricultural outputs in addition to raising nutrition and educational access for rural residents (c.f. Hsing 1990, Parish and Whyte 1980). On the other hand, hardly anyone I spoke to, regardless of gender, remembered the collectivization years with fondness, but instead remembered hunger, hard labor, and extreme boredom as a result of the lack of entrepreneurial opportunities.

Work points were granted to individuals in exchange for the time and tasks that were put forth within the work team and at specific period. Points were exchanged for allotments of staple grains and food. Value was arbitrarily assigned and as Eisenman (2018) points out, ordinary people had little knowledge of the total productivity of the commune allowing cadres to extract the highest resources possible while keeping local consumption low. The result of the work point system was a manufactured shortage economy. Under the demands of labor and work point exchange, consumptive decisions of the family were drastically reduced to a basic subsistence level, driving the entire family to reorganize their traditional or common sense arrangements of labor.

In order to understand how work points impacted idealized gender and age-based roles,

two factors are central: 1) the differential awarding of work points based on age and gender and 2) the exclusion of sericulture and childcare from the collective economy. I first turn to ways in which age and gender factored into the reward of work points in collective-era China. The widespread practice of awarding men's labor more favorable to women's regardless of effort or difficulty is a point well documented (c.f. Parish and Whyte 1978, 62–63; Wolf 1985; S. H. Potter and Potter 1990, 120–21; Bossen 2002, 111–12). In order to flush out the intersections of both age and gender, a fine-grained analysis is needed. Here I draw from Huaiyin Li's (2005) comprehensive article which details the work point allocation in Jiangsu Province. While geographically specific in detail, this data can be extrapolated to represent a larger national trend. Li records that age is a central factor in determining working capacity and thusly determined one's work point remuneration (2005, 280). While work point accumulation was universally tied to age, the life-course influenced men and women's work point earnings differently.

The average earnings across the life course of males to follow a regular pattern, young workers started out as teenagers with the status of 'half laborer' (*ban laoli*) moving up to 'full laborer' (*zheng laoli*), but then being demoted to 'half laborer' when their age and physical barriers restricted their labor capacity, retiring fully at the average age of 50–60 years old. Men reached their peak earnings around 35 and each year the average earnings decrease regularly until retirement (H. Li 2005, 286). Women however, show a drastically earlier peak—around 21 years of age. Li speculates that this intensive period of labor represented a window of opportunity before marriage when a young woman could contribute to her dowry and her natal family. Labor outputs decline significantly during her 20's—prime childbearing years—but increase again in her 30's when the children have reached school-age and women have increased pressure to support their in-laws. Women retired on average at 45, and as Li, records, often did

so with the express purpose of supporting the household tasks which went unrecognized by the collective system (2005, 287).

The second factor contributing to the rearrangement of age and gender roles is the exclusion of sericulture and childcare from the collective economy. This feature is best examined with selections of interviews from my older female informants who remember the difficulties of the collective era as a particular hardship on women of childbearing years. In the words of Grandmother Yang, ‘if you had children, you didn’t eat well.’ Women, as Li’s analysis corroborated, were already at a disadvantage for work points compared to men, and could not afford to take time off for illness, childbirth, and recovery, let alone for childcare (c.f. Wolf 1985).

An example is from Grandmother Yu, now 75:

Yu: When I gave birth to my children, it was my mother-in-law who helped me. I give birth quickly, I didn’t even have time to return home to go into labor, let alone go to the hospital. When my stomach hurt, my stomach hurt very badly...almost like that, the child was born.

Erin: It was that fast? How many hours?

Yu: Now, how could I know how many hours it was? I didn’t have a watch! (laughter) At that time we didn’t have anything! If an hour past, how could I know how long it was?... now [my kids] are all grown—over 50 years-53, 54 years old. We didn’t even have eggs then, how could I have had a watch?

The birth story is colored not only by the unique experience of a fast labor, but, Grandmother Yu points out the generational experience of the lack of material goods. Eggs are one of the traditional foods given to women after birth—said to be healing and replenishing for female fertility. The lack of an egg here demonstrates not only a material poverty which shapes her experience of time, but also a denial of what has become, in contemporary times, one of the most fundamental provisions towards women—the offering of nutritional support after giving birth. In

the same interview, Grandmother Yu states that she rested just ten days before returning to the fields because the family couldn't spare the work points. "After I gave birth, I still had to make bread. I still had to cook food. I still had to do everything... Nowadays your mother and mother-in-law come to help you out. Back then, maybe they would make you some food, but you still had to wash the dishes."

After the child was born and a mother returned to working in the fields, mothers had to cobble together creative childcare options. Auntie Cong, another villager who was now in her mid-50s recounts the effort of finding care for her eldest son while she worked in the fields. Like Grandmother Yu, she also did not rest a post-partum month. Her father-in-law had died and her new husband had four other young siblings that needed food, school fees, and clothing. Her tale comes in the form of a rhetorical question, revealing the collective difficulty of mothering during this time period.

When I gave birth, that time, it was the work division system. Collectivization, not like our life today. Collectivized life. Yes, it was all collectivized, the team leader--we had a team--he would plan and you would take the cow and go to work. If you had a kid, who could you ask to watch it? Who?--If you think your mother in law, she also has to get the work points, my mother in law... you see I have no father in law. Before I came (got married) here, he was already gone.....Going to the field, you see my mother-in-law also had to earn work points. My [husband] is the oldest, and at that time it was collectivization, they hadn't divided the land, like that's yours, that's mine... it wasn't like that. It was all in one piece. You talk about work? We all worked together. Ok? -- This--this wheat ripened, that is to say, harvest, we cut it using a scythe, use a scythe to pull, at that time we were so backwards, really there was no way to save effort, we just cut with a scythe, and used a pull cart. Used a pull cart, Erin! in this way we would pull use a cow, do you know cow? We'd use a cow and in this way ah! We honestly were really facing hardship a lot! Anyway, my oldest son, my mother-in-law couldn't watch him. You know I'm not far from my mother. My mother is close. My mother-in-law, she couldn't watch him because she also need to go to the field. So, I took my baby to my mother's to watch him. I went down there and [my husband], he carried him. If he carried him, and he didn't cry...This is how I handled it. In any case, our [maternal] village is close. It was bitter. ...

The childcare situation reveals a strict economic calculation. Cong's mother, as an elder, earned less work points than the younger woman and since Cong's father still worked, Cong's mother was able to care for the baby son without a loss of too many work points. Still sometimes, there was no one to watch her son and she constructed a mattress with ashes and dried leaves that would absorb the urine and feces of the baby. Strapping the baby to this, she left him and went to the fields.

Another informant, Grandmother Zhu, lamented that 'back then it wasn't like now where you could buy powdered milk formula. I only had radishes. I boiled them and I fed [my daughter] with that.' Zhu's mother-in-law died shortly after her marriage and her own parents both passed away when she was only 8-years-old (see more in Chapter 7). When she worked in the fields, she brought the children with her and set them in the shade of the trees. 'Of course, then sometimes the ants would bite and they would cry' she told me. Gail Hershatter's oral histories in Shaanxi also reveal a hodge-podge of creative solutions including tying infants with a rope to the *kang* (heated bed) so that they could not get off, utilizing babysitters paid with a few work points (Hershatter 2011, 196-8).

For a few short years during the Great Leap, collective kindergartens and kitchens officially recognized women's household labor of cooking and childcare and attempted to professionalize and support it. Hershatter records that the Shaanxi kindergarten training was seen as vital to the political involvement of women and locals took it very seriously, a wide variety of ages and even one man participated in the training in 1956, indicating that childcare was not simply relegated to older, non-laboring women but seen as part of the collective economic system (2011, 196-8). Unfortunately, the campaigns were short lived and in my own field site, women did not remember the kindergartens at all. Tragic reports of child neglect, including the

deaths of young children and toddlers, followed as a result of the lack of responsible oversight for children (Hershatter 2011, 197).

The traditional “*nanzhuwai, nüzhunei*” division of family labor was not practical, or politically favorable during the collective era, but the categories separating “outside” and “inside” tasks still remained. Women were required to undertake “outside” labor in the fields, but men were not asked to reevaluate their “inside” contributions. This is highlighted not only in the lack of arrangements for childcare, but also in the vivid recollections of sewing, spinning and weaving of cloth recounted by my informants. Sewing clothes and shoes and making the materials for such endeavors was not provided by the work point system. Instead women maintained their own cotton patches in their gardens, harvesting and spinning the cotton into cloth. During one of our interviews, Auntie Cong showed me the items she used for spinning yarn and cloth—a large loom and spindle. Then she took out an oil lamp because the three tools were intimately tied together. The domestic task of making clothing was undertaken after the day’s labor an oil lamp was vital to the weaving process. “Your whole family must have new clothes. We had to stay up all night,” corroborated Grandmother Zhu in a different interview (see also chapter 7 and Hershatter 2011).

On the surface, the various family reforms established during the collective era period might seem to fall in line with a feminist agenda; the promotion of equal access to divorce and emphasis on marriage as an equal emotional and economic partnership shares similarities with the American “second-wave” feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s. Yet, as both Mayfair Yang (1999) and Emily Honig (2002) point out, Chinese party-state Feminism has quite a different history than feminisms within the West. Without the foundation of Western Victorian-Era gendered dichotomy, Chinese concepts of femininity are more tied to household roles of

daughter, wife, and mother than a simple biological dichotomy (Barlow 2004). Therefore, the move to advance women's positions within the revolutionary period was not a "destructuring" of gendered identities, but rather an erasure of gender in favor of emphasizing class struggle and the nationalist project. Yang writes, "the liberation of women was always tied in with the liberation of the nation, so that the former was a means to the ends of the latter struggle" (1999:40, see also D. Ko 2005). Consequently, women's voices about their experiences and their goals for social change were subsumed under nationalism.

The legislation of family, by encouraging women workers and establishing legal guidelines for marriage can be seen as part of the larger project of reforming the cultural and economic patterns within China. It is difficult to underestimate the impact of collectivizing household labor on the construction of family. The shift to work points fundamentally changed the nature of gender as operationalized within the family unit. Whereas traditional divisions of labor rested on gender alone, the devaluation of older women's labor within the work point system afforded a systemic shift in the intergenerational contract.

One of the unintended consequences of the state demands for women's labor and the vacuum of childcare was the shifts in the older generation's responsibilities towards the youngest generation. Younger women instinctively looked to the older generation for help and support because of the intensive labor demands. Grandparenting, and especially grandmothering, can be traced to the double devaluation of older female work points and the increasing requirements for younger women's labor. While my sample of five informants⁷ is small, I argue that the ideological roots of intensive grandparenting can be traced to labor patterns in the collective era. A close reading of several other sources also documents an increasing mention of grandmothers

⁷ Of the 7 women I interviewed intensively, only 5 had children during collectivization.

serving as childcare support during the collective era (c.f. Herschatter 2011, 187, 190, 205; Li 2005, 287)

Being the most expendable of collective work unit, older women were deemed to be the most available to undertake the unpaid labor of childcare and when available, grandmothers became the primary caretakers to grandchildren across China.



Figure 11 Grandmother and Granddaughter

Contemporary China

When examining the collective era work point allocation system, the parallels to contemporary social arrangements regarding age and gender-based labor are striking. Since the 1990's Chinese women's participation in the labor force has decreased ten percentage points from 73 to 63 percent⁸ (International Labour Organization 2017). Recent years have continued the devaluation of older women's labor. For example, a string of layoffs as a result of the closing of state-owned enterprises overwhelmingly targeted older female workers (M. Yang 1999, 53;

⁸ by comparison the US female workforce participation rate has been steady and lower at 56% (International Labour Organization 2017)

Liu 2007). A new boom of service-oriented jobs preference youthful-looking, beautiful women (Zheng 2009; J. Yang 2011; Hanser 2005), and factory work continues this favoring of younger, more agile bodies (Pun 2005).

These labor market trends continue to value younger women's labor over the older female generation which translates directly into practical decisions within the home. While the work of the home has become less defined by spinning and weaving, increasingly intensive parenting (Kuan 2011, 2015; Anagnost 2004) and rural-to-urban migration affect younger women's daily demands. An examination of gendered and age-based roles can help to clarify this household dynamic. One spring day, during my fieldwork, I recruited a fourth-grade classroom in Pear Branch Township to explain the role of each member of the family. The class gave unified shouts of the role and purpose of each family member—a Grandfather labors in the field, a Grandmother cooks, a Father earns money—almost as if they had rehearsed the answers before, they swiftly associated the tasks and kinship titles. “But what does a mother do?” I asked them. The room gave way to a cacophony of shouts which did not settle upon an answer while some shouted, “also earn money,” some said “look after children,” and some simply said that they didn't know.

This confusion within the classroom can be traced to the incomplete and sometimes contradictory transformation of younger women's ideal position within the family. Do mothers earn money or care for children? If they do both why did other members of the family have only one role while mothers had multiple jobs? Additionally, while each one of the other family members had different and specific positions, a mother's labor seemed to repeat both the older woman's household tasks and the father's economic responsibility. This redundancy within the

division of labor has helped mother's roles to become very flexible, fitting within the ever-changing demands of the home and the market.

Migration complicates this further as a host of studies on migrant women remind us, the freedom (and even obligation in some cases) to live independently from one's natal family and earn income has further renegotiated the role of women within the economic unit (Gaetano 2015; Brown 2016; Jacka 2005; Ling 2017; H. Yan 2008). Further, returned migrants of both genders have impacted rural spaces by investing capital in entrepreneurial projects (Murphy 2002, 2008; Kessel 2016), allowing for new business opportunities for young women more locally.

Migration is not a new economic strategy for the Chinese family. For men, migration has been a normative form of work for at least a century (c.f. accounts in Freedman 1979; Potter 1970; Unger 2002). However, men's migration to urban centers is part of a patriarchal norming of male labor. In economic need, men would travel in search of paid labor, sending it back to their home. This ability for the family to grow and expand over geographic distance caused Myron Cohen (1970) to remark on the flexibility of the household as a productive unit.

Young women migrating to urban centers, however is a phenomenon which only recently sprang up in response to a plethora of low wage factory jobs which rely on young women as a ready work force (Pun 2005). In her analysis on migratory experience, Tamara Jacka argues that young women are considered marginal to household economy and migration prior to marrying and having children is considered an acceptable and expected youthful experience (Jacka 2005, 136). Whereas men tend to view their migration as a fulfillment of family obligation, young women utilized experiences of urban life as way to delay family expectations for marriage and children. Mother migrants, on the other hand, as I discussed in the last chapter, defy such

expectations of care because they disrupt the neat folk-theory of nuclear family as an ideal development model.

A simple survey of the households within my study reveal that of the 28 women aged 20-40 who did not yet have grandchildren, 24 mothers were working wage-labor, 6 had migrated, 18 worked locally. Of the four women in my study that did not work, only two did not have a plan to return to work once their child was of school age. This economic and literal mobility of younger women has capitalized on the immobility of the older generation whose work has become even more tied to the home through the practices of intensive grandparenting. This household childcare has stood in the gap of a lack of quality daycares and early childhood educational opportunities. In the township, there was one preschool for children aged 4-5 but it was costly and the mother I knew who enrolled her son for a half-day program complained that it was poorly run.

A string of demographic studies record the rise of grandparenting in both urban and rural China (Cong and Silverstein 2008a, 2008b, 2008b; L. Xu, Silverstein, and Chi 2014; P.-C. Ko and Hank 2013; Nyland et al. 2009; Zeng and Xie 2014). For example Chen, Liu, and Mair (2011) record that paternal grandmothers spend as much time with children as mothers do beyond the first year of life. This is true both in urban and rural China, despite differential access to quality day care, leading to the conclusion that this high rate of grandparenting represents a change to the intergenerational contract. Feinian Chen (2004) analyzed data from a wide scale social survey and found that daughter-in-law's profession often determined the mother-in-law's labor with the most frequent arrangement of the older generation supporting the wage-labor of the younger. In my own fieldsite, primary grandparent-caretaking in the absence of migrant

mothers accounted for 10 of 43 children (23%) and frequent grandparenting during holidays and weekends or while a mother worked in the township was very common.

All of these data point to the idea that grandparenting has become an enduring family strategy which has made use of the devaluation of older women's labor within the job market and adapted to the demands for dual-wage income.

Grandmothering and ideal personhood.

Up until now, I have pointed out how rearrangements in the economic sector have impacted family arrangements of labor, following the shifts from household organized labor based on gender, to a state reorganization which conscripted women's labor. This effectively increased women's workforce participation while simultaneously increasing the need for older women to care for young children while mothers worked. Such a change impacted not only the demands to women's time and labor, but it also shifted the intergenerational contract, changing the assumed roles for both younger and older women.⁹

Yet ideology and economic shifts impact more than practical arrangements, they also have profound implications for the interior lives of people within the economic and family arrangements. I now turn to a discussion of subjective assessments of well-being discussed by grandmothers caring for their children in the wake of new requirements of older women's family contribution. Given that traditionally older women were understood to be the recipients of age-based filial care, how do contemporary grandmothers feel about their new obligations?

When considering well-being and grandmothering, I am immediately reminded of a conversation that I had with one Grandmother Yan who cared for her two grandsons. The eldest,

⁹ see also Chen 2004 for her redefinition of inside and outside labor based on generational differences

a 13-year-old boy was developmentally delayed such that he could not attend school, and needed constant supervision for to avoid injury or confusion. The grandmother was a congenial lady who tirelessly worked in her house and the field—drying peanuts, planting corn and maintaining the household garden. On one sunny afternoon, I took advantage of her captive audience and discussed her son’s migration and her caretaking duties while she broke up the winter soil. After the talking with her, I wrote in my fieldnotes, “I asked Grandmother Yan if she was happy taking care of the two boys. The oldest, after all is mild mannered and obedient even if he disabled. She didn’t answer me. So, I asked if she had a choice. ‘*Shenme shi xuanze?*’ she answered rhetorically, meaning ‘What is a choice?’ Such a response points to the irrelevance of agentic decisions in the family for older women. Obligation is an all-encompassing feature of self-assessment and daily action.”

Cultural anthropology has long been interested in investigating meaning-making from a grounded-perspective. Anthropologists have asked questions such as: how to find hope in the midst of tragic circumstances (Mattingly 2010), how everyday practices of meaning-making draw from “already ‘there’” cultural symbolic systems (Bruner 1990, 11), or how to understand both the ordinary and extraordinary moments of experience that bring comfort and grounding to experience (Das 2007; Conrad 2014). Many of these discussions involve a discussion of personhood, as the self is inherently implicated in meaning-making.

I draw from insights from Yunxiang Yan’s (2017) recent work on the tripartite model of what he titles, “doing personhood.” Doing personhood, Yan argues, is a fundamentally different process from reflective personhood—a narrative model of self-making which has dominated previous approaches (c.f. Bruner 1997; P. J. Miller, Fung, and Mintz 1996; Mattingly 1998; E. Ochs and Capps 2009). Approaching personhood as a process of behavior also bypasses an

important debate between the constructed and experiential nature of the self (Throop 2000) and affords attention to the ways in which individual desires, social expectations, and local moral understandings dynamically interact to shape how ordinary people understand themselves and act within socially prescribed roles. In this model, Yan argues that the moralist self is always mediating between individual desires and social expectations in attempts to balance these competing pressures. While Yan's article hints at the gendered nature of social expectations, I want to push this idea further to understand what might be demanded of individuals by virtue of their age and gender, and consequently, understand how older women might assess their new roles as caregivers in light of economic and kinship changes.

Yan's keyword is the term *zuoren*, or literally "to make oneself into a human" which is the local Chinese term for conforming to the moral and ethical demands upon the self by one's family and community. In my experience in Henan, I found the term *zuoren* to be more commonly used by men than women and rarely did childcare or household tasks come under the umbrella for opportunities for moral fortitude. This is very possible because the meaning of the word *ren* "person" historically only referred to men (Barlow 2004).

As Grandmother Yan's utterance reveals, grandparenting was looked upon as a natural and unquestioned part of life, not a critical period of moral breakdown or an opportunity to *zuoren*. The rhetorical question, 'what is choice' reveals the various ways in which childcare obligations shape the daily experiences of older women without a conscious weighing of the benefits and costs to such an endeavor.

However, this does not mean that female labor was exempt from the category of moral personhood. Indeed, those who failed to perform household and reproductive labor were regarded as disgraceful, not only to themselves, but also their entire family. In one example of

breaking with this moral model, my neighbors gossiped particularly vehemently about one older woman who always asked her neighbors for bread, in the discussions some neighbors condemned the woman's son who had migrated with the entire family, leaving her lonely and without grandchildren or a daughter-in-law. But others said that it was her own fault for not planning ahead, after all the son sent regular remittances and she was probably just lazy, not lonely.

In a different example, after church one day, I witnessed three women trying to solve another kind of family dilemma. Grandmother Xu was the primary caretaker to her two grandchildren while her daughter-in-law worked in the township. The two families had two separate houses, but only one kitchen.¹⁰ She also dutifully cooked the family dinner each night. But when her daughter-in-law returned home, she did not offer the older woman a portion, but instead ate the dinner with the children herself. Grandmother Xu ate whatever scraps were left and sometimes just ended up eating the remainder of the *hetang* (flour-thickened soup). 'Confront her directly,' advised one of the youngest women of the group. 'Eat your dinner, first before your daughter-in-law comes home,' suggested another. Grandmother Xu seemed to be embarrassed and upset, her gaze directed more and more downwards with each suggestion. I'm not sure how the predicament was solved because I didn't run into Grandmother Xu again, but the very fact that the problem occurred speaks to the centrality of household labor as a feature of moral meaning and the difficulty in balancing individual desires for recognition of one's labor,

¹⁰ This situation is named in local terms as *fenjia*, *haimeiyou fenguo*, or "divided houses but haven't divided the stove." The stove is one of the primary symbols of family life (Brandstädter and Santos 2009; Jing 2004; Y. Yan 2003) but with the increase of younger women's paid labor, extended families are now eating together since the mother has no time to cook. Hence, the fourth-grade characterization of grandmother role as a cook.

with the relational demands of an inconsiderate daughter-in-law, both of which are situated within a changing cultural context.

In addition to household chores like food preparation, a central feature of kinship obligation was the continuation of the family line which is represented by a pronatalist view of giving birth to children in one's early 20s and providing the grandchildren for the patriarchal group. Getting married and having children is a central duty of the younger generation towards the older and even when they knew that it would mean a significant load of childcare, the older generation encouraged their children to have children—ideally two, a boy and a girl.

This sentiment is perhaps reflected best by the community reactions towards my then-childlessness since I had already reached an age of over 30 years. Villagers teased me mercilessly about not having children. When we adopted a puppy and took it on a daily walk, Grandmother Fong joked to her neighbor that because I had no children I had to care for the dog as if it was a baby. Grandmother Yu gave me unsolicited advice about the best techniques for conception and assuming I was infertile, Auntie Tang tried (unsuccessfully) to make me drink an herbal remedy to cure my barrenness. In one conversation with returned migrant, the father of three children told me that I was a failure to my nation since I refused to have a child at a reasonable age. 'If you have no children, you have no life,' (*meiyou haize, meiyou shenghuo*) was a phrase that was often repeated to me.

I came to expect the communities' assumption that without a child I was a failed woman, but what I was surprised by was the concern that many older women directed towards my own mother and my mother-in-law. 'Your mother-in-law will be too old to care for the child if you don't hurry up and have a kid,' Grandmother Yu admonished me. Grandmother Chen asked me pointedly if I didn't care to offer my mother-in-law a full and lively (*renao*) household. The

same women who complained about caring for their own grandchildren were curious why I didn't make my own mother-in-law the primary caretaker of my future child. Without children, they were significantly concerned about the happiness of my parents and parents-in-laws.

Notably, here people did not utilize the category of *zuoren* to describe my obligation to have children, but rather appealed to a different sense, an obligation towards ethical meaning. Liveliness (*renau*) and life (*shenghuo*) were invoked as compelling factors towards a particular action. Female reproductive labor and the labor of childcare afterwards was considered not only as a burden and obligation, but a moral call towards an ideal good life. This moral call extends also to grandmothers who are an integral part of the reproductive labor of the family, urging their sons to marry and have children (see Chapter 5) and taking a very active role in childcare and supportive household labor afterwards. While this labor was not always enjoyable, it does give meaning and purpose to one's life. It allows the laborer to understand herself as a moral and upright person even if the returns from her family did not match her output.

In each situation of grandparenting as I describe above, the grandmother does not end up on the winning side of economic calculation. Grandmother Chen, raised her three grandchildren in the wake of her daughter-in-law's infidelity, Grandmother Yan cares for her two grandsons while her son and daughter-in-law work in an urban area and Grandmother Xu not only provided caretaking to her grandchildren, but dinner to her daughter-in-law and was not even invited to eat the food she prepared. Yet what would these grandmother's do without the demands of grandchildren? An examination of Auntie Cong's working life provides insight into this question.

Auntie Cong, whose childcare situation I described earlier, seemed to always be working. During the time I lived in Henan, I found her working several jobs. She glued plywood at a factory, each sheet she glued earned 1 *yuan*. When the glue began to give her headaches, she

harvested cilantro as a field hand. She sewed elaborate beading on colorful clothes. (Once she held up a H&M brand tunic meant for a plus sized woman, are American's really this fat? She wondered.) The close beadwork began to hurt her eyes and she again returned to the plywood factory. In addition, she cooked elaborate meals regularly for myself and Ben, kept her kitchen spotless and I often found her after working performing a domestic task such as washing the blankets, sewing a pair of homemade shoes for her grandson, or making a pot of Chinese medicine for her daughter.

Uncle Jia, her husband, however, namely tended the garden and the field. He had long periods of leisure time that he spent with his grandsons.¹¹ He often picked them up from school and watched them play in the courtyard. During one-month long period, I hardly set eyes on Cong since she returned after dark and left before the sun rose. After repeatedly going to the couple's house but not finding her there, I asked Uncle Jia why Auntie Cong worked so hard. The two were well supported by their sons; their eldest son was one of the wealthiest families in the township. They didn't actually need the money. The answer revealed the value of labor as a critical component of personhood—"she becomes anxious when she does nothing."

Later when I asked Cong about it, she echoed this idea. She had worked her whole life. When she was married, her husband's family still had considerable labor to undertake. She said, 'I have nothing to do. There are no kids that need me.' The value she held for work was also expressed in her evaluation of others too. Grandmother Yu (Chapter 3), who continued to support three deaf children was a frequent subject of her praise—*benshi* or "capable and skillful" was her assessment of the Grandmother's ability to keep working, manage the household

¹¹ How to think through grandfather care? I'm still in the process of thinking through the gendered nature of care and the specific ways that individuals construct themselves in relationship to the gendered nature of care.

economy and keep her children and grandchildren out of trouble. Other women, Auntie Tang for example, expressed similar feelings about labor and worthiness. Auntie Tang had been caring for children since she dropped out of school in the fifth grade. Her life had been spent caring for children, so she was ‘used to it.’

The value on work even in old age has no doubt remained a central part of Chinese village life. Wei-Ming Tu argues that classic Confucian moral education is grounded in a vision of social stability based on the principle of mutuality (Tu 1998, 124). Specifically, Tu examines the three hierarchies (the so-called ‘Three Bonds’) and five relationships central to Confucian ethical self-cultivation. Central to our discussion here is the father-son hierarchy and the old-young relationship. In both instances, Tu argues that age (or in his term “biological bondage”) (1998, 128) affords the opportunity for virtue cultivation. Consequently, Tu points out that Confucian ethics did not necessarily emphasize a blind duty to the older generation, but rather a recognition of the wisdom accumulated with age. This means that while classic ethics did emphasize age, it emphasized virtue-cultivation above simple generational standing. The Analects description of Confucius reprimand of an old man is pertinent here: “In youth not humble as befits a junior; in manhood, doing nothing worthy of being handed down. And merely to live on, getting older and older, is [to] be a useless pest” (Analects 14.46 in Tu 1998, 127). How to avoid being a “useless pest” in old age?

Facing increasing life expectancy and improved health outcomes, older women must reconcile how to spend their time into late age. In rural China, work, whether household chores or paid labor, can be seen a primary method of virtue cultivation. Idleness was the enemy of collectivization and it must be remembered that the cohort of contemporary grandmothers came of age in which working was a political and collective vocation. In contrast to their male counter-

parts, women were largely uneducated during the collective era. Auntie Cong, for instance states that she “cannot even read a newspaper to stave off boredom.” Instead of going to school, her childhood tasks included gathering firewood and caring for her younger siblings. Self-cultivation for a large swath of elders, then cannot be found in intellectual pursuits. Labor has its own virtuous rewards.

In recent explorations of family rearrangements, there have been several explanations for the breakdown of vertical authority. For instance, Yunxiang Yan (2016) argues that the focus on personal happiness for the middle generation has led to a decrease in filial sacrifices and unconditional respect for elder parents. In what he calls a “redefinition of filial piety,” the villagers in his Xiajia village study show an increasing attention to specific practices of intergenerational intimacy such as expressions of care, embodied practices of attention, gift exchange, and travel; all of which point to a focus on the emotional and intersubjective collaborations of the middle and upper generation to raise the youngest generation, or the “centripetal power of the third generation” (2016a, 245). For Yan, the traditional vertical authority has been replaced by a more collaborative and negotiated cooperation.

In another explanation for the renegotiation of intergenerational contract, Hong Zhang (2016) points to the ideological campaigns and collectivization of family landholdings of the Mao-era along with skyrocketing prices of healthcare as a central factor in elder neglect of the 1990s and 2000s. Zhang highlights the new campaigns designed to improve intergenerational relationships, especially the publication of a new list of filial exemplars in a style mimicking the 4th Century B.C. document the *Classic of Filial Piety (xiaojing)* (see also Chapter 6). Alongside the rise of institutionalized and commercialized care, Zhang highlights the expressive desires of the older generation to avoid burdening their adult children.

My research indicates a similar shift in the intersubjective feelings of value and self-assessment. In the eyes of many of my informants, value is from being useful, fulfilling family obligations and working hard even into old age. This, of course, has profound implications for the intergenerational contract, as older women see their continued obligation to the family in terms of work, sacrifice, and the provision of childcare.

Conclusion

A constellation of forces have rearranged the intergenerational contract to redefine roles for younger women. In part because of the long-term devaluation of older women within both the socialist and post-socialist labor market, grandparental caregiving has become increasingly common strategy to balance the demands for young women's wage labor. Ironically, reconfiguration of mother's roles is situated within political and ideological shifts that have been spurred on by Party legislation and State-initiated campaigns to target gender inequalities. In fact, the increased economic burden upon women of childbearing age and the shifts in intergenerational caregiving towards grandmothers maybe part of the unintended effects of the political and ideological campaigns in the collective-era.

Recognizing the labor of childcare advances our understanding of the shifting dynamics of the intergenerational contract. In this chapter, I have pointed out that reconfigurations of women's ideal roles during the collective era helped to shape a cleavage in older and younger women's expected labor contributions in rural China. Instead of anticipating themselves as recipients of old-age care, most women assume that they will work and contribute to the household economy, either by the provision of childcare or their continued participation in wage-labor and sidelining projects. Such obligational commitments go beyond concepts of willingness,

choice, or agentive negotiation and are deeply rooted in concepts of self. The rewards for such sacrifice are few, but the costs of refusing sacrifices of time and labor are high.

Chapter Four

Teaching Morality in the Face of Contingency: Parenting and Grandparenting in Rural China

It was Chen Lijuan's tenth birthday, and each member of the party participated in making the day special. Her mother, Xiulan, had come all the way from Yunnan—a province with just one syllable difference from Henan that was separated by more than 2,000 kilometers.

Grandmother Yu had made a special dish of chicken and glass noodles and Xiulan had bought a cake. Her father and uncle, both deaf, even had the afternoon off from work and sat smoking and watching television. Liying, her 13-year-old brother, was the only one who didn't seem to be enjoying himself. He lay on the bed facing the television, thumbs moving methodically over his mobile phone. After we ate and Lijuan blew the candles out, Xiulan divided up the cake, which had cherries and strawberries—fruits Grandmother Yu had never seen before. Xiulan then addressed the sullen 13-year-old Liying, who had missed so much of the seventh grade that he felt hopelessly behind and planned to drop out, joining an older cousin as a restaurant hand. She told him that the world had changed and it wasn't like before; you couldn't even get a decent factory job if you dropped out of middle school. 'I wish I had learned more before I set out for work,' she lamented. Lijuan piped in: 'Mom, I thought that you were good in school!'

