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Women at a Crossroads:

Gender Dynamics among Urban-Urban Migrants in China

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree Master of Arts in East Asian Studies

by

Yali He-Schaefer

2023

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Women at a Crossroads:

Gender Dynamics among Urban-Urban Migrants in China

by

Yali He-Schaefer

Master of Arts in East Asian Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Chi-Fun Cindy Fan, Chair

The study of split households in China and elsewhere has tended to focus on rural-urban migration. But the phenomenon of split householding, in which members of the family live separately, is also common among urban-urban migrants, despite the relatively little scholarly attention this group has received. Against this backdrop, this research is concerned with urban and educated split households in China, with a particular focus on how women in these long-distance relationships negotiate relational power in their split households. This paper draws on a combination of 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis of public socio-political rhetoric, both historical and contemporary, regarding husbands and wives from split households to shed light on the contemporary relationships between urban, educated Chinese parents and patriarchal values rooted in the Confucian family system.

This research reveals that household-splitting is not only a strategy in service of a family's economic goals, but also a site that potentially (re)shapes gendered values and norms. Split householding incidentally serves as an outlet for women to gain a sense of respite from their "wifely duties" and discover new forms of autonomy, and for men to more freely express emotions of pain and regret, challenging the convention that emotions are associated only with femininity. While such newly constructed freedoms are not a consciously engineered result, these findings support the notion that gender relations in China are at a crossroads between entrenched patriarchal ideologies and narrow spaces of alternative gender practices.

The thesis of Yali He-Schaefer is approved.

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Andrea S. Goldman

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University of California, Los Angeles

2023

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Introduction

China has witnessed urbanization of unprecedented speed and magnitude since the beginning of the Economic Reform in 1979 owing to economic integration with the rest of the world and rapid industrialization, which encouraged rural-urban migration on a massive scale. Recent statistics help illustrate the significance of this transformation: China's urban population increased from 18% to 64% of the total population between 1982 and 2020 (Cheng & Duan, 2021; Wu, 2016). These dramatic spatial changes in China's population have inspired a growing number of studies on rural-urban migration in relation to structural inequalities and wide-scale social change. Urban-urban migration, on the other hand, has received relatively little attention, despite urban migrants' rapid growth into a salient social group. The 2020 census in China estimated that approximately 375.82 million Chinese people were living away from the place where their *hukou* (household registration) was registered for at least six months. Within that group, 82 million people had migrated from one urban area to another (Cheng & Duan, 2021).

The study of split households in China and elsewhere, in which members of the family live separately, has tended to focus on households that result from rural-urban migration. The phenomenon of split householding is also common among urban-urban migrants, despite the relatively little scholarly attention this group has received. To remedy the paucity of research concerning urban-urban split households, this research examines specific split, urban and educated households in China, with a particular focus on how women in these long-distance relationships negotiate relational power in their split households.

Most of the urban women from this research live in split households, and have stayed behind in a relatively smaller city while their husbands migrate to a larger city. They differ, however, from rural "left-behind" wives, a group of some 47 million women (as of 2010) whose husbands have typically migrated from rural hometowns to cities or other countries (Li, 2015). As a result of split householding, rural-left-behind wives have found themselves facing increased domestic workloads, spanning from taking care of children and elders to housework and farm work (Xiang, 2007). Consequently, rural left-behind women are also found to be at a higher risk of physical and mental health problems, including increased feelings of insecurity and loneliness (Jacka, 2012; Li, 2015; Xu, 2009).

In contrast, urban "stay-behind" women, while also playing the role of a "stay-behind" wives and mothers, continue pursuing their careers and personal development on top of fulfilling their domestic roles. The "stay-behind" subjects of this research–urban dwellers–share certain traits unique to women who grew up in China's Post-Reform Era: they are highly educated, cosmopolitan-aspiring, ambitious, and typically their parents' only children. Thus, while the adjective "left-behind," which connotes females' passivity as submissive participants in the familial migration decision process, is often used to describe women in rural split households, I use the term "stay-behind" in this paper, which emphasizes urban women's agency and aspirations. Many urban stay-behind wives play an active role in their household structural decisions and marital power negotiations.

Even though women from urban and rural split households have very different social and educational backgrounds, they share a few things in common. Most notably, many rural-urban and urban-urban wives and mothers engage in split households as household members who do not move, despite the stigma and social issues commonly associated with split households and

absentee parenting in China. Similar to their counterparts in rural split households, urban stay-behind wives and mothers continue to live under the influence of patriarchal values despite tenacious social efforts in Socialist China–led by Mao–to eradicate values and practices associated with the hierarchies of the Confucian family system. This study, by focusing on urban-urban split households, foregrounds research on urban and educated women from split households, shedding light on how they lead their lives in split households in ways that are both similar to, yet different from, rural-urban left-behind wives, using the framework of householding.

The concept of the household has been expanded in its meaning and form over the last few decades. For example, Lawson (1998) differentiates between neoclassical household strategy models and feminist ones in an examination of the mechanisms and consequences of migration, opening up different categories of "household" and bringing a spotlight to variations in household compositions, such as female-headed, male-headed, extended, and nuclear (Lawson, 1998, p. 43). These variations, Lawson argues, are critical to understanding both the reasons behind and consequences of migration. Aside from opening up household categories, Lawson also suggests the necessity of expanding the conceptualization of households to include those that involve multiple members in diverse places. Questioning the notion that a "household is simply a basic unit of every society", Douglass et al. use "householding" to "convey the understanding that creating and sustaining a household is an ongoing, dynamic social process that covers all lifecycle stages and extends beyond the family" (2007, p. 158). This creates an opportunity to explore the interactive process by which different households are linked to larger structural issues and issues of human agency.

My analysis echoes and furthers these "household" concepts and seeks to highlight social productive and reproductive processes by incorporating householding approaches. Specifically, by focusing on households that are split between different cities and areas, this study expands on the concept of the household by highlighting the understudied urban-urban migrant social group. This research also recognizes the fluidity of household forms in each family, especially in sole-migrant families that have often given rise to *de facto* women-headed households. I also adopt a "householding" approach to understand the ongoing social process that sustains and transforms the household in the dynamic socio-political context of contemporary China.

Several reasons justify a householding approach in this research. First, this method highlights social processes in addition to the push and pull factors of migration, which enables capturing a holistic picture that encompasses not only migrants' individual agency but also their interactions with each other and the socio-political environment. Second, it facilitates a nuanced interpretation of gender and intergenerational relationship transformations as migrants and stay-behind family members constantly rework and renegotiate their roles in both private and public spheres. More specifically, this research focuses on the split household, informing research on internal migration and the landscape of contemporary families in China.

To shed light on the contemporary relationships between urban, educated Chinese parents and patriarchal values rooted in the Confucian family system, this paper draws on a combination of 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis of public socio-political rhetoric, both historical and contemporary, regarding husbands and wives from split households. This paper situates urban stay-behind mothers at the intersection of contrasting identities and life pursuits resulting from an evolving social, political, and cultural rhetoric around women in China. A juxtaposition of two contrasting discourses surrounding married women in

contemporary China helps to shed light on the rationale behind the core argument of this paper: that household-splitting has become not only a strategy in service of a family's economic goals, but also an unintended outlet for women to gain a sense of respite from their "wifely duties" and discover new forms of autonomy and freedom. It is important to note, however, that this newly discovered autonomy is not a consciously engineered result; instead, these women are benefiting from a household arrangement that, from their own perspectives, is less than ideal. By uncovering urban and educated women's struggles in the spaces of split households, this paper supports the notion that gender relations in China are at a crossroads between entrenched patriarchal ideologies and evolving—if limited—spaces of alternative gender practices.

This paper consists of five sections. First, it will review existing literature concerning Chinese internal migration in relation to intra-household gender dynamics, with attention to how this research contributes to the relevant academic fields. Second, a methodology section provides demographic details, as well as rationales for the methods employed. The next section discusses the differences and similarities between rural-urban and urban-urban split households, shedding light on unique determinants contributing to urban-urban split householding decisions. This is followed by the fourth section that discusses the persistence of a patriarchal discourse and norms that sustain gendered subjectivities and decisions in split households. The fifth and final section explores the ways in which women (re)gain autonomy and men's emotionality is made visible through split householding.

Literature Review on Migration and Rural Split Households in China

Migration has been a widespread practice throughout Chinese history, including the practice of household splitting. To take a somewhat recent example, during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) society had become relatively mobile, with a significant proportion of the

population traveling domestically and internationally in search of better socioeconomic opportunities (Miles 2020, pp. 52-89). Then, too, husbands often migrated alone to seek job opportunities, leaving their wives behind to take care of the family. While some literature shows that the long-term absence of migrant husbands caused great distress among the wives who were left behind in Qing China (Theiss, 2004, pp. 177-191), some other historical records show that women from the past relied on their natal families and entrance into the nunhood in search of an alternative when their migrated-away husbands failed to provide a stable source of income.[1]

During the Maoist period, split-householding appears to have transformed from a result of individual motivations to a manufactured outcome enforced by the government. Many families were forced to separate in response to political agendas. One of the most well-known campaigns that caused household splitting and internal migration of a significant magnitude was the Sent-Down Movement (1968-1980), which relocated 17 million urban youths, many of whom had just graduated from middle and high school, to the countryside as part of a large-scale re-education campaign (Bernstein, 1977). The goals of the Sent-Down Movement were both political and practical, including solving urban unemployment, re-educating urban youth with Communist ideology, developing rural and frontier areas, nurturing the upcoming cohort of revolutionary leaders and inheritors, and ending the turmoil caused by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution (Bernstein, 1977; Bonnin, 2013; Gu, 2009; Liu, 2009; Song & Zheng, 2016).

The Sent-Down Movement not only affected young people, but also older intellectuals, professionals, and individuals accused of "incorrect" political and social behavior (Honig & Zhao, 2019; Li, 2014). Li (2014) in her book uncovers personal stories from generations of

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[1] The Ba County Archive 巴县档案: 6-10-06555, 6-15-17252. Sichuan Provincial Archives, Chengdu.

residents of the Shanghai's alleyways, documenting several instances of split householding between couples who were forced to separate when one spouse was sent to the countryside for "re-education" due to perceived political and ideological deviance.

What sets the subjects of this study apart from those in the past who practiced household splitting is their unique socio-political environment. Socially, contemporary split households in China live in a relatively more gender-egalitarian environment that is less constrained by patriarchal expectations. The Chinese Communist Party brought fundamental changes to gender relations during the Socialist period, whose influence extends to the present-day, reminding women, at least officially, of their privileges no less than men. This is in contrast to women in the Qing period, when female chastity was enshrined in state legislation and internalized by many women (Theiss, 2004, pp.177-191). Politically, China after Mao successfully has promoted a pro-market economy that encourages and relies on internal migration to achieve its urbanization and modernization goals. Therefore, while household splitting during the Socialist period was motivated by a top-down political agenda, the subjects in this study decided to split their households based on personal and economic motivations, which were an organic product of their own choice.

A search for studies on migration in contemporary China suggests that the majority of recent research (2010 and after) in the field of rural-urban migration utilizes quantitative methods. Among these studies, the following topics are the most common: health and environmental consequences resulting from domestic migration (Shi, 2022; Shi et al., 2020; Tong & Piotrowski, 2012); implications of different state policies and programs on internal migration (Howell, 2022; Meng & Zhao, 2018; Mullan et al., 2011; Ren et al., 2020; Zweig et al., 2021); influences of social networks and media on internal migration (Zhao & Qu, 2022);

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determinants/push-pull factors of inter-/intra-provincial migration (Gries et al., 2016; Minale 2018; Shen & Liu, 2016; Su et al.,2018; Wang et. al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2021); rural-urban socio-economic disparity vis-à-vis domestic migration (Zhang, 2017); and the relationship between different types of local governance and village institutions (Lu, 2015).

Household-splitting, the social phenomenon on which this research focuses, has received some attention in studies of Chinese rural-urban migrant groups. Fan and Li (2020) in their research on rural migrant behaviors and patterns in China defined household-splitting as "a situation where family members who under 'normal' circumstances would be living in the same place are actually living in separate places." (p. 253) Fan and Li also identify different types of household arrangements among Chinese rural-urban migrants in response to work opportunities, caregiving needs, and other family changes (Fan, 2020), including: 1) sole migrants who migrate alone and leave their spouses and all young children behind in hometowns; 2) couple migrants who migrate as spouses to and reside together in the same host cities, leaving all young children behind in hometowns or villages; 3) and nuclear family migrants, where both spouses and all young children reside together in their host cities (Fan and Li, 2020). These categories will also be used as a frame of reference in this research.

Similar to rural-urban migrants, the majority of the subjects who engaged in household splitting strategies in this research expressed little to no interest in permanently settling down in their host cities, challenging the notion that migration is a one-way, permanent move from one place to another. While rural-urban migration and rural split households have received much academic attention, the academic focus on its urban counterpart has been minimal. Through an interview process that includes urban and educated migrants from each of these categories–sole migrants, couple migrants, and nuclear family migrants–this research seeks to seeks to bridge

this gap and pioneer research on the population of urban-urban migrant families, shedding light on the understudied phenomenon of split households among urban and educated migrants in China. A microscopic view into split households among urban-urban migrants in this research shines a spotlight on an often-invisible group–the stay-behind family members–and foregrounds them as active participants in the process of reinventing gender and intergenerational landscapes.

Literature Review on the History of the Traditional Chinese Family Structure and Its Influence on Internal Migrant Families

Traditional Chinese Family Structure

The traditional construction of Chinese women in premodern China has often portrayed them as victims of an oppressive patriarchal system (Hershatter, 2011; Wolf, 1985, p. 2; Wang, 2000). The Three Obediences (*san cong*), a male-dominated ideology that defined and restricted women's lives to inferiority, was at the heart of this system: as an unmarried girl a woman was expected obey her father and her brothers; as a married women she was to obey her husband; and as a widow she was to obey her adult sons (Wolf, 1985, p.2). Patrilineal and patrilocal practices were widespread, and gender inequality persisted throughout women's lives beginning with their natal families, which often favored and prioritized sons over daughters (Peng & Choi, 2016). Married women were compelled to not only physically move into their husbands' household but also to prioritize loyalty to their husbands' families over their own, leading to further domination. The gendered differentiation between men and women was reinforced by the culturally prescribed "inside/outside" framework, which designated the public domain for men while confining women to the domestic realm (Mann, 2011)[2].

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[2] The divide engendered by the "inside/outside" narrative in China aligns with the inside/outside or public/private framework discussed by many scholars (for example, Gal & Kligman, 2000 and Hochschild, 1989) in the field of sociology, in which it has been observed that women have been traditionally relegated to the "'natural,' more

However, the reality in imperial China did not always align with the ideal. A wealth of research delves into gender dynamics, family structures, and cultural values from premodern China that diverged from the official moral and legal doctrines of the time. In these studies, men were not always at the center of the household (Sommer, 2015), and patrilineal values were compromised when confronted with survival needs (Ransmeier, 2017). In the *"nei"* (inside) sphere, women were not always powerless figures. Studies have shown that they exercised their affective power to establish their own authority and power base within the family (Wolf, 1972). Women were able to employ various informal strategies to negotiate power within the family (Li, 2014; Peng & Choi, 2016, p. 68). Additionally, some research (Hershatter, 2011) highlights women's invisible domestic labor, such as spinning, weaving, and shoemaking, which helped bring income to the family in late imperial times, challenging the notion that money-making was reserved for the "*wai*" (outside) sphere.