'I was, but there are just some things you can't learn from teachers.'

'Like what?'

'Like who to trust. That is why I always tell you both to not follow my footsteps.' Xiulan then turned to me and explained that at a young age, she was lured by the promise of a job. Instead, she found herself married to a deaf man, Lijuan and Liying's father. They fought endlessly, but out of compassion for her mother-in-law, who continued to provide for her deaf

adult sons and often for her deaf adult daughter, who was mentally ill, she tried to stay as long as possible. In the end, she moved back to Kunming but maintained a relationship with her two biological children and adopted son through an annual visit and the occasional provision of money.

‘My mother-in-law,’ she said pointing at the 76-year-old who had begun to nod off in her chair, ‘doesn’t understand how to raise children. She is not educated (*bu renzi*). She is not moral. She is not ethical. All she understands is *teng* (love/pain).’ Grandmother Yu, at this point looks up, smiles and nods. ‘It is not her fault, but now we must deal with this.’ She turned back toward Liying and began suggesting to him how to catch up with the school material. Liying, did not look up from his phone the entire time, the mechanical beep of the phone the only sound he made.

I begin this chapter with the family contention which presented itself at Lijuan’s birthday celebration because this everyday drama reveals an important clash of values highlighted by the different players within the family. Xiulan and Grandmother Yu have distinctive ways in which they influence and care for the children, resulting in conflict not only between the teenager and parent, but also mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. My research is punctuated with many such examples of the ways in which different parties disagree about how to influence children. While this family is especially informed by the cultural distance between the Henanese grandmother and Yunnanese mother which exaggerates their conflict, the struggle between the two generational approaches is not unique and was expressed to me by a number of different families. This chapter explores socialization routines as a multi-faceted project which draws from a bricolage of traditions and worldviews and receives inputs from multiple family members. My

goal in this chapter is to capture the everyday moral education taking place within four different families.

In this chapter, I draw from a long anthropological history on investigating socialization as cultural communication of values, ideas, and skills. Socialization is the process of turning children into cultural persons through both explicit articulation and unconscious modeling of behaviors, speech, and routines. Socialization is largely culturally mediated, with influences from the normal biological processes of human development and growth. That is, while children everywhere physically and mentally mature and grow into adults, the specific quality and demands of adulthood differ in each society, so that, in Tom Wiesner's words, socialization is a goal-oriented activity with "pluralistic solutions" (Weisner 2005, 89).

Anthropologists have long been interested in researching the different ways that societies shape individuals, beginning with early speculations on the role of culture and personality as exemplified in Malinowski's (2003) challenge to the universality of the Oedipus complex. In harmony with the Boasian approach of questioning human universals, early American research projects made attempts to specify how early childhood training and experiences led to adult personality formations. Margaret Mead, in particular, explored the limits of culture and biology by challenging universal teenage angst (2001a), Paiget's animism theory (2001a), and patriarchy as natural (Mead 2001b). Mead's writings remain enduringly influential in the field of child development and cross-cultural psychology.

The literature on cross-cultural socialization contends that local ideas about what the child is, how it develops, and the role of caretakers within this process has significant influence in the choices that parents make about how to interact with their children and what kinds of skills they want them to learn (Harkness et al. 2011). A number of authors call the way in which

parents approach child raising an ethnotheory, pointing out the role of cultural values, beliefs and ideals on child development. Throughout the literature on cross-cultural socialization, I recognize two broad categorizations of parenting styles, which are also influential in this chapter. The first style may be described as natural socialization, or the traditionalist pattern. The second approach can be described as intentional instruction, or the modernist paradigm. Below I highlight these models and the literature which describes them.

In many traditional societies, anthropologists have noted that there is a lack of formal instruction. In the absence of direct structures for learning, children are thought to naturally and gradually learn adult tasks, morals, and roles through modeling, play, and apprenticeship. Natural socialization usually progresses through the cultural use of games and storytelling which confer on young children the values esteemed by society. Much of maturation is done in age-sets and children do not often receive specific instructions from parents or elders, but are given models to follow and tasks to complete, which facilitates a scaffolded learning of adult ways.

For example, Meyers Fortes (1938) recorded that Tallensi children spend significant time following and learning from adult behavioral models. Otto Raum's notices the early motor development in young infants that mimics adult behaviors, such as drumming, stirring, and hoeing amongst the Chaga people of Tanzania. These movements displayed and encouraged by parents are the basis for mature participation in daily life and ritual ceremonies (1940, Part iii Ch 6). David Lancy's (1996) work in Liberia describes Kpelle children imitating and playing at adult work behaviors in close proximity to adults. He calls the location of play "on the mother ground" because of its adjacency to women's working areas, which allows children's activities to be monitored while also given space for free recreation. While playing "on the mother ground,"

children are not the direct objects of adult interactions, but engage in make-believe play and idiomatic games which assist in acculturation of values and skills for productive social lives.

Robert LeVine's career-long research into socialization has highlighted the impacts of modernity, urbanization, and formal schooling upon family socialization routines (1963; 1979; 1988; 2003, 2007). He argues that characteristic of a modern approach to parenting is the way in which parents intentionally build skills, values, and behaviors which they deem necessary within the ever-modernizing, ever-globalizing environments in which we live (2003). Finding that modern parenting in many different societies exhibits similar fundamental features, including greater permissiveness of individuality and the decline of patriarchal and hierarchical authority, LeVine's work shows that social conditions radically impact parental attitudes and expectations for children's behavior. In his research, he links parenting attitudes to shifting social definitions of children's economic utility and emotional salience. Greater permissiveness is coupled with placing high sentimental value on children and more authoritarian approaches are linked with a more traditional view of children's economic worth (for more along these lines, see Lancy 2008).

The "modern" socialization approach is a more intentional approach towards utilizing skills, techniques, and methods to inspire particular behaviors and attitudes in children. It is not surprising that this approach follows other trends within the modern attitude labeled by Anthony Giddens as the "reflexive project of the self" (1991, 5). Giddens describes high-modernity as the proliferation of options and opportunities which creates considerable anxieties and risks so that individuals must perpetually ask themselves: "how shall I live?" (1991:14). While Giddens does not specifically address parenting as part of the "do-it yourself biography," the overlaps between Giddens' account of high-modernity and contemporary China are undeniably similar. Take for example Giddens' account of the proliferation of options and increasing inputs from experts and

the competitive day-long preschools, explosion of study schools (*peixunban*), and the endless barrage of parental advice subtly and explicitly contained in news and television dramas available to Chinese parents. Parenting can be seen as part of a larger shift toward reflexivity and self-conscious examinations, or “self-work,” which involves a conformity of one’s everyday interactions to certain models and ideals.

Teresa Kuan (2015, 2011) has written about the rise of parenting as an act of self-governing for middle class urban parents in Kunming, China. Her work adds insight to this chapter. Kuan’s examination of *tiaojian* or ‘environment’ are instructive in considering the ways in which parents feel limited by the external social, economic, and political conditions which inscribe parent’s options for effective child-raising. I will explore this further in section 3. Additionally, Kuan’s analysis shed’s light into the ways in which childhood is increasingly a space for apprehension and concern. Continuing from my argument in Chapter 2, this targeted anxiety over children and childhood shapes the political and social realities not just for middle class urban children, but also for rural children and their caretakers, who are the subject of a growing number of legislative interventions.

Yet, my argument differs from Kuan’s in two central ways. First, rural parents and grandparents lack the kind of intentional and focused self-reflections found in Kuan’s informants. The mothers in Kuan’s study speak eloquently about the conflicts and difficulties of raising good children. During my research, I found that parents and grandparents had great difficulty reflecting on their own behaviors as parents. They often were more intent on describing their children’s behaviors as innate or given. I expand on this conflict between innate character and the teach-ability of moral behaviors throughout this chapter.

Second, my argument also considers the contributions of grandparents as a major socializing force within the family. While grandparents have largely been left out of the national calls for quality parenting, a number of demographic studies have shown the prevalence of co-resident and caretaking grandparents to be very high, especially within rural China (F. Chen, Liu, and Mair 2011; F. Chen 2014; Z. Zhang, Gu, and Luo 2014). This chapter focuses on the ways in which several grandparents do make intentional and unintentional investments into children's socialization.

The literature on cross-cultural socialization provides an outline of two broad characterizations of (1) a traditional approach to indirect teaching and learning and (2) a modern, self-reflexive parenting. However, I take the position that such divisions between traditional and modern parenting are much less clear than they might seem from the outset and contemporary communities cannot be parsed so neatly, even along education, age, or gendered lines. My goal in this chapter is to draw attention to the various overlaps, inconsistencies, and variabilities within what might otherwise be painted as a cohesive worldview of parenting and socialization. I argue that both traditional and modern parenting styles exist as a bricolage, conflicting and complimenting each other in the everyday. Additionally, since child raising in rural China is characterized by a multi-generational effort which defies the neat categorizations of both nuclear family and Confucian-extended family, families often negotiate between modern and traditional approaches to influencing their children. The way in which family members contest the socialization of children is one of the everyday dramas of family.

Like all populations, rural Chinese families have ethnotheories that help to define moral standards for children, including standards of behavior, and corresponding developmental stages at which they feel children to be capable of learning and acting on such behavior. First, I explore

the community standard of goodness as linked to traditional filial piety and explore the ways in which moral and social norms remain outside the purview of direct instruction. I look at four scenes which complicate and contextualize the various ways that villagers conceive of and enact moral education. Together these scenes portray the on-the-ground realities of raising a child from multiple viewpoints. Each one of these scenes involves multiple kin-actors, and each one of these actors highlights the multiplicitious and fragmented approach inherent in the course of action. My intention here is to examine how parents and grandparents act upon the uncertainties inherent within ethics education and to show the various ways that these individuals make sense of the limits to their own efficacy of influencing the next generation.

Scene 1: Tinghua Behavior and the Filial Attitude

At the start of the meal, Auntie Cong, came and went bringing in hot dishes, soup, and vegetables in turn. Stepping in and out of the room, she invited everyone to eat. The invitation reiterated by Uncle Jia, everyone began dipping chopsticks into dishes. However, Yiran noticed her youngest son, Jia Peida, did not eat any dishes. ‘Why aren’t you eating? Eat,’ she commanded. But Peida did not touch his chopsticks and instead asked when his grandmother was coming to the table. ‘Soon.’ Was the reply. However, after several minutes Auntie Cong remained in the courtyard kitchen; Peida left the room. His mother and father turned to each other and laughing, said, ‘Do you think he would care that much if *we* weren’t eating?’ Peida soon reappeared leading his grandmother by the hand and led her to the table to continue the meal. Only then did Peida lift his chopsticks and begin happily eating. Yiran beamed at me: ‘My children are good children (*hao haizi*). It’s because of their grandparent’s guidance.’

Why is Peida's fetching of his grandmother considered good even when he ignored his mother's direct instruction to eat? His refusal to eat without his grandmother present demonstrates a care and attention that I rarely saw demonstrated by 8-year-old boys. In this section, I argue that being "good" is more about an attitudinal approach towards the family and community than obedience to specific commands. Peida and his sister were heralded as good children in part because of their general willingness to obey their parents and grandparents' instructions in many other circumstances, but also because they anticipated their elders' desires and needs above their own, demonstrating not only mastery over individual rules, but also a keen awareness of the emotional and ritual valence of politeness routines toward elders, guests and community members.

Expectations of children's behavior can be summarized by the phrase *ting hua*, which means both to listen and to be obedient. *Ting hua* describes an ideal child who acts in deference to the elder and who demonstrates model behavior. Even though the term *ting hua* literally refers to listening to the word of a command, *ting hua* is more about an attitude or orientation to elders and teachers than specific listening. *Ting hua* is a virtue which upholds politeness routines surrounding eating, favors, and money, and while it does not necessarily extend to academic achievement, it encompasses the full range of behaviors which are demonstrative of subordination, deference, and favor-building. Local people understand that children's behaviors are shaped both by a natural attitude as well as direct instruction. Consequently, while *ting hua* behaviors are a dispositional orientation that some are born with, as I explore further in the scenes that follow, *ting hua* behaviors should also be taught and encouraged.

In other examples, *ting hua* describes a child who is calm, helpful and productive. Auntie Tang described her neighbor's 2-year-old child as *ting hua* because he stood doe-eyed and

holding his grandmother's hand. This was in contrast to Auntie Tang's own grandson, who repeatedly climbed onto the *sanlunche* (a three-wheeled motorcycle truck) jumping vigorously up and down, despite Tang's mild protests for caution. A child who is *ting hua* not only presents a calm demeanor but displays a general reverence for social order. This behavior is demonstrated in the classroom by sitting in one's seat and following specific instructions from the teacher. Within the home, *ting hua* is also demonstrated by following commands from the elder party, such as fetching any specific items requested and generally being amiable and helpful.

Willful disobedience is described as the opposite— *bu ting hua*. Yuqi described her eldest as *bu ting hua* because he often stayed up late watching television and did not help with household chores. Auntie Tang described her grandson as *bu ting hua* because he continued to grab the firewood in the kitchen despite her protests. Grandmother Yu described her grown son as *bu ting hua* when he provoked a neighbor in a dispute over property lines which ended in a fist fight. When he wouldn't stand down, Grandmother Yu herself held a brick aloft threatening to beat him with it.

As in many other patriarchal societies, community standards of goodness and correct behavior have definite gendered expectations, as boys were at once considered to be more naughty and also given more leeway over their free time.¹² For example, Yuqi's eldest son was enrolled in an auto mechanic's course in the city. He was fond of staying out with his friends at internet cafes and sleeping late. I often found Yuqi making him breakfast around 1 or 2pm when he returned home. She discovered that he had not been studying seriously and was in danger of flunking out. Yuqi told me that when she found this out she and her husband threatened to no

¹² For studies in other societies documenting this phenomenon please see Montgomery's (2011) review of gendered education. In China, consider the time use study by Chang, Dong, and MacPhail (2011) which shows the household demands on girls and older women.

longer pay the fees unless his class attendance improved. The next month, when he came home, I was again at her house in the afternoon, and he was still sleeping. “*Meiban fa*, there is nothing I can do about it,” Yuqi said, brushing off his nocturnal behavior. ‘All children are naughty.’ However, she did mention that he had been taking his mechanics course more seriously. Yuqi’s daughter, however, in junior high, was almost never a source for complaints, and I often saw her caring for Yuqi’s neighbor and best-friend’s daughter. In another example, 11-year-old twin girls were required to cook dinner for the family when their mother worked a 12-hour shift at the thread factory and their father long hours at a construction job. Their 9-year old brother was not asked to do a single household chore.

The general idea that boys are naughtier than girls is frequently brought up when discussing gender preference for children. While most villagers will repeat the political slogan, “boys and girls, both are the same,” they will also admit to a male preference when directly asked. However, as my young neighbor stated, ‘Boys are much naughtier, but we still want them anyway.’

Close analysis of expectations of goodness for children reveal that parents hope children to become both emotionally attached as well as economically and practically productive, showing care and concern and contributing to the household by making a meal or learning a trade. While families and individuals may have different desires for their children including differences in educational attainment or career plans, the family’s goals for their children center around a constellation of *ting hua* features, that is, caring and productive. Since conservative gender norms define productivity, there is variability in terms of expectations for boys’ and girls’ participation in household chores. Nevertheless, productivity along with emotional attachment remains as the foundations of socialization goals for both genders.

This dual-expectation finds direct correlation with Confucius-influenced values of filial piety, since Confucius's writings emphasize the correct attitude toward elders while providing material goods. However, as Saari (1990) pointed out, affection toward one's parents is not directly teachable, but rather must be inculcated through time, modeling, and contact.¹³ In the example of Peida, his disobedience to his mother—refusing to eat without his grandmother—is in fact the more obedient action, since he ultimately exhibited concern for his elders and a reverence for hierarchy that is the quintessential quality of *ting hua*. While it is possible that his parents, desiring this attitude, could have directly commanded him to wait for his grandmother, the goal of socialization is to inspire the attachment and disposition that preempts direct instruction. Refusing food, drink, and money at first-offer is part of politeness routines that have been modeled repeatedly in the home.

I learned this first-hand as a novice to rural politeness routines. When, shortly after I arrived in the village, I was told that I was accepting favors too readily by my host-family's niece,¹⁴ I had been distraught at her comment and tried to find a myriad of ways to repay our host family for their many kindnesses. Additionally, I communicated widely a number of times that I was still learning how to be polite in the village. It was shortly after I complained to Grandfather Jia of my ignorance of etiquette that he arranged for the gate of our courtyard to be freshly painted a bright green for Lunar New Year. Peida, Uncle Jia and I sat in the courtyard watching the painter until he was finished. Uncle Jia passed several hundred RMB to the painter, but the painter pushed it away, allowing the money to drop to the floor rather than accept it. Peida, small and agile, snatched the money and placed it in the painter's shirt pocket despite his protests.

¹³ See also Hashimoto (2004) for a comparison of Japanese children

¹⁴ Her advice to me was also perhaps selfishly motivated, since she had hoped that I would spend more time with her own mother-in-law and less with her uncle, elevating her status in the village

The interaction was physical, pushing and pulling, and almost involved wrestling to confer the money. Eventually, Uncle Jia and Peida succeeded in paying the laborer, and when he left, Uncle turned to me and said, ‘politeness (*limao*) goes like that, you see. You will learn gradually how to be polite.’ Uncle Jia comment adds to the discussion of *ting hua* behaviors because he shows me first that politeness cannot be directly taught, but is a gradual process of learning, mimicking, and understanding. Second, in this model, politeness goes directly against verbal protest against accepting the money. Finally, in this example, while the onus of responsibility is murky between Uncle Jia as a teacher and myself as a student, there are clearly defined roles for each—the teacher models appropriate behavior and the student must mirror these behaviors, adopting them as their very own attitude.

Prior to moving on, one more point is worth examining from this discussion. In this family, the goals of both the grandparental and parental generations coalesce since Yiran lauds her in-laws for their adept instruction of her son. This is markedly different from the criticisms from Xiulan at Lijuan’s birthday party. I find several uses to Yiran’s compliments. First, Yiran is modeling *ting hua* behavior herself by recognizing the work that her in-laws do in affecting her son’s disposition. This comment honors the generational hierarchy and defers to the older generation as moral leaders within the family. Second, Yiran is fostering the emotional connection between her son and in-laws by praising the relationship as morally sound. In assessing the children as good children, she at once supports Peida’s action of refusing to eat without his grandmother and his emotional connection to his grandparents. Finally, Yiran’s comments show that not every family is divided in terms of their ideals for appropriate behaviors for children, though throughout my fieldwork I saw more examples of intergenerational tension than cooperation.

In its essence, obedience is a conservative yet uncertain social force, helping to shape a younger generation modeled on the behaviors of the elders. This scene has given insight into the complexity of teaching moral values. While the community holds that *ting hua* behavior is deferential and honoring of the older generation, this attitude is not always teachable but is dependent upon the child to take up the appropriate disposition. As an attitude, emotional bonds which lead to deferential behavior are not available to direct intervention. Additionally, children's dispositions are influenced by a number of other factors. For instance, developmental age and the general environment and economic situation in which the family finds itself. It is these two factors that the next scenes explore.



Figure 12 Children of both genders were described as 'suan.'

Scene 2: Routine Naughtiness and Grandparental Roles

Despite the community emphasis on deferential behavior, however, children did not always live up to that standard. Children of both genders were often described as *suan*, which in standard Mandarin is used to describe a sore aching muscle, or persistent pain. Young children especially were indulged with food, candy, and often toys which they threw, banged upon, and exhibited all manner of destructive behavior. I came to understand that naughtiness was an expected and sometimes even a positive part of childhood because of a misunderstanding with Auntie Tang. In a particularly emotional and burned out week for me, I went over to Auntie Tang's house and was surprised to find her daughter-in-law returned from working in the city. When parents return, they often bring treats and candy to celebrate. Three-year-old Ziwei, her 1 ½ -year-old brother, and their 7-year-old cousin were intermittently munching on these snacks and running after each other in the courtyard and lane. Ziwei was especially excited by her mother's return, and everything she said was in a high-pitched yell. Finding my cell phone on a bench, she brought it to me and asked if she could use the camera that I had last week allowed her to use to take pictures of a puppy. Since I intended to use the cell phone to record my conversation, I told her no, and she spit on the floor in response. When I made a grimace, and told her not to spit, she immediately spat squarely in my face. In a flash of anger that I myself am still surprised at, I snapped at her and growled at Tang, "Look at your granddaughter, she just spit on me!" Auntie Tang laughed, and I burst into tears. Tang and her daughter-in-law began trying to cheer me up, but I was embarrassed and upset. In our conversation, Tang and her daughter-in-law repeatedly emphasized that 'she doesn't *dong shi*' and that 'nothing could be done'. To *dong shi* is translated literally as "understanding things" but has the connotation of responsibility, intelligence and maturity. To *dong shi* is to demonstrate mastery over a situation,

especially in terms of politeness. *Dong shi* is a coming of age expectation. At three, Ziwei was not expected to *dong shi*; she did not know that she was insulting me by spitting in my face. Consequently, what could be done about the situation? She was too young to understand.

After this incident, I became intensely interested in trying to find a source of Ziwei's behavior toward me. Was it because I often asked about her mother when she was gone? Was it because I was monopolizing her grandmother's time? Was it because I stepped outside of social norms and wouldn't share my cell phone camera with her? Or was she simply a naughty kid? I refused the explanation that she didn't understand what she had done, in part because of my own American ethnotheories about children and because I read Ziwei's delight at my tears as an indication of her intentional maleficence.

I was both curious and judgmental towards Auntie Tang following this interaction, and many of our following conversations centered on children's behavior— 'Don't you think that children are more naughty because they have everything that they want?' or— 'Isn't it true that children are harder to control when their parents are out to work?' Tang resisted my questions and often gave conflicting information. In one of the most insightful conversations, however, I finally began to understand that my obsession with her grandchildren's behavior and her own concerns were not matching up, and that minor misbehaviors and naughty children were an expected part of childhood. We were in the kitchen making *baozi*, and Ziwei showed me a small kindness, offering a candy before running shyly away, a departure from her usual hitting and spitting. I told Tang, "Ziwei is not as naughty (*suan*) as before."

"Naughty is good. (*Suan shi hao*)" She said flatly.

Thinking I did not hear her correctly, I clarified, "Uh, naughty is, or is not good?"

“Naughty is good, is what we say.” She said it flatly again, as if her tone indicated her fatigue with the subject.

“Being naughty is a *good thing*?” I said, incredulous, hoping that she would clarify why naughtiness could possibly be good.

“If [the child] is not naughty then it must be an idiot”—that is what we say here. (*youbusuan jiu shadaole*).”

The conversation ended because we were interrupted, but the phrase stuck in my mind. I had not heard this idiom before and I realized how much it reflected the tolerance for small misdeeds that I had seen regularly with young children under 10. The phrase *youbusuan jiushadaole* can also be twisted with a different tone to mean, “if the child is not naughty, then you might as well kill it.” Both ways of using the phrase indicate a permissiveness of naughtiness including curiosity, hitting or kicking objects, displays of selfishness, and not listening to instructions. The implication is that unresisting obedience is surely a sign of mental retardation and such a child should not live. In combination with her resistance to talk about the subject and her discussion with me on the evening Ziwei spit on me, Tang’s repetition of this phrase in a flat voice finally helped me to understand my own misplaced expectations of children’s behavior. The conversation also reminded me of Marjorie Wolf’s (1970) description of rural Taiwanese children who are expected, like a great number of other societies’ children, to be naughty and spoiled until a certain age, at which point they are required to undertake more mature attitudes and behaviors. Hildred Geertz described the Javanese belief that before the age of 4 or 5 that children were incapable of learning proper social comportments and were categorized as “not yet Javanese” (1961, 2:105). In another example, Bambi Chapin (2014) records that Sri Lankan children that are continually indulged come to reject their own desires

and trust their parents by middle school. After this conversation, I no longer asked about Ziwei behavior though it continued to hover in the background of almost all our interactions.

About two months later, I accompanied Auntie Tang while she sprayed pesticide on the fields, a job for which she was paid about 100 yuan. Wrapped from head to toe in cotton scarves to protect her skin, she walked in and out of corn rows already taller than her head while I chatted with the family who owned the field. Addressing the matriarch who was also looking after her grandchildren for her migrant son, she poked her head out of the corn field and said, ‘grandchildren are always much naughtier when their parents are away. Erin knows that first hand, she has seen my grandkids do the same.’ I was shocked at this admission because I had asked her to think about her grandchildren’s behavior in relation to their parent’s migration several times, and each time had received answers which highlighted lenient expectations for young children and my own failure to appropriately assess their behavior.

To me this statement highlights the tension between expectations of routine naughtiness, which can be constructed as normal along the developmental course, and the difficulties in dealing with children’s misbehaviors. Tang seemed more willing to admit her grandchildren’s misdeeds as a product of their parent’s migration when speaking with another grandmother who was facing similar circumstances, perhaps because of commiseration or perhaps because the grandmother, unlike myself, had not repeatedly asked questions which were indirectly critical of her child-raising efforts. Regardless, the comment represents a different perspective of routine naughtiness than her earlier viewpoint. While earlier Tang constructs naughtiness as positive, her comment later indicates that she is also frustrated with her grandchildren’s misdeeds. Her earlier comments highlight a frustration at the innate naughtiness of children and her statement here points to the circumstantial contributions to an otherwise normal course of action. Though her

comments appear to vacillate between seeing naughtiness as positive and troublesome, I propose that she is also attempting to locate her own role and ability to effect change upon her grandchildren.

Grandparents, as I pointed out in Chapter 2, have been almost universally condemned for their methods of child socialization. Characterized as either too coddling or too neglectful, grandparents like Tang struggle to make sense out of their own roles as caregivers and providers while still taking a back seat to their children and daughters-in-law. Inspiring goodness or *ting hua* behavior is important but tenuous. Significant questions loom in the background: How much naughtiness is permissible, and until what age? Whose responsibility is discipline? Additionally, what can be done about a child's inherent naughtiness as a natural part of development versus a child's naughtiness caused by parental migration? Both kinds of naughtiness are unavoidable; development and economic necessity create circumstances outside of Tang's control. Nevertheless, Tang must still take on the task of caring for her four grandchildren despite the limitations of circumstance, age and environment. Consequently, while she does not necessarily dwell on the existential questions of her role and agentic power, these inner thoughts reveal themselves at the borders of our interactions.

Scene 3: Lenience, “Tiaojian” and Parenting ideals

While Auntie Tang frequently resisted discussing her granddaughter's behavioral problems, many younger mothers brought up the subject unprompted. This was in part because of their curiosity about American parenting methods and also because at the time of my fieldwork it was well known that we were thinking of having children and I often asked mothers for advice as a way of broaching the subject of socialization. Zhang Ming and Wang Lili are two

sisters-in-law whose views on socialization differed from each other yet contained a central question about the efficacy of parental intervention in the face of an economic and community context beyond their control. Zang Ming and Lili's husbands are brothers and live next door to each other; they share meals with each other and their parents-in-law, who alternate living between the two houses. Zhang Ming is mother to Kesai and 18-month-old girl Kemeng. Lili had faced several years of infertility and was 27 when she finally gave birth to a son. These women were the nieces of my host family and I often spent time with them in their sunny courtyard playing with Kesai and Kemeng. Kesai was an energetic boy who loved to throw rocks, sticks and toys. Dealing with the younger 18-month-old girl, Kesai's mother was often overwhelmed and sighed that you could do nothing with a naughty, "*qisiren*" child (extremely annoying).

One afternoon, we stood chatting while he knocked over buckets and tried to hit the dog with a stick. 'It's because he is on break from school,' she said, running after him to prevent him from scattering the chickens, while the 18-month-old girl clung to her leg. When Wang Lili walked by with her own 2-month-old, I left the small family and joined her in the adjacent courtyard, taking an opportunity to admire the newborn. Lili was tired and, looking at Kesai who was still running with chickens next door, she shook her head. 'Some parents are just too lenient. They don't hit their kids, they aren't strict, and that's what happens.' I asked what kind of mother she would be, and she raised her hand in a slapping motion.



Figure 13 Playing in the village.

‘One kid is easy, but two is too much.’ Surprised that she did not want another child, I told her that she was only the second person in the village who had ever told me that they preferred one child. ‘I don’t want another child because then you have to pay for this and that. It’s too expensive. Also, you need to be at home until the kid goes to school. After he’s in school then you can go out to work, but if you have more than one child you must spend more time at home.’ She says that she plans to migrate for work after her son enters school when he’s around 4-years-old, and I ask her to comment on the tension between staying home and earning money. ‘It’s definitely better to stay home to help with the kids, but not everyone can do that.’

Just then, Kesai appeared with dried tofu snacks, eating one and offering one to me. I teased him about his stomach turning into tofu and walked with him back to his house since Lili needed to attend to the newborn.

‘All our kids are *suān*,’ Zhang Ming said. ‘I think it’s the environment (*tiaojian*). I’m sure American kids are better. Take Kesai with you and maybe he will get better.’ Kesai

interrupted our conversation by grabbing an unripe pomegranate from the courtyard tree. Zhang Ming told him that he cannot pull them off the tree because they are not ready to eat. He made a high-pitched squeal, and held out the fruit to his mother, who rolled her eyes and opened it, pointing out the unripe white seeds inside.

‘Don’t eat them, they are ‘cold’,’ Zhang Ming instructed, referring to the Chinese medical classification of certain foods which disrupt digestion. In direct defiance of this instruction Kesai put a seed in his mouth and, disappointed by the tasteless bitter seed, began to throw the seeds at his toy truck. When this game grew long, he returned to the pomegranate tree, again drawing protests from his mother. ‘You must wait.’ She says. ‘Be patient,’ I chime in. And he repeated in a sing-song voice, ‘I must wait. But, I don’t want to.’ He picked up a shovel and began hitting his toys with it. ‘He cannot play nice,’ Zhang Ming bemoaned. ‘He is always this destructive. Kesai, go wash your hands.’

I present this scene of two sisters because of their active thoughts on child raising. While they have different approaches, one preferring to strictly discipline and one choosing more of an environmental approach to shaping her children’s behavior, both sisters express a desire to directly and actively change their children’s behavior. Their comments are an attempt to locate the source of naughtiness and a struggle to understand how parental intervention can change the course of naughty behavior. Lili hopes that vigilant discipline and a smaller childcare burden with only one child will facilitate a smoother upbringing, while Zhang Ming, exhausted by the demands of two young children, portrays the futility of parental mediation.

Both women’s thoughts are shaped by their specific experience and situations. As a new mother, Lili’s comment that some parents are too lenient with their children is both a statement of her own hopes for motherhood and an indirect judgement toward her sister-in-law. Kesai was

indeed a very rambunctious child and I witnessed several instances where, though given explicit directions to the contrary, he was allowed to play with or do things that were understood to be dangerous or unhealthy. One example is when Kesai's father was home for a long weekend and picked him up from preschool. Along the way, they stopped for some groceries and Kesai had chosen a highly caffeinated Red Bull drink. When they arrived home, Zhang Ming tisked and sighed, 'why did you buy him that?' His father replied that Kesai had wanted it. Kesai ran with delight through the courtyard holding the bottle. Then, wanting a drink, he presented it to his grandmother to open. 'Eeh, this is not good for little boys,' said his grandmother, but she opened the bottle and helped him tip the contents into his mouth. Grinning, this process repeated with each one of the adults. Kesai, ran, presented the bottle and each one of the adults told him, 'this will give you diarrhea' or 'this will hurt your stomach.' I even joined in and offered my own American-folk theory of caffeine consumption, 'this will prevent you from growing. If you drink this, you will be short!' Even still, by the end of the evening he had drunk the entire bottle. The next day I asked Zhang Ming if Kesai had indeed gotten ill from drinking the Red Bull and she shook her head, 'he was awake until past 10pm! There was nothing we could do to make him sleep!'