In the "*wai*" sphere, a multitude of studies have demonstrated that women ventured beyond the home and challenged, and sometimes even resisted, the traditional boundaries that divided men's and women's spheres. These studies explore various aspects of women's lives and highlight their contributions to shaping the family, economy, and broader culture of premodern China. For instance, women played an active and vital role in writing and publishing (Ko, 1994; Mann, 1997), maintaining the stability of the empire and the continuity of their families (Bray, 1997), and making significant contributions to various labor markets (Hershatter, 1986; Hong, 1986).

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emotional, domestic, reproductive, and still hierarchical private life," while men have been associated with "the public, the 'social,' power-laden, and historically determining sphere" (Gal & Kligman, 2000, p. 38).

Contemporary Discourse Surrounding Traditional Chinese Family Structure

From the 1940s to the 1970s, undergirded by orthodox Marxist ideology, the Communist

Party initially aimed at "freeing" women from "feudal" ideas–the patriarchal system–that

subjected women to the oppressive systems of political authority dominated by men (Wolf, 1985,

p.15). Chairman Mao Zedong declared gender equality as a critical revolutionary goal,

culminating in his famous saying, "Women hold up half the sky" (Fincher, 2014). Consequently,

the Chinese Communist Party at least initially emphasized women's equality and actively

promoted the integration of women's labor into the planned economy, recognizing it as essential

to strengthening the country's economic productivity. The emergence of radical movements and

campaigns resulted in a society that was relatively more egalitarian and brought about

fundamental transformations in gender relations, in both the public and domestic spheres.[3]

Although the Communist Party under Mao professed emancipation of women and did

prompt some women to take advantage of the new laws and resources at hand to create new

gendered subjectivities that defied traditional familial norms and values, multiple studies have

demonstrated that most of the reforms did not significantly eradicate patriarchal attitudes and

practices (Croll, 1983; Judd, 1994; Yan, 2003), and that in instances where the objective of

mobilizing peasants clashed with the aspiration of women's liberation, precedence was

consistently accorded to the former (Hershatter & Zheng, 2008). As feminist theorists have

observed with regard to Enlightenment critiques of the public/private framework, "political

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[3] One of the most famous laws in pursuit of this effort was the 1950 Marriage Law, which aimed at granting women the rights to demand divorce and end arranged marriage. Additionally, women were mobilized to participate in the construction of socialism in pursuit of achieving gender equality. (Ji, 2017). Equal pay for both men and women, along with provisions for paid maternity leave and public childcare services, were introduced through the 1954 Constitution and new labor regulations (Hooper, 1984). This led to a significant reduction in the economic dependence of working women on their husbands, as they were able to earn comparable wages. As a result, the traditional familial support system that centered on the kinship system at a grassroots level was largely dismantled and superseded by state instruments like the *danwei* system (Yan, 2010), effectively blurring and even erasing the boundary between private and public spheres in China and generating superficial gender equality during the High-Socialist Era.

life…has always required constituting and then 'forgetting' a domestic sphere where 'natural' hierarchy–now expelled from political life–continued as a legitimate organizing principle for the relations between men and women, parents and children" (Gal & Kligman, 2000, p. 38). Research has shown that patriarchal traditions were not eradicated in the pursuit of gender equality in Socialist China, but instead were essentially confined to the domestic space, where domestic division of labor remained gendered, such that women were subjected to double burdens in both the inside and outside spheres[4] (Ji et al., 2017; Wolf, 1985; Diamant, 2000; Hershatter, 2011). However, the persistence of a gendered division of domestic labor is not to say that no changes were brought about by state-led campaigns and institutions in Socialist China. There were state feminist organizations, such as the Women's Federation, who were subordinated institutionally but were nonetheless dedicated to achieving gender equality, and who worked towards a Socialist feminist revolution (Wang, 2017).

Post-Mao China shifted its priority from ideological revolutions to the pragmatic, Reform-Era pursuit of the so-called Four Modernizations in 1977–modernizations of industry, agriculture, national defense, and science and technology (Yan, 2021, p.234). Caught between the legacy of a socialist planned economy and marketization, contemporary Chinese society has gone through a dramatic institutional and cultural reconfiguration. Numerous studies (Davin, 1976; Honig & Hershatter, 1988; Young, 1973) have raised concerns that the post-Mao reforms, which were just getting under way in the early 1980s, would undo the progress that women had

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[4] This double burden in Socialist China is not unlike what women undertook in other Socialist states in the twentieth century (Gal & Kligman, 2000). Committing to homogenize and equalize the populace, women from the Soviet Union and most of the communist states of Eastern and Central Europe were mobilized by their governments to join the workforce. As a result, women became a critical presence in the public, traditionally male-coded sphere, to engage in secondary, state-owned, paid work and state-run political activity. Meanwhile, they continued to have almost sole responsibility for household work and childrearing. The domestic division of labor in Socialist East European regions thus remained gendered and was never fundamentally transformed by government intervention.

made during the Maoist Era. This is demonstrated by the continuously widened gender gaps and the instrumentalization of women's bodies in Post-Socialist China.

With the opening up of its economy to the rest of the world during the Reform Era, China's gender gaps have only widened due to the interplay of two forces: the promotion of a pro-market economy and a resurgence of gender-normative moral guidelines promulgated by the Communist Party. For example, with the increased burden of childcare and domestic responsibilities, women's participation rate in the workforce has decreased in comparison to Socialist China, and the gender income gap has steadily widened in recent decades (Dong, 2019). According to demographer Isabelle Attane's analysis of data from the All-China Women's Federation and NBS (Fincher, 2014, p. 28), urban women's average income dropped from 77.5 percent that of men in 1990 to 67.3 percent by 2010. While the percentage of Chinese women's overall labor participation rate is comparable to that of developed countries, China's urban female employment rate has also dropped by close to 10 percentage points in recent decades (*idem*.).

In the pursuit of economic modernization and political agendas, women's bodies have been manipulated and abused in the Reform Era through the implementation of "necessary" measures such as the well-known One-Child Policy. Introduced in 1979 and terminated in 2015, the infamous One-Child Policy was launched to boost economic growth by "creating a more rational ratio between population size and economic resources." (Yan, 2021, p.235) The One-Child Policy had consequences that extended beyond its intended scope and impacted multiple social spheres, crossed national borders, and affected generations to come.

These unintended social consequences include a skewed, male-favored sex ratio (Attane & Gu, 2014), a phenomenon that was explained by female infanticide (Coale & Banister, 1994),

concealment in reporting births (Shi & Kennedy, 2016), infant abandonment (Johnson et al. 1998), domestic and international child adoption (Dowling, 2017), and sex selective abortion (Attane, 2013). In these processes, women's bodies and minds were recursively harmed and threatened. For instance, in the year 1983 alone, a staggering number of actions were undertaken, including the abortion of more than 14 million fetuses, the implementation of over 16 million female sterilizations, and the insertion of over 17 million intrauterine devices (Whyte et al., 2015), resulting in botched operations and lifelong disabilities for some women (Chen et al., 2007). The policy also put significant stress on parents, particularly mothers, who had to hide their pregnancies and births, often fleeing from one village to another (Cai & Feng, 2022). Moreover, the policy hindered pregnant women from receiving prenatal care, affecting both maternal and infant health.

Another direct outcome resulting from the policy is China's currently aging population and persistent low birth rate. With China's dwindling birth rate, the government has come to realize that it can no longer rely on a vast pool of inexpensive labor as a demographic dividend to propel China's economic growth. Following China's transition to a post-socialist society, childcare and eldercare services were privatized and turned into commodities. As a result, the responsibility for the cost of social reproduction shifted from state-owned enterprises to individuals, who primarily rely on low-cost labor provided by rural migrants. However, with China's population declining and urbanizing, the availability of inexpensive reproductive labor–low-cost rural-urban migrants–is reaching its limit (Dong, 2021). In response, the Communist Party abandoned its infamous One-Child Policy and adopted a "two-child policy" in 2015, in the hopes of stimulating a baby boom (*idem*.). Provincial-level governments also made regulatory adjustments to support this change, including lengthening maternity leave, offering

financial incentives, and providing free basic fertility services (Population Research Institute, 2018). In recognition of its below replacement total fertility rate, the Chinese Communist Party has recently promoted a "three-child policy."

The conflation of a pro-market economy and patriarchal authoritarianism in China has resulted in conflicting ramifications for gender relations. While the promotion of the idea of capitalist modernity inspires women to be autonomous professionals on par with men, the revival of patriarchal ideologies compels them to prioritize familial obligations over professional pursuits. The last two chapters of this research will discuss in detail how these clashing discourses have emerged and how they influence the lives and identity formation of stay-behind wives in urban split households.

As discussed previously, the majority of studies concerning domestic migration in China focus on economic, political, and health impacts. Among studies that do concentrate on the effects of rural-urban migration on the family, it appears the dimension of intra-household dynamics has received little attention in recent academic efforts. Reviewing some of the research after the year 2000 that investigated the influence of domestic migration on migrant families, three common issues emerge. First, much of the research concerning migration and gender in China tends to place its attention on external dynamics and factors, leaving out the intrahousehold nuances concerning conjugal and generational dynamics. For instance, Zheng (Gaetano ed., 2004) explores the effects of institutional factors and state-promoted discourses of "modernity" and "civilization" on migrant women. Murphy (Gaetano ed., 2004) discusses the similarities of the external environmental complexity between the destination city and hometown living experiences. This research places part of its emphasis on the other end of the continuum and examines the interactive experiences within migrant households between married couples

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and how each married couple perceives their relationships with their elders and the young. In doing so, this research contributes to the relevant literature by illuminating how domestic urban-to-urban migrants affect the Chinese patriarchal system through examining both gender and intergenerational dynamics within urban and educated migrant families.

Second, among studies conducted on the relationship between gender and migration, much of the research (Dupuy, 2021; He & Gober, 2003) focuses on quantitative outcomes. This qualitative study bridges the gap and looks beyond quantifiable outcomes in pursuit of searching for migrant women's agency and a microscopic view into their marital relationships.

Third, the subjectivities of women are more emphasized than those of men in this field (Beynon, 2004; Fan, 2004; Jacka, 2005; Lou, 2004; Murphy, 2004; Zheng, 2004). While men have traditionally been the beneficiaries of Chinese patriarchy, their voices and opinions are nevertheless important in the process of constructing a full picture of migrants' experiences vis-à-vis intra-household dynamics. Gender is a relational study, and the absence of men in gender research in China *de facto* invalidates migrant men's experiences, many of whom carry the triple emotional burden of being marginalized while working in a "foreign" province, the guilt of not able to fulfill their filial piety to their parents, and the emotional gap migration causes between them and their children and wives. When existing studies (e.g. Peng & Choi, 2016) do look into men's subjective voices, they neglect women's voices. This timely research fills this gap by including male points of view along with those of their partners to present a comprehensive picture of the experiences of domestic migration and its impact on both the reproduction and transformation of the Chinese patriarchal system.

Another pillar of the traditional Chinese patriarchal system is intergenerational dynamics. In a review of the literature concerning intergenerationality within Chinese migrant families, the

following themes and patterns can be observed. First, studies focusing on the children's generation (Cui & To, 2021; Wang & Mesman, 2015; Zhang, 2017) from domestic migrant families tend to exclude parents from the picture, missing the parents as important actors in the structural consequences these studies are investigating. Second, other research that involves children tends to treat them as a non-participatory variable, which is then used as a push-and-pull factor on par with other external factors to identify the major determinants of migration intentions (Shen & Liu, 2016; Wang et al., 2019). Third, an examination of most of the recent literature concerning the migration effect on the grandparents' generation shows that the attention is heavily focused on rural left-behind grandparents (Thomason, Yan ed., 2021) and rural floating grandparents (Qi, Yan ed., 2021), neglecting intergenerational investigations in urban families. The very few studies that do examine cooperation and conflicts in intergenerational child-rearing (Xiao, Yan ed., 2021) miss the context of migration and split households. As a result, the fourth contribution to the literature concerning Chinese migration made by this research is that it sheds light on the converging paths of de-traditionalization and re-institutionalization of marriage and family, in the context of split households.

In summary, previous academic efforts to examine migration, gender, and integration in China overlook a few key issues. Empirically, they tend to omit one of the most conspicuous social groups–urban-urban and educated migrants–and the voices and opinions of men, which constitutes an academic lacuna in our understanding of how urban-to-urban migrants contribute to the systematic changes in gender relations resulting from migration in China. Methodologically, they place much of their effort on external factors and actors through quantitative methods in the pursuit of understanding migrants' day-to-day experiences in both origin and destination cities, sometimes treating the experiences of migrants as homogeneous

and leaving the issues of intra-household dynamics, emotionality, and individual agency out of the picture. This research seeks to expand our understanding by exploring the interaction of migration, gender, and generation with different life choices of both men and women in urban and educated migrant families, through the methodology of qualitative semi-structured interviews.

Methodology

Relying on the "snowball sampling" technique, this research draws on 30 semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted via a Chinese social network application (WeChat) between June and October 2022. All interviews were conducted online. Many factors favor semi-structured interviews as a data collection method for this research. First and foremost, semi-structured interviews have proved to be versatile and flexible (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2955) both in their format and content. They can be carried out as individual, dyadic, or group interviews, with participants interviewed together or separately (*ibid.*, p. 2955), and the coverage and relevance of the question content can be reformulated during any stage of the interview process (*ibid.,* p. 2960). Another advantage of using the semi-structured interview method is that it encourages "reciprocity between the interviewer and participant" (*ibid,* p. 2955). This enables the interviewer to improvise follow-up questions and leaves ample space for interviewees to express and reflect themselves, which allows both parties in the interview "a greater chance of becoming visible as knowledge-producing participant[s] in the process itself" (Brinkmann, 2014, p. 287).

Without funding or the opportunity to direct this research on-site, conducting semi-structured interviews online was an especially suitable option. First, online interviews make "exclusive auditory communication" (Mclntosh & Morse, 2015, p. 7) available as an option to all

participants, especially for participants who do not feel comfortable sharing in a face-to-face setting. This is particularly advantageous to my research because some of my research questions concern interviewees' intra-familial structural dynamics, which may include sensitive questions such as, "What is the major source of your conjugal conflict these days?" Second, online interviews provide a level of flexibility and immediacy in terms of scheduling and location that in-person interviews often cannot match. Lastly, online interviews are less costly in regards to the time, labor, and expenses involved and are therefore more efficient (*idem*.).

To recruit appropriate respondents, I shared recruitment announcements both directly to my immediate social circle and on WeChat Moments–a public space where WeChat users share and view added friends' social feeds. Recruitment criteria included the following: both husbands and wives are vocational-school or college-educated or above; the family has been splitting their household for more than six months; and the family has one or more children under the age of 18. To make the "snowball" bigger, I employed additional strategies in the process. At the end of my initial interviews, I asked my interviewees whether they have friends/family that fall within my recruitment criteria. I asked them to introduce appropriate contacts to me through WeChat with a message that includes an interview description and my research purpose. I followed up with all interviewees who had connections to another appropriate interviewee at least once to enlarge my snowball sample. To incentivize my potential interviewees, I also offered in my recruitment advertisement to send a small gift for their child(ren) (such as stuffed animals) in return for my informants' time and effort. In compliance with IRB regulations, I delivered an oral consent[5] form to each of my interviewees at the beginning of the interview.