No doubt, Lili has seen such scenes repeatedly and while wishing for her own children for more than 6 years, has watched her willful nephew interact with her sister-in-law. She has given her own parenting style a good deal of conscious thought, observing her sister-in-law and deciding to do almost the very opposite: have only one child instead of two and go out to work as soon as she is able. Lili's comments are a statement of future intention and hope. She imagines an ideal situation is one where parents are more strict and the child will hopefully be less naughty, since lenience leads to mischief—'They aren't strict and that's what happens.'

Zhang Ming's comments, on the other hand, lament the ability of parental intervention to arbitrate children's behavior. 'All our kids are naughty. I think it's the environment (*tiaojian*)' is a testimony that, no matter what kind of parent, children's misbehavior continues. She supposes that it must be the village environment (*tiaojian*) which leads to naughtiness, since logically if it were parenting style, income, or extracurricular activities, other families would have different results. Here, she posits that America must be a more ideal environment for children since she has heard that American children are better behaved. Lining up with larger national discussions on population quality (*suzhi*), and the failures of the rural environment, her comments are a co-construction of the rural as a liability to parenting efforts (refer to Chapter 1).

The word *tiaojian* can be loosely translated as environment, but it also contains the economic and social context as well. The concept of *tiaojian* also contains the external influences such as friends, family and the economic conditions which determine education, extracurricular programs, and the material environment. Teresa Kuan's (2015) chapter on urban Kunming mothers use of *tiaojian* is instructive. She argues that, resonating with traditional Chinese thought, contemporary urban parenting philosophies privilege external circumstances over interiority, attempting to utilize whatever resources they have to shape children's dispositions. For middle-class mothers, this means setting up extracurricular activities, playing elaborate games to improve children's self-concepts regarding schoolwork, and switching schools when teachers had begun to paint their children in an unfavorable light.

The classic fable of Mengzi gives insight into the long history of *tiaojian* as a philosophy of environmental influence. This classic story, "Mengzi's mother moves three times," or "*mengmusanquan*" depicts the search for a neighborhood that would have the best impression on Mengzi. After his father died, the single mother and son lived near a cemetery. When she

discovered him mimicking the professional mourners, she moved near town. Then she found him mimicking the merchants, so once again she moved. Finally, she moved near a school and Mengzi settled into mimicking the teachers and students, eventually becoming a scholar. In this story, Mengzi's mother has limited influence over her son with direct parenting. More impactful are the community of people surrounding them. Zhang Ming's remarks about the environment as influencing the majority of village children is an attempt to locate this source of children's misbehaviors within the environment. Just as with Mengzi, the conditions which largely lay outside of parental influence have a great impact on the behaviors and character which children display.

For Kuan's middle class mothers, *tiaojian* is not a condition which excuses agentive behavior, but rather it shapes the ways in which they feel they can and should act. Instead of a reluctance toward action, the limiting *tiaojian* of their circumstances such as a competitive school system and China's large population, inspire mothers to manipulate what external circumstances that they can. One mother in the study helped her child stay awake to complete the homework, while another punished her son, despite her reluctance to do so, when he kicked his cousin. Almost all of them placed their children in extracurricular classes such as music and language enrichment.

Rural women's viewpoint on *tiaojian* adds an important insight to Kuan's discussion, because in contrast to urban women facing "polluting influences" at school or at the neighborhood playgroup, rural women's very homes, communities and even their own families are constructed in a national discourse as liabilities to improving population quality. This disempowers parental efforts, especially when faced with difficult financial decisions. Lili's comments reveal this same resignation, that while a certain ideal family structure is best—

mothers staying home—‘not everyone can do that.’ Financial constraints largely configure the options available to poor rural women, leaving the best kinds of child raising environments out of reach, even for mothers whose viewpoints favor greater amounts of parental investment and discipline.

Zhang Ming’s comment reflects on the limitations of environment as a factor in ethical sense-making. *Tiaojian* configures one’s ethical obligations and ability to act, not necessarily removing responsibility for intentional instruction, but shaping them within the constraints of reality (c.f Tu 1978). Yet Zhang Ming’s actual actions—repeatedly instructing Kesai on what to do and how to act—bely a more agentive approach, highlighting that the sisters’ actual parenting behaviors and intentions might not differ so drastically after all. Whereas Lili’s statement places a more weight on parental discipline, both are statements which attempt to account for the ability of a person to change and influence their children. How can one manage an advantageous home environment in light of larger unfavorable circumstances which beguile one’s efforts? How to fulfill the necessity of economic provision while also influencing a child to resist the community patterns of naughtiness?

These two sisters-in-law attempt to reconcile the limits of their own agency in influencing their children. Both intend a concerted effort toward shaping their children’s *ting hua* behaviors and dispositions, but are both faced with the uncertainties of this very project.

Scene 4: “*Bu Wen*” Grandparenting and Natural Socialization

Sometime after Lijuan’s birthday party, when Xiulan had already returned to Yunnan, several neighbors asked me what methods I would use to improve children’s grades and exam scores. When I recommended supplying them with ample reading materials, Grandmother Yu

chimed in that Lijuan was smart but her scores were low. Recalling an incident in which I observed Lijuan bribing another child to complete her homework, I hypothesized that Lijuan's grades could be raised if she did her homework regularly. Surprisingly, the grandmother laughed, saying that she didn't know anything about homework. "*Wo bu wen*" she repeated to me several times. Cuilian, another neighbor, announced: 'My daughter doesn't tell me anything either. She decided to work this summer after high school and didn't tell me until she had already gotten to the city. She gave me a call, and what can I say? I also cannot *wen*. (*Wo yebuneng wen*).'

The word *wen* is difficult to translate into English; it can be alternately translated as either "ask" or "hold responsible". The comment "*wo bu wen*" refers to an area which is out of one's control or responsible purview. When Grandmother Yu says "*wo bu wen*" she directly refers to her strategy of intentional non-interference in her granddaughter's daily behaviors, particularly regarding school and education. The neighbor's comment about her high school daughter's decision to work during the summer points to the ways in which childhood is painted as not amenable to direct investments, but rather naturally develops according to a logic of its own. "*Bu wen*" can be characterized as a kind of natural socialization within a more traditionalist paradigm. The "*bu wen*" approach to child socialization is in direct contrast to relentless national campaigns aimed at improving children's educational standing and grades (see especially Kipnis 2011). I saw this attitude repeated in a number of my informants of various ages, though it corresponded most usually to those with low educational attainment. Women who were illiterate were more likely demonstrate this attitude, perhaps because of difficulties in contributing towards the formal educational process.

On the surface, this attitude relegates the responsibilities for formal education to educational institutions and children's own intrinsic motivations. Under this idea, children are

thought to either be naturally gifted at study, or not, with little room for effort to make a difference in school performance. There are echoes of the community-wide expectation for children's misbehaviors within this idea because children are assumed to be dispositionally oriented towards success or failure; intervention is nearly impossible. This became apparent to me during my fieldwork as some parents and grandparents complained that their children did not do well in school, but confessed that they did not monitor their grades or study habits. Many children completed their homework during the school day, usually during recess, and many parents and grandparents did not check their work, often because they could not read the homework themselves and had little idea how to help if there were any questions.

Unsurprisingly, this was a source of conflict between mothers and grandmothers, especially when mothers had migrated for work, just as the opening scene of this chapter featured Xiulan's criticism of Grandmother Yu's socialization approach. Enforcing school attendance or homework was not only outside Grandmother Yu's goals, but also outside her expertise, since she was illiterate and had never attended school herself. Attempting to make up for her mother-in-law's illiteracy, Xiulan gave her daughter several volumes of classical ethics written for children, and sent money to enroll Lijuan in the local summer school enrichment class. This further enforced the idea that educating the grandchildren was outside Grandmother Yu's purview since she had little to do with these educational decisions and had little interest in classical ethics.

However, over the course of my fieldwork, I came to discover that the policy of "*bu wen*" was not as *laissez-faire* as it appears upon the surface. Even though Grandmothers such as Yu lamented their inability and even refusal to take responsibility for educational attainment, this did not mean that they weren't actively and intentionally influencing children, on the contrary,

especially regarding areas of their own expertise and understanding, they exhibited a good deal of deliberate instruction. To understand the ways in which Yu continues to influence her grandchildren, despite the policy of “*bu wen*,” I turn to an everyday interaction that I observed while eating lunch with Yu just days before 13-year-old Liying departed for the city with his older [adopted] brother, Litao. Despite his mother’s protests, Liying had temporarily left the seventh grade to work in a restaurant in a neighboring city. The two boys talk in soft voices with heavy dialect, so that some of what they say is inaudible, which I’ve represented with an ellipsis. Yu is yelling at them in a loud voice and was clear on my recording:

Yu: Where are you guys going?

Litao: We are going to play and get something to eat.

Yu: Now, are you going to buy him shoes, or are you not able to?

Litao: (inaudible reply)...

Yu: Well, I can take you along, or are you not going into town?—

Litao: ...I’ll buy them tomorrow..

Yu: *Tomorrow* you’ll buy them?!...didn’t you say that in just a few days he needs to go? Does that leave enough time? Two days is when he will leave. ... I will go buy them myself... Well, let’s do it this way, Liying will tell me what he wants, and I’ll buy that; your niece could even buy them!

Litao: Look, we want a particular kind of shoe, you will not pick the best one.

Yu: But you are going to work as a laborer (*ganhuo*), should you wear nice [shoes]?

Litao: ...he’s just going to buy one pair. He can wash them.

Yu: (inaudible mumble) can you even wash them?

Litao: ... We’re going to spend about 60-65 RMB.

Yu: ...with that amount I can buy two pairs! Fine! You go eat then...

The boys continue to talk in fast quiet voices which I don’t understand, and Yu alternately shouts out questions about the legitimacy of the prospective purchase and her resolve to influence what kind of shoes they will buy — “what about the ones your dad bought?” And, “Fine, I will buy another pair for him myself.” When Liying describes the pair of shoes he wants,

Yu says, “Buy ugly shoes! Look, Liying, what if someone steals them on the road? Better to have ugly shoes!” Four minutes later, the boys finally depart. The two boys return once again later in the recording and again, Yu quizzes them on the shoes. Why does Yu care so much about the shoes? Why doesn’t the purchase fall under the category of *bu wen*? Perhaps Yu cares more because she needs to balance the family budget? But the money for the shoes is almost certainly not coming from Yu; Liying’s money comes from his father and his own earnings from construction jobs, so she is not concerned for her own purse strings.

I propose that Yu is making educational statements to Liying and Litao about frugality and spending, an important value for Yu. Yu is, in fact, a well-known deal-finder; she knows where to get vegetables at the best prices, and having raised 5 children, three of whom are deaf, under the tight budget of collectivization, my host Auntie Cong deemed her “*benshi*” or “capable” because of this shrewdness. Despite the difficulties in her family, she was well respected in the village for her perseverance, not the least of which was her ability to manage money. In the interaction above, Yu passes on this value by spending time instructing the boys about how to bargain and what type of shoes are the best. In contrast to her approach of natural socialization with formal education, Wang has specific and recognizable expertise in this area. Therefore, she gives precise instructions and spends time and energy following up with the boys’ results.

Several months later, Liying came back from his migrant experience and presented his father Fengmin with 2,000 yuan. Fengmin, who is deaf, motioned to me proudly and drew the number in the dirt. Liying decided to return to middle school the next fall in order to start the school year anew. He planned to ultimately finish the 8th grade and perhaps go to trade school, a compromise between his mother’s wishes and his own motivations. The other members of the village were quite impressed with the young boys’ ability to save and earn money.

Yu's influence on Liying and Lijuan is perhaps more subtle than other socialization approaches, which may be why the strategy of "*bu wen*" is considered by national discourse and certain family members as a lack of care. Such an approach is not simply a product of being unequipped within the educational system, but has its own values and logic as demonstrated by Yu's insistence on proper shoe buying. Here, Yu's emphasis on bargaining reveals the value that she places upon financial management as a teachable skill. Because she models such financial frugality, she is able to directly instruct her grandsons on this value. In contrast, she is illiterate and never attended school herself and leaves Liying and Lijuan's formal education up to the school teachers and her daughter-in-law's influence.

Moreover, Yu is parenting out of her own experience and capabilities. Her memories from the collective era include hardship in finding food and clothing. Education was outside the purview of most mothers during this time, and the daily difficulty in tending to the household economy was a priority above attention to exam scores. Consequently, Yu's parental intervention follows a historical and generational common-sense that is more than it appears. No doubt, the family conflict which I highlighted in the beginning of this chapter between Xiulan and Yu is intensified because of Yu's proclamations about abdicating responsibilities of education. Yet, her influence remains a critical part of her grandchildren's socialization.

Teaching Morality in the Face of Contingency

Taken together, these four scenes present a community standard of child socialization. In their chapter, "Learning Morality" published in *The Anthropology of Learning in Childhood* (2010), Fung and Smith contend that a sociocultural approach to moral socialization should address the following four dimensions: 1) what are the values being socialized? 2) to what extent

are these values socialize-able? 3) who can provide value instruction? and 4) what techniques and strategies are used to achieve socialization? (2010, 263). By highlighting scenes from four families, I have shown the cultural models of moral education within the village. Additionally, my argument has expanded the sociocultural portrait to include how these models play out in everyday life. *Ting hua* behavior is a dispositional attitude and reverence toward parental and grandparental authority directly related to Confucius-inspired filial piety and is difficult to directly teach. Parents and grandparents cooperatively socialize children into this moral attitude, sometimes agreeing and sometimes diverging on the best strategies to inspire proper behaviors. These four scenes highlight the limitations of parental intervention in the face of the vulnerabilities as developmental stages, gendered dispositions, and environmental liabilities.

All of these scenes reveal that parents and grandparents are struggling with the questions of socialization and of how to deal with challenges specific to rural parenting. How can one still have a good child in a bad environment? What can you control and what do you leave to chance? What types of things require careful instruction— shoe buying or classroom attendance? What kinds of behavior require punishment— plucking an unripe pomegranate off the tree or staying up too late watching television?

All parties to struggle through this difficulty with actionable interventions. As split-second decisions and comments inspired by naturally-occurring behaviors, these scenes portray the meaning-making that happens in the face of the daily challenges of raising young children and highlight the tensions inherent within the philosophies which undergird child socialization practices in any society. These everyday interactions reveal the conflicts between fatalistic understandings and direct actions. The intentions of mothers and grandmothers to inspire *ting hua* behavior and dispositions is an inherently risky endeavor, subject to the liabilities of

environment, financial responsibilities that limit the time parents can spend with their children, and the uncertainties which characterize the human experience. Additionally, the most highly valued behaviors cannot be directly taught; as seen with the example of Peida, becoming “good” is a slow process of gradual understanding unfolding after repeated modeling. This means that while direct discussion hold some value, the responsibility for the correct dispositional orientation can only lie within the child.

All socialization routines described here contain elements of both intentional intervention and natural socialization. Parents and grandparents exhibit generational differences in their description of parenting, revealing that the younger generation has more explicit thoughts on how to influence and socialization children within the modern schema of parenting. However, the three grandparents portrayed here, Grandmothers Cong, Tang, and Yu all have made explicit interventions in children’s behavioral and dispositional patterns. “Modern” parents as exhibited by the younger generation of mothers, Xiulan, Lili, and Zhang Ming, do have more expressive thoughts about their parental intentions and are more ready to comment on general behavioral patterns of their children. Nevertheless, despite these intentions, they also are willing to abdicate responsibility over certain areas, not unlike Grandmother Yu’s proclamation of “*bu wen*.” Lili planned to migrate for work as soon as she was able, leaving a large portion of the childcare and educational responsibility to her mother-in-law. Likewise, while Xiulan remonstrated her mother-in-law’s *laissez-faire* approach to socialization, she herself left the children in Henan while she lived more than 2,000 km away in Yunnan. Aside from her annual two-month visit beginning with Lijuan’s birthday and ending with spring festival, she did not call or communicate with the children. While the literature describing socialization does not necessarily outline a strict division between the two types of parenting, my research here suggests that trends

toward modern parenting are complicated and progress is in no way linear. Behavior and intentions do not always match up, highlighting the importance to community-based ethnographic methods to understand the actual routines guardians use to socialize children despite self-conscious narratives of parenting philosophies.

Finally, this chapter makes a case for examining socialization as a family affair which includes negotiations between generations. In each situation, I presented there are players from both the older and younger generation who must together work out a strategy for cooperative socialization that defies older models of the extended family and must confront the reality of migration. The clearest example of this intra-generational discussion comes in my opening scene where Xiulan complains about her mother-in-law, and there are echoes of the realities of family-oriented socialization in each of the examples. Yiran, in contrast to many other families, praises her in-laws' efforts at socializing their son, even if it means he might be more attached to them than to herself, as her comment reveals—'Do you think that he would care if *we* weren't eating?' Auntie Tang admits to another grandmother the struggle of caring for inherently naughty children whose behavior is worse when their mother is away, hinting at the complicated nature of extended intra-generational care. And sisters-in-law Zhang Ming and Lili both utilize their mother-in-law for support, Lili planning to migrate more permanently for work after her son enters school.

There is significant variability in different families' approaches to answering the questions raised by socialization. Child socialization is not only a local philosophy but also exists within a field of various voices which attempt to color and shape children into particular models of goodness. These models are not stagnant, even within the same person. Moreover, much of socialization happens on an unconscious level, such that despite guardians' intentions, modeling

and the continual emphasis of specific values will continue to play a large role in the shaping of the next generation.

Chapter Five

Girl's Power, Mother's Sacrifice: The impact of increasing bridewealth and marital autonomy on mothers of adult sons

Mom is the best in the world
The child with a mother will always be cherished
Throw yourself into your mother's embrace
This happiness is enjoyed forever
Mom is the best in the world
A child without a mother is like a blade of grass
If you leave your mother's embrace
Where can you find happiness?
-Chinese nursery rhyme

One afternoon, 40-year old Yujie shows me three red items: a suitcase, a basin and a towel. Each item was decorated beautifully with flowers and phoenixes, and towel was embroidered in gold thread with the character “double happiness.” In just four days she would present these items as a sign of well wishes to her son, Liu Chaojin's new bride. Red is the color of happiness and joy, but Yujie doesn't seem happy. In fact, since I met Yujie, seven months ago, she has had frequent headaches, weakness, and twice she has avoided food for whole days, a sure sign of deep anxiety. Her thoughts are consumed with how she will procure the entire 200,000 RMB which she needs for the bridewealth and wedding. Even though she has less than half the money, she is going through with the nuptials anyway.

A house just two blocks away has already been purchased and remodeled, the door is painted an inviting green. The young couple, introduced through a *meili* (a paid intermediary), have gotten along so well that they were now going around together like lovers. She rode on the back of his motorcycle all around town, he treated her lavishly, and the couple often spent the night together. The couple's mutual affection should be favorable to both families, except that

the bride's family was concerned that their liaisons had spoiled their only daughter's reputation, and now used the impropriety to their advantage, asking for the maximum bride-price—over 100,000 RMB. Chaojin was 17 years-old and, according to Yujie, he was not very reliable. For most of his life, he had lived with his mentally ill father and had received his father's unhealthy influence. Dropped out of middle school, Chaojin never held a regular job and what savings he did earn, he quickly spent. Yujie didn't trust him enough to send him to work in a factory to earn some of the money. Neither could she postpone the wedding to buy more time because she worried that the bride's family would ruin the reputation of the entire family.

She talks to me about all of this while chopping pork. It is a bit violent, complaining, chopping; "There's no way around it," she sighed and slammed the butcher knife on pork knuckle. Just then, the groom-to-be called, Yujie puts the phone on speaker so that Chaojin's voice echoes in the cement-walled kitchen. He was reticent to ask his father for his contribution to the wedding. She makes repeated attempts to convince her son to ask his father, whom she left over ten years ago, to provide his part of the wedding fees. "Did you say it like *that*?" she shouted into the phone, criticizing his tone and phrasing. He repeats that his father just doesn't want to give towards the marriage. "Any amount" she urged, "I mean, just a few thousand even will be fine." But her son is adamant--his father will not contribute.

After hanging up, Yujie recounts the fight that her son had with his sister over 300 RMB worth of eggs just a few months ago. "Three hundred *kuai* and he is so mad, but this is so big and he can't do it." Without the father's support, the entirety of the cost now fell on her shoulders.



Figure 14 A Bride and her sister-in-law. A marching band is seen in the background.

Yujie was not unique in her complaint about raising money for the high cost of her son's wedding. In fact, it was a preoccupation that overwhelmingly occupied most of my informant's thoughts and behaviors—driving many middle-aged parents to migrate for work, take on extra economic risks, and forgo small comforts that they would traditionally be entitled to by virtue of their age.

In Yunxiang Yan's (2006) article, *Girl Power: Young women and the waning of patriarchy*, he argues that younger women have challenged patriarchal power in the last 50 years and taken more autonomy in mate choice from two factors. First, he says that young women are given the final say in marriage decisions, including marriage trousseau and bridewealth negotiations. Second, Yan points out that the artificial shortage of women in rural areas from sex-selective abortion has boosted young women's bargaining power in negotiations for bridewealth and marriage conditions. This phenomenon of shifting power towards young women has received wide support and documentation with many scholars noting young women's increasing position within the family (C. C. Fan and Huang 1998; Sargeson 2004; Jacka 2005;

Huang 2012; Obendiek 2016a).

From one perspective, the triumph “girl power” may seem like a victory of feminism over a patriarchal family structure that has systematically disempowered women over the last century (M. M. Yang 1999a; P. Ebrey 2003; Barlow 2004; Hershatter 2007). However, from a different perspective—that is from the viewpoint of mothers of adult sons—this shift in kinship authority has led to an increasingly troublesome worry (Shi 2017; G. D. Santos 2016). This chapter takes the vantage point of mothers and asks how changing bridewealth has burdened and disadvantaged mothers of sons in contemporary rural China and how mothers of adult sons have adapted to the new demands. I investigate the ways in which sacrificial contribution towards son’s marriages are a continued attempt for mothers to exert control over an increasingly insecure period of life. This contributes to understanding what Gonçalo Santos and Steven Harrell have labeled as a “reconfiguration of patriarchal hierarchies” in contemporary China (Santos and Harrell 2016a).

The topic of increasing bridewealth and insecurity of mothers of adult sons arose quite naturally over the course of my dissertation research and was the subject of many interviews. During my fieldwork, I attended and participated in four different weddings and I conducted informal interviews with the bride and groom for two of these weddings. For the other weddings, I interviewed other family members in attendance at the wedding and prior to the wedding. Additionally, my primary case for studying the impacts of bridewealth on mothers comes from my interactions with Yujie, who was one of my central informants. When I left the field, her son was still not married and she had still not procured the entire bridewealth. Her husband had found a temporary construction job in Zhengzhou, and her daughter had opened a *malatang* (hot soup) stand in order to earn more money for the bridewealth. I return to Yujie’s case in the

conclusion of this chapter.

Before continuing, a note on my focus of mothers instead of fathers is required. Fathers also contribute to the arrangement of a son's wedding. They contribute a bulk of the financial provision and take a role in arranging the son's marriage, yet they do not do so without the input of mother's perspective. However, I find that while fathers do contribute and are concerned with their son's marriage, this role is neither novel nor unexpected. What higher bride wealth has done is to necessitate income from both father and mother. While the father is more likely to already have taken on a traditional role as bread-winner, mother's wage labor is necessary for the leveraging of bridewealth and an advantageous future marriage. In this chapter, I will argue that mothers in particular are concerned about their son's future prospects because of the increasing vulnerabilities for older women in late age.

Mother-in-Law Blues

Older women have received uneven representation in the anthropological literature on the Chinese family. Many anthropologists studying the family in China have focused on the experiences of younger women. For example, young female migrants in search of empowering experiences in urban spaces (M. M. Yang 1999b; Gaetano and Jacka 2004; H. Yan 2008; Zheng 2009; Gaetano 2015), finding advantageous marriage partnerships (Croll 1981; C. C. Fan and Huang 1998; Y. Yan 2006; Obendiek 2016b, 2016a), and "jumping out of the agricultural gate" (Huang 2012). Documentation of emotional and material strategies employed by young women to avoid and circumvent the patriarchal system of mother-in-law tyranny have captured the imagination of researchers. Such affinity for young women is understandably given that many anthropologists have been young women themselves and have found a commonality and shared

experiences with young women in search of new forms of power in a male dominated world. At the same time these studies have—however unintentionally— left a characterization of mothers-in-law as blind participants part of the patriarchal system at best, or nefarious villains seeking to preserve their own power and keep young women in their place at worst.

A focus on young women’s experiences in the marriage process began with the excellent analytical work done by Marjorie Wolf in her classic, *Women and the family in rural Taiwan* (1972). Written from the perspective of young women, Wolf’s research explores the various vulnerabilities inherent in the displacement of a patrilocal marriage system. In traditional views of kinship, women’s descent and lineage was not recorded; neither were women able to inherit property. Their contribution towards the patrilineal family was therefore largely from reproduction and domestic support. Wolf argues that without institutionalized recognition, women’s kinship influence is dependent upon a strategic play of emotional resources. This focus on the strategy of women within the patriarchal family was revolutionary for studies of Chinese kinship which—until then—had been largely approached from a male-centered lineage paradigm (see Santos’ excellent (2006) review article).

Wolf titles the sphere of female authority “the uterine family.” I include her description here at length:

With a female focus, however, we see the Chinese family not as a continuous line stretching between the vague horizons of past and future, but as a contemporary group that comes into existence out of one woman’s need and is held together insofar as she has the strength to do so, or, for that matter, the need to do so... the uterine family has no ideology, no formal structure, and no public existence. It is built out of sentiments and loyalties that die with its members, but it is no less real for all that. The descent lines of men are born and nourished in the uterine families of women, and it is here that a male ideology that excluded women makes its accommodations with reality (1972, 37)

In Wolf’s description, the uterine family is the tactical method for young women to build up

strategic resources in the marital patriline (see also Wolf 1970).

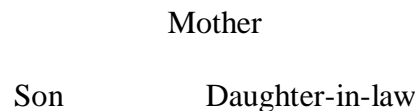
This theoretical emphasis on young women's strategies within the family allowed for further analysis of the role of emotional attachment on the continuation of the kinship system. Charles Stafford's (1995, 2000) investigation into women's roles in rituals of separation and return, for example, highlights the ways in which emotions fostered by mothers may provide incentive for sons to return to the patriline. Steve Sangren (2013) has argued that young women's emotional investment in the uterine family is because of a felt need for attachment after the removal of a young girl from her natal family to her marital one. Consequently, the cultivation of the uterine family is a result of hidden psychological phantasies which compel the continuation of the entire kinship and social system.

In these analysis, the transition from young girl to wife and mother is a liminal period that is fraught with vulnerabilities (c.f. Turner 1987). Young women's actions and strategies undertaken within her new family will help to establish her role for the remainder of her adult life. In classical kinship arrangements, mothers-in-law have already established kinship authority through her strategic emotional relationship with the son, therefore daughters-in-law were the more vulnerable party (Wolf 1972; H. Baker 1979). "*Poxi guanxi*," or the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, is the central relationship of concern within this liminal period. In much of the research which follows Wolf's ethnographic insight, the mother-in-law's perspective is silenced because she is thought to previously have achieved authority in the domestic sphere through the strategic use of emotional and material resources employed in her early married years.

Instead of understanding at women's roles only from the perspective of young women, I propose to look at the family as a negotiation of rights, privileges, and obligations between a

number of different actors. Central to understanding familial authority within the Chinese context is the conflict between horizontal conjugal bonds and vertical intergenerational attachments. I invite a reconsideration of Fei Xiaotong's classic analysis of vertical and horizontal family bonds. Fei flushes out the Chinese saying "between men and women there are only differences" (1992, 87) which proposes the idea that conjugal horizontal bonds were threatening to the vertical parent-child relationship. Fei argued that because traditional Chinese kinship was reckoned by an age-based hierarchy, displays of affection and sentimental ties between man and wife were downplayed in favor of agnatic ties to the patriline.

While Fei saw kinship from the male line, in this chapter, I'd like to consider the primary role of older women in the creation and maintenance of the uterine, sentimental family. Visually, the triad of relationships that concern my analysis can be represented as a triangle.¹⁵



Since most Chinese families act as de-facto extended families, daughters-in-law, sons, and older parents negotiate responsibilities for land management, household chores, childcare and cash income from sideline industries and migration (Cong and Silverstein 2008a, 2011; Chang, Dong, and MacPhail 2011; G. D. Santos 2016). With increasing migration, these responsibilities, which were traditionally designated along gendered and generational lines, are increasingly negotiated between members of the family, all of whom have financial and emotional stakes riding upon the success and well-being of the family unit (Y. Yan 2016).

¹⁵ Of course, the diagram is simplified because many mothers of adult sons in rural China have more than one son. Likewise, fathers of adult sons may also play a large role in negotiations of marriage, however, as I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, my informants were overwhelmingly older women.

Several cultural and legal practices favored the vertical connection between mother and son over the son's connection to his wife in traditional China. First was the practice of *tongyangxi* where a bride would be taken in infancy and raised as a wife/daughter/house servant. *Tongyangxi* both undermined the conjugal bond (by dampening romantic feelings between the pair) and reinforced the vertical tie (by boosting the authority of the older woman over the younger (Spiro 1993)). While this practice was most likely only utilized by the very wealthy, the ideology that it expresses was quite relevant to everyday families in pre-revolutionary China—who would hope for an obedient and helpful daughter-in-law to support the older couple and hold a weak bond with their son.

Second, under traditional practices, parents held ultimate control over marriage and divorce. Marriages were entirely arranged by the parents of the groom. Husband and wife may not have even met prior to the wedding ceremony. Once they were brought into the family, wives were held in check by the threat of divorce which was an ultimate social death. Hugh Baker describes the “seven outs” or the seven reasons a wife would be made to leave the patrilineal family: “barrenness, wanton conduct, neglect of parents-in-law, garrulousness, theft, jealousy and ill-will, and incurable disease” (1979, 45). As the breadth of this list suggests, parents were given broad authority over the daughter-in-law. This generational influence in divorce and marriage also operationalizes the cultural ideal for weakened conjugal bonds in favor of the vertical tie.

Both these practices have seen a radical transformation over the last century, largely due to direct and intentional interventions by the Chinese party-state to drastically change the structure of the patriarchal family. One of the first pieces of legislation passed by the newly established government was the Family Law of 1950. In the law, *tongyangxi* was outlawed and

women were allowed individual control over divorce and marriage (Diamant 2000; Glosser 2003). Companionate marriage was also encouraged and accompanying reforms of land and property holdings significantly reduced parental oversight in match-making. All of these reforms have shifted the bonds of affinity from vertical to horizontal ties (Y. Yan 1997, 2003).

While these policy-led changes fundamentally changed the foundation of relationships within the family, changing the cultural attitudes of local people about divorce has been born from a confluence of factors not necessarily related to marriage practices, such as mobility and a growing value for personal happiness. The two instances of divorce that I encountered in my fieldwork illustrate this nicely. Yujie, whose family predicament I began with, was the first woman who I met who admitted to being divorced and remarried. She had left her first husband in Anhui after he accused her publicly of having an affair. Thinking of the effects upon her children, she left rather than have them face the social stigma of an unvirtuous mother, even though she knew his allegation to be false. After migrating for work, she met and married another migrant and returned to his hometown in Henan. Yujie felt a significant amount of shame about her divorce and she tried to keep it a secret from her in-laws and all but her closest friends. Her son materializing and requiring financial support for his wedding was a major cause for disagreement with her mother-in-law who didn't view the step-grandson as family.

In a second example, Tianmei was always fighting with her mother-in-law and viewed her as overly harsh, uneducated, and dirty. Her husband, Libo, had migrated leaving her at home alone with her mother-in-law, and all the chores fell to Tianmei who was always cleaning up after the older woman. To make matters worse, Libo remitted his earnings to his mother, who distributed only small portions to Tianmei. When Tianmei obtained some money from her family to buy a pair of shoes, she was subject to merciless criticism and questioning about where she

had gotten the money. The entire village knew of the mother-in-law's harsh treatment but interacted with Tianmei with a kind of fearful distain. When graffiti appeared in the village underpass which cursed an evil mother-in-law, the village gossiped that Tianmei had scribbled it in a drunken fit of anger.