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[5] In the oral consent, the following security plan is shared with the respondents. First, although data from the study is collected through audio recordings, handwritten notes, and typed transcripts of both audio recordings and handwritten notes, audio files are destroyed upon completing transcription. Insights that my informants provided that appear in the form of direct quotes in published research and/or presentations do not identify participants by name, and any other identifiable information would be removed. Additionally, all interviewees could ask me questions concerning the interview and/or withdraw before or during the interview without any penalty.

Collectively, I interviewed 20 women (19 mothers) and 10 males (fathers) representing a total of 21 households, including the following three broad types: split households that include sole migrants (11 households), split households with couple migrants (one household), and nuclear family migrant households (eight households), plus one family that went through multiple phases of migration–from sole migrating to couple migrating to reunification–between 2014 and 2022. All but three participants are between the ages of 25 and 35, with children's ages ranging from six months to seven years old. 17 out of the 21 children are under the age of six. In China, kindergarten serves children from age three to six and primary education is intended for children aged 6-12. This indicates that the majority of households require full-time childcare, and this role, among this study's participants, is mostly fulfilled by a combination of labor between a single spouse and one or more grandparent(s). All interviewees except two wives are employed as full-time professionals, with occupations ranging from teachers to accountants to product analysts to lawyers. Eight interviewees work for state-owned enterprises. (See Appendix A: Descriptive Interviewee Statistics). Given that this study focuses on the intrahoushold dynamics of split households, analysis from this study will be concentrated primarily on the data collected from split households (13 households, including 13 women (12 mothers) and 8 men (all fathers)).

In these split households, sole and couple migrants are scattered in cities of varying sizes, including megacities with a population over 20 million (such as Shanghai and Beijing), medium-sized cities with a population between 8 and 15 million (such as Wuhan, Guangzhou, Changsha, and Dongguan), and small cities with a population between one and two million (such as Changde and Chenzhou). All but one sole migrant have converted their *hukou* to the destination city.

Each single-session interview lasted between 45 and 100 minutes and all interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. During the semi-structured interviews, I explained explicitly how I would be collecting and using the interview data, as well as how I would best protect and uphold their anonymity to their own partners and to the public, both during and after interviews. We spoke about several topics, including reasons for splitting the household, the role *hukou* plays in their migration decisions, the positives and negatives of family separation, changes in family members' lives before and after splitting the households, and strategies they have adopted to maintain intimate relationships. (See Appendix B: interview guide). All interviews were transcribed in Mandarin Chinese and then translated into English excerpts as needed in the coding and analysis stage.

Using NVivo qualitative research software, the coding process was based on grounded theory coding methodology and consisted of two stages: initial coding and focused coding. In the initial coding phase, I selected four participants from two split households and coded their interview scripts line by line. Following initial coding, a list of significant codes–such as long-term living location preference, lack of confidence in parenting ability, a mismatch between perceived cultural stereotypes and reality, low-level gendered pressures–was developed to facilitate and guide other interview data in the focused coding phase. It is important to note that my initial coding strategy was guided by a variety of techniques including NVivo coding, emotion coding, values coding, and evaluation coding.

In the focused coding phase, I coded split households separately from nuclear family migrant households, which were further refined by coding wives independently from husbands. This strategy allowed me to make constant comparisons between data and codes and the families of various interviewees. As I analyzed the data and sorted them into frequent initial codes, I

made continual adjustments, creating new codes and renaming old codes. As a result, three primary themes were identified: new forms of independence for wives and mothers, husbands' emotional awareness and engagement, and intergenerational collaboration in child rearing.

Several potential downsides can be identified with the online semi-structured interview approach relying on the snowball sampling method. First, while remote communication can make people feel more relaxed (Adams-Hutcheson & Longurst, 2017, pp. 152-153) and reconfigures power relationships between interviewers and interviewees, a familiar and comfortable home environment in the background can serve as a distraction to interviewees, which could discount the quality of participants' responses and the interactive interview process. Research has also shown that "interviews that take place in person tend to be stabilized by patterns of flow that produce rhythms or 'atmospheres' that can feel comfortable" (*ibid*., p. 153). Online interviews, on the other hand, remove the chance for researchers to become part of the rhythm that would have been established by sharing the same physical space. Moreover, and importantly, online interviews require a certain level of internet literacy. Recruitment of my research participants thus may have been compromised, as only participants who have access to and literacy with the internet could participate. I asked one of my participants if I could interview their parents, and the participant told me that an online conversation with their parents would be fruitless as they are constantly distracted with household and childcare chores and that they are not very tech-savvy. Lastly, snowball sampling is by no means a comprehensive method to recruit representative samples of the social group this research investigates, in the sense that it is difficult to avoid selection bias in the process of snowballing the sample. For example, the age group of this research is overwhelmingly represented by young parents in their 30s.

It is also important to note how power relations between the researcher and participants affect the validity of the interview process, on both macro- and micro-scales. As discourses concerning the U.S. government and society are escalating in Chinese mainstream media, it is likely that my interviewees may question the intent of my research and the potential risks of their participation. From a micro-level, it is possible that my identity as a young, educated female researcher from China now living in the US plays a part in the relationship-building process with my participants. For example, most of the wives from nuclear migrant families were very hesitant to let me talk to their husbands. When asked why, most of them offer superficial explanations such as busy schedules. One of my interviewees even questioned my political intentions, wondering if I work for the U.S. government. In order to gain their trust and create the least impact in my participants' conjugal and familial relationships, I assured all my interviewees before and during the interview that the content from the interviews would not be disclosed to their partners and any identifiable information would be removed in any future publications. I also shared a detailed research information sheet to all my participants a day ahead of the interview to explain the intention of the study and their rights and responsibilities as an interviewee for this research.

Chapter I: Urban-Urban Split Household Mechanisms

A unique characteristic of rural-urban migrant groups who engage in split householding strategies is the practice of circularity (Fan, 2018). Hugo (2013), in examining circular migration, defines the practice as "repeated migration experiences between an origin and destination involving more than one migration and return" (p. 2). One prevalent explanation for the nature of circularity among rural-urban migrants in China is an institutional one–the *hukou* system. The *hukou* system was adopted in 1958 by the Communist Party with the aim of

preventing rural peasants from escaping rural labor and famine in pursuit of implementing a

planned economy (Wallace, 2014, p. 74). *Hukou* is a system of registration that categorizes

individuals based on two standards, "one by socio-economic eligibility and one by residential

location" (Chan & Buckingham, 2008). The first dimension divides individuals into agricultural

or non-agricultural, whereas the second refers to the location of a person's permanent or official

residence (Wallace, 2014, p. 74). The *hukou* system is criticized in much of the literature for

barring non-local residents of cities from equal access to employment opportunities, education,

welfare, health care, and other social and economic benefits (Chen & Fan, 2016; Chan et al.,

2018). However, Chen and Fan (2016) in their research on rural-urban migrants' settlement

intentions reveal that the majority of rural-urban migrants intend to eventually return to the

countryside and have little or no interest in giving up their rural *hukou* in exchange for an urban

hukou, despite the seeming economic and social advantages of urban areas and urban *hukou* over

rural counterparts.

To resolve this paradox, Fan and Li frame householding as a strategy for facilitating the

migration process in China and view rural-urban migrants as active agents who use a

"straddling" tactic to keep their roots in the countryside on the one hand, and take advantage of

economic resources in urban areas (that nevertheless lack a permanent economic and social

outlook for these migrants) on the other (Fan, 2011; Fan, 2018; Fan & Li, 2020). Collectively,

these studies suggest that circular migration in China is not usually ephemeral and circular

migrants are not short-sighted, instead showing circular migration to be a process that

emphasizes long-term circulation and uncovers migrants' agency. These studies also suggest that

circular migration and household-splitting may be used as tactics to allow urban and educated

migrants to access both origin and destination urban cities' resources as part of a long-term householding strategy.

Besides the *hukou* system, previous research (Fan & Li, 2020; Ren, 2006) has also identified other factors contributing to household splitting among the Chinese rural-urban migrant group. Economic factors have been identified as the dominant contributor. The "new economics of labor migration" theory argues that the practice of sole migration empowers a household to retain social and economic resources in the place of origin, while simultaneously capitalizing on employment opportunities at the destination to maximize income and minimize economic risk (Hugo, 1982).

Children's ages and the availability of intergenerational support are other important determinants of migrants' split household management decisions. For example, Fan et al. (2011) contend that whether couple migrants bring their children along may depend on the children's age and whether the migrants' parents are available to help with childcare. This is echoed in Fan and Li's (2020) findings that some sole migrants leave their spouses behind to take care of their children and couple migrants bring their children to the host location due to a lack of intergenerational support.

Educational opportunities have also been identified as one of the key factors that influences rural migrants' household management. While Duan et al. (2013) have identified four stages of household arrangements for rural migrants and concluded that many migrant families eventually transform from sole migrants to nuclear family migrants, other studies have shown that this progression can be interrupted or repeated due to local education restriction policies at the destination city. Fan (2016) found that many nuclear family migrants eventually send their children back to their home village when they come of age for primary school, as the *hukou*

system places education access restrictions on non-local residents, and private schools are out of the question for most migrants due to their staggering cost.

Some research (Fan, 2003; Fan, 2018) indicates that discourse surrounding the gendered division of labor may also play a role in rural migrants' house-splitting decision processes. One particularly relevant example is the inside-outside framework.

In some rural split households, Chinese left-behind women's "inside" obligations have expanded in some cases to include not only childcare and family obligations but also agricultural labor–a traditionally male-dominated sector–while their husbands work in a different city. This feminization of agricultural labor was already underway during the Socialist Era (Hershatter, 2011), which might on its surface suggest a shift in the power dynamic of the inside/outside divide. Gal and Kligman (2000) posit that "public" and "private" are not particular "places, domains, spheres of activity, or even types of interaction…[but] rather…are best understood as a discursive distinction that…can be used to characterize, categorize, organize, and contrast virtually any kind of social fact" (41).

However, despite women's active roles in the agricultural sector, the "inside/outside" framework in the rural split household remains largely unchanged. The inside and outside aspects of the framework, like their counterparts in the public/private framework, are indexical signs (Gal & Kligman, 2000, p. 41) that embody fluid definitions and categorizations. Although rural left-behind wives have taken on traditionally male-coded responsibilities, the physical and geographical divide between the migrated husbands and left-behind wives has resulted in women's newly engaged agricultural work being assigned as "inside" work that holds less value than the husbands' "outside" jobs in a new city. This illustrates that, even when women take on new roles outside the home, the power dynamics of the inside/outside divide can remain intact.

Building on mechanisms that help explain rural-urban split householding decisions, the rest of the chapter discusses the push and pull factors in each urban and educated family's splitting process. The contrast between rural and urban split households contributes to the enrichment of the kaleidoscopic landscape of internal migration in China.

Financial Considerations

The "new economics of labor migration" theory partially explains the split householding praxis among urban and educated families: interviewees from this research shared that they engage in split householding so as to take advantage of economic resources at both origin and destination cities, either maintaining or upgrading their middle-class lifestyle.

For example, Mr. Lun[6], a 33-year-old sole migrant who lives in Beijing and works as a sales manager while his wife and daughter live in a small city in Hunan, commented that as a result of splitting the household, his family was able to purchase a second condo in Hunan. As another example, Mr. Zhu is also a sole migrant in his early 30s who spends most of his time working in Shenzhen as an artificial intelligence engineer. Mr. Zhu says his salary would likely be reduced to half of what he makes in Shenzhen were he to work in a smaller city. Continuing to split the household helps Mr. Zhu's family to accumulate savings and create a financial buffer for the future if and when he decides to return to his wife and daughter in Changsha. In fact, by working and living in Shenzhen alone, Mr. Zhu's family was able to pay off most of the mortgage on the property they purchased in Changsha.

While split householding may seem unconventional and unappealing to the general public, urban and educated parents employ this strategy to attain their long-term financial objectives, which include paying off mortgages, investing in real estate, and saving for their

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[6] All personal names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

child(ren)'s education. The practice of split householding is comparable to that of rural-urban split households, which depend on dividing the household to increase income and reduce economic uncertainty.

Parental Self-Advancement

While some interviewees hinted that financial reasons were one of the key determining factors contributing to their split householding decision, many emphasized the opportunities to aggregate and maintain human capital in the form of job skills and educational and promotional opportunities, as well as self-improvement in child-rearing practices. In some couple's minds, a model parent is one with a robust financial basis and an ambitious mind that craves endless self-transformation.

For example, by leaving their two-and-half-year old daughter behind with a paternal grandparent, Ms. Yang and Mr. Chan, who are both 30 years old, were both able to enroll in an MBA program on top of working in full-time administrative jobs at a local vocational school while also running an education consulting business on the side, a practice which requires frequent business trips from both the husband and the wife. When asked about the rationale behind such an intense lifestyle, Mr. Chan commented:

> "Life in China is very *'juan'* [hectic]. Many people like me are pursuing an advanced degree after working for a while…For example, the basic requirements for an administrative position at my school [vocational college] is a master's degree from a 985 school [elite college or university in China], with a Communist Party membership… Some good elementary schools, even kindergartens, have stringent requirements for parents' occupations and educational degrees."

Even though Mr. Chan, who works closely with young adults on their mental health, believes that spending quality time is the most important parenting characteristic, his actions belie his stated beliefs. For both Ms. Yang and Mr. Chan, temporarily splitting the family enables

them to advance their competitiveness in the job field and increase chances to accumulate

financial capital, both of which not only elevate the social status of the whole family but also, in

their minds, set a good example for their child, the importance of which they believe outweighs

physically spending time with their young daughter.

Institutional Factors

The role that the *hukou* plays in split households of urban and educated individuals varies

depending on the size of the city in which they reside. Out of 13 split households interviewed for

this research, only two families converted their *hukou* to the (sole-migrant's or couple-migrant's)

destination city, including one couple migrant family that intends to settle down in the

destination city (mid-sized), and one husband who lives close to his wife and child but chooses

to stay at the company dorm during weekdays. For most families interviewed for this research

who are split between medium-sized and small cities, *hukou* is no longer a pivotal factor in

migration decisions. Most of the couples living and working in medium or small sized cities

were able to convert their *hukou* to the cities of their choice, most of which are capital cities,

through purchasing a property or relying on their college-graduate status. Yet, some

interviewees, such as Mr. Chan (who moved from Jinzhou, Hubei to Wuhan, Hubei), did not feel

the need to transfer their *hukou* as they saw no reason to navigate administrative hassles when

their hometown *hukou* does not play a significant role in their migrant lives.

However, for families that include sole migrants living in mega cities (with a population

over 20 million) such as Beijing and Shanghai, *hukou* continues to play a decisive role. While

many local *hukou* reforms led by cities and provinces were announced to urbanize China and

bridge the gap between the rural and the urban (Chen & Fan, 2016), many of these reforms have

been limited to small- to medium-sized cities. Mega cities like Beijing and Shanghai–the most popular migration destinations for educated urban migrants–continue to set prohibitively high criteria for migrants seeking to obtain local *hukou* (Sun et al., 2020). As one example, the Shanghai local government requires an onerous application process for non-locals to obtain a Shanghai *hukou*[7].