The final straw came when Tianmei was required to undergo an abortion. Her husband refused to accompany her to the hospital or care for her after the procedure. When she returned to the demoralizing criticism of her mother-in-law, she left the marriage. She sent me a wechat message to inform me of the divorce. "I'm single now" she wrote. "Divorce has become liberating (*liguohun shi ziyou le*). It's happy and also not happy (*kaixin*). Yes. I now can follow my own feelings (*jiugenzhe wo zijide ganjue zou*)." Additionally, Tianmei's parents, who knew of her unhappiness and also had experienced the hot-temper of her mother-in-law were supportive of the divorce. They allowed Tianmei to return home. Her mother even defended her publicly after the separation when she overheard the mother-in-law gossiping about Tianmei in the township.

The experiences of both Tianmei and Yujie point to the fact that divorce no longer represents a social death or ultimate ostracization. While divorced women still face social stigma and difficulties, mobility through migration, changing ideas about the value of girls as filial supporters, and a growing value in personal happiness has allowed women to divorce and still carry on meaningful lives (c.f. Y. Yan 2013). Yujie—who faced two different mothers-in-law—migrates without permission after her first marriage and continues to arrange a wedding for her son contrary to the wishes of her current mother-in-law. Tianmei escapes the tyranny of her ex-mother-in-law and returns to her natal home. In both these instances, mothers-in-law influence feature prominently in the difficulties encountered by both young women and yet, the ultimate

decision is granted not to the mother-in-law, but to the younger party.

Mothers-in-law are like *Baomu*

The eroding privileges of older women within the family have been captured within popular imagination and sentiments. Reilian had returned to her natal village to spend some time with her mother and allow her children to play with her three nephews, who were in the primary care of her mother and father while her brother and his wife worked in a factory in Guangzhou. Finding her mother's health deteriorating and her father working long hours in construction, she lamented her brother and sister-in-law's migration, stating that the entire family would be better off if they returned home. Yet at the same time, she presented migration as the only viable option for parents of three sons. "Around here—aya! Tsk! In the last several years, you absolutely must migrate. Otherwise, it will influence your kids. If you have just one son, that's already several hundred thousand (*jishiwan*) [RMB]... I'm fine with my mother-in-law, but I've noticed that these days, daughter-in-laws are just... I mean, they don't understand why they should take the mother-in-law into account at all. They are all like, 'I want a car. Absolutely require a car' That is—*require (bixude)*—that is the meaning!

"I absolutely require a car. If there is no car, that's not acceptable.' Your son invests in the daughter-in-law's side. Right now, it's just like that!... I'll give you an example, our neighbor has just turned 16 or 17 years old. She just got married. She received 100,000 RMB *caili*, that's not including anything else. The house must also be supplied, the car must also be supplied, also that—everything! All those things were not included in the *caili*. The cost of the wedding fees (*shangche xiache*, i.e. fees for the wedding procession), that's not even included. That's just the cost of one little girl's (*yikou yatou*) bridewealth cash!"

"When the mother in law didn't have all the money at once, she said, 'okay I'll give you

a little now, and then after a while I'll give you the rest.' But that wasn't acceptable. So, the daughter-in-law received—she received 80,000. 80,000! After they got married, she got to thinking—she thought that the mother-in-law had tried to cheat her. Tsk. She had that kind of attitude!... With that kind of attitude, the mother-in-law cried. The daughter-in-law was unhappy. Can you imagine? She has a car, she has a house, and she has 80,000? This generation! Aya. My own generation, we were very easy-going (*suibian*). Right now, it's just-- raise the price! Raise the price! Until it's several hundred thousand! Non-stop inflation (*yizhigao yizhigao*)!"

Against this mounting pressure for bridewealth (*caili*), Reilian stated that her brother and his wife had no choice except to migrate in order to earn enough money to handle all three son's weddings. This pressure not only affected the younger couple, but placed incredible strain on the grandparents who received little financial support from the migrants and had to discipline the three boys (incidentally they were actually some of the best-behaved children in the village). Reilian summarized, "Today, mother-in-laws are like *baomu*." Reilian used the word *baomu* which is a term for hired domestic support. *Baomu* are generally ill-educated, poor, and face discrimination in their urban employer's houses. Additionally, *baomu* often leave their own families behind to care for wealthier urban children (H. Yan 2008). In using the term *baomu* to describe the contemporary situation of mothers-in-law, Reilian is pointing out that mothers-in-law have the most minimal amount of power within the family and have provided the greatest sacrifices of labor and emotional attention. Since *baomu*'s are usually outsiders, Reilian's remark also comments upon the extreme nature of marriage cost and labor arrangements after the marriage.

Conditions for marriage now favor young women, who by benefit of a skewed sex ratio,¹⁶ shifting ideologies of gender preference, and increased decision making within the family (Y. Yan 2006; Poston Jr, Conde, and DeSalvo 2011; Yuan, Xuehui, and Dagsvik 2011; Obendiek 2016a). Outnumbering men and benefiting from improved social value from their ability to earn money themselves, young women have gained the upper hand in marriage negotiations. Young women's desire for "marrying up" or hypergamy, have placed a heavy burden on the groom for satisfying all kinds of material, emotional, and physical requirements. The colloquial term "*gao, fu, shui*" for a man who is tall, rich, and handsome, describes women's ideal marriage partners.¹⁷

However, the crucial part of marriage negotiations, as elucidated by Reilian's story is that young men are very frequently not responsible for the all of the material conditions of marriage—his parents are. Sons are treated as the beneficiaries of parental care, even after they marry. While some sons do contribute, the huge costs to the wedding and marriage require the contributions of many family members. In addition to the labor of a father, which is already planned and expected, a son's mother must also add a dual income to the family in order to save for the increasing costs. Additionally, as I detail below, because of older women's new precarity in late-age she must find a way to utilize the marriage and her fertility to stabilize her position and secure her future within the family.

If young women have more bargaining power in terms of bridewealth, domestic labor and financial contribution, then the power has not necessarily been taken from men, but rather from

¹⁶ Attane (2012) argues that overall, the sex ratio in China is one of the most skewed in the world with 104 males per 100 females. The numbers tend to become more serious in the youngest population sets, for example, in 2010, there were 120 boys per 100 girls under age 15. Future projections predict that in 2020 among young adults of marrying age, there will be 24 million women to 30 million men. Which will translate to at least 6 million "left-over" bachelors.

¹⁷ Though my urban male friends often joked that most women actually only wanted "*fu, fu, fu*" eliminating the physical requirements for a match and only depending upon a man's financial position.

older women. Within the contemporary situation, women face more vulnerability in middle age as mothers-in-law than younger women. This is a shift from the previous insecurity of the transition from natal home to marital patriline as recorded in Wolf's writing. This precarity is a visceral fear for which women have developed several strategies. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to fleshing out two of these strategies: fertility practices and marriage partnerships. Both these strategies can be seen as attempts for mothers to maintain and bolster their vertical relationships with their sons by influencing the son's marriage choices.

Changing Fertility Practices and Educational Investments in Sons

I had accompanied Auntie Tang to sell her cicadas at a village store. Her daughter-in-law had returned, she told the shop keeper. But when I asked the reason for her return, Auntie Tang whispered to me and insisted that we go across the street to a stand of trees. 'You can't have too many sons' she said in hushed tones. Her daughter-in-law had returned from her factory job at 6 months-pregnant, but she was not showing yet and they didn't want anyone else to know that she was pregnant. The couple already had two sons who were enrolled in the local boarding school and cared for by Auntie Wu during the school's vacation. If this third child was a boy, the couple planned on aborting it. The cost of sons was too great to have too many, Auntie had explained. 'And if it's a girl?' I asked. Auntie Wu said 'A girl is not as much of a burden. They'll keep it.'

The idea that sons were a financial liability was widely expressed by young mothers in the village. Nevertheless, at least one son was absolutely crucial to the continuity of the family line. Consequently, a new fertility strategy has emerged which can be summarized by Auntie Wu's statement "you can't have too many sons." Overwhelmingly, informants thought that the ideal number of children was one boy and one girl. Two boys would also be acceptable, but two

girls would lead the couple to try for a third time for a son. After three children, most couples gave up. No one in my fieldwork had more than three children. Sex-selective abortion was widely practiced despite attempts to curb the practice by outlawing the revealing of sex during ultra-sound examinations. Families simply bribed their nurses to reveal the gender of the child. While sex-selective abortion was a regular practice for families to obtain sons, yet during my fieldwork, I heard of two instances, like the situation I describe above, where families had considered aborting the fetus if it was male.

This new attitude towards reproductive decisions have arisen largely out of concern for the rising price of nuptial arrangements as well as the increasing cost for investing in a son's education. Limiting the number of sons has been an increasingly common strategy for many families around China. For instance, Lihong Shi's research also explores impact of rising bride-price on families child-bearing practices in rural Northeast China, arguing that families now consider boys as a financial burden and are increasingly hoping for girls (Shi 2009, 2016, 2017). In urban China, where the birth quota is much more strictly enforced, many couples are now happy with singleton daughters (Fong 2006; Evans 2010).

Families not only considered the cost of marriage, but also the costs associated with educating their children. Because most elderly in rural China are dependent upon their sons for old-age care, boy's potential economic success was of great concern for rural parents. While most children in my fieldsite were not expected to attend college or even high-school, parents went to great lengths to enroll their male children in technical colleges and career training schools. Boys were given more educational investment, not only because of explicit gendered biases, but also because a variety of different situations which granted their sons preferential educational environments. Two cases illustrate this nicely.

The Wang family consists of a migrant father, a mother, a 13-year old girl and a 5-year-old son. The girl has lived with her grandmother since she was two while her mother accompanied the father to Shenzhen, an urban area about 12 hours away with a vast network of factories. The mother didn't work, but rather fulfilled a traditional house-wife role for her husband who was a successful factory manager. After several years, the son was born and the mother felt that the grandmother already had a great childcare burden, so they split the siblings apart, preferring to keep the younger son with both parents in Shenzhen. In the meantime, school enrollment policies changed and the younger son was now eligible to change his *Hukou* to an urban *Hukou* in a different province. The daughter, however, could not change her *Hukou* because she had already begun middle school where she studied very provincial-specific material for the high school entrance exam. Were the family to change the girls school, she would face significant academic challenges since urban schools were usually much more advanced and rigorous than rural ones. Besides, the young girl was attached to the grandmother and preferred to stay in the countryside. Consequently, the younger son is now entering an urban school with an urban *Hukou* and will be better placed throughout his educational tenure.

In a second instance, the Chen family have two 12-year-old twin daughters and a 9-year-old son. The mother worked at a nearby thread factory in 12-hour shifts and the father worked as a local construction worker. The twin girls were obedient and well mannered. They performed chores willingly and seemed to genuinely enjoy cooking for their parents. Additionally, at school they were at the top of their class, regularly earning near-perfect scores. Their 9-year-old brother, Jieming was a different story, however. In part because of differential behavioral expectations for boys and girls, and in part because of natural differences in talents, Jieming performed terribly in school. He was often in trouble and the teacher, whom I interviewed, had all but given

up on improving his scores or his behavior. His mother had tried all manner of threats and even chased him around the village with a broom to no avail. So, the parents had decided to send Jieming to a private school in the county seat where, they hoped, the teachers would be able to support his learning more effectively. The parents also planned to send the twin girls when they had obtained enough money, but because they were performing well, supporting Jieming's education became a higher priority.

In both these families, the younger son was given access to better education, because the family put in a small amount of additional effort to change their educational environment. Even though in both instances the parents showed little explicit bias that girls were less capable than their male siblings, a confluence of external circumstances worked together allowing the sons to have better educational opportunities. The extra effort and income needed to invest in young son's education was thought of as a mandate which was not necessarily required for daughters. Mothers considered educational investment in their sons as a way of leveraging their marketability for match-making and also solidifying their earning power later in life. Sons who were successful educationally and vocationally would also be in a better position for the incredibly competitive marriage market.

Marriage Formation in Pear Branch Township

In Pear Branch Township, the majority of marriages are arranged through an intermediary, known as a *meiren*, who helps parents find a suitable match for their children. In some instances, the matchmaker is a professional. He or she may even advertise their services. In the township, there was a professional matchmaker who set up a table in front of the county hospital. But more common in the village that I resided, a mutual acquaintance would perform

the role. Yujie, for example, knew that her son was approaching a marrying age and she asked a friend if she knew any eligible young women who might be interested. The friend happened to know another family who was also looking for a match for their daughter and the two were introduced. Informal matchmaking, like this case, seemed quite frequent and many parents thought that arranging a match through an informal network would be more relaxed and help the couple feel a more natural attraction. Once introduced, the couple would both agree (or disagree) on the match after meeting one another and the intermediary would be paid a small fee or token of appreciation. The pair might engage in a period of romantic and erotic interludes, similar to western-style dating. This period after the engagement and before the wedding was thought to solidify the marriage. However, not all girls approached their wedding as happy or romantic.

I spoke to one young woman a few weeks before her marriage. It was early in my field research and I offered my congratulations, asking ‘Are you very excited?’ She laughed a little and replied ‘What is there to be excited about?’ Upon further pressing, the girl admitted that she felt the match was acceptable and since she had few other options since she did not want to migrate, she thought that taking this match was *chabuduo* meaning “more or less.” From her sentiments, she felt that she might as well take the offer and marry this guy because she had no other real prospects for a job or other romantic partnership.

On the other hand, two couples who had met outside the formal introductions of their parents were ecstatic. 19-year-old Yuping had met another young man while working in Wuhan. His parents were well respected members of a neighboring village in the same county. The two were deeply in love and Yuping was looking forward to the wedding, attending carefully to each aspect of the plans including picking out her wedding dress and shoes. Zhuanglin and Caihong were high school sweethearts that had already been living together for close to ten years. As the

youngest son, Zhuanglin did not expect any contribution from his parents towards the wedding and he and Caihong had saved themselves for a wedding ceremony and had even contributed money to decorate his older brother's house to host the event. Both these couples showed great care and attention to the various aspects of the ceremony, and even contributed their own income to towards the purchase of household and ceremonial goods.

In marriages where parents had arranged the introduction, however, there seemed to be more negotiation that focused on increasing the bridewealth of the match. Tianmei, whose unhappy marriage ended in divorce as I described earlier, demanded a high bridewealth during her engagement. "I felt in all other aspects he was unremarkable." She commented flatly while showing me the wedding photos. A high cash gift was a way to recompense for the lack of emotional and physical attraction. In her research on bridewealth, Lihong Shi also remarks that a high bridewealth was a token of the patrilineal families appreciation for the bride. Brides would compare bridewealth with each other and maintain a materialistic sense of self-worth (2016, 67).

Added to the cost of the bridewealth were the various expenditures for the wedding itself, including a long train of cars that would ferry the bride and groom from her natal home to the new house, the cost of lavish food and drink (the ceremonies that I attended served more than 10 dishes of various meats, seafood, fertilized egg and delicacies, in addition to several cases of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks), the wedding musicians (at one wedding I attended there was a full brass marching band), an M.C., fireworks, and small favors given to the guests—boxes of cigarettes, candy and sunflower seeds. During the year of my dissertation research, the cost of most weddings averaged about 70,000-100,000 RMB.

A critical aspect to weddings and matchmaking was also building a home for the new family or *gaifangzi*. Whereas other aspects of the wedding and matchmaking might vary

considerably for couples depending upon whether or not they had been *zitan* or arranged marriages, providing a house was a non-negotiable for families in my fieldsite. Providing a house for a son established the continued presence of the son's identity within the patrilocal lineage system. The house built for a son was generally a large cement structure which was multi storied and had various modern features, sometimes including indoor plumbing, solar water heaters, or indoor access to a well pump. In contrast, older houses were made from brick or even mud, were one story, and generally lacked indoor access to water.

A large house gave the new family prestige and established them as residents of the village even when the family might migrate for long periods of time, leaving their house empty. Building a son's house was so essential to the families in my study that many older couples tore down their own houses to make room for their son's house, or they maintained a significantly older wing within the courtyard. The older parents would often remark that they had no house of their own, or that they lived with their sons, even when they were the primary residents of the house. When migrant sons returned home, even temporarily, the older parents would set up a room in the courtyard or backhouse and leave the family to occupy the newer dwelling. For example, my host family maintained two houses, both constructed in the 1990s for their sons. The first son and his wife lived there only for the first several years before the son, who had been very successful in agricultural trading, purchased a new house in the township center. The second son was married in his house but soon after the wedding, the new couple relocated to Xinjiang where they were both employed in the public security bureau. The older couple now lived in the younger son's house and maintained both courtyard gardens and chicken houses. Though both sons did not live in either the houses, the older couple still claimed that they had no residence of their own.

The cost of building a new house was often the first expense planned for a son's wedding and I met families that had already begun construction for their son's houses when they were even less than ten years old. Families that were building houses for their pre-pubescent sons often were currently occupying older houses that were in extreme disrepair and were quite small. Once the house was constructed, the entire family would live there until the son came of age, though the houses were usually unfinished without much furniture, decoration or flooring. Prior to the wedding ceremony, the new house would be remodeled and decorated to fit the latest fashions. In this way, many families could live in more comfortable housing while still conforming to an ethic in investing in their sons.

In total, an arranged marriage, wedding, and housing construction would cost the family upwards of 300,000 RMB. The average savings of a migrant worker was just around 10,000 RMB, so it took many families at least 15 or more years of dual-parent migrant income to save for such an expense. Families also undertook creative sideline businesses, rented out their fields, or relied on cash obtained from marrying out their daughters in order to meet this financial obligation.

Marrying Close: A strategy for mothers of adult sons

If an arranged marriage required a larger bridewealth, why did so many mothers I spoke to prefer to arrange marriages for their sons instead of allowing for them to find their own marital partners? While the functional explanation for a traditional preference for arranged marriages is found in continuing traditional authority and maintaining vertical over horizontal ties, my research suggests that contemporary arranged marriages actually had a practical and sentimental motivation which has arisen in response to migration. Arranged marriages all shared

a central ethic of locality; parents overwhelmingly preferred their sons to marry local girls. This new ethic of “marrying close” has been documented by Ellen Judd as a strategy for parents of daughters in maintaining emotional and uterine ties in the face of patrilocal relocation (2010). Yet increasingly, parents of sons also expressed their desire that their sons find and marry girls who were located at least within the neighboring county and urban district. This strategy has come largely as a response to son’s migrant labor which relocates them to urban centers during a critical coming of age stage.

Family background has long been considered as a decisive factor of marriage eligibility. The principle is expressed in the idiom, *mendanghudi*— which literally translated means “the gate is equal, the households are fitting.” This idiom articulates the notion that well-matched marriage partners come from family backgrounds that are equivalent in terms of social status, educational attainment, and financial assets. The ideal of equal backgrounds has changed in some respects in the contemporary context because of additional flexibility of movement, the rise of companionate marriages, and the large number of men in proportion to women; matchmaking has been increasingly fluid over the last 50 years. Yet family background still factors into rural family’s calculations in several key ways since knowing one’s family was thought to be a critical method of social influence (c.f. Obendiek 2016a).

The ways in which family background was centrally important to rural family’s marriage negotiations came to me in a situation that was completely unrelated to marriage. My husband and I had received a number of concerning and threatening visits from a man involved in a local cult. He seemed mentally ill and quite often was drunk and he was obsessed with the idea that we could spread his religious message to the United States. He began shoving hand written treaties through our gate at all hours of the night and would wait for us on the street corner. At first, I

was interested in his beliefs from an intellectual curiosity, but when we started to feel that the behavior was unsafe, I approached my neighbors about the issue. Surprisingly, my neighbors all suggested that if we simply ignored the man, or if we pretended we could not understand him that he would go away. After about one week of enduring harassment from this man, I again pleaded with my host family to intervene. ‘We cannot do anything about it,’ Uncle Jia said. Upon further questioning it was finally revealed that because they did not know anyone in his family or village, they had no way to control the man.¹⁸

Social connections with extended family members was not only a way to understand an individual’s history or background, but platform for mutual social control. Extended family members could exert subtle or direct pressure on the bride or groom in ways that would hopefully turn out to favor the entire extended family. This pressure was critical in avoiding the main fear of many mothers of adult sons—an escaped bride.

Jiatian village was perhaps effected more than other villages from the effects of runaway wives and mothers because it became very popular in the mid-2000s to purchase brides from Yunnan through a network of human traffickers. I knew of four definite cases of brides purchased for sons who were disabled, developmentally delayed, or simply considered unmarriageable through traditional arrangement or romantic means because of their age or poverty. Several more families were rumored to have captured brides. In two of these instances, the wife abandoned the family, leaving the children behind without contact, remittance, or trace. Once the young woman had left, the family faced the social shame of the abandonment, the financial stress of lost income, and the additional burden of motherless children.

¹⁸ In the end, Yiran (Uncle Jia and Auntie Cong’s daughter-in-law) discovered his harassment when she drove into the village on a large truck while hauling renovating materials. She publicly shamed him shouting, ‘Everyone look out! There is a bad man here! There are people who steal children!’ She told us to call the police the next time he came, but he never did.

Even without human trafficking, rumors of brides making off with the bride wealth and leaving the family were rampant. In part, this was rooted in reality as one such case suggests. Jiaqiang was a developmentally delayed 30-year-old man who was considered to be too stupid to marry. Though he was able-bodied, he lacked the social skills for sustained relationships. However, while he was working in Suzhou, he met a girl and she became pregnant. Jiaqiang proudly returned home with his new bride and the baby. However, when the bride left when the baby was a few months old, the entire village began to gossip that the woman had run away (*paole*). Even 13-year-old Jiawei, whose own mother had abandoned him, teased Jiaqiang. “Your wife is gone! She’s left you and your son!” Jiawei shouted. Jiaqiang retorted quickly, “We are a family! She will come back! She’s just out working. I spoke to her on the phone just yesterday.”

I didn’t know whether or not to believe the rumors or Jiaqiang until I spent some time with Jiaqiang’s mother who had taken on the lion’s share of the childcare and domestic support. She held the baby in one hand while airing out a pile of clothes that had become fuzzy with mold in the recent humidity, when I spoke to her in the courtyard. ‘When will your daughter-in-law return? Has she sent financial remittances from working?’ I prodded her. ‘Sha!’ she snorted. ‘That boy [i.e. Jiaqiang] has a lot of ideas. She won’t come back.’ The baby, seemed to be developing normally, and Jiaqiang took great pride in walking the child around the village. But the grandmother had no illusions that she would care for the baby herself. Already over 60, she had just joined the ranks of older women caring for grandchildren.

In light of this fear, many mothers of adult sons thought it best to marry their sons early before they could form attachments to non-local migrant girls which might endanger the family’s economic and labor commitments. Doing so meant that mothers preferred to arrange a marriage to a local girl while their son was still below the legal age of marriage.

Chinese law stipulates that legal marriage age was 22 for men and 20 for women. However, the average age of marriage in my field site was closer to 18 years of age. Couples marrying below the legal age would hold a village ceremony and file paperwork to register the union several years later.¹⁹ Because of social pressure of local networks, this practice worked quite well for local families who could finish their parental responsibilities early and be assured that their son had an established local presence and therefore be compelled to return to the village, even if he migrated for work.

Yet this practice could also be risky since not only did the couple marry without a permit, they often also had a child without obtaining the required documentation. Children born without this certification remained unregistered until the parents became of age. I encountered two instances where the family had not obtained legal paperwork. In the first case, the couple had married at 18 and given birth to a chubby baby girl. When I interviewed the grandmother, who was then just over 45, she was very pleased to care for the 10-month-old girl while both parents were working in urban areas. She gushed with happiness about being able to spend time with the infant while she still was in good health. She was not worried about obtaining the *Hukou* documents in several years because her daughter-in-law was not only local, she was very attached to her son.

The second instance of an unregistered child was not as hopeful. Auntie Li's son Muqiao had met a young girl while working in an urban area. The two had fell in love and they quickly married and had a child. However, since the two were below the legal marrying age, they didn't not obtain the proper certificates to register the child. No one was worried however at the time, since the couple seemed happy and they could always obtain the certificate later. Yet, for a

¹⁹ This is a reverse of many urban couples, who file the paperwork first and plan the ceremony for up to a year afterwards

reason not disclosed to me, the couple separated before they filed the paperwork, leaving the young boy in the care of his father and grandmother without documentation. Complicating matters, Muqiao had found a new wife who seemed willing to formally adopt the boy, except that doing so would require a huge fine which would push the migrant families already strapped financial situation. At the time when I met Auntie Li, she was debating how to obtain a *Hukou* since the boy was quickly approaching school age and it would be difficult for him to enroll without the registration.

These cases above emphasize the risks to mothers of adult sons when they form attachments to non-local girls. Without the social control of local families, and with little formal recourse for child support and custody, there was a very real possibility that a non-local girl might disappear, leaving behind children. Because of the gendered divisions of labor within the home, grandmothers took on the responsibility for childcare, even if they were already struggling with old age, care of an ill spouse, or other labor-intensive sidelining work. Children in this situation would not only be subject to social stigma, but would also be worse off financially in comparison to other children whose mothers had migrated for work because of the lack of migrant remittances. Additionally, in a few cases families confronting the loss of a mother might also face the further legal hurdle of obtaining official identification documents for the child through the household registration system. Because of these very real threats to well-being and old-age comfort, it is no wonder then that mothers of adult sons preferred to arrange marriages to local girls, despite the high cost of this task.



Figure 15 A village wedding ceremony

Patriarchy Rearranged

Sometime after the ritual engagement ceremony, where she presented the red-colored items to her new daughter-in-law, I once again found Yujie in a sour mood. Her husband had migrated to Zhengzhou to work construction and her mother-in-law, protesting the support of her step-grandson, had joined her husband in Xiamen, about 6 hours away. With three young children on summer vacation, Yujie found herself strapped. Constantly working piecework or selling food, her children largely were left to themselves.

In addition to all of these domestic responsibilities, Yujie's older male relative—her husband's uncle, a bachelor who had never married—had asked that she make him steamed bread that morning at 7am. She and her husband had already tended to his fields, harvesting the wheat and planting the new corn crop. Even after expending a great amount of their time and energy, they had turned over the entirety of the harvest profits back to him, though the younger

couple were in severe financial distress. He was an older man and claimed he had high blood pressure and diabetes. ‘Really, he is just incredibly lazy,’ Yujie spit out contemptuously. When the uncle walked past where Yujie and I had stopped along the road to chat, she had narrowed her eyes and stopped midsentence, glaring at him. When he addressed me, she quickly turned her back and walked into the courtyard leaving me behind with the older man.

Yujie’s behavior mystified me. Why would she work so hard for her son—who in my observation was just as lazy and contemptuous as this uncle—and begrudge an old man a piece of bread? How is it that patriarchal obligation would indenture attachment to one younger male and not to an older one?

This chapter has tried to make sense of this puzzle of patriarchy and consider mothers strategies for maintaining uterine ties in the face their eroding authority in the family. In some ways, my research has found that women have made incredible gains in their access to power. Mobility, freedom, and changing gendered values have meant that women can escape legitimately abusive marriages, have better access to education, and improve their lives through economic and romantic means. With rising power, women are increasingly standing up for themselves in the domestic sphere—unwilling, for example, to serve a freeloading relative, remain in an unhappy partnership, or endure a mother-in-law’s brutality.

Ironically, the same factors which have caused a strengthening in conjugal bonds have also caused instability within a previously secure marital system. While this instability, expressed through divorce or escape, has benefited younger women by virtue of improved mobility, older women who have virtually no access to migration are being left behind. An increasing number of authors have recognized that young women’s power may have come at the cost of older women (Pang, De Brauw, and Rozelle 2004; H. Zhang 2005; Sargeson 2012; Shi

2016; Ling 2017).

My investigation points out that the marriage of one's son represents a new period of vulnerability to women's lives. Marriage is a decision already burdened with the insecurity inherent in human conditions. Rural women must negotiate and balance affective and material wealth, balancing proximity and personal and family allegiances. Finding a suitable marriage partner for one's son is likewise fraught with the potential for future happiness or failure. A daughter-in-law might run away, leaving you with a large domestic burden and an unsecure financial future. Or a daughter-in-law could become part of the extended family, bringing help, support and companionship into your old age. Such a risk is worth a great amount of calculation and personal sacrifice.

At some point in our conversations, I asked Yujie if she had considered the huge financial burden that arranging her son's marriage might be before she had found an intermediary. She said in reply: "I only thought that we could be a new family (*neng zuo hao xin jiating*)."

Chapter Six

Filial Fears: Parents of Adult Children and the Reassessment of Filial Expectations

‘I am not the kind of person to be sad,’ stated Auntie Cong assertively. For weeks, she and her husband had been anticipating the arrival of their middle son, Leiqliang, his wife and two grandchildren for the New Year’s holiday. They had described to me in detail the family’s preparation for the 40-hour train ride between the younger family’s current residence in Xinjiang and their hometown in Henan—they would prepare snacks like eggs and instant-noodles, they would take some games and toys for the youngest 5-year-old child. Auntie Cong and Uncle Jia pointed to the family portrait that hung on the wall—the picture which included all three adult children, two daughters-in-law, and four grandchildren. The photo had been taken about three or four years earlier. When the youngest son and his family returned, they would be able to update the photo.

But violence had broken out in Xinjiang—‘it’s a very unstable (*bu’an*) region,’ explained Uncle and since Leiqliang worked in the police unit there, his job was to pacify and control the violence. The recent political unrest meant the increase in police presence, delaying and canceling the plans of return trips for Chinese New Year. Leiqliang called one day and explained that the family could no longer come home to be reunited.

‘My whole life, I have not been sad.’ Auntie explained further. ‘I think that when your son and daughter are successful. They are happy and they cared for, then, that is good.’ Despite her assertions, I couldn’t help feeling a little sad myself. I had spent a good deal of time with the family and their eldest son and youngest daughter’s children. Since they had been planning the entire extended family’s reunion I too was anticipating the excitement (*renau*) of the holiday and

the chance to meet a new migrant family and document their return to the village after several years away. I didn't know how to interpret Auntie Cong's emotional attitude and assertions of positivity.

To make up for their absence the Leiqiang's family sent money—a little over 2,000 RMB (about \$285). To the older couple, the money represented a continued connection with their son. It was a demonstration of their filial feelings, said Uncle Jia—all his children were filial. They all gave money regularly, bought the couple clothes—'in fact we have too many clothes,' he laughed. The older pair planned to make renovations to their house with this recent gift and install a new shower room with a solar-water heater so that the couple could bathe comfortably in the winter. Even still, when Chinese New Year arrived and the family sat on short stools around a low table eating dumplings and drinking homemade corn alcohol, there was a distinct absence of the middle son. The gathering in the room, did not match the photo on the wall.

Filial piety is an ethical emotion woven into the fabric of kinship relations. It is responsible for the obligation to return home, to remember one's parents and ancestors, and to return the child-raising investment to one's aging parents in tangible gifts of money, clothes, and food. A number of authors have explored filial piety and the contemporary changes brought about by migration and urbanization. For example, Danyu Wang describes a new form or ritualized coresidence which nods to the ideal of an extended family while also allowing a recently married couple to have privacy (2004); Jun Jing records meal rotation practices (2004). Several other scholars note the shifts in gendered ideals of filial care (E. T. Miller 2004; Fong 2006; Shi 2009).

This chapter considers filial piety from the perspective of parents of adult children and does not pretend to take a balanced view. I have not considered the adult children's experiences in this chapter or sought to understand their own intersubjective process. I focus on the older generation for two reasons. First, as Cong and Silverstein showed in their (2008a) study, filial acts have real effects on assessments of well-being and mental health; elders are less depressed when their daughters-in-law perform deferential acts of service and they are compensated for their childcare with cash gifts. If older adults are happier when their children conform to traditional filial roles, then how do they puzzle through unfilial behaviors? What kind of filial fears haunt their everyday reality? How do they reconcile their adult children's own attitudes and consequently, how do they shift their expectations for filial care?

Second, I focus on the experiences of older adults because this is the data that naturally arose from my fieldwork. While I did speak to a number of younger adults, none spontaneously mentioned filial piety as a concern. As these two cases show, however, older adults are thinking in quite complicated ways about filial piety as an ethical system. Their narratives reveal a shift in filial expectations under current economic situations of migration.



Figure 16 Filial piety is an ethical emotion woven into the fabric of kinship relations.

Filial piety

Filial piety is one of the most important intergenerational bonds between parents and child, confirming lineage continuity and having resounding effects for the material organization of family. As described by Confucius, filial rituals and ethics encouraged sons to subordinate themselves to the patriline and to serve the ancestors even after their deaths. This patriarchal submission was also an idiom for understanding hierarchy in general including political and social order. The character for filiality, *xiao* 孝, expresses the meaning quite well. It is an ideogram of an old person (*lao* 老) being supported by the son (*zi* 子). This conveys the idea of an age-based hierarchy which is at the heart of filial piety.

Confucius advocated for obedience to ones' parents as a fated product of the natural order and encouraged submission to the state as a moral good. Both these ideals come at the cost to personal happiness or agentive individuality. This logic comes through quite well in the Daoist text, *Zhuangzi* Chapter 4 (P1):

Confucius said, "In the world there are two great decrees: one is fate and the other is rightness. That a son should love his parents is fate – you cannot erase this from his heart. That a subject should serve his ruler is rightness – there is no place he can go and be without his ruler, no place he can escape to between heaven and earth. These are called the great decrees. Therefore, to serve your parents and be content to follow them anywhere – this is the perfection of filial piety [*xiao*]. To serve your ruler and be content to do anything for him – this is the peak of loyalty. And to serve your own mind so that sadness or joy do not sway or move it; to understand what you can do nothing about and to be content with it as with fate – this is the perfection of virtue. As a subject and a son, you are bound to find things you cannot avoid." (in Tomohisa 2012, 14–15)

The Daoist text sees filial piety as an inevitable feeling and natural response to positionality—being a subject or being a son. Submitting to this natural order is constructed as the "perfection of virtue."

Filial piety can be understood as a system of social organization which presents a model

of the self existing only by virtue of a natural ordering. Within the understanding of filial piety, the self is emplaced within a continuous line of descent. Hugh Baker has explained this idea as the “Continuum of Descent” using an analogy of a rope to understand the individuals’ relationship to the family:

“Descent is a unity, a rope which began somewhere back in the remote past, and which stretches on to the infinite future. The rope at any one time may be thicker or thinner according to the number of strands (families) or fibres (male individuals) which exist, but so long as one fibre remains the rope is there. The fibres at any one point are not just fibres, they are representatives of the rope as a whole. That is the individual alive is the personification of all his forebears and all his descendants yet unborn... In short the individual alive now is the manifestation of his whole Continuum of Descent” (H. Baker 1979, 27)

The logic of descent confers a moral ordering to the Chinese kinship system. This moral order is most clearly defined within the ideal of filial piety.

Following the continuum of descent, classic Chinese kinship is pronatalist and patrilineal. Pronatalist in the sense that filial piety requires the individual to have children in order to carry on the family line and patrilineal because the line is traced through males. This is not to say that other kinds of kinship logics do not exist in either contemporary or historic China (for a good summary see Brandtstädter and Santos 2008), but that patrilineal authority was conferred through codified rituals, stories and those who conformed to family ideals were generally well respected and economically successful.

Moral piety and economic success were often closely linked. To quote Hugh Baker once more, “while not all wealthy families were ideal families, almost all ideal families were wealthy” (1979, 25). The stem family, a multi-generational family unit which shared economic resources was the ideal residential pattern until the early 1900s. These ideal families followed Confucius rituals of filial piety including ancestor worship, gendered divisions of labor, and age-based hierarchical authority. Additionally, the Confucian morals were continually emphasized

through the examination and education system which utilized moral classics.²⁰ The experiments in Chinese governance during the twentieth century were also attempts to do away with the cosmological ordering of patrilineal descent as I explore further in the next section, yet filial concepts continue to circulate through literature, stories, and even contemporary film and television.

Filial piety with modern characteristics

In a 2012, CCTV public service announcement, Director Hou Zhongxian depicts an old man eating a simple meal alone in a rural house. He waits alone, looking out over the courtyard and over the fields of corn. A narration flashes: “Do you ever consider that family includes the elderly (*nianmaidelaoren*)? In every instance of an anticipatory glance (*meiyige qipandeyanshen*), don’t make them wait too long.” When the scene shows young people walking back with luggage, the old man grins broadly. “When relatives return, old people are joyous (*xishuo*),” the description continues. A final scene is of the entire family in a portrait-style setting with each member smiling and waving. “Take care of the elderly, act from the heart,” reads the final narration.

The Chinese Communist Party has taken a role in shaping and defining filial piety both through legislation and through direct discursive interventions such as advertisement campaigns like the one I recount above. These efforts cannot necessarily be seen as a reinvigoration of Confucianism, however, and must be seen as a larger political effort to shape the family and insert itself further into private life. Filial advocacy by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) may be understood through the lens of practical and moral concerns.

²⁰ for more on the Imperial system see (Elman 2000) and for a look on how the exam system continues within contemporary society see (Feng 1995)

China is one of the few governments to include a statement on filial responsibility in the constitution (Ikels 2004b, 88). Throughout its history, CCP has held favorable views of the elderly, “standing as models of orthodoxy for citizens of all ages to emulate” (Davis 1991, 6). At the same time, the CCP has also instituted several campaigns which have eroded the power of older members of the family. Even while new policies were implemented to shift power towards the younger generation, the CCP continued to advocate for family responsibility in the care of the elderly.

Simply in terms of demographics, older adults represent a considerable proportion of the population. In 2015, Chinese persons over the age of 65 made up 10.1 percent of the populace (136.9 million people). In 2030, this number is expected to balloon to 17.2 percent and elders are anticipated to reach 238.8 million. In 2035, the entire older population of China will have tripled in size from its 2001 demographics, making China the second only to South Korea as the world’s fastest aging population (W. He, Goodkind, and Kowal 2016). The presence of so many older adults leads to increased concern over the economic provisions and well-being of the retired and aged, particularly given the growing financial burden of care that falls to younger laborers. In order for the state to continue benefits for a rapidly expanding population, family responsibility for the care and financial provision of the elderly is paramount. Additionally, public outcry over the life-circumstances of older rural adults separated from their migrant adult children (C. He and Ye 2014) and a string of elderly suicides (Yip et al. 2005; X. Li, Xiao, and Xiao 2009) has drawn attention to filial piety as a social problem.

The commercial that I recounted above articulates several central anxieties of older adults in rural areas. Primarily, it focuses on the emotional tenor of intergenerational relationships and uses the language of inclusion to prompt urban migrants to return and spend time with the elderly.

In the commercial, the older man is depicted as alone and longing for his family to return. A smile only appears on his face when finally accompanied by his relatives. The central problem within the advertisement is one of emotional attention and remembrance, which has become a central component to modern filial morality.

The CCP has attempted to modernize filial piety by emphasizing the moral call to remember the elderly. Yet changes in the new call to filial piety are most evidenced not by its appeals, but by its silences. Advertisement campaigns do not feature ritualized offerings, unyielding obedience to the patriarch, or the virtues of lineage continuity. Rather, the state's emphasis restructures filial morality based upon filial feelings. The new forms of filial piety open up a new moral field allowing emotional comportment to become an ethical project. This allows individuals to think about filial piety not only in terms of a guaranteed co-residential model, but also in terms of intention.

Intentionality, however is much more slippery than ritual acts of care. Gaging others intentions requires other's emotional state to be comprehensible. As Douglas Hollan and Jason Throop (2008, 2013) have argued in their exploration of empathy, emotional transparency is always intersubjectively determined. This means that two individuals must also somehow contextualize the others actions. Intergenerational relationships complicate this project of contextualization. How to understand a son or daughter's care, or lack of it? How to take into account the different generational demands of labor? The employment strains for a police man maybe very different than a business professional, and both of these jobs require a radically different relationship to time than the aging agriculturalists in this chapter. Below, I detail the difficulty that two elders have in understanding new ethics of filial piety. In one way, both of these narratives can be seen as an older generation puzzling through understanding new demands

placed on the younger. In another, these narratives can be interpreted as attempts to reconcile different moral fields—modernity, Confucianism, and, in the case of Grandmother Fong, Christianity.



Figure 17 Family members of the deceased wear white during a funeral.

Human Liver Soup

A 103-year-old neighbor died and I took special care to be involved in the funeral. I followed the mourners around the village, I visited the family on the third day while they sit vigil with the body. I took them brown paper to signify money in the afterlife. This small token, a symbolic gesture of my own contribution to ancestor worship was understood by the Christian community²¹ in the village as a grievous offence and sin. Grandmother Fong was tasked with teaching me that such an offering is sinful and that I need to repent and pray for my actions.

²¹ The Christian community within the village is quite active and I contributed regularly to the village based bible study which was held twice weekly. I also participated in the activities of the large church in the township and investigated the house-based church. I attended these services in part because of my own religious commitments, but also to understand Christianity in rural China.

Shortly after the funeral, she invited me to her house and opened her hymnal. Pointing to the hymn, she said, “can you read this?” Since she is illiterate in the beginning of our interaction, I thought I was doing her a favor since she could not read the hymn herself. As I struggled through the characters, it became more and more clear that she, in fact, knew the hymn well since she was able to finish the lines before I did, and she started to hum the tune of the hymn. I just finished reading a verse which caused me to giggle:

Brothers and sisters, we ought to show filial piety to both sides, we call forth and remember (*jizhu*) our father and mother’s graciousness. They caught our shit and urine, what good patience! They expended a great deal of energy (*xiadaogongfu*), washing our wet diapers (*niao bu* literally, piss rags). Two hands have pain, pain that enters the bone.

After reading this verse, Grandmother Fong explained:

look, when taking care of a baby, you take great pains to bring up that child especially in winter time. In winter—back then it was really cold. Now we have these heating elements, but back then, you had to open—you had to open ice pieces and get [water]. Look, my own grandmother also took care of this one [son], she opened the ice to go--Ah-uh. Her mother, her mother had a disease. Her mother said “Son, son.” Her son was very filial. She [said] “Son, son, you... ah; I want to eat that, uh, human liver soup.”

Erin: Human liver soup!

Fong: Human liver soup! Human liver.

Erin: Eee. Really?

Fong: She wanted—she was in a place of death (*daweisile*). You can see, it’s like this, “I want to eat human liver soup.” She had to eat human liver soup, until then she couldn’t live. So then, her son, he was very filial (*xiaoxun de hen*). Her son went. He grabbed, grabbed one of those knives, and he did like this [she uses her finger to trace a vertical line on her abdomen]. He grabbed a knife. He made a hole. It burst forth. He said “Father! Father! Heaven! Heaven! Father! Father!” He said, “My mother wants to eat human liver soup. Of the three livers I have, I take out two. I leave one.” Na, his heart is strong. You see, men’s hearts are strong. What happened next? He grabbed the knife and went like this—one opening! My heavens, when I heard that I said, “wow. I don’t even know.” He said--he took a knife and made a cut. With the knife, he was at once crazy. He took a human liver and plucked it out himself (*zijiizhai*). Out of three livers, he took out two.

He left one. En. That man’s heart is strong. Uh, when she had eaten it, she said “Son, son, I still want to eat.” What did she want to eat? “I still want to eat fish liver soup.” Fish?!

At that time, it was winter, you see that kind of fish. He went to the ice. He ran. Do you dare do the same? He said, “My mother wants to eat fish-fish liver soup.” You see, he went to the ice, the ice was like this, and he grabbed that fish. Was it warm (*nuan*)? Did he not fear the slipping on ice, *ma*? Yes. He slipped. Finished. There lay his body-- like this. He carried the thought in his mind; he wanted to give. Give his mother, delicious food. And it was finished. He gave his mother two---

Erin: Was she cured?

Fong: En. Cured—he gave her—and she was cured. Ah, he said, “Mother.” She said “Son! Son! You are very filial. Son, son, you are very filial.” If her disease wasn’t cured, do you think she would have said, “Son, son, you are very filial”? He went up to heaven, that is heaven glorified him (*rongyao*). Glorified him... Parents and grandparents all glorified him... He said, “I took my liver, and took out two. Gave it to [someone] higher—gave it to drink. His mother said—his mother lived because of the fish liver soup and the liver—the human liver soup. She drank them both and when they were in her stomach, she was better. Didn’t she say, “Son, son, you are really filial. You are really filial”?”

Erin: Very filial.

Fong: That son was very filial. You can’t find anyone on the earth as filial as him.

Fong became silent when her husband, Jia Rongguo entered the house. Throughout my research, I found him almost constantly annoyed at his wife because she would tell stories, sing songs, and pray loudly while walking in the village. Immediately, he shouted, “What stupidity is she telling now? She’s talking about Peng Yujuan, the story of the filial son!” Grandfather Jia, then told his own version the story very quickly without Grandmother Fong’s dramatic story lines. In his own rendition, he made it clear that this story is a myth, a legend, and not something that happened to Fong personally. Trying to avoid an argument between the two, I state that I had heard this story before, in my Chinese class. Though I admitted, when Grandmother Fong started telling it, I did think she was actually describing her own grandmother’s experience.

The original myth is attributed to a Guanyin disciple who, dreaming that the Guanyin appears to him telling him to give his mother human liver soup, does so without his parents

asking (see the full text in Yü 2000, 342). Grandfather Jia doesn't remark about the disconnect between his outspokenly Christian-religious wife recounting a Buddhist fairy tale, but does want me to be sure to know that the myth is not an actual event.

Grandfather Jia, satisfied, leaves the room and Grandmother Fong, returns to the hymn.

When we come to the last stanza, she makes sure I understand, repeating twice the last line about sin:

Brothers and sisters, we ought to show filial piety to both sides. When father and mother die, absolutely do not go to the grave, taking burning paper to serve as gold and silver, it is an utter waste of time (*xiadagongfu*). Gold and silver are vanity, you commit a sin (*zijifanzui*), a sin against the true God.

“What does this mean,” I ask, “does it mean not to burn paper? But how can you be filial?”

Grandmother Fong says, “Then you can't be filial.”

Surprised, I press her, “Don't be filial?” But she has already anticipated my question. Before I finish, she says quickly, “I mean when they are alive. While they are still living, you should be filial. When they die, aren't you going to be very upset? But don't go to the grave.”

“So you mean, when they are alive, you should be filial, but after they die—then what?”

“You should be filial this way—be filial while they are alive. If they die, do this, you go, you also cry, you do it like this, then you're done (*hao le*). Because after they are dead, can they protect you in your trouble (*wei nide shi*)?” Grandmother Fong then goes on to describe that she has not gone to the grave of her parents, or celebrated Qingming (a tomb cleaning holiday which redecorates the graves and offers sacrifices to deceased ancestors) since she became a Christian almost 25 years ago. This surprises me because Grandmother Fong was orphaned young and she often laments that she has no one. I press her asking whether or not missing her parents would be cause for her to return to the grave to remember them. She gives a strong response, “What is

there to miss? They are already dead. What will missing do? They are asleep. After they are dead, to whom are you being filial?”

This ethnographic scene reveals a puzzling through of filial piety in response to two seemingly contradictory belief systems. In Grandmother Fong’s eyes, filial piety is only moral while one’s parents are living, but after death, all ritualistic offerings to ancestors are akin to offending the Christian God and are a sinful act. Yet, at the same time, she recites a mythic account of a Guanyin disciple who performs a heroic and miraculous act adding in new details which have clear symbolic loans from Christianity. This retelling of the myth coupled with the discussion of the hymn are a working out of how to reconcile moral kinship with new religious commitments, but I also argue that this conversation reveals Grandmother Fong’s own feelings about contemporary filial piety, pointing to a profound ambivalence towards the possibility of receiving filial support and placing filial acts within the realm of tradition and miracle. Below I distill two themes within Fong’s narrative: 1. The working out of filial morality within a Christian frame; and 2. The experience of positional poverty and powerlessness within the family. Both these motifs reveal a careful crafting of a subjective reassessment of well-being and moral conformity in the context of changing filial obligations.

As I analyzed the data from this interaction, I found myself again captivated by Grandmother Fong’s dramatic storytelling. Grandmother Fong told me a number of different stories during my fieldwork in addition to the one above. All her tales were variations of biblical fables: the creation of the earth, the story of Esau and Jacob, and a vision that she had of the last judgment. So I was familiar with her style of storytelling by the time I recorded this tale. It was difficult for me to see how or why she even brought up the story of the filial son after talking

about washing diapers, until I saw the linkage between the cracking of winter ice and the cracking of ice to catch a fish for fish liver soup. The everyday difficulty of washing diapers by hand in ice cold water is repaid by the filial son running to catch a fish in a winter pond. In the story, the ordinary difficulties are met with an extraordinary sacrifice and the son becomes a Christ-like character.

The original story of Peng Yuyuan is a graphic account of personal sacrifice which calls on other religious motifs from the cult of the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, Guanyin, one of the most popular bodhisattvas in China. Peng dreams of Guanyin who instructs him to give his ailing mother human liver soup. When he awakes, his mother requests sheep's liver soup, a dish which signifies the family's humble origins. Peng takes his mother's craving as a sign of confirmation and gouges out his own liver, accidentally pulling his lung partially out of the wound. Presented as the requested sheep's liver, human liver soup turns out to have miraculous healing qualities and Peng's sacrifice is discovered in the form of his gaping organs. According to the legend, his wound was visible for more than ten years so that everyone who saw him would know of his filial sacrifice (Yü 2000).

Grandmother Fong's story draws directly from Christian imagery, most profoundly in the words uttered by the son "Father! Father! Heaven! Heaven!" which are very similar to the words spoken by Jesus on the Cross in Matthew 27:46 "My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?" Again, Fong makes a reference in words and tone to John 19:30 where Jesus states: "it is finished." In dialect, Fong says "*hao le*" which can mean, it was done or finished. Saying this of his death upon the ice along with the preceding foreshadowing—"Did he not fear slipping on the ice?" shows the Christ-like fortitude of the sons sacrifice. She hints that the son goes willingly to his death. Even in laying on the ice, his mind is directed towards giving to his mother. The final

Christ imagery comes in during the sons ascent into heaven for which she uses the words “*rongyao*,” to glorify, which is a very particular phrase that Chinese Christians use in describing the worship of Jesus.

By using these phrases that clearly reference Jesus, Grandmother Fong makes the previously Buddhist disciple into a Christ-like sacrifice. Oddly enough, the tale that depicts a Confucian morality mixed with Buddhist spirituality becomes a Christian one in Grandmother Fong’s telling. Yet more than a cultural mixing of moralities and traditions, Grandmother Fong is also trying to tell me something about filialty—that is how to be a filial Christian. This is why her story is placed in the midst of requiring me to read a hymn which gave explicit instructions not to burn paper or offer sacrifices after death. Her retelling of the filial son as a Christian story places these seemingly disparate spheres of morality squarely within each other. Christianity and filial obligations are intertwined and syncretized in a way which she intends to impact my behavior by instructing me not to make offerings of paper at a funeral. She offers an example of a filial son one who gave his own life to save his mother’s. Grandmother Fong’s own sons were, however, less than filial. When I ask her directly whether or not they are filial, she grew silent. “Do they send money?” I ask, thinking maybe she didn’t understand my question. “What money!” she retorted and she mumbled that her sons were not filial.

About a month later, I bumped into Grandmother Fong on the village road with tears in her eyes. She leaned in close to me, almost as if to kiss my cheek and told me that some time ago her daughter, Jia Meng, had divorced. Hearing of the separation, Jia Rongguo told Meng that she was no longer welcome within the house. “See all these women,” she pointed to her neighbor’s house. “All their daughters come back to their *niangjia*. Mine will never come back.” I asked her if she was sad and she wiped the tears from her eyes. “All my sadness, I give to God. We must

always give glory to God (*rongyao shen*).” When she said this, I could not help my flash of intense anger and sadness; I must have revealed my feelings in my face and body language. Seeing my reaction, Grandmother Fong quickly grabbed my hand and rushed me down the road to a house I had not entered before—it was her eldest son’s house where she slept separate from her husband. Grandmother Fong gave me piece handmade bread and told me to feed a small cat that cried at her feet, perhaps as a distraction from our sadness. After we laughed and fed the cat, she took me upstairs to show me two beautiful hand-made quilts. These blankets were made for her daughter when she was married. They were part of the bride-price trousseau purchased in advance of the wedding, she said. She needed to air them out. Normally she kept the blankets wrapped in thick plastic but with the arrival of spring, she hung them on the second-floor balcony.

I cannot understand the retelling of the Buddhist fairy tale apart from the social conditions of abandonment which color Grandmother Fong’s life. Orphaned as a young girl, Fong was raised by her maternal aunt. After her first husband died, her brother—a friend of Jia Rongguo—could not care for her and her three children and decided to marry her to Jia. According to Fong, she did not have any say in the matter and she was tricked into the marriage—she thought she was visiting a relative and then she found herself married. Jia and other men in the village claim Fong is mentally-ill and that Jia was a good man who had taken in a widow and three children.

From my own perspective, I think there was truth to both sides of these stories, but I could not ignore the real violence that Grandmother Fong experienced. Fong performed all the domestic chores and she had no say in the household decisions of money management, migration, or her son’s marriage arrangements. During the harvest, she was required to cut the small patch

of wheat by hand with a scythe. She lacked a method of transportation and she often walked several miles to visit a friend or attend church services. If she failed in her domestic labor, she was punished. In December, there was a domestic dispute and Rongguo locked her in a room after beating her. Jiawei, Fong's 13-year-old grandson unlocked the door for her and she ran more than 2 miles to a neighboring village. I was with several members of the village church at the time and we were attending a Christmas festival. We caught up to her on the road and drove her to the festival, holding her hand while she cried.

With this contextual background, the myth of the filial son has a new kind of meaning. More than just a syncretic retelling of a fairy tale, understanding the lack of filial and familial care within Grandmother Fong's life means that the tale can also be seen as an unvoiced desire for filiality. The tale both personalizes and distances acts of filial piety—claiming that the most filial son was her ancestor places her within an important lineage of moral exemplars. Yet at the same time, the tale is the stuff of legends—the filial son's sacrifice is rewarded not in this life, but in the life to come.

Before I move on, I offer one more tale recounted by Grandmother Fong which offers insight into Grandmother Fong's subjective stance towards the changes in filial piety which affect her life.

Lina, Fong's granddaughter came home from Wuhan to prepare for her wedding and the three of us—Fong, Lina, and I—sat chatting. Fong had been teasing me about my lack of children. During the prayer times at Bible studies, I heard her loudly presenting her request that God grant me two children; a boy and a girl. Fong told me, again, that she was certain that God would grant me two children when Lina interrupted. 'Grandmother, if God grants children why did He wait until you were 29 to give you children?' (In the village, 29 is considered much too

old to give birth. The ideal age of childbirth is early 20s.) Fong stated, ‘I am like Abraham! You see Abraham was very old and God gave him a son, Isaac.’ Fong began a dramatic retelling of the story of Abraham and Isaac where Abraham was directed to bring his only son up to a mountain to offer him as a sacrifice.²²

Grandmother Fong continued, ‘While they gathered the wood, Isaac asked his father, ‘Where is the sacrifice?’ Abraham said, ‘Son, today I will kill you.’ Isaac said, ‘if you need to kill me, then kill me.’ He took a knife. He wasn’t scared. He took a knife. He still didn’t run. Then a voice came from heaven and said ‘Look on the hill!’ There was a goat. You see—God gave him a gift! He couldn’t have a child, but then he did, and then God let him live. Isn’t God strong? Isn’t God capable?’

There are many parallels between the filial son and Abraham and Isaac. Both involve an intense demand from a deity: a demand for a liver and a demand for an only son. Both involve sacrificial narratives of personal harm and both give significant attention to the instrument of sacrifice: a knife held aloft. Both Isaac and Peng offer their bodies willingly: both are not afraid. Fong’s conclusion of the first story is a praise of Peng, and the second, a praise of God. In this way, both stories involve a praise of a provision a gift of something needed: health and a sacrifice.

I think of Grandmother Fong’s own construction and her assertion that she is like Abraham. She is like Abraham in that she was 29 before she had her first child. But is she also like Abraham in that she is willing to sacrifice her own children to please God? The story’s significance comes in the miraculous appearance of a goat for the sacrifice so that Abraham did not need to give the life of his son after all. Her delight in this provision is designed to emphasize

²² Unlike the tale of the filial son, I did not record this rendition. The conversation is reconstructed from my fieldnotes.

a moral attitude of obedience and martyrdom. In both stories, the hero is one who is willing to give sacrificially.

To me this sacrificial attitude becomes more meaningful when understood within the background of Fong's structural powerlessness and her loss of connection with her own children. On the one hand, the stories convey a deep longing for a filial connection: a son who will gouge out his own liver for his mother is truly a filial son, and a son who is willing to trust his murderous father with his life must have a profoundly deep connection. Yet Fong herself has no such filial sons; her two sons have migrated for work, leaving her with a heavy childcare burden and the domestic task of cooking and cleaning for a husband for whom she feels contempt. Her only daughter is banished from the family, leaving only the embroidered blankets from her wedding trousseau.

By emphasizing the value of sacrifice, Fong becomes the hero of her own story. She is willing to wait for God to provide children; she is willing to sacrifice the connection with her daughter; she is willing to sacrifice the traditional ethics of filial offerings made to her parents, or the promise of her ancestors continued efficacy. She is even willing to sacrifice her own sadness—"all my sadness I give to God." Recall her instruction for how to be filial: "You should be filial this way—be filial while they are alive. If they die, do this, you go, you also cry, you do it like this, then you're done (*hao le*). Because after they are dead, can they protect you in your trouble (*wei nide shi*)?"

What emerges is a powerful instruction on the true meaning of sacrifice. For Fong, the sacrifice that is most important is the self-denying offering of one's desire. This has profound effects for her assessment of well-being as she must continually conform her emotions to the moral demands of a Christian outlook. While she cannot do much to control her husband or her

sons, she continues to claim her own moral-rightness in the face of adversity because of her virtuous sacrifice. Yet there is also a feeling of ambivalence towards the actions of her sons and husband as well as a deep sense of loneliness and isolation in the absence of filial displays of affection and connection. Even as she emerges from her narrative as a moral person, she is also one who suffers.

“Human quality doesn’t raise itself”

In very different life circumstances from Grandmother Fong, 60-year old Teacher Lu, is a well-respected teacher who surmounted many formal obstacles to studying. Yet, one spring afternoon, he tearfully recounted his relationship with his three adult children. He felt mostly satisfied (*manzu*) that he had done well as a father, his three children were all very successful college graduates. In particular, his middle son, Gaoying, earned his M.B.A. and is now a prosperous entrepreneur in Shenzhen; at the time of my research, his business was on the verge of an international expansion. Likewise, Teacher Lu felt had done right by himself (*xie manyile*). Pushed out of schooling by the tumult of poverty and social instability that characterized many of his generation, he had enough drive to *zixue*, or independently study literature and education. Starting out as a tutor for *gaokao* (the college entrance exam) in the early 90s, Teacher Lu’s students earned high marks and, as a result, he was invited to teach high school, eventually becoming a well-respected administrator. Having never gone to college or even high school himself, his success was lauded by the entire community. Even in his retirement, Teacher Lu has been invited by the local middle school to serve as a consultant and so he travels once a week from his city home to the countryside.

After telling his story about self-study and the individual drive that led an unschooled

peasant to become a well-respected educator, Teacher Lu said that he often recounts his personal experiences of poverty to all of his students so that they can understand the concept of *kaojizi* or self-reliance. Then his narrative turned to his own children. Gaoying, his oldest son “experienced the most difficulty” say Teacher Lu and because of the difficulty in the family that caused “sadness” for Lu, he was unable to support Gaoying in high school. Even so, in a mix of regret at his own failings and admiration of Gaoying’s individual resilience, Teacher Lu reports that since Gaoying was “rebellious (*buting hua*)” he succeeded in continuing to study, earning top marks all the way up to his MBA. Because Lu wasn’t always encouraging of Gaoying’s educational and business pursuits, Lu states that he regrets that he didn’t support his development. Yet, Lu remains conflicted about his own efficacy as a father as he vacillates back and forth between an ideal of individualistic drive and a desire for interpersonal intimacy and empathy.

Lu: Being human is a journey that you must go on yourself (*ren—zhege lukou ziji zuo*), whether it be grades or whatever, you must rely on yourself. That’s why I tell my children, I tell them—“I have no inheritance to leave to you” Right?

E: Yes, that’s right ((laughter))

Lu: But Gaoying, his classmate gave him a criticism. He said, “isn’t it right that your father doesn’t want you? Look, why else wouldn’t he help you.” ((laughter))

E: okay. ((laughter))

Lu: You know, your education level is much higher than mine, so I’m not sure you can understand. He just said, “isn’t it true that your father doesn’t want you” But in truth, in every second of every moment all I think about is him. But I cannot []... I have no way of acting. ((his voice breaks and he begins to cry)). You see, I think about it to the point of crying.... Oh, I think you must think I am very funny.

E: ((sighs)) No, not funny, it is very moving.

Lu: Right now, I am writing a memoir. The memoir is 3-4000 words. Maybe some think that I am bragging. I’m not bragging. I say, after I die, I want my children to look at my life as full of struggle and strife, and say “yes, he was very capable. (*jiu keyile*)”. You know? I don’t care if other people know, I want my

children to know. I wrote it on my computer; I wrote “after I die, I want my children to look at my life as full of strife (*fendou*).” Right now, they still aren’t willing to know that I am this kind of person. You know? Really... I think you should laugh.

The recording is full of awkward pauses, not only because Teacher Lu speaks very fast in dialect and I am almost always trying to play catch up, but also because I found myself laughing out of sync. This is partially due to my own identification with his narrative. As I told him later in the interview, I found some of the same issues in my own family, since my father sacrificed much of his own retirement savings for myself and my siblings. I too found that going through difficulties and poverty has had a positive impact on my life, because as other villagers remarked with surprise, I could labor (though awkwardly) and could endure hardship. I mistakenly thought that Teacher Lu was progressing to this direction because the inability of the younger generation to understand the benefits of long-term planning had been a topic of our conversation. To my surprise, I suddenly found our affects to be out of sync. I was still smiling when I looked up to find tears streaming down his face.

Lu’s narrative turns towards his son without my prompting, connecting teaching his students and his own children the value of self-reliance that he learned through a life of hard work and poverty. Yet his emotionality, caught me off guard. In fact, other than ritualized crying at a funeral, Lu’s interview was the only time that an adult man cried in my presence. The tears indicate a deep pain, the sharp sting of a comment made by a teenager long ago. Yet the comment still resonates with Lu and is part of his motivation for writing a memoir. He seems bothered by a profound fear of misrecognition by his children and the desire to be understood in a certain light. Not only so, but I believe Lu’s tears reveal the emotional precarity of intergenerational relationships and the fragility of filial piety in the contemporary era.

In this section, I want to consider Teacher Lu's conflict as a confrontation between ideals of modernity and tradition. Specifically, as Teacher Lu later enunciates, a clash between determinants of success within different spheres of value. There are at least three evaluative fields at play, (1) Success as determined by educational level and competence which is also closely tied to (2) ideas of independence and (3) interdependence in interpersonal, specifically family relationships. These spheres are always implicating each other and are playing off each other throughout Lu's narrative.

The most clearly verbalized desire that Teacher Lu has is for his children to recognize his competence. He uses the term *jiu keyile* which can be translated, somewhat awkwardly, as 'to be assessed as adequate.' In using the term *keyi*, Lu is asking for a bare minimum of accolades, since *keyi* contains the meanings of 'able, worth doing, not bad, passible, or pretty good.' He wants to make it clear that he is not bragging or gloating, but rather wants his life to be assessed within its own context, that is, within the contexts of *fendou*, 'struggle and strife.' Since I did not read his memoir, I am not privy to all the details of this struggle, but he did reveal to me that he felt his education level and background was more suitable for "food service, or these kind of [blue color] jobs." The process of moving up in social class without even a high school education was often met with contempt (*bufen wo ke*). Additionally, the process of building his career was a slow one of doing tasks in a "dignified manner" which was slowly and eventually recognized by his employers who gave him more and more responsibility. However, it seems that this same recognition from his family eludes him since he repeats three times that he wants his "children to know that [his] life was full of struggle and strife" and laments, "right now, they still aren't willing to know that I am this kind of person." This effort to communicate his competence to his

children and the pain of their misrecognition puts his concerns within a nexus of two competing values of independence and interdependence.