Thus, for families like Ms. Yun and Mr. Lun, who are split between Beijing and Yueyang, Hunan, *hukou* plays a critical role in their householding strategies. Ms Yun remarked:

> "I could move in with my husband to Beijing now, but *hukou* is an issue. Without a *hukou*, my child would have issues with her school enrollment process, especially when it comes to her future college entrance examination [qualifications], so my child and I will wait until my husband obtains a Beijing *hukou* before planning to reunite."

Besides *hukou*, the status of a state-owned company employee is another institutional factor that influences migrant families' split householding decisions. Out of 21 interviewee households, 8 families include members working for state-owned enterprises. Within these families, some were forced to split their households due to working obligations and requirements.

Thanks to a policy called "couple avoidance regulations," which requires partners from the same marriage to be working in different branches located in different counties of the city while they are working for the same state-owned bank, Ms. Qi and Mr. Liu at one point split their household in three different locations in the same city. Ms. Qi and Mr. Liu were relocated to workplaces so far apart that they had to reside in different places away from where their child

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[7] An official document describes how to obtain a local *hukou* with a Shanghai residence certificate (上海市政府 2020): "1. The individual must have had a 'Shanghai residence certificate' for 7 years. 2. During the same period, the individual has been paying city social insurance taxes for 7 years. 3. During the same period, the individual has been complying with tax laws. 4. The individual must be appraised as holding an intermediate-level professional technical position according to city standards. 5. The individual has been complying with national family planning policies, and must have no felony record or other conditions that do not suffice to obtain a local hukou." (The phrase "other conditions" is not described in any further detail.)

lived with the paternal grandparents. To compound this, Ms. Qi and Mr. Liu's "weekend" days did not align during that period, and they barely saw each other during the year when they had to split their family in three different residences.

The availability of dormitories and cafeterias offered by private and government-owned entities is a crucial factor in promoting split householding. Some husbands may choose to engage in split householding when they have access to company dorms and cafeterias, which take care of their daily needs while also providing free amenities. Mr. He, for example, who works for a company that is about an hour away by car from where his wife and child live in Dongguan, Guangzhou, decided that he would live at his workplace during weekdays and visit his wife and child during weekends, so that he could devote more time and attention to his work.

Availability of Grandparents

Similar to rural-urban split households, the availability of grandparents in the hometown cities and children's age are also factors that influence each family's migration decisions. Facing jaw-dropping housing prices in large cities (in 2021, the average price of residential housing sold in Shanghai surpassed 361,000 yuan–approximately 5,242 dollars–per square meter [Statista, 2023]), the availability of grandparents' free labor at their origin city becomes an enabling factor for some families where both husbands and wives have been working in large cities for a while.

Having lived and worked in Shanghai for more than 8 years, Ms. Huang and Mr. Shi believe that Shanghai *hukou* is very difficult to apply for, and this mental block, coupled with their inability to afford a condo in Shanghai, contributed to their decision not to convert their *hukou*. In Shanghai, unless one has a local *hukou*, eligibility to purchase property requires married status and at least 5 years of contribution to the local social security plan. At the time

when they considered buying a property in Shanghai, Ms. Huang and Mr. Shi were not in the eligible purchasing group. As revealed by Ms. Huang, they later decided to purchase an apartment in Changsha instead of Shanghai due to home-purchasing restrictions and the husband's desire to return to Changsha in the near future in order to be closer to his parents. As such, the plan to purchase a home or to apply for a Shanghai *hukou* fell through. When their baby came into the picture, they realized the inconvenience of not having a permanent residence in Shanghai. Without owning a sizable place in Shanghai, it was out of the question to bring both of Mr. Shi's parents over to take care of the baby in their small rental apartment. In the end, Ms. Huang returned to Changsha, where Mr. Shi's parents are located, during her pregnancy and has been living with her parents-in-law for the last 2 years, even though Ms. Huang and Mr. Shi own a condo nearby. Stringent rules surrounding Shanghai *hukou* applications and a staggering cost of living, on top of the availability of free childcare from Mr. Shi's parents thus meaningfully, if indirectly, contributed to Ms. Huang and Mr. Shi's split household decision.

Many households rely on grandparents for childcare to avoid compromising the attention and care their children receive as a member of the stay-behind group. All but one of ten sole-migrant families with children under the age of seven depend on grandparents for childcare to varying degrees, with seven stay-behind family members choosing to move in with the grandparents. While split households also rely on grandparents' childcare labor, it is important to note that only one family out of all split households resorted to the practice of couple migration, leaving the child behind with the grandparents. Most households associate "left-behind" children with social stigma but do not consider themselves neglectful or irresponsible parents.

Patriarchal Narratives

As mentioned earlier, the "inside-outside" framework serves as a critical lens to examine rural-urban migration decisions, in which rural wives often end up staying behind while husbands migrate away. In this research, the majority of the subjects expressed discontent with the traditional patriarchal "inside-outside" narrative, emphasizing both that women's roles should not be confined to the inside and that men should also be available to attend to domestic obligations and responsibilities.

However, their householding decisions and arrangements contradict their stated beliefs. Despite significant educational advancements, traditional patriarchal values and culture continue to dominate the negotiation of marital power structures. In all but one of the twelve split households examined in this research, husbands were the sole migrants. Female grandparents in the stay-behind space assumed the majority of the childcare and housework responsibilities, while grandfathers took on a complementary role. The next chapter will explore the interplay between patriarchal narratives and migration decisions, demonstrating how the practice of split householding reinforces and transforms traditional Chinese patriarchal beliefs through exploring the tactics on which husbands and wives rely in deciding on and maintaining a split household.

Chapter I Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the mechanisms contributing to the decision to engage in urban-urban split householding. Contributing factors include financial considerations, parental self-advancement considerations, institutional factors such as the *hukou* system and the presence of free food and lodging, availability of grandparents, and the influence of the "inside-outside" patriarchal narrative. Urban-urban split households share with rural-urban split households in

that migrants from both groups straddle between two regions, leveraging economic and social connections in both their home and destination areas. For both groups, split householding is an economic strategy they employ in response to the uneven development in different cities.

The differences between urban-urban and rural-urban split households are nuanced but significant. Urban and educated families, many of whom come from small- to mid-sized cities, have obtained advanced degrees from megacities in China or from universities in the United States or European Union. The significant gains from their tertiary education inspire them to continue living and working in large cities to fulfill their career and financial ambitions. However, exorbitant housing prices in these megacities prevent them from achieving their personal and family goals simultaneously. In their minds, the inability to own a condo in their desired city perpetuates their "floater" identity and deprives them of the ability to provide a desirable lifestyle for their children.

Consequently, temporary split householding has emerged as the best solution for these families, allowing husbands to pursue career aspirations and maximize income while also securing a permanent home in a smaller city. The majority of the participants in this study expressed little to no interest in permanently splitting their families. For most households where the husband is the sole migrant, the stay-behind wives and children serve as a mental anchor that motivates the family to work toward a reunion plan. While split householding is often considered as a reluctant choice, many interviewees did not have a set reunification date. How do husbands and wives internalize and reconcile with such uncertainties? How are patriarchal/patrilineal/patrilocal values challenged and sustained in this liminal space? The next two chapters will attempt to address these questions, unveiling how household splitting

highlights the clash between values anchored in traditional patriarchy and ideologies inspired by a socialist market economy.