On the one hand, he holds strong values for individuality, while on the other he displays a strong desire for emotional interdependence with his family. His independence is primarily evidenced by his existential proclamation about the nature of the human life—“a journey that you must go on yourself.” His own career progress also speaks to the value of an individual’s ability to strive against adversity and succeed. Additionally, he gives the same gloss to his son, Gaoying whom he describes as capable (*henkeneng*) if a bit rebellious (*butinghua*). These verbal markers all index his value of individual drive and accomplishment. Yet, none of the success that he has experienced drive him to tears. What he “thinks about to the point of crying” is an unresolved fear of misrecognition by his son.

To me this fear can be placed within the cultural psycho-dynamics of filial piety by examining filial piety as a cosmological constellation of the self. As I outlined above, drawing from Baker, filial piety can be thought of as conferring a model of the self within a continuum of decent. In this model, the self only exists by virtue of one’s ancestors and descendants. Fei Xiaotong took this idea further when exploring the Chinese self and stated that the Chinese ideal of personhood is a dis-unified self. In his concept of “*chaxugejue*” or ‘differential mode of association,’ Fei argues that persons have no standard way of interacting with others, but must act in accordance to the relationship between the self and other (Fei 1992). In other words, hierarchy and differential social positioning determines proper action. Behavior demanded by the larger social system are actually modeled upon hierarchy and obedience within the family—part of the explicit values of filial piety.

In terms of psycho-dynamics, filial piety is based on an identification between father and son (see also Hsu 1971). In contrast to Western ideals of personhood which valorizes the act of self-identification (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), filial piety emphasizes the synergy of fates between the two generations. Since this model of self permeates into public life, there is a dynamic interplay of family and social relationships. One can see this clearly within Teacher Lu's vacillation between understanding himself as a distinct individual and understanding himself as co-constructed through the acts of his sons. Later in the interview, the case for understanding Teacher Lu's fear as a filial fear becomes even more clear when he begins to hint at his desire for Gaoying to have children.

L: I told Gaoying if he didn't go to college, he would already have some kids by now. You know, not too many, 2, 3 kids. You don't need too many, just a few... that's what happens these days...

E: Right, it's a kind of contradiction (*maodun*). If you go to a good college it's not easy to have kids early. And if you have kids early, you can't easily study.

L: Exactly right. That's how it is now.

E: Yes. I also have been considering this question.

L: See, in the countryside, there is a saying (*yansu*): "*shangruo, shangruo*."²³ That means, you see, no matter what you have, what kinds of achievement (*chengjiu*), you will also die. And you cannot give life when you are old (*bu zai laole shengnian*). There is a lot of truth to that. I have a friend, when he looks at his life he says, "you studied well, but what value is there in studying really? Is studying useful?" Get into college, find a job, it's the same. If you don't study well, maybe your economy won't be as good—you will have a simple life. But isn't that still good? En... Look, so that is why we have that tradition. We must think carefully about this issue. Should you study well? Should you not study well? Is it better to raise (*peiyang*) a child? Or is it better not to raise a child? Right now, that is a sincere question... But really, I should say, a better interpretation is that accomplishment (*chengjiu*) really is better... even my second son has had success (*chenggong*). For a people group (*minzu*), human quality (*suzhi*) doesn't raise itself, you know? As far as traditional viewpoints, traditional customs are lacking, [they] should be broken, they have to be broken. So, I have to look at it from today's vantage. Modern thinking requires ordered planning.

²³ *ruo* in dialect is the equivalent of *kuai*, 'fast' in Mandarin. The statement, *shangkuai shangkuai* in Mandarin is also popular to say at weddings. It means "quickly give birth to children."

The pronatalist value within the filial tradition requires that sons beget sons. Mencius, a 3rd century B.C.E. Chinese philosopher argued, “there are three unfilial things [that a child can do] and to leave behind no posterity is the greatest” (Xiaojing Ch 1, in Ivanhoe 2012, 191). When Teacher Lu debates the value of traditional virtue of having children versus the modern ideal of studying and having economic success, he is referencing this explicit ideal.

Teacher Lu’s interpretation of the common saying, “*shangrou shangrou*” also requires a bit of analysis. This phrase in dialect is the equivalent of the Mandarin phrase “*shangkuai*.” It is a statement said repeatedly at weddings and it means, “quickly give birth to children.” Chinese weddings are full of verbal and symbolic gestures which encourage the fertility of the new couple. During the wedding, the couple goes to each table, making toasts with the distinguished male guests with strong *baijiu* (rice liquor) and the guests offer congratulations, wishing them happiness and many children. Additionally, guests are often served dates (*zao*) and peanuts (*sheng*) the words for which share linguistic characteristics with the phrase “have children soon” (*zaosheng*). Teacher Lu interprets these fertility rituals with the meaning “no matter what you have, what kinds of achievement (*chengjiu*), you will also die. And you cannot give life when you are old (*bu zai laole shengnian*).” I take this interpretation of the pronatalist view to express Teacher Lu’s explicit concern over the continuum of descent. Here, he contrasts the value of achievement with the value of the filial tradition. The series of questions indicates a real puzzling out of these moral values.

Teacher Lu conforms himself to the “ordered planning” required by modern thinking through narrative work. In offering his final solution, that “success really is better” he gives an explanation that “human quality doesn’t raise itself.” *Suzhi*, ‘human quality,’ has been widely explored by anthropologists who point out the ways in which this term has been utilized to

advance a neoliberal ideology (c.f. Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006, 2007). Yet, in contrast to the ways that *suzhi* becomes an individualizing demand, Lu actually utilizes the idea of national human quality to join in a larger collective ideal, that of *minzu*, people group or nationality. In using *suzhi* to assuage his fears about the discontinuity of the family line, he moves from his nuclear family to national quality and in doing so implicates his own work as an educator and father.

The narrative work involved in conforming Teacher Lu's ideas to modernity indicates the extent to which modernity acts as a type of moral regime. Implicated within modernity's moral demands are human quality, ordered planning, and the eschewing of traditional viewpoints. Teacher Lu indirectly includes filial piety in the category of traditional viewpoints by referencing the filial concern for continuity. Yet, filial piety remains connected despite his assertions decrying the failure of traditional customs and the triumph of individualism he cannot help to feel moved when thinking of his son.

Writing on filial piety and the intergenerational contract, Yunxiang Yan has argued that China is experiencing an emergence of descending-familism which causes all sorts of family resources to flow downwards towards the "centripetal power of the third generation of children" (2016a, 245). With these changes, Yan argues that the focus of the "existential meanings of life has shifted from ancestors to children" (2016, 245). Though Teacher Lu's family lacks the centripetal force of a grandchild, the salience of emotional connection as a central part of filial piety continues to remain a central concern for Lu.

Yet the older structures of feeling engendered by the traditional filial organization remain as scaffolding to Lu's assessments of well-being and happiness. He is dogged by an unresolved relational conflict with his son and an ever-present fear of obsolescence. Consistently yearning to

be useful, competent, and capable, these desires set the terms of how far modernity can permeate into his moral framing.

Filial Piety and Moral Assemblage

How can we account for the multiple moral fields which exist within these two parents' discussions of filial piety? Creolization (Stewart 2016), hybridity (Bhabha 2012), syncretism (Stewart and Shaw 1994) all imply a kind of mixing resulting in a contemporary transformation. In a certain sense, Fong and Lu can both be understood to be mixing and borrowing traditions to come to terms with their respective situations. However, I prefer to utilize the concept of assemblage. I trace the term assemblage back to Claude Levi-Strauss's idea of bricolage in (1966) *The Savage Mind* to describe the ways in which mythological narratives recraft already existing symbols to create new stories. Assemblages, like bricolage, are always larger than the sum of their parts in that they draw from diffuse and sometimes conflicting fields. Moral assemblage can be understood as constituted through three interrelated regimes—(1) institutions, (2) public discourse and (3) bodily dispositions or *habitus*. The term assemblage draws from a long anthropological tradition of examining how meaning is created through diffuse forms of cultural materials and ideas (Zigon 2010).

In viewing filial piety as a moral assemblage, I call attention to what I label “the actual moral” in a riff from Stephen Collier and Aihwa Ong's “actual global” in which they articulate the inherent contradictions, instabilities, and partialities of global phenomena as understood from the vantage point of specific localities (2005, 12). Collier and Ong state that globalization has redefined the conditions of possibility in incalculable ways. New technologies and new ways of thinking translate, transmute, and rearticulate into local ways of being without following

preconstructed logics. In the same way, moral ideals “move” from cultural to individual, from national to local, and from universal to particular (and *vice versa*) without regard for previous configurations.

Along these lines, moral tradition is a conglomeration of ideas, imperatives, and rituals which inserts into individual lives through an unfolding. The specific nature of this unfolding is only available to analysis through reflecting back on how tradition is implied, invoked or attributed in both behavior and speech acts. This is a messy endeavor, because at any one time there are numerous influences at work giving shape to the social world. Consequently, the task of tracing out generative origins of moral ideas is always partial. Additionally, anthropologists face the added complexity of viewing individual lives as both products and producers of the social. When understanding moral decisions, we must take into account both individual idiosyncrasies and cultural patterns (for more along these lines, see Yan 2011).

I have chosen these two elders’ reflections on filial piety because I feel they reveal something about the unfolding nature of moral assessment. In both these cases, a filial problem presents itself and the individuals must assess the moral actions of another party—an act that requires an empathetic understanding of the moral demands of the other person.

In the case of Grandmother Fong, her narrative highlights several intertwining spheres of moral beliefs. The strongest of these is, of course, the Christian-inspired moral code which includes a sacrificial offering of self to God. Grandmother Fong’s discussion also reveals that conformity to this Christian moral order requires the eschewing of traditional filial sacrifice to ancestors but a reinvigoration of sacrifice towards one’s parents while they are still living. The theme is made clearer in her retelling of the story of Abraham and Isaac where Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son is rewarded with the provision of a goat and the sparing of his

son's life. The ultimate filial ethic is Grandmother Fong's own willingness to submit herself and her own desires as a sacrifice to God. For Fong, in the absence of ancestors, a benevolent patriarch, or filial sons, the most important figure of kinship authority is God.

Grandmother Fong, it should be noted, spends little narrative space reflecting upon the actual moral or immoral filial behaviors of her sons. The merits of their acts are implicated sideways—condemned by their absence in her reflections and less by their presence. This makes her reassessment of filial piety all the more powerful and effective for her daily life. Her shift from filial piety as an act of obedience towards ancestors to an act of obedience towards God refocuses her energies from others to herself. This intersubjective shuffle reconfigures the entire frame of filial assessment. While her children are still not filial, her focus becomes the moral-worthiness of her own sacrifice of the right to filial obedience.

Teacher Lu similarly reframes filial continuity—the obligation to have sons—within the context of modern planning. Even though Gaoying is unwilling to have sons, Teacher Lu justifies this unfilial act as a sacrifice towards the modern nation. In his reframing, the entire population benefits from the encouragement of success and rationality over the traditional pronatalist view. Yet this proclamation of the value of modernity does not take place instantaneously in our conversation. In fact, it comes after he has shed tears about a possible misrecognition by his son. For Teacher Lu, the assessment of his son's filial or unfilial acts are only brought out in the appraisal of his own moral worthiness as a father. He weighs his own efficacy as a provider as he reflects on the context of his entire life. His desire to be recognized as capable is also a plea for filial obedience from his children.

Teacher Lu's comments reveal that modernity and ideas of individual agency are very powerful parts of the contemporary imaginary. Yet, close analysis reveals the fragility of this

power to shift the psycho-dynamic infrastructure laid out by filial morality. Even though Teacher Lu expresses a firm resolve towards individual success as a part of a national project to raise human quality, he is still haunted by the intersubjective demands of filial continuity.

Both individuals in this chapter struggle to come to terms with their disconnection with their children and their narratives reveal a longing for more demonstrations of filial obedience. Yet at the same time, both individuals try to stifle their own desires. Grandmother Fong constructs herself as the hero of her own story. In teaching me how to be a proper and moral filial Christian, she also intends to teach me the value of sacrifice. Fong believes that a sacrificial attitude will be repaid either on heaven, or on earth. Teacher Lu also implicates his desires for filial continuity as something to be cut off or “broken.” For him the benefits of giving up traditional attitudes are the evolution of the entire population. Both Lu and Fong, struggle to come to terms with the new realities of filial relationships.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have looked at two individuals puzzling through the diffuse moral constellations surrounding new expectations for filial piety. In doing so, I have explored filial piety as a moral assemblage, focusing on the ideological spaces of possibilities carved out in its wake. These spaces are riddled with disjunctures, inconsistencies, conformities, and contradictions. These two cases show that unlike a shopping cart analogy of moral value where social actors are free to pick and choose, certain fields may carry more weight than others. At the same time, that weight is patchy and uneven because moral influence is not always applied in a straight forward, predetermined manner.

Individual concerns about filial piety are not new, Chinese literature is rife with these same kinds of considerations of how to be filial in the face of contradicting feelings and obligations. One poignant example of the is found in the 18th Century novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, which tells the story of the wealthy Jia family struggling to enact Confucius morality despite a romantic entanglement which threatens to throw the entire family into ruin (c.f. Gu 2006). In all likelihood, as long as there is a field of morality determining right from wrong, individuals will find it difficult to conform their entire being to the demands of such requirements (c.f. Foucault 1988).

However, what is novel about contemporary puzzling through of filial concepts is the sheer number of moral fields operating at once (Kleinman et al. 2011; Stafford 2013). The existential difficulty these competing moralities cause comes through quite well in Teacher Lu's questions about life's true value. Yet there is also a hint of this difficulty visible in Grandmother Fong's filial tale. Left without access to filial rituals for her parents and without filial attention from her migrant sons, filial piety enters the stuff of legend and religious doctrine. The filial son enters heaven just as Christ did and she is left with "no one on earth as filial as he was." To both Lu and Fong, ideal filial piety is inaccessible because of the new demands of modern independence in Lu's case and Christianity in Fong's. Despite their attempts to move past traditional ideas, both Teacher Lu and Grandmother Fong are still living in the shadow of filial piety.

Chapter Seven

My life is very long, My life is full of trouble: Narrative, memory, and dysphoric experience

情由忆生，不忆故无情

Feelings are born of memory, without memory, there can be no feelings.

--Jinshu, scroll 94.

In the afternoon heat, 64-year-old Zhu Yanli and I sat on a cardboard mattress sipping water and strategically positioning ourselves to feel the sputter of moving air from the dusty white electric fan that sat in a corner of her one-room mud-walled house. Over the noise of the television, Grandmother Zhu told me that she had decided not to accompany her granddaughter to Guangzhou where her son was a manager at a factory. Her son had lived there for years, and in Guangzhou he had married another migrant called Hongchan, and together they rented a flat and had two children. The oldest, a shy middle-school girl, Chenyu, had been born in Henan and raised exclusively by Grandmother Zhu. Even though Hongchan had quit her job following the birth of a son 5 years earlier and was available to take care of Chenyu, the girl preferred to live with her grandmother. This attachment seemed to trouble Hongchan, who relocated with her son to rural Henan the year before fearing that as her daughter got older, she needed a better influence in her life. ‘She spoils her,’ Hongchan had told me. ‘She gives her all the meat in the dish and in the summer, she would wave a fan for her for up to three hours!’

After Hongchan and her son moved back to the village, Grandmother Zhu began sleeping in the inferior mud house across the path from the larger, newly constructed courtyard house. The family hung an extension cord from two poles so that the dwelling would have electricity for the pixelated television, wobbly fan, electric well pump and the yellowing light bulb which hung from the rafters. She even began cooking from a small gas burner instead of in the courtyard

house equipped with a cobb stove and refrigerator. Chenyu still preferred to sleep on the bed next to her grandmother as she had the entirety of her 11 years, but she only slept at home on the weekends, since she was living at the middle school dorm the remainder of the time. ‘It’s fine,’ she told me after I expressed my concern that she would be cold or lonely in the smaller mud building; ‘I have what I need here.’ While it was true that she did have all the necessities and Hongchan often brought over food and made sure her mother-in-law was eating well, I still worried that Grandmother Zhu was getting the short end of the stick. So, when I heard about Grandmother Zhu’s small rebellion—not accompanying the family on a summer holiday, I was both relieved and puzzled.

‘For fun they go to a grocery store,’ Grandmother Zhu gave a smirk indicating that she disapproved of the activity, though her voice continued the constant rhythm and quiet tone I had come to associate with her manner. ‘And there are lots of stairs. How can I climb stairs? You know my son wanted to take me to see the ocean last time I went. They even hired a car. I didn’t go.’

‘You didn’t go?’ I was incredulous. ‘But have you ever seen the ocean?’

‘I don’t want to,’ she said, and repeated it again. ‘I don’t want to.’

Grandmother Zhu is one of several grandmothers caring for grandchildren that I visited regularly over the course of my fieldwork. Like other grandmothers, she often doted on her grandchild—concerning and angering her daughter-in-law who thought she should be stricter. Like other grandmothers, she often willingly gave up and sometimes eschewed the many benefits to her son’s migrant labor—living in the inferior house, refusing to leave the countryside, taking on a lion’s share of the domestic tasks, and even turning down opportunities for novel consumer

experiences like sightseeing and travel. And like many other grandmothers, her daily life was filled with nearly constant references to past suffering and pain.

This chapter is an attempt to understand how the present and past inform each other in the life of a single informant. It is an attempt to trace the lines of history and its tentacles, puzzling out why Grandmother Zhu would refuse the benefits of modernity, even while decrying the hardships of the past. In this chapter, I reflect on the nature of narrative and the ways in which continued memorializing of painful experiences serve as a communicative practice, highlighting the chronicity of embodied trauma and the failures of the sacrificial narrative to effectively recognize and honor individual experience.

While the entirety of this dissertation is based on person-centered interviewing and participant observation, this chapter is unique in its focus on the entire life of just one person. The tradition of intently investigating a single life has a specific history within anthropology and particularly psychological anthropology (cf. D. W. Hollan and Wellenkamp 1996; Biehl 2013; Crapanzano 2013). As an anthropological exercise, looking at a person's life history has the strength of allowing one to look at the *longue-duree* of life course. Yet different than biography or longitudinal studies, person-centered work allows for a concentrated focus on the contours of thoughts, feelings, and emotions that shape a life-world within a particular time (Peacock and Holland 1993; Levy and Hollan 2015; Moore and Mathews 2001; Hollan 2005).

This doesn't mean that the narratives are objective accounts. Narratives might even be more subjective than other kinds of social science research data. However, the subjectivity which paints this chapter is informed by a carefully cultivated sensibility, something which psychoanalysts point to as intuition or attunement, but in fact is a familiarity and adroitness into

reading the nonverbal and contextual clues within a relationship developed through time (Ewing 2006; 1987; Davies and Spencer 2010).

I met with Grandmother Zhu sporadically from October to February of 2015 and weekly from February to August 2015. Following the conventions of person-centered interviewing (Hollan 2005), I had very little research “agenda” other than to listen to Zhu’s concerns. Often, we shared a meal together and occasionally I would help her run the snack stand outside of the local elementary school. Sometimes our meetings involved a number of neighbors and family members and other times, we sat in silence watching television, or played with her little dog which she fed table scraps. My interpretation of the interview data, therefore, is always formulated within a larger research experience of the social life of my fieldsite. My understanding of Grandmother Zhu is shaped not only through my weekly recorded interviews, but also through the lens of numerous interactions with different members of her family, neighbors, and community. Grandmother Zhu’s specific story told to me is always understood—by her and also by me—in relation to other stories which circulate in the course of everyday interactions and media.

Also as a theoretical departure from the remainder of this dissertation, this chapter takes a more linguistically-oriented approach to consider the ways in which reflections and verbal utterances of past experiences of pain and suffering give shape to memory and everyday experience. I have selected parts of Grandmother Zhu’s life that roughly correspond to culturally-shaped identity categories: daughter, wife, mother, and laborer. In each of these four narratives, Grandmother Zhu struggles to find meaning within the suffering ascribed to each of these categories. Ultimately, as I will argue through my examination, she rejects the idea that her

own suffering and pain has significance—while at the same time drawing from a national cultural imagination which portrays suffering as an important moral and ethical practice.

The Anthropology of Pain and Suffering

Suffering and pain have been widely studied by anthropologists interested in human experience. I categorize three approaches to the study of pain and suffering. Each of these three approaches have overlaps and each of them—as theories are apt to do—fail to adequately capture the full range of pain and suffering as human experience (Scarry 1985). Nevertheless, since each of these theoretical approaches allow a different vantage point for seeing; these theories reveal different aspects of human experience.

The first approach, can be characterized as an attempt to account for the individual psychological and physical experiences of pain and reconcile this with social experiences of pain, illness, and suffering. Much of this theoretical work is found within early medical anthropological accounts of illness which have also been titled “interpretive or meaning-centered” (Mattingly 1998, 9). The work of Byron Good in examining a “semantic illness network” (Good 1977) has laid a foundation for future scholars to investigate the overlaps between cultural constructions of health and the individual experiences of disease (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1986; Frankenberg 1986; Mattingly and Garro 2000; Tabishat 2014). A number of scholars have noted the social and moral modes of illness, suffering and distress (Ong 1988; Tabishat 2014) and the social impacts on treatment and healing (Crowley-Matoka and True 2012). Perhaps most notably, Arthur and Joan Kleinman’s investigation of illness in both the US and China, has argued for understanding pain and suffering as a way to express social and political disorder (1988a, 1988b; 1994). Allowing further exploration of the overlaps and interstices of individual

and cultural experiences, this approach invites reflection into how individual experiences are shaped by cultural meaning (c.f. Scott 1987; Scheper-Hughes 1993; Bourdieu 1999).

The second approach is an analysis of how pain and suffering might be culturally understood as virtuous or redemptive. This approach falls under the category of the anthropology of morality and ethics. Some excellent examples are C. Jason Throop's (2008, 2010) examination of pain and suffering in Yap, which I will explore more thoroughly in my conclusion, Cheryl Mattingly's consideration of hope in the experiences of medically fragile African American families (2010, 2014), and Jared Zigon's account of addiction, HIV, and moral efforts of self-remaking in Russia (2011, 2013) (also see Yarris 2011; Wikan 1989). Many scholars of morality and ethics think through the narrative transformation of suffering and pain into a socially-productive category (Das et al. 2014), drawing from the philosophical writings of Levinas (1998) and Hannah Arendt (c.f. 1958, 2006). Considering how pain and suffering is part of a cultural system of morality allows us to see how meaning making occurs at the level of discourse and behavior.

The third approach is a socio-political analysis of how tropes of pain and suffering are co-opted by groups in order to gain political power. This can be seen within the Chinese context in "speak bitterness" forums during the collectivization (Schwarcz 1997) and in narrative accounts of the cultural revolution (Zarrow 1999; D. J. Davies 2005). In other contexts where war, genocide, and violence has shaped the political atmosphere, memories also are mobilized for political and social action. Scholars have investigated political uses of memorialized pain and suffering in contexts as diverse as Ireland (Dawson 2003), Spain (MacDonald and Bernardo 2006), Israel (J. Ochs 2006), Columbia (Meertens and Zambrano 2010), immigrant communities within the United States (Haas 2017) and the UK (Jeffery 2006) and international NGO's and

media (Kleinman 1997). Often groups who are suffering must somehow make their suffering visible in order to gain recognition, even if that visibility is a destruction, or a flattening of their experience (Jacoby 2015).

These approaches to pain and suffering, particularly the first two draw heavily from the linguistically-informed analysis of narrative to understand how individual reflections of pain draw from cultural tropes embedded in language and prosody. Consequently, narrative analysis and the idea that as a linguistic act, narratives “do” something features prominently in the approaches to pain and suffering (E. Ochs and Capps 1996; Mattingly and Garro 2000; E. Ochs and Capps 2009; Mattingly 2010). The nature of narrative effect also is featured in my analysis below.

Divorced from the actual experience of real pain, narrative reflections of dysphoric experience cannot be confused for the actual moment of pain. Narratives are attempts to shape and inscribe meaning on past experiences through the communication between speakers. And even farther away from the moment of pain, is my analysis recorded in this chapter, which I see as a kind of secondary shaping—a reading of a reading. This chapter, then is my own story about Grandmother Zhu, and my own narrative about what it might mean to reflect upon painful experiences in the light of so many radical social changes.

Suffering and Temporality

Grandmother Zhu’s memories of her early life are full of descriptions of suffering. Particular kinds of hardships form the narrative arch in her recollection more than chronology and plot. From starvation and poverty to bodily pain associated with labor, the difficulties of her early life are recounted in lamentations which center around specific experiences of adversity. In

piecing together her biographical narrative, I found our discussions to be overwhelmingly centered on two key complaints: 1. That she had no relatives for support in domestic tasks when her children were small, 2. That she faced chronic pain due to earlier injuries from collective labor requirements. Both these complaints lead Zhu to continually reflect upon her life as simultaneously ill-fated yet improved due to changes in agricultural and economic infrastructure.

To rearrange her narrative chronologically, I think would miss out on the central themes of her narrative. Yet, aware that Western cultural constructions of narrative are largely oriented through temporal organization, I have provided a timeline which shows the parts of her narrative (pictured in red) as it overlaps with other political events in China (outlined in blue), many of which have directly affected Zhu. The transcripts which I include often include two different temporal periods. Usually, Zhu is specifically referencing the past in relation to the present. But also she sometimes puts together two different past experiences, linking hardships through laments of hunger, hardship and poverty. In the transcripts, I have edited out longer portions of these chronological meanderings for the sake of readability and analytical focus.

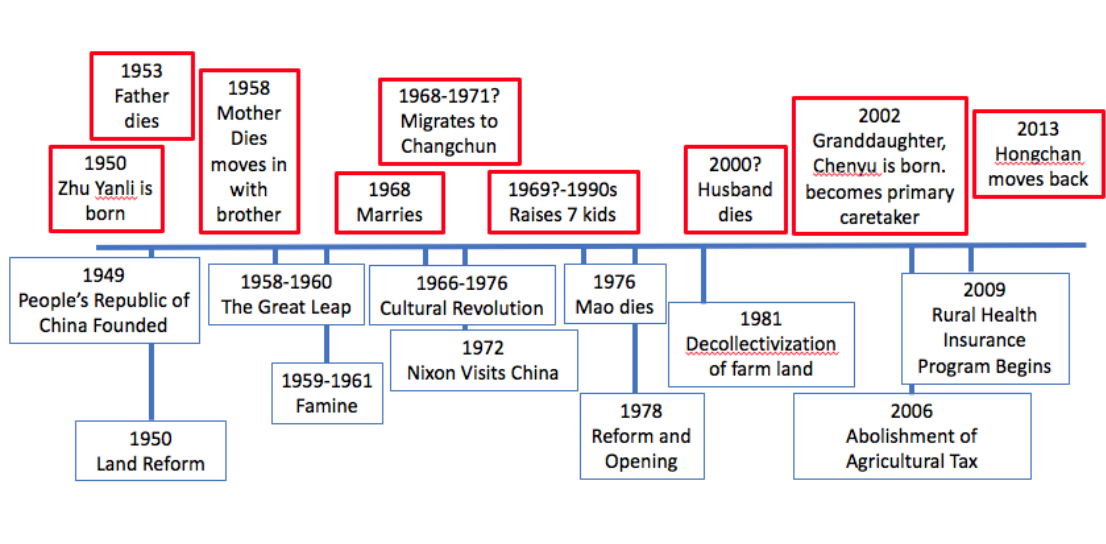


Figure 18 Grandmother Zhu's Chronological Life Events

I begin with the major theme of the loss of her parents and in-laws which shape the ways in which she is able to complete domestic tasks and what options are available to her as a young orphan. Then I move into her marriage and domestic responsibilities. Finally, I examine her experiences as a laborer during the collective era before turning to an analysis of narrative meaning and resistance. While each of these narrative themes also contain referents for other identities, I focus on how each of these identities—as culturally available models of personhood—is reflected upon in her narrative.

I have followed Conversation Analysis transcription conventions in a somewhat idiosyncratic manner (Jefferson 2004). For readability, I have chosen to present the transcript in English with clarification of certain Mandarin terms in double parenthesis in *pinyin*. I have preserved the sentence final particles which often indicate affective stance and are largely untranslatable into English. At several points, I expand on the use of these particles (for more information on sentence final particles please see Wu 2004; Lu 2005; Hancil, Haselow, and Post 2015). For the sake of flow, I sometimes eliminate my questions and interjections.

{...}	Indicates an eliminated section of transcript
(())	indicates an action or characterizes the speech tone and pacing
()	Added in speech for clarification
[unintelligible]	indicates a portion of the recording which was unintelligible
(word?)	indicates a section of the recording which is uncertain
[indicates two speakers overlapping

Figure 19 Transcription Conventions

In the transcripts, my speech is indicated with E; and Grandmother Zhu with Z;



Figure 20 "When it's not too hot, when it's not raining, I can sit on the bench, even a child can do it."

Daughter

Grandmother Zhu weaves through distinctive time periods, setting up the contexts for her experience with specific linguistic markers. In different parts of our conversation, she uses different kinds of linguistic markers. Each of these linguistic markers can be seen to express affect through grammatical and linguistic resources (E. Ochs and Schieffelin 1989). She frequently uses the particle *le*. The sentence final particle *le* is one of six commonly used sentence final particles in Mandarin Chinese. As Li, Thompson, and Thompson write, "*le* claims that *a state of affairs has special current relevance to some particular Reference Time*" (Li, Thompson, and Thompson 1982, 22 emphasis in original; c.f. Li and Thompson 1989; Soh 2009). More than a simple indication of tense, *le* marks the temporal relevance of the event in one of five ways. Here, the addition of *le*, particularly with the addition of the particle *dou* serves to indicate "a state that will determine what will happen next," signaling to the hearer that because

an event took place, something else can happen (Li, Thompson, and Thompson, 1982, 36). To illustrate this point, I've modified two example sentences from Li, Thompson, and Thompson to explore how *le* communicates this meaning (1982, 36).

1. *Wo xi hao le yifu le.*
I've finished washing the clothes *le*. (So now that the chore is finished, the speaker and hearer can do something else, watch a movie, or do yoga in the laundry room, etc.)
2. *Wo he le san bei le!*
I've drunk three (whole) glasses *le*. (So don't pour me anymore, quit making toasts, or let's just talk now, etc.)

In this way, the *le* indicates that the action affords a certain thing to happen in the future. Here, Zhu's use of *le* indicates central aspects to the narrative plot, and marks that the event is relevant to what can happen in the future. *Le* marks events which opens and constrains forthcoming possibilities. Especially when paired with the word *dou*, meaning already or both, and *jiu* indicating earliness or suddenness, the sentence final marker *le* in Zhu's narrative below often serves to mark out time that is out of sync with her expectations. Below are two examples:

八岁都没有妈妈了. 跟着他长大成人
Ba sui dou mei you mama le. Genzhe ta zhang da cheng ren
At 8 years old I *dou* didn't have a mother *le*. with him (older brother) I grew up and matured

三岁多一点都没有父亲了. 跟着我哥哥
San sui duo yi dian dou mei you fuqin le. Genzhe wo gege
When I was a little older than three years old I *dou* didn't have a father *le*. I was with my older brother

These statements contain *dou* and *le* as a temporal marker for something which is exceptional which forecloses and affords certain possibilities for the future. For the sake of readability, I've recorded the transcript in English but I've marked the sentences that contain these linguistic features with an →.

Because her parents died early, Zhu went to live with her older brother and support the family doing domestic work. The ages at which she starts doing domestic chores emphasize her difficulties. At 3, her father died; at 8, her mother died, and she began cleaning large pots much bigger than her so that she needed to stand on a wooden stool. At 10, she began taking care of her six nieces and nephews and at 12, she had to make herself cotton shoes. Each of these ages are marked within her narrative with the combination of the particle *dou* or *jiu* and the sentence final marker *le* or *ne*. These sentences stand out to me as significant time periods in her life and indicate emotive stances towards something that is unanticipated or tragic.

Z; Over there [i.e. her home town] there are no relatives *le*
only our two younger sisters, one older brother
→ At 8 years old I already [*dou*] didn't have a mother *le*. with my older brother I grew up
and matured
→ When I was a little older than three years old, I already [*dou*] didn't have a father *le*. I
was with my older brother.

E; How did your father pass away?

Z; He died early, I already cannot remember *le*.
My older brother is older than me by ten or more years. He also passed away *le*.
→ I was already [*dou*] more than 70 *le*.

E; Do you still remember how your mother passed away? {...}

Z; I was eight years old at that time.
She had a disease, before hospitals and medicine were not as good. Right?
We all searched and searched for a doctor to eat a little Chinese medicine.
If not, isn't that the reason to see a doctor? Is it not to pass through the symptoms *ma*?

E; You were 8. Your brother was 18. At that time your brother was already married *le ma*?
{...}

Z; Married *le*, he (had) five [sons, one daughter,

E; [five sons! One daughter!

Z; Hnn. Five sons, one daughter, also me, I stayed at home to help him watch them until
they were grown.
{...}

- E; Was that tiring?
- Z; You see he was older than me by 15 years. ((pause)) {...} He himself had to go to the fields to labor, he had to tend the fields.
- E; At that time you had to grow crops, right?
- Z; En. Also feed the pigs and feed the cattle. {...} harvesting by hand, Hn ((pause))
 → Eh, truly I have put out *le* a lifetime of bitter work, eight years already standing beside the wooden bench to scrub the pots-- they all were those kind of big pots.
 By the time I was twelve years old, already I made myself homemade shoes to wear. Twelve years old. I didn't go to school.
 No other person made them for me, (I had) no people, and also several children, right?
 → already I watched children *ne*.
 I was older than my older brother's wife's (son), my nephew, by ten or so years, that was the time when I watched the children.
 {...}
 When I came here, I also but forth *le* bitter work, at that time there was no road rollers
 {...}
 also all we had to eat were radishes.
- E; You didn't eat that good flour, right?
- Z; There wasn't any! 1959, tending the land until about 58, that was starvation (*jiu ai'e*) {...}
 Was it possible to have good bodily health, *ma*?
 Nothing to eat, but also had to work so hard; Eh.
 → People all became hallowed out (*bei wakong*) *le*
- E; Did you have any happiness? {...}
- Z; None
- E; There was nothing that was happy? No fun at all?
- Z; No, what happiness was there? A child's father has died *le*, gone to serve as a laborer *le*,
 → a child's father and mother both (*dou*) have died *le*.

It is unclear to me why, in particular she uses *le* to mark out the temporal landscape in this section of narrative, but does so less in other interactions. In other instances, she marks out time with a predicate indicating the referential time such as "The day that X happened" or "At

that time.” She also uses these prepositional time references in the section above. While it is possible that using *le* here and not at other times is just an idiosyncrasy, a passing mood, I am more inclined to argue that *le* is actually a significant linguistic resource for Zhu to mark the events that happen which are contrary to an idealized version of childhood. These statements imply indignation over something that should not have occurred.

Wife

At a different interview, Zhu discussed her marriage to her husband who had been deceased for about 15 years. In contrast to her age when her parents died, she could not clearly remember the timing of her husband’s death—though it was more recent. She sets up the marriage as particularly poor and deprived with vivid descriptions of her living conditions. In her introduction to the marriage she hints that marriage was not her choice, but that she was bound by social conventions to go along with the match.

Z; We built our house in September. We had to give the construction worker our leftover food, rice, to construct the house. At that time (work points) included dried foods. Half the rice (we used) for construction.

E; Oh, to construct the house. *En*.

Z; The house when I came, *a*. I lived for three years in that house with my husband and also his p-parents together.
That house leaked—you see, every time it rained you had to o-open the roof and put more mud to cover the leaking place.
It leaked *le*! What could you do, *a*?

E; Leaked water. Wow.

Z; (We) didn’t even have two beds!

E; You didn’t—you didn’t have two beds?

Z; One of-the old couple, they slept on the bed over there. We made a [makeshift] bed *le* in the room that stores firewood.

E; *En.*

Z; I didn't have a bed, I didn't have any chairs ((pause))
Two--Hhn, ((pause, her voice becomes quiet and sad sounding. Her pacing suddenly shifts from fast to very slow))
I don't want to even say it (*bu yao shuo*). I didn't have cloth even. ((She begins to speed up her pace again))
In the summer it was just bear, bear!
we simply put our clothes on the bed, *ne*.
But when we needed the quilt for warmth, we borrowed from others for about two months, after that we didn't have even a blanket, *la*.
Oh. I don't want to talk about my experience (*bu yao shuo wo de shi*)
Others all say that our experience was extremely bitter *le (ku le hen)*.
See, others had blankets.

The significance of the lack of a bed and blanket is central to her feelings about the marriage.

These feelings are evidenced linguistically by a series of emotionally charged interjections, her speech pacing, and the repeated, "I don't want to talk about my experience."

Goffman (1978, 1981) has titled interjections like "Hhn," "Oh," or "Wow" response cries and a number of other linguists have analyzed their usage. Ameka, for instance, has argued that interjections are—in contrast to speech acts—are "mental acts" which revealing the disposition of the speaker (1992, 110). In displaying an attitude or affect, these remarks are not usually conventionalized in the same way as formalized grammar, but are uttered spontaneously in reference to the social situation (Goffman 1978, 813).

In the transcript above, Zhu lets out two sighs, which I've transliterated to "Hhn." These sighs are followed by the same statement, "don't talk about." Both sighs come after she has listed a litany of emotionally charged complaints about the lack of bedding. Except for the phrase "don't talk about..." which is slow and uses a very low vocal tone, her phrasing is very quick, and she repeats herself indignantly several times. In the narration, these statements "don't talk about..." are affect keys (Ochs and Schieffelin, 1989, 16-17; Hymes 1972; Gumperz 1977)

which signal her emotional state as sorrowful, a bit embarrassed, and full of grief. They are reflections which signal her attitude and contemporary assessment of past events.

Blankets hold more than simple material use within the local context. Blankets remain a significant marker of marriage and part of the bridal *trousseau*. In one of the weddings that I attended during my fieldwork, making the marriage bed with dozens of blankets was a ritual part of the festivities. Performed by the groom's family, the activity was marked by the playing of Chinese music which is thought to drive off evil spirits. Blankets are also part of the funeral goods provided when someone dies. Since local people do not regularly use fires or heating for housing, blankets are a fundamental provision for warmth and survival. Additionally, blankets hold ritualized significance in marriage and funerals. The lack of quilts signifies not only a material poverty but also a reluctance of the family to honor the union.

After discussing the house and marriage, Zhu then turns to experiences of displacement, linking two events together. The first displacement was because of the marriage, which was to a family about 30 km away from her hometown (for more on marriage displacement see Judd 2008 and Zhang 2009), and the second displacement is due migrating to Changchun for work, where she accompanied her husband for three years.

Z; The day my older brother mentioned the issue about his family friend's brother, I didn't dare say anything. During that generation, they could just give you to a person and you had to go with them. How can you find anything to compare it with now (*neng xiang xianzai shide*)?

{...}

At that time, there was no way to go visit family. You couldn't go visit that one. Who knew that it was like that? I didn't know it was so far. I didn't know that we would have nothing, not even two beds, that we would borrow a blanket for two months. The third year we came back there was nothing.

→ Yes. There really (*dou*) was nothing *le*.

E; There really was nothing *le*. ((long pause)). This village isn't all based on one name, right? Over there (the village where I stayed), everyone is named Jia.

- Z; No, we all have a different surname here.
He didn't have a house. Everyone else was more powerful than he was. He had five brothers and sisters, there were a lot of kids.
He is the very youngest.
- E; Oh, he was the youngest.
- Z; ((very quietly)) the very youngest. ((long pause))
At that time, there wasn't a way to go out for work. At that time, we called "going out" "*liucuan*" or we would say grab the ones who flee (*zhua liucuan*). Right now, if you need a little money, everyone goes out.

In the conversation above, I leave in my question because even though I ask something totally off topic, Zhu returns again to her husband's positioning within the village and his family. Circling back to the issue of material poverty, and linking the material conditions to an explanation of why she and her husband needed to migrate for work.

She approaches the displacement from a variety of different voices (Bakhtin 2010). She asks rhetorically, "who knew it was like that?" and responds to her own question "I didn't know..." This evidences her own stance and lack of culpability in the decision to migrate and the location of her new house. Later, by invoking the voice of a collective: "we called going out, '*liucuan*,'" she provides her assessment of migration. The term *liucuan* can be translated "to flee hither and thither" and has the sense of scattering. It is often used in reference to bandits or criminal in hiding. Instead of "*chuqu*" (going out) which is the contemporary term for the now ubiquitous rural-to-urban migration and which contains little moral condemnation, the term "*liucuan*" reveals how collective-era migration was thought of as criminal activity, enforced by the household registration and ration system. Migrants leaving their home villages were labeled deserters of the collective project. For food and housing, they had to rely on black market goods.

Later, Zhu tells me just how demoralizing the migration experience was when she recounts that the family had to live with a Japanese woman who was, at that time, a relative's

wife (they have since divorced). Zhu recounts in disgust and laughter that the woman would eat raw egg and rice. Her tone recalls a clear sense of discomfort.²⁴ Japanese people were (and still are) reviled and hated reminders of war. Living with a Japanese woman would have indicated their outsider status within the Changchun community. Ethnic others and migrants were categorically lumped together as individuals who did not conform to the local political ideals and legal confines of the household registration system.

It is difficult to parcel out Zhu's feelings towards her husband and her feelings about the material poverty and spatial displacement that occurred as a result of the match. In both sections of the narrative above, she merges the two together. While most of her complaints feature the conditions of poverty that the young couple experienced, it is also salient that she says very little about her husband. This is not surprising because a number of my other informants often have the same attitudes towards their partners—one of indifference or resignation. However, saying little about one's husband also indicates that there was nothing very positive—or very negative—about the man's character, since at several key points in the narrative she could have provided correctives or an aside which assessed his behavior. This silence is another kind of affect key which provides a clue into her feelings about being a wife.

Mother

Until now, I have pointed out how Zhu has used linguistic tools to convey her feelings towards marriage and tragedy in her childhood. As I showed in the first section, temporal sequencing is a vital linguistic tool to signal key events for the remainder of her life. In the second section, I examined the ways that her stance towards material poverty and displacement

²⁴ In fact, she also asked if I ate raw eggs like the Japanese. An interesting link to my own foreigner and outsider status.

are indicated within her speech. In both these narrations, Grandmother Zhu gives context and background for her present situation. How and why she lives in this particular house, with this particular family is understood only with the proper placement of critical events in her life. Becoming orphaned and marrying a poor man are central to her experience of suffering.

In the next two sections, Grandmother Zhu discusses bodily pain. A quality shared in both of these sections, which is more emphasized in the second, is a rumination of pain. I use the word rumination because of the frequent recurrence of the word “pain” (*teng*) and the ways in which these two narrations both circle back to the issues of pain. In both these sections, I’ve highlighted the statements of pain in bold. Attuning to these repetitions can highlight the enduring and persistent nature of bodily pain and facilitate understanding of the links between social structure and individual dysphoric experience.

Z; I had so many children, and didn’t even have a grandmother or grandfather, (they) didn’t even set eyes upon grandfather; it was that way,
There was just one older daughter that saw him.
→ he was two and a half and her grandmothers already (*dou*) had died *le*
Seven, [unintelligible]—seven children

E; seven children?

Z; Two children, would be in charge of the stove.
Do you know, you pull- you pull *ma*?

E; okay

Z; With a windmill; you pull—you pull-- this kind of thing.
Two children: one put fire wood and one pulled the windmill
Once my labor (in the fields) was finished *le* I rushed nervously back because I also had to make food.
And I also had to make steamed sorghum²⁵ bread (*wowotou*), so I had two children start the cooking fire.

²⁵ Making sorghum bread versus wheat bread is a significant indicator of poverty. White wheat flour is considered the best flour to make bread. Course cornmeal or sorghum meal bread used in *wowotou* appears in many of my informants accounts of deprivation and hunger.

No matter who was supposed to do it, they were unwilling
You tell one, you yell, she says he, he says she, ((laughter))
The two were in on it together! ((laughter))

E; Of course it was like that, [they blamed each other!

Z; ((laughing)) [I-- I returned from the fields and tried to grab two of them.

E; Could they do it? Could they manage the stove?

Z; As soon as they saw it, they could do it.

One added the firewood, one would pull the windmill ((pause))

→ To make clothes (we) always (*dou*) stayed up late stay up late *le*.

Do you know New Years?

During spring festival, your family all must have new clothes to wear.

In your own family, the kids all must have (new clothes). Each child must have two pairs of cotton shoes

E; [oh

Z; [Un. One pair. Two pairs.

When it was cold, (we could) start to wear (both pairs?). They would wear them black going to school. During the New Year's time, we would have to make them all new [unintelligible] making them by hand, always (caused) neck **pain**.

On top of that, I endured pain (*haiyou shouguode teng*)

[unintelligible] that is, my leg **hurts**, my back **hurts**, my arm **hurts**

On top of that, I endured pain (*hai you shouguode teng*)

You couldn't complete a month (after childbirth) before (*dou*) having to start making shoes, [[unintelligible]

E; [you all made shoes?

Z; At that time, there were no old people *le*.

On this side- my in-laws- there were also no old people *le*. Who was there who could help you make things, *a. Keshi*?

E; *Jiushi*.

Z; (Everyone's) children wear new clothes, ours also had to wear new (clothes). We had to stay up all night making them.

E; You had to stay up all night. Eh.

Z; Un. [unintelligible] **Enduring that *le* (*shouguole*), my back hurt *le*.**

That lead to (my) poor eyesight now *le*. (My) hands and neck also **ache**, (my) back also **[hurts]**.

E; [of course!

Z; Truly tiring, *keshi, ne*. Ay, there's no way around it.

In this section of transcript, Zhu utilizes the sentence structure *doule* to indicate temporal significance twice. In the first instance, she highlights a loss for her children—the death of grandparents. Yet, it becomes clear that even though the loss is framed from the perspective of her children, the real pain is felt in her heavy domestic burden—“I myself finished bringing them up.” In this time period, the list of household demands is exhaustive: weaving cloth and sewing clothing, making dinner and tending the stove. The “stoves of the past” were large cobb stoves which usually required two people to tend. One person would feed the fire below and make sure the temperature was correct. The other person would fan the flames with a windmill-like device to prevent the fire from going out. Though it is not unusual for this task to be given to children, the household management required for Zhu to tend seven children and cook food after a full day's labor in the collective fields is grueling. While she humorously recounts how her children would each ask one another to perform the task, her narrative is still framed in a lament of the lack of social support she had at home. Her main complaint is that there was no “old people” to help complete these domestic tasks.

Earlier in this dissertation, I pointed out that during the collective era, domestic responsibilities shifted to older women because of the requirements for young women to labor in the collective farms. Women like Zhu whose in-laws had died, however, faced a double burden of household chores along with labor. At the time, cloth was not available to rural people on the ration system. Women would harvest cotton, dry it, spin it into thread and weave it into cloth. Then they would use the cloth to make shoes and clothing. Only occasionally could they afford

to purchase cloth. Many women that I spoke to recounted the arduous process of spinning, weaving, and sewing (c.f. Hershatter 2011). My host mother had saved her loom and showed me how to weave cloth in plaid patterns. She still made shoes for her grandson who lived more than 16 hours away. During the collective era, sewing shoes and clothes for a large family would have been an enormous undertaking. Without the support of a mother-in-law, Grandmother Zhu's domestic load was extremely heavy, taxing her body even until the present day.

The second instance of using temporal framing (*dou/le*) marks the transition to a discussion of making clothes and shoes for her children for the New Year's holiday. Staying up late, sewing each child new clothes and two pairs of shoes is a significant burden for her. She identifies this task as part of an origin story (Kleinman 1988a) for her physical pain located in her back, neck, and arm. She identifies these physical pains somewhat arbitrarily in the narrative, first listing: leg, back, and arm, and second: back, eyes, hands, and again back. This contributes to an overall description that her pain spirals through the body, or a sense that everything hurt.

She repeats the phrase *haiyou shouguo le teng* which I have translated as "on top of that, I endured pain" but *shouguo le* also means receiving or accepting something, to be subject to suffering, to stand, bear or endure. This sentence could alternately be translated, "in addition to all of that labor, I was also subjected to pain" or "also, I had to bear pain." By using the phrase *shouguo le*, Grandmother Zhu points to the additional burden of her own bodily sensations, as if her body was just one more thing on a long list of things she must manage.

Laborer

When her husband and family moved to the township after returning from Changchun, Zhu joined into a work brigade that was assigned to construct the road through the township--

now a major provincial-level thoroughfare connecting townships to the county and urban center. However, she injured her leg during the difficult manual labor which affected her ability to work. This recollection comes after I have brought peaches for us to share. She recalls seeing peach trees on the way to see the doctor for her leg and I ask her how her leg is doing now.

Z; (My leg) doesn't **hurt** now,
It's not **painful**, (I) can't bear heavy lo[ads.

E; [You can't bear heavy loads.

Z; Un. Three hundred *kuai* of money.

E; Ya?

Z; Three hundred *kuai* is a heavy load.

E; Oh. I see, is it that bad *ba*? Hhh.

Z; En. They used a knife, a scraping needle, and also an iron. They dug.

E; Dug?

Z; D[ug.

E; [Ya! Was it painful?

Z; If they don't use **pain** medicine and use a needle to scrape you, how is that not **painful**?

E; Wow. Used a needle. A needle (ie. Acupuncture), right?

Z; En. [unintelligible] I've gone many times for treatment {...} To treat this leg it cost 1000.

E; 1000?

Z; To treat the other you need 600 more, *ne*. First, he said to take medicine and to go see someone for that medical issue. Take some medicine, find some money.

Again, grab ten *kuai* worth of money and once again spend 300 *kuai*. ((pause))

I (lagged?) behind my team. I couldn't work the fields. (It was enough to make food.?)
Keshi, ne?

E; *Jiushi, ne.*

- Z; You know—I also have another—another arm. This arm *ba* ((pointing to her left arm)) gives this arm help ((pointing to her right arm)), but this arm still couldn't do it *a* ((laughter))
This arm gives the other [help]
- E; [Right, aya, that is really difficult to bear. On top of that, that part also hurts. Aya.]
- Z; My-my- this hand, it can't do stuff. It just does, it goes with the other (*gei ta zuo*). It's like it's helping the other one ((laughter)).
Really. The left hand is not as convenient as the right. ((laughter))
- E; Of course *a!* the left hand is not [as convenient as the right
Z; [ah... no matter what you do it's not as comfortable
That time was still “*santong*” (meaning collectivization), this place was still bitter [unintelligible]
My leg was the same way. ((pause)) Ah. We did this, would you be able to help? No matter what, (there was) also no help, also couldn't embrace (*lou*) *le* (my) kids. My kids—handling everything required all my effort, *ne*.
They couldn't (earn work points?), if they went here or there they would make a mistake, *keshi, ne?*
- E; *Jiushi*
- Z; ((unintelligible)) Kids went to school, you say, go to work-the family's kids.
→ (I had to) handle everything (*dou*) at the house *le*, also had to tend the fields, *keshi a?*
((pause)) take all the kids {...}
Pain, I cried *le*. Pain. [unintelligible] for a long time (*fubanshang*) ((unintelligible))
- E; Has your leg been cured?
- Z; In the end, it wasn't cured. In the end, it wasn't cured. For one cure it costs 300. For the other leg it's more than 1000
- E; Ya!
- Z; It hasn't changed yet.
- E; It hasn't changed yet.
- Z; Slowly, slowly, I can manage ((unintelligible))
You can't earn enough money to spend and make do. *Keshi [ne?*
- E; [Zhenshi

- Z; In one day which spans until evening, you can't even earn one penny. If you still need --
With what can you cure? You eat medicine, drink (medicine?) [[unintelligible]
- E; [ou, right.
- Z; You have to manage, if you don't take the medicine it's not a big deal
Earn, don't earn (money), it doesn't totally **hurt**.
- E; You can endure it (*neng shoudeliao*)?
- Z; En. Once the night has set, you lay on the bed, you are so sleepy **you have to hold out**
This way, the leg **hurts**. Put it that way, the leg also **hurts** [unintelligible] Then you are
not tired, then you cannot lay down ((laughter))
Pain, pain, pain, pain (*teng*).
No one could call me to work. My kids couldn't call me to work.
If you don't work, will there be (work points)? (I had to understand the anxiety of
idleness?) I moved a small bench. Sat on the small bench giving out cold noodles. That
piece, at that time. I gave them all out well. Sitting on a small bench. Sitting there.
If the work point would drop, then they would drop. If they didn't drop, then I could
watch. When it's not too hot, when it's not raining, I can sit on the bench, even a child
can do it.

This section of transcript, like the memory of mothering, contains repeated references to bodily pain and endurance of difficult labor. There are several points of ambiguity within the narrative; the fee for the treatment, for example, changes several times. It's unclear how badly her leg hurts in the present day, or whether the pain that she experiences while laying down is a past recollection or a daily difficulty. This is not the first time that Grandmother Zhu has told me about her leg. I have heard several versions of this story over the time that I visited with her, this version is the longest taped recording of the story. All of the versions include a reference to hard manual labor on the now widened provincial road. All also include some kind of joking about the repeated, enduring nature of the pain.

In the transcript above, the section about her inability to use her arm is significant. To me, it recalls a kind of corporeal rebellion and a frustration that her left arm could not do the work of the right. This imbalance is directly rooted to the experience of pain, the bitterness of the place,

and the lack of social support for domestic and laboring tasks. Because she cannot labor to earn money, she cannot buy medicine, and because she cannot buy medicine she cannot earn money. Consequently, she becomes caught in a kind of cyclical problem which ends only in refusal of the labor.²⁶

In another version of this story, she recounts with great detail how the road was dug by hand, how laborers put large stones into baskets which were carried by two people, and how the team used stone rollers to flatten the pavement by hand. All of the labor on the road required enormous amounts of human effort. In order to earn work points, which were exchanged for staple foods of rice, corn and wheat, one had to put in a certain amount of laboring hours. Extra income could be earned by running a sideline business, which is what I believe Zhu is referring to when she talks about handing out cold noodles. However, as it is clear in the narration, running the noodle stand was significantly less important than working with the team on the road, both for social status and for work points.

In addition, her domestic tasks also loom large in the narration. Handling the children and domestic tasks were a significant burden—as we saw in the sections above, but added to that burden was the demands of her labor requirements. Because of the injury, she cannot carry her children and because there are no childcare provisions for laborers; she must face the added problem of caring for them while handling all the other domestic and laboring tasks.

There is a sense throughout these two narrations that pain is an additional burden to the already steep demands. Using the words *zhichi* (hold out), and *shuo* (endure), Grandmother Zhu conveys the sense of pain being both a part of a long list of sufferings and also separate from those sufferings because it also informs and invades many aspects of her life. Sleeping, for

²⁶ Rural China established the rural health care cooperative in 2006 which provided low cost treatment to all rural residents. Before the establishment of this cooperative however, access to medicine and trained doctors was very limited and not included in the work point system.

example, a daily habit of rest, is interrupted by pain. Laboring in the fields, working with the team, and her domestic chores all are influenced by the pain in her body.

Remembering Bitterness

How and why we remember certain things and forget others is central to the ways in which we both imagine and present ourselves and our environments. The act of remembering is a culturally constituted activity (Antze and Lambek 1996). Remembering dysphoric experiences, in particular, can be a critical part of well-being as Doug Hollan writes, “although people will always carry with them the psycho-bodily signature of their past experience, these signatures are affected by the cultural idioms of distress into which they are woven and from which psycho-bodily attention is channeled and given meaning (or not)” (Hollan 2004, 63). Grandmother Zhu is narrating her experience through very specific cultural tropes of suffering, and at the same time, she is making a claim about the significance of dysphoric experience that cannot be sublimated within a generic cultural model.

Rural Chinese women, as Gail Herschatter’s *The Gender of Memory* (2011) examines, tell stories about their history that fit into a specific models of sacrifice that are circulated through revolutionary and post-revolutionary ideology. How to be a model worker? How to participate in various political campaigns? How to raise a family? These kinds of questions dominate older women’s accounts of the past because their tales are always a performative tool to reflect on oneself within the social context (Labov and Fanshel 1977, 21). Zhu was not unique in her repeated assertions that she had experienced excessive hardship. In fact, almost every informant, even young women—who are thought to largely be the recipients of improved economic conditions—asserted that they experienced adversity. Stories featuring hunger,

deprivation, and loss formed the bulk of villagers' reminiscences of the past. In portraying the self as especially pitiful, older women conform to a demand to understand the self as a sacrificial part of a great revolution and social experiment of China.

In remembering past trouble, rural people are, in part, drawing from a cultural imaginary propagated in part by the Chinese party-state. To suffer for the revolution was considered the highest ethical good. The attitudes of altruism, endurance, and selfless acts of nationalism were honored and encouraged by the Party. A profound example of the encouragement of these attributes is found in the memorializing of Lei Feng, a young martyr of the People's Liberation Army. His diary was published in 1963 and became the basis for a number of propaganda campaigns which encouraged individuals to sacrifice their lives and bodily comfort for the sake of national progress (Farquhar 2002).

Vera Schwarcz argues that personal suffering was also utilized by the Chinese government to "enforce amnesia about unspeakable portions of one's own history" (1997, 126). In ritualized "speak bitterness" sessions, older members of the community told tales of woe and sorrow to indirectly praise the contemporary situation. By drawing attention to the bitterness of the past, the community could frame their current sufferings in a meta-narrative of progress which ultimately placed the responsibility for progress on the actions of the party-state. In her analysis, Schwarcz notes the make-up of the Chinese word "*ku*." Alternately bitterness and sadness, *ku* 苦 is made of the radicals grass (艹) and ancient (古), and conveys a "notion of old hurt grown terribly sour over time...this appreciation for bitterness at the heart of suffering is key to all Chinese expressions of grief" (1997, 121).

Yet, Schwarcz fails to note that *ku* also has a healthful, positive valence as well, even without the coopting of suffering for political means. For example, eating bitter melon is thought

to be beneficial to health, children and elderly are often required to eat it to nourish the body. Additionally, *neng chi ku* (the ability to eat bitterness and endure suffering) is a quality that was highly regarded by my neighbors and interlocutors. While suffering has been utilized by the Chinese Communist Party to support a grand-narrative of progress, suffering is also a central part of the local moral code of the village. The ability to endure suffering, to work hard, and to perform heavy labor are all important to the ways in which villagers understand themselves and their community. Especially in contrast to urbanites, intellectuals, and individuals who do not contribute to the family economy, rural people felt that their ability to withstand hardship and work was an important marker of identity. Suffering centers in narratives of the self prominently, not only because everyone truly did suffer, but also because suffering was a quality that was socially desirable. This was politically beneficial to the national narrative, and it is locally productive as well.

In a different context, Jason Throop (2008) examines the role of suffering in the South Pacific community of Yap. Drawing from Levinas (1998) and Elaine Scarry's (1985) reflections on pain, Throop argues that narratives help shape pain from a meaningless experience to a virtuous moral engagement. Throop points out that suffering has value within the Yapese community through the connection to others (2008, 176). This positive valence of "suffering-for" allows individuals experiencing pain to transform an otherwise useless and meaningless tragedy into a purposeful event. Throop outlines the multitude of ways that Yapese culture constructs enduring pain as a positive moral attitude, including laboring without food, enduring medical treatment and surviving war injuries.

Within the rural Chinese community, there are a number of overlaps to the Yapese admiration of pain and suffering which can be seen within Grandmother Zhu's narrative. The

refusal to see optimism within her experience, for example, when I ask her if she had any happiness—“what happiness was there? A child’s father has died *le*, gone to serve as a laborer *le*, a child’s father and mother both have died *le*.” The repeated references to enduring pain are all within a domestic context, leading to the sense that her suffering was a virtuous sacrifice for the good of her family. The origin story of her injuries is rooted in the experience of performing a long list of tiresome duties thrust upon her by the demands of the collective system and the fate of being an orphan, marrying a poor man and having many children. In each of these narratives, her pain is part of being a virtuous daughter, wife, mother, and laborer.

Yet something else, beyond a triumphal sacrifice continually prevents her story from fully fitting into an idealized version of individual martyrdom. Instead of a model worker and contributor to the household, Zhu, is—at multiple points in her narrative—a failure. As an orphan, she has no family to care for her. As a migrant, she faces the legal and ethical condemnation of the community. As a mother, she is nervous and overworked again without support of older family members. And finally, as a laborer, she must excuse herself from labor because of a persistent injury. In each of these accounts, she points to the inability of her suffering to become integrated into the meta-narrative of national progress.

Douglas Hollan (1994) posits that there are three distinct reasons why an individual’s experiences of dysphoria might not be smoothly encapsulated in ready-made cultural idioms. First, he argues that there may be a disconnect between personal experience and available models and labels, such as maladies which defy diagnosis. Second, he posits that certain experiences are particularly resistant to the imposition of meaning and order, for example intense grief, trauma, or atrocity. Finally, Hollan argues that individuals may fail at using cultural idioms

to express personal experiences because of an inability to manipulate symbolic resources.

Hollan's article largely addresses the last point by drawing out a metaphor of cultural "work."

While I do not discount the possibility that Grandmother Zhu may not always adroitly utilize cultural symbols to her advantage, I am drawn to the first and second reasons for the failure of Grandmother Zhu's experiences to fit within a national and cultural narrative.

Grandmother Zhu not only experiences acute periods of pain, but the nature of her suffering is long-term and chronic. The confluence of loss, poverty, demoralization, and physical symptoms can find little fit in available psychological and cultural models of suffering. Throughout the narrative, Grandmother Zhu struggles to sort out what is simply a product of generational fate and what is specific to her own experiences of suffering. The sentences below all appear within the context of narrating her persistent pain and limited options due to material poverty:

Now that I think about it, I can't dare to think about how I lived until now. That's just our generation.

In any case, just resign to fate (*renming*) *ba*, I don't have a good fate. There's no way around it really.

Aya, we lived, but I'm not even sure how we lived. I didn't starve to death, older people (in my family) didn't starve to death, the kids didn't starve to death. But there was no other way—If you read my fortune on my palm (*shouming*), my life is very long {...} my life is full of trouble (*naodehen*).

Using the idea of fate and generational experience, these statements all show the ways in which Grandmother Zhu is also attempting to answer how and why she underwent so much suffering while the current generation (and even—she points out—the people just 10 years younger than her) have access to much better material conditions and medical care. By turning to fate and the inability to control human fortune, she is also stating that misery is not always part of a progression narrative.

This sheer purposelessness of her suffering is most clear in the last narration of her experience as a laborer. Depicted an unending search for treatment, the leg pain resurfaces despite her best attempts at ameliorate the pain until she finally sits down, acquiescing to her bodies failure to perform its task. When first revisiting this transcript, I was tempted to interpret her refusal to work and sitting down as a kind of triumphant rebellion over the unfair work point system. Yet, recalling again her tone of voice and general affect, I can find little victory in her sitting down. Rather there is resignation, anxiety, and repeated chronic pain, which despite modern medicine now accessible through the rural health cooperative, continues to haunt her days. Her narrative is a rumination of pain, not a search for pains meaning. In her recollection, there is no plot which traces the problem and resolution, but a continual circling back to the difficulties which informed her entire life.

Conclusion

In the opening to this chapter, I presented a puzzle—that is, why would Grandmother Zhu deny herself the fruits of modernity in the form of a house with air conditioning, consumer experiences of shopping, and a trip to the ocean? In order to understand—though only in part—this denial of urban life, I have examined a series of narrations about Grandmother Zhu’s early experiences. In these narrations, I have pointed to the repeated references to pain, anguish, and tragedy, which I have argued are a rumination of dysphoria which while drawing from national and cultural ideals of virtuous suffering, also fail to be incorporated within the meta-narrative of national progress and domestic sacrifice. These narrations, as I have presented them, show themselves to be a series of laments which center on the questions of why an obedient and moral person should still undergo such trouble.

Veena Das's research with families living after the partition of India and Pakistan explores how ordinary life, even a life lived in mourning can be a monument to one's personal history. In several volumes Das argues that agency occurs from a "descent into the ordinary" rather than a transcendence into the extraordinary (Das 1996, 2007; Das et al. 2014). Das reflects on the ways that memory is a kind of spider's web, reaching out to always anchor traumatic events in ordinary acts. Since violence has occurred in the ordinary, overwhelming everydayness, then it is a profound act of courage to return to places effected by the original offence. She argues that continuity of dwelling and relationship "give everyday life a quality of something recovered" (2007, 101). Restoration, according to Das, comes in momentary instances in which achieving an ordinary life is a monumental victory.

I find Das's reflections of these everyday struggles relevant to Grandmother Zhu's narration. Pain and loss continually invade Grandmother Zhu's present moment. Eating bread recalls the loss of good flour in years past. Chewing on fruit, which causes pain in her teeth and her stomach, awakens memories of hunger. The movement of sitting down, and the slight twinge she feels in her leg performing the motion, reminds her of the persistent injury which removed her from laboring during the collective era. Cooking eggs and peppers and sharing it with her anthropologist-cum-friend evokes the memory of rushing home to feed a family of seven, her children arguing about who would start the stove.

It is in this context that Zhu's memories resurface. For her, it seems the trouble of the past is not only simply a part of being old, or simply a part of a generational fate. Memorializing that trouble is also an important act of agency which simultaneously upholds and destabilizes the party-state's meta-narrative of progression and development. In continuing to recount periods of trouble with a specific emphasis upon their purposelessness, Grandmother Zhu provides an

important critique of the sacrificial narrative. Can the suffering of so many actually be ameliorated by the current period of comforts and prosperity? Is her own generation's sacrifice, physical hardship, and loss made up for the fact that the generation below her has not experienced such trials? To give a definite answer would, I think, fail to capture the full ambiguity of her remembrance, and therefore miss the complexities inherent within Zhu's illocution (DiGiacomo 1992). And yet I find moments of victory in Zhu's everyday life. The "new ordinary" of modern rural life, seems, to me more of an achievement than an embrace of urban consumerism.

In Becker, Beyene, and Ken's (2000) work on memory in Cambodian refugee populations, they argue that embodied distress is a way for individuals to continually reassert their agency over a traumatic event. To continually remember the past, especially through embodied sensations of pain, is part of the ways in which historic events impart upon the present (c.f. Kirmayer 1992). They assert, "remembering, despite the pain it causes, constitutes political activity that protests injustice and inhumanity" (Becker, Beyene, Ken 2000, 341). Memory, seen in this way, is an act of agentive unforgetting (see also Langer 1991; 1997).

Memory, as indefinite, subconscious, and unpredictable, continually impresses upon the present in ways which force us to reconsider our understanding of history. By refusing to allow her suffering to become sublimated in a national narrative of progress, or a cultural model of virtuosity, Grandmother Zhu's invites a reflection on the hidden contributions of rural poor women, which include—among other things—arduous domestic tasks, agricultural labor, and extreme hardship. The strength of her narrative is that it demands a recognition of suffering, even when that suffering is one of failure or fate, not of virtuous sacrifice.

In this chapter, I take a linguistically-informed approach to examining Grandmother Zhu's narrative in order to point out the subtle linguistic tools utilized in her narrative stance-taking. Although I was not trained specifically as a linguistic-anthropologist, I find attention to the pragmatics of speech which indicate Grandmother Zhu's feelings have been a critical tool in exploring the significance of the memories in her daily life.

I discussed Zhu's narratives as a continual rumination of suffering. I pointed to the ways that Zhu makes a claim to suffering's meaninglessness in her life. In doing so, Grandmother Zhu rejects a meta-narrative of progress or theodicy—which Levinas argues gives pain meaningful purpose (Levinas 1998, 163). Yet at the same time, there is something else to note within the chapter, which is my part in both the collected narrations and the writing of this reflection. Empathy, or in Levinas' words, "the inter-human perspective," offers new meaning to pain.

In anthropological research, we are engaged in listening to life-stories which frequently contain unspeakable acts of violence, trauma, and suffering. How we respond to these stories is a critical act, not only of scholarship, but also of moral engagement with the world. Levinas' writings speak directly to the ways in which the "inter-human perspective" facilitates a moral engagement with each other at the end of theodicy (Simon 2009). When meta-narratives of progress and hope fail, bonds of suffering facilitate a deeper human connection as individuals take responsibility for each other's experience. Such an engagement is frightening, especially for scholars who engage in the lives of others only to write about them in climate-controlled, resource-sucking, and comfort-driven spaces of the urban. How to take responsibility for what Grandmother Zhu has told me?

When I left the village in August of 2015, I said goodbye to Grandmother Zhu. I brought her fruit and bread, and I sat and chatted with her. When it was time to go, she insisted on

walking me to the main road, holding my hand. 'Will I ever see you again?' she said with tears in her eyes. 'I am so old. I will be dead before you come back.' I began crying as well, promising that I would return as soon as I could (I was still naïve and thought that I would quickly finish my dissertation). As I pedaled my bike away from her, I thought of how she had become like family to me, forgiving my frequent language and cultural errors, laughing and sharing jokes and enjoying everyday life with each other. I hope that I have, if even for a brief moment, taken responsibility for Grandmother Zhu. Maybe by watching hours of Korean dramas together, handing out so many pieces of candy and hot dogs at her corner store, and playing with her beloved dog, I have given her a small reprieve from the weight of history. By sharing her story and her life with me, Grandmother Zhu's suffering became meaningful in my own narrative. I hope too that through writing, that this meaning will be shared.

Conclusion

The Intergenerational Family in Rural China

In this dissertation, I have examined the role that intergenerational family members play in critical periods of vulnerability along the life-course. In each chapter, I have distilled a central conflict or collaboration within intergenerational life. In the first chapter, I discuss the role of identity practices and rural experience that has been circumscribed by larger discursive devaluations of rural space. Yet, instead of disparaging these boundaries, my rural informants seemed to embrace them and humorously utilize the characterizations of dirtiness and backwardness to their own ends, for example by cooking on cobb stoves instead of propane, or by pointing out the discomfort and immorality of urban spaces. Chapter One has shown the importance of not only living generations but also the connections with ancestral tombs which are visible in the corn and wheat fields and are honored with regular ritual celebrations.

In the second chapter, I argue that the well-intentioned targeting of left-behind children as a critical population for care and policy concern is rooted in a nuclear family model which ignores and even condemns grandparental care, placing blame and culpability on migrant parents and particularly migrant mothers. Tracing the more than 1,500-year-old history of Chinese-state interventions targeting family, I point out that it is theoretically fruitful to consider the family as one of the major institutions of political concern. In contrast to European contexts where governmentality has targeted individual responsibility and self-policing, in China there exists a long history of utilizing family reform as a way to remake and reposition the nation. In giving three examples which defy neat definitions of “left-behind” status, I also argue that rural families

deal with migration in nuanced ways, accepting separated living arrangements as part of modern life while making real attempts to care for one another across generations and distance.

My third chapter makes the case for considering how shifts in the intergenerational contract impact the self-assessments and well-being of grandmothers who are now expected to take on major responsibility for childcare in their late age. I take a generational-cohort model, considering how today's grandmothers were the new wave of female agricultural workers during the collective era and ask how the state policies which pushed for women's empowerment and wage-labor participation reconfigured the ideal sense of personhood and self. Adopting a tripartite model of personhood, I point to the community and relational values of having children and argue that even when they knew it would mean more work for themselves, grandmothers still valued the continuation of their family line and celebrated the birth of children. Relatedly, I also examine the role of labor in old age, asking how elders, now faced with better health futures and longer life expectancies deal with moral questions of idleness and labor.

In the fourth chapter, I describe four scenes of everyday socialization and point out the intergenerational project of inculcating children into local moral ideals. I describe the difficulties and contingencies faced by both parents and grandparents in this shared project of teaching ethical attitudes and particularly point out the uncertainties in inculcating moral ideals of goodness when goodness is also simultaneously culturally constructed as an inherent dispositional attitude not amenable to direct instruction. In reviewing the literature on parenting, I characterize two different styles of socialization: a traditional approach of indirect learning and a modern approach of self-reflexive parenting. By investigating the everyday dramas of parenting within four intergenerational families, I expose the various overlaps and

inconsistencies between these two styles and argue that both parents and grandparents draw from both direct instruction and indirect modeling of appropriate ethical behaviors.

In Chapter Five, my investigation points out that the marriage of one's son represents a new period of vulnerability to women's lives and that in response to younger women's increasing power within the family, middle-aged women take a variety of strategies to continue to influence their son's marital decisions. The same factors which have strengthened conjugal bonds in Chinese society have also caused instability; the increasing mobility of younger women however, is born by the immobility of the older generation which shoulders the burden of childcare in the wake of a divorced or escaped daughter-in-law. Tactics to bolstering their position within the family are undertaken by mothers of adult sons, including investing emotional and practical resources in hopes of reciprocated future care and encouraging their sons to marry local girls who would be less likely to leave the family with a childcare burden. Notably, state policies which attempt to limit marriage at early ages are ignored by rural parents who instead prefer to see their sons married before they create attachments with other migrants from different areas. Without robust child support laws, local parents have devised their own strategies for protecting their old age household labor and ensuring their future receipt of filial piety.

Chapter Six continues the examination of filial piety from the perspective of two older adults who feel as if they have not received enough respect from their children. I detail the narrative work involved to justify and explain their current predicaments. In Grandmother Fong's case, I argue that she sidesteps the filial ideal altogether, instead focusing on her sacrifice of internal desires to the Christian God. In Teacher Lu's case, I argue that he explains his son's lack of filial behavior (expressly to have children) within a modern moral order which sees progress and the raising of "human quality" as over and above traditional appeals for continuity.

In the seventh and final chapter, I take a person-centered and linguistically informed approach to examine the narrative construction of suffering and dysphoric experience of one Grandmother Zhu. Tracing her emotive use of pragmatics, I reveal the ambivalence she holds towards dysphoric experiences in the past. Instead of seeing her suffering as a part of national progress, she instead paints her experience as one of failure and pain. Utilizing Levinas' idea of meaningful suffering, I argue that by denying meaning to her grief, Grandmother Zhu makes a powerful political claim on the value of dysphoric memory as a critique of the meaningless suffering of her generation.

Taken together, these chapters paint a complicated portrait of contemporary family life in rural China. I focus on three distinct periods of vulnerability along the life-course and argue that experiences of family members within these periods reveal the various conflicts and collaborations of multiple generations. My investigation reflects the liabilities within 1) childhood and the process of socialization for young children, 2) marriage, which is the expansion of the family unit and a combination of two families, and 3) late age and the concerns about caretaking and receipt of filial piety for the oldest generation.

Most of this dissertation is from the viewpoint of older women and I point out the central responsibility of grandmothers and older women within the intergenerational family, arguing that they play an important role in the socialization of the next generation, the determination of son's marriage partners, and maintaining the economic viability of the extended family. I do so intentionally in order to raise attention to their contributions to the rural family since grandmothers have largely been ignored by policy and state-interventions. As some of the first women to experience the twin demands of wage and household labor, their voice is critical to considering the gendered and generational boundaries of care and work within the family.

On Making Moral Persons in the Intergenerational Family

Legislative concerns paint the intergenerational family, and specifically grandmother care as a significant liability to the modernizing project of the Chinese party-state. Many studies worry that grandparents lack modern parenting skills and their inability to encourage an appropriate moral attitude to education will lead to an entire generation of children into hooliganism and social failure. Poor school performance, internet addiction, and mental health concerns of loneliness and depression are just some of the perils facing children raised by their grandparents in the wake of parental migration.

In my research, I have tried to combat this disparaging stereotype of grandparent guardians by fleshing out the larger contexts of socialization in rural China. Both in households where parents are present and in households headed by grandparents, there is significant concern about children's behaviors and moral attitudes. Raising any child and inculcating them into appropriate personhood is already a project fraught with vulnerabilities (c.f. Wikan 2001). Guardians in rural China are not oblivious to the possibilities which threaten the youngest generation's success in moral learning. Yet, as I point out with the example of Grandmother Yu and her conflict with her daughter-in-law, Xiulan, grandparents and parents might have very different goals for what successful morality looks like. For Xiulan, success included mastering classic treaties of Confucian morality and studying well in school. However, for Grandmother Yu, success could be measured by financial savvy, buying the correct shoes at a low price. Xiulan, who returned to the village only once per year, complained about her mother-in-law's lack of education, thusly echoing a national narrative that decries the older generation's inability

to confer classic ethics and foundational morality to young children. But the reality is actually much more complicated.

In the same case, for instance, the entire village praised the ability of Lijuan, the middle-school boy who temporarily left school to work, to save over 2,000 yuan from his migrant wages. They credited this financial shrewdness and filial behavior of presenting the earnings to his father to Grandmother Yu's capable (*benshi*) example of deal-finding and budgetary management. In this example, Lijuan still fits into a local ethnotheory of moral goodness, demonstrating the appropriate filial attitude of both economically productive and emotionally attached. Xiulan, however is more concerned with his *future* productivity than the enactment of this kind of filial behavior before he has yet graduated from compulsory school. Her concern is that in the highly competitive economic market of contemporary China you cannot find a decent factory job without basic education and worries that the focus on present productivity distracts from the cost-benefits of educational returns. Empirical studies may side with Xiulan's perspective, as recent work has shown that returns to education are higher in rural areas lacking skilled workers (De Brauw and Rozelle 2007), and most likely Lijuan's continued school enrolment will translate to higher earnings in the future.

The temporal focus of each guardian profoundly influences their attitudes and assessments of "good" behaviors for the middle school boy and their expectations for daily conduct shape the socialization process. This is an important point when considering the larger characterization of a "changing China." Recalling the poem composed by Auntie Tang who lamented that "everything has changed," the reality of intergenerational socialization is an important corrective to this sweeping statement. Obedience is an inherently conservative force

which ties the moral behaviors of the youngest generation to the models encouraged, both directly and subconsciously, by their older guardians.

Throughout this dissertation, I have shown very real ways in which grandparental actions foster emotional connection and inspire fidelity to extended kinship relationships, encouraging feelings of rootedness, comfort, and care. Many grandparents continue to worry about their own future support, inculcating a filial attitude within their grandchildren is one of their primary goals, even if this project has mixed success. The contribution of grandparenting should be not only recognized, but also celebrated.

To me, such a recognition cannot come without real policy change and a cultural shift in the ways in which grandparenting is portrayed. While a number of analysis have encouraged the improvement of early childcare services, a few projects also try to include grandparent caretakers as important players in early learning initiatives (Burkitt 2016). It is my hope that by understanding the family as an intergenerational unit, future policies can escape the nuclear family bias and applaud the real contributions of grandparents to the raising of the next generation.

The Obligation to Care

What holds a family together across the boundaries of space, gender, and generation? What makes one feel obligated to another family member given the differences of generational experience? What kinds of emotions are meaningful as connectors or disrupters of family unity? And likewise, what are the expectations for each member's contributions to the household?

In the beginning of this dissertation, I made a case for understanding emotions and economics as deeply intertwined with each other. Money and feeling can draw a family together

into a shared project of improving the collective benefit. While at the same time, the disagreement in how family members should contribute both economically or emotionally can also threaten to disrupt mutual bonds of kinship. For the average rural family, affected in a myriad of ways by internal migration and rural development, the central tension between care and money becomes embroiled in a moral and ethical sense as family members try to determine how, in light of new mobility and new demands for wage-labor, to care for each other.

In each of the chapters, I have shown how periods of vulnerability along the life-course have made such tensions visible. In socializing children, parents must balance the need for income, which is more effectively earned through migration and the desire for family co-presence. In marriage decisions, middle-aged women must influence their sons to marry a local girl so as to maintain a future relationship and secure a more comfortable old age, even if arranging such a match requires a higher payment of bride wealth. In late age, parents of adult children assess their children's filial behaviors through the lens of economic contributions and emotional sacrifices.

When considering these pressures, I find myself returning to an old debate in China studies about the nature of work, sacrifice, and care within the Chinese family. This debate is best summarized by Sulamith Heins Potter's (1988; 1990b)²⁷ article, describing the cultural construction of Chinese emotion. Potter argues that in rural China, emotions have little value for social action and identity. In contrast to American society, where emotions are "taken as a legitimizing basis for social action" (1990, 180), in the Chinese village "the important aspects of social continuity are external to the self" (1990, 183). This does not mean that villagers do not

²⁷ The article appeared in *Ethos* and was awarded an Honorable Mention for the Sterling Award in 1986. It was reprinted as a chapter in *China's Peasants: The anthropology of a revolution*. All citations are from the book chapter.

have emotions; Potter gives a laundry list of vivid expressions of emotions in daily life: toddler tantrums, tears of shame when recounting a memory of parents, sadness at the loss of a child, angry cries at the news of birth planning policy. Potter argues that these free expressions of emotion point to the ways in which villagers construct emotion is a way that is insignificant and external to social meaning. Instead of “intrinsically dangerous and to be concealed” (1990, 185), unchecked displays of emotion add credence to the idea that emotions are not a relevant for human action.

Before I entered the field, I approached Potter’s argument with skepticism—surely migration, urbanization, and the 25 years that have elapsed since Potter first made her observations would have changed the relevance of emotions in daily life. I returned to the article fresh from the field and I was sure Potter was wrong; what of the instances of divorce or love marriages that I had seen, weren’t they testimony to the relevance of feelings of love and affection in family life? Similarly, what about the narratives of so many that preferred a rural sense of home to an urban place of unfamiliarity? Didn’t that lend credence to the role of emotions of comfort in life choices? Additionally, feelings have been a central part of traditional filial morality dating back thousands of years. Armed with these examples, I set out to argue against Potter in this conclusion. After two years of working with the data in this dissertation, I sat down at the library to re-read the article and I found myself actually agreeing with Potter.

Central to changing my mind is the second half of Potter’s argument which plays off of Freud’s distinctions between work and love. The West utilizes love as a central cohesion to relationships, while “the critical symbolic dimension for the affirmation of relationships [in the Chinese context] is work, and the related and subordinate concept of suffering, which is thought of as an intrinsic aspect of work” (1990, 189). Potter then gives several examples where couples

have used the idiom of shared work and a partner's capacity to work as a way to express feelings of mutuality and belonging. One particular vivid instance is when daughters attempt to earn more than their brothers as an effort to stake claim within the patrilocal family even if she will marry into another family (1990, 193-194).

In the field, I too noticed that anger, sadness, frustration and even romantic love often have little relevance in constellations of identity. Remember the words of a young bride-to-be before her wedding – ‘what is there to be excited about?’ Recall Grandmother Fong's powerlessness to influence her daughter's return despite her sadness. Or Teacher Lu's inability to influence his son to have more children—he resigns himself to contextualizing the decision as good for national progress even if he desires filial continuity. Remember too Teacher Jia's assertion that “willing or not, you still must care” for grandchildren. Or the rhetorical question of Grandmother Yan, ‘what is choice?’ Refer to Yujie's challenge where she must, despite her anxiety and fatigue, quickly raise the funds for her son's wedding or risk losing the possibility of the match all together. All of these examples give evidence that, at least for the older generation, particular kinds of emotions are not attuned to in a way that would change the course of action.

At the same time, I saw many examples of work and sacrifice as a central mode of affirming relationships and identity. In Chapter 3, I point out the ways in which work and avoiding being an “old pest” were central to grandmother's continued labor in retirement. The gendered obligation of providing childcare to one's grandchildren is likewise conceived of a sacrifice towards to the family. In Chapter 5, I show the sacrifice of mothers of adult sons. In scraping together large amounts of cash for the bride wealth, wedding, and house construction, mothers affirm their relationship and attempt to secure their future returns. In Chapter 6, I illustrate that Grandmother Fong sees the sacrifice of her emotions and desires as affirming her

relationship to God. Likewise, Teacher Lu offers his own desires for filial continuity on the altar of modernity. In Chapter 7, I show how the refusal of the national narrative to honor the work and sacrifice of Grandmother Zhu ends up in a rejection of suffering as purposeful.

At the same time, however, I have learned through noticing the complexity of human thoughts, behaviors, and actions that Occam's razor rarely applies to human intentions. Simple divisions of work and love pass over the complexity of the way individuals experience emotions, assess moral attitudes, and act. I entertain the possibility that work, and in particular the obligation to work-for, is motivated by a feeling. Thusly, emotions are intertwined with work—and by extension, since work implies production, emotions are caught up with economics. Each of these examples I recount above show the relevance of obligation as a central form of emotional experience. In each of the examples a feeling of obligation eclipses feelings of sadness, loss, or personal desire.

Understanding Èmile Durkheim's proposition in *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, helps to flesh out why certain emotions might be given more credence than others (2001). Durkheim lays out an argument for the centrality of emotion in moral authority. In exploring the ways that individuals conform themselves to values and beliefs, Durkheim's investigation leads him to consider the emotional obligation that we have to social forms. Particular emotions are the products of moral collective consciousness which impress upon the individual in a visceral and emotional way. Some examples include Durkheim's exploration of aesthetic rites (2001, 222-242) and "collective effervescence" (2001, 266-268). He also mentions the feelings towards religious leaders; "when we obey someone because of the moral authority we recognize in him... a psychic energy immanent in the idea we have of this person makes us bend our will and incline to compliance. Respect is the emotion we experience when we feel this internal and entirely mental

pressure” (2001, 155). Later, when describing funeral rites, he explains group mourning and its effect on the individual: “All he knows is that he is compelled to mortify himself painfully. Since every obligation awakens the idea of a will to oblige, he searches around him for a source of the constraint to which he submits... they do not weep for the deceased because they fear him; they fear him because they weep for him” (2001, 298-299).

For Durkheim, society operates upon the mobilization of individual feelings: “collective force is not wholly external to us; it does not move us entirely from the outside. Indeed, since society can exist only in individual minds and through them, it must penetrate and become organized inside us; it becomes an integral part of our being, and in so doing it elevates and enlarges that being” (2001, 157). Whether it is a religious feeling of awe for the sacred, feelings of rage inspired by a death, or the feelings of belonging to a social entity, individual feelings have roots that are deeply intertwined with the social system which have economic and material consequences. In this way, individuals are able to assess their own moral compliance by the conformity of their emotions to a social model.

I offer the idea that obligation is a significant moral feeling which is hypercognized—that is, as Robert Levy originally explored in Tahiti (1975), a certain feeling which is given more attention and recognition. Hypercognition reveals that an emotion is either particularly welcome or particularly disruptive. In Levy’s case, he argued that Tahitians were especially aware of feelings of anger and there was a litany of theoretical discussions of what anger was, the consequences of being angry, and what to do to prevent being angry. As I noticed throughout my field work, there is a host of discursive talk about obligations within the Chinese rural context.

To understand obligation as a significant moral feeling, I offer a reexamination of Xiulan’s words that I recorded in Chapter 4. Xiulan, as I describe earlier, is part-migrant mother,

part-divorcee who was trafficked at a young age into marriage of a deaf man. Xiulan says that out of concern for her mother-in-law, Grandmother Yu, she stayed until she simply could no longer stand the fighting between herself and her husband. She migrated back to Kunming where she is rumored to have another partner. While she does not contact her three children while she is away and she does not send regular remittances, she does return once per year for one or two months to reconnect with her children. She is concerned for their moral education and she wants them to stay in school. Grandmother Yu, however, who is the children's daily guardian, does little to support their schoolwork or encourage attendance. When Xiulan returned home, she discovered that her son had missed much of the 7th grade and was planning to drop out. Xiulan lamented 'My mother-in-law doesn't understand how to raise children. She is not educated (*bu renzi*). She is not moral. She is not ethical. All she understands is *teng* (love/pain).'

In Chapter 4, I use this conflict between mother and daughter-in-law to ask questions about the intergenerational project of moral socialization within the extended family. Here, I want to examine the last part of her statement further to understand how obligation can be considered a moral emotion. In part, this is a defense of Grandmother Yu's morality because I see care as a critical part of ethical self-making. But also, I am drawn to Xiulan's contrast between "understanding *teng*" and morality.

Initially, I myself did not quite understand the word *teng* because I had learned that the word means pain, as in a bodily ache and was unaware of its second meaning. When I wrote the words in my fieldnotes, I thought that they simple referred to Grandmother Yu's age and physical pain. But I came to recognize that in Pear Branch Township the word is more commonly used to describe a feeling of aching love which is self-sacrificial. The word is found in complex emotions: *teng'ai* (to love dearly), *tengxi* (to have tender affection), *pianteng* (to

show favoritism to a child). It is a feeling that parents have for their children and that filial children have for their parents. While in other areas in China, *teng* can also describe feelings for one's wife or husband, I did not hear it used thusly. In fact, when I asked my informants if they ever exchanged expressions of love to a spouse, they laughed at me as if I were making fun of them. It is possible that these romantic feelings were still spoken of in private, but by and large the usage of the term in Pear Branch Township referred to an expression of intergenerational affinity caught up in the value-laden moral system of filial piety. *Teng* is an emotional attachment which reveals an obligatory demand to work-for. In this sense, *teng* expresses obligation and is caught up in the material benefits of provision—the tangible result of motivated work.

At the same time, *teng* is a risky kind of feeling because it can be excessive and conveys the sense of doting or spoiling. It is to this risk that Xiulan refers when she criticizes her mother-in-law for caring too much. While I don't know for sure, it's my guess that Xiulan thinks that Grandmother Yu has cared too much about her son's complaints about going to school and has not forced him to go. *Teng* therefore, is an emotion that is socially productive. Here it has motivated Grandmother Yu to react to her grandson by allowing him to skip school and migrate.

Another example of the use of the word *teng* is by Grandfather Chen. Close to 80 years old, Grandfather Chen has three sons, and while he can point to their houses in the village, they have not returned home. One morning when I asked him about his family, he said that he wished he had had daughters. His sons, he said, did not visit or send money. In contrast, his granddaughters *teng* him. For example, they had visited in the last week, driving in a shiny white car from the city and carrying bread, meat, and vegetables. He did not need much, he said, but it was nice of them to remember him.

Here feeling *teng* is considered an asset—an expression of remembrance that has material effects. For Grandfather Chen, his granddaughters' feeling of *teng* is also a feeling of obligation; they must go out of their way to visit and bring him gifts. In contrast, his sons do not *teng*. Chen did not use the word filial to describe his granddaughters. While filialty is generally understood as a male responsibility, there is a growing acceptance of daughter's roles in filial affection (Shi 2009; E. T. Miller 2004; Zheng 2009, 147–72). Nevertheless, Chen's use of *teng*, a feeling, instead of *xiao* (filial), a value, points to the significance of feelings of attachment in social bonds.

I gave two examples of the local usage of the feeling *teng* as an expression of emotional obligation which has material and social efficacy. A close analysis of the other ethnographic scenes in this dissertation will reveal similar sentiments. Feelings of obligation are central to the creation of intergenerational family bonds and is responsible for the motivations of care and caretaking. Obligation is often expressed through the idiom of work and sacrifice. Emotions and work are not separate as Hochschild (2003) has explored. Each of us do critical emotional work to conform our spontaneous feelings to the demands of society. But neither is work separate from emotion. To work, and specifically to work for others, requires a feeling of compulsion, a visceral experience of responsibility and care. Inspiring such a feeling of obligation is the central goal of moral socialization. Receiving gifts which show the mobilization of obligational feelings is the critical component in late-age assessments of well-being. Feeling the obligation of other's expectations is an important part of being in a family.

A critical factor, however, is that the family combines individuals with disparate ideals of how to express obligational feelings. These feelings drive many behaviors. Sometimes, actions inspired by obligation will be in contrast with another family member's expectations, creating

conflict and animosity. Sometimes they will coalesce and the different generations within the family will enjoy peace and happiness. The future of the intergenerational family relies on an individual's emotional and actual work of care.

This dissertation has contributed to an understanding of the ways in which development affects people on the ground by looking at the everyday institution of the family. By paying attention to everyday family interactions, we can come to a deeper understanding of the role of intergenerational collaboration and conflict in several key features of the family: identity formation, socialization, old-age care, marriage arrangements, and sacrificial suffering. Through examining the experiences of families addressing each of these issues of care, I argue that family is a fruitful space for considering ethical problems. Attending how families respond to change, and particularly changes in economic and emotional roles within the household is a critical and important question that adds to our understanding of how development impacts subjectivity and experience.

Glossary of Chinese Terms

English Term	Pinyin Romanization	Mandarin
housemaid or nanny	<i>baomu</i>	保姆
capable	<i>benshi</i>	本事
cannot hold responsible or control	<i>bu wen</i>	不问
bride wealth	<i>caili</i>	彩礼
to comprehend social expectations	<i>dongshi</i>	懂事
non-agricultural	<i>feinong</i>	非农
struggle or fight	<i>fendou</i>	奋斗
to construct a house, esp. for one's son	<i>gaifangzi</i>	盖房子
college entrance exam	<i>gaokao</i>	高考
to play with grandchildren with candy in one's mouth, i.e. to enjoy old age	<i>hanyinongsun</i>	含饴弄孙
a drinking soup made with boiled flour and water	<i>hetang (local usage)</i>	喝汤
regretful	<i>houhui</i>	后悔
household registration system	<i>hukou</i>	户口
precisely, used in pair with keshi	<i>jiushi</i>	就是
adverb for emphasis	<i>keshi</i>	可是
able and capable	<i>keyi</i>	可以
bitter	<i>ku</i>	苦
a measure word for money, i.e. "bucks"	<i>kuai</i>	块
simple minded or naïve	<i>laoshi (local usage)</i>	老实
a past-particle	<i>le</i>	了
to flee hither and thither as in a criminal on the run	<i>liucuan</i>	流窜
floating population, i.e. migrant population living in urban areas	<i>liudongrenkou</i>	流动人口
left-behind children, i.e. children remaining in rural areas apart from migrant parents	<i>liushouertong</i>	留守儿童

backwards	<i>luohou</i>	落后
to be satisfied	<i>manzu</i>	满足
to utilize a paid intermediary for marriage introductions	<i>meili</i>	媒历
to be well matched in terms of social and economic background	<i>mendanghudui</i>	门当户对
a people group or nationality	<i>minzu</i>	民族
steamed bread	<i>mo (dialect)</i>	馒头
men control the outside and women control the inside	<i>nanzhuwai, nuzhunei</i>	男主外女主内
peasant	<i>nongmin</i>	农民
impoverished	<i>pinkun</i>	贫困
lively	<i>renao</i>	热闹
to praise or honor, esp. used in Christian settings	<i>rongyao</i>	荣耀
"the three agricultural problems"	<i>sannongwenti</i>	三农问题
collectivization	<i>santong</i>	三同
to utilize a cobb stove for cooking	<i>shaoguo (local usage)</i>	烧锅
life	<i>shenghuo</i>	生活
water and soil, i.e. the characteristics of food products from local areas	<i>shuitu</i>	水土
naughty	<i>suan</i>	酸
quality education, a concern for well-rounded moral training for children	<i>suzhijiaoyu</i>	素质教育
pain/to love dearly	<i>teng</i>	疼
circumstances, surroundings, or conditions	<i>tiaojian</i>	条件
obedient	<i>tinghua</i>	听话
to raise an adopted daughter-in-law from an early age	<i>tongyangxi</i>	童养媳
to act on one's behalf	<i>weinideshi</i>	为你的事
cultured/uncultured, esp. uneducated	<i>wenhua/meiwenhua</i>	文化
the five human relationships central to Confucian morality	<i>wulun</i>	五伦

filial	<i>xiao</i>	孝
a failed firework, or dud	<i>xiapao</i>	吓跑
to form a habit	<i>xiguan</i>	习惯
self-taught	<i>xixue</i>	自学
if the child is not naughty, you might as well kill it, or, if the child is not naughty it must be stupid	<i>youbusuan</i> <i>jiushadaole</i>	又不算就(杀/傻)到了
dirty	<i>zang</i>	脏
a love-match, as in a marriage which was not arranged by family	<i>zitan</i>	自谈
to be a guest	<i>zuoke</i>	做客
to perform human kindness, or doing personhood	<i>zuoren</i>	做人
work units formed in urban China during collectivization	<i>danwei</i>	单位

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