Chapter II: Marital Power Negotiations in Split Households

Connell's analysis of masculinity (1998) suggests that in many patriarchal societies, there is a clear division of labor where men are expected to perform certain tasks or roles that women are not, and vice versa. Despite previously discussed efforts during the Communist revolution to promote gender equality and encourage women's participation in the workforce, research indicates that these movements and campaigns did not fundamentally challenge China's "inside/outside" gender segregation (Croll, 1983; Yan, 2003). In addition, the state's renewed endorsement of Confucian values has further strengthened the patriarchal narrative. Confucianism promotes values such as "filial piety, ancestral worship, the benevolent authority of parents, and a hierarchical order based on gender and age," (Wu & Dong, 2019, p. 153) which reinforce traditional "inside/outside" gender roles and power dynamics. These revived ideas undoubtedly play a crucial role in shaping the perceptions of gender roles and responsibilities in urban and educated split households. This is exemplified by the case of Ms. Xian.

Born as an only child in Ningxiang, Hunan, Ms. Xian received significant educational investment from her parents, both of whom hold stable government positions. After earning her bachelor's from a prestigious university in Beijing, Ms. Xian decided to pursue another bachelor's degree in Germany to further her pursuits in music. While Ms. Xian wanted to continue her master's studies in Germany, her parents demanded that she return to China. As a compromise, Ms. Xian returned to Beijing and completed her master's degree in musicology from the same school where she had obtained her bachelor's. Her parents' control later extended to her career and marriage. Upon finishing her master's studies, Ms. Xian moved to Guangzhou

to settle down with her husband, Mr. Li. Despite receiving good job offers in Guangzhou due to her sterling academic background, Ms. Xian eventually returned to Changsha, Hunan, where both her parents and parents-in-law are located, and gave birth to her first child while maintaining a long-distance marriage with Mr. Li. Even though Ms. Xian originally intended to stay in Guangzhou, she ultimately decided to follow the advice of her husband and parents, explaining:

> I am heavily influenced by my parents [in terms of gender expectations]. My parents, since I was young, do not like girls to be too far away from home. I think parents from Hunan have similar mindsets…My parents can be pretty extreme when it comes to this…They want me to be close to them…My husband also insisted on me coming back to Hunan, although he never explained to me why.

Despite owning a large and luxurious condo located about 40 minutes by car from her parents' house, Ms. Xian chose to stay with her parents. Ms. Xian's mother has become the primary caregiver for her child while Ms. Xian is busy with work and personal business. When asked about her father's involvement in childcare, Ms. Xian commented that he mostly plays with her child and leaves the majority of the childcare and housework to her mother, who recently retired from work. Mr. Li intends to return and settle down in Changsha as soon as his work allows him to do so. The family plans to have both maternal and paternal grandparents take turns moving in and caring for the child when they reunite in Changsha.

Ms. Xian's interview illustrates how traditional notions of gender persist in conjugal and family relationships, and reveals the underlying tension between a woman's pursuit of personal development and her gendered obligations to her parents and her husband. It also shows how migration and split householding have brought patrilocality into question. Even though both Mr. Li and Ms. Xian's mothers are retired from working, Ms. Xian chose to move in with her own parents, rather than Mr. Li's, in the absence of a husband figure. The implementation of the

One-Child Policy has led to availability of childcare labor provided by the grandparents'

generation. Importantly, most grandparents do not show preference for male grandchildren, thus

interrupting the patrilocal tradition that builds its nexus around the male side of the family.

However, while this arrangement may seem gender-neutral, the imbalance of childcare work

between Ms. Xian's mother and father indicates the perpetuation of traditional gender roles.

Finally, it reveals how advanced education and a worldly perspective do not necessarily

transform deeply ingrained gender expectations.

This chapter will examine the marital negotiations involved in the split householding

process. Despite not necessarily advocating for a gendered division of roles and labor, husbands

and wives from split households often use tactics associated with gendered language and

expectations to facilitate split householding decisions and manage long-distance relationships.

This chapter sheds light on some of the ways in which husbands and wives inadvertently

perpetuate patriarchal values in urban-urban split households, and aims to address the following

questions: How does the general discourse surrounding gender relations in contemporary China

inform marital power negotiations in urban, educated split households? What tactics and

strategies do husbands and wives rely on to negotiate and maintain a split household?

Contemporary Discourse Surrounding the Chinese Families

To provide a broader sociocultural context for the subjects of this study, this section

briefly outlines contemporary discourse surrounding Chinese families before delving into the

details of how husbands and wives manage and maintain a split household. After the Mao era,

China focused its political efforts on economic development. The One-Child Policy was

implemented to optimize the demographic composition of the country and facilitate economic

modernization. As noted in the introduction, this policy had significant consequences for women and reinforced gender divisions in Chinese society. In addition to visible measures like the One-Child Policy, the Chinese Communist Party also relies on less formal tactics to promote its patriarchal authoritarian goals.

Viewing single men as "a threat to social stability" (Fincher, 2014, p. 11), the government has adopted many strategies to revive traditional patriarchal values and encourage women to prioritize their family goals, so as to solve the problems associated with single men by turning them into married men. One example involves coining new lexicons to influence the discourse surrounding single, educated women in China. The All-China Women's Federation, a Communist institution focusing on women and family affairs, defined the term "leftover" women (*Shengnv*) in 2007 to refer to single women over the age of 27 (Fincher, 2014). This derogatory term has been frequently employed in state media news reports, surveys, columns, cartoons, and television shows, with the aim of discouraging urban and educated women from delaying marriage beyond the age of 27. The fruits of this policy are shown in this research: all 20 women interviewed were married before the age of 30. Moreover, the introduction of private property rights through legal reforms since the 2000s has limited women's access to real estate and other assets in the event of divorce, thereby reinforcing the traditional institution of marriage (Fincher, 2014; Wu & Dong, 2019).

The Chinese State Council has identified upgrading "personal qualities" (*suzhi*) as a critical step toward improving national strength (Fincher, 2014, p. 25), which includes promoting early childbirth from urban and educated women. As a result, many educated "high-quality" women feel obligated to participate in this national mission. State-owned news outlets often report on babies born with birth defects, which, according to official news sources, are

attributable to older women giving birth for the first time (*ibid,* p. 26). Under great pressure, many urban and educated women may feel compelled to marry early to partners they may not have otherwise chosen and have children before the age of 30, the perceived cut-off age between giving birth to a healthy versus less healthy baby. Perhaps it is no accident that most women interviewed for this research gave birth to their first child before the age of 30. When asked about their plans to have a second child, many women who plan to have a second child expressed the concern that "they are getting very 'old,' and they feel pressured to get pregnant again as soon as possible."

These various campaigns promoting women to "return to the home affairs" have resulted in a resurgence of patriarchal attitudes toward gender roles in China. According to a 2010 survey conducted by the All-China Women's Federation and NBS (*ibid*, p. 29), the majority of Chinese men and women agree with the notion that men belong to the outer sphere and women belong to the inner, domestic sphere. The number of men and women who agree with this traditional gender division has increased by eight percent and four percent, respectively, over the past decade (*ibid.*).

"Rational/Irrational," "Calm/Emotional," and "Assertive/Erratic"

Studies have shown that emotions are gendered and embedded in sociocultural contexts (Fernandes et al., 2000; Montes, 2013, p. 471). Emotions such as sadness, worry, and anguish are often linked to femininity in many societies, whereas masculinity is often described with words such as anger, pride, and independence. This type of gendered emotional divide–expressive vs. repressive–is utilized by sole-migrant fathers and stay-behind mothers to make sense of and manage their split households.

In split households, both husbands and wives evoke a gendered division of emotions during the migration negotiation process, in accordance with the expected Chinese gender roles. When describing their migration negotiation process, husbands and wives often use dichotomous phrases such as "rational/irrational," "calm/emotional," and "assertive/erratic," implicitly reinforcing gender divides between the two partners. Despite their husbands being physically absent from the household, most stay-behind wives continue to uphold their husbands' dominance and perceive them as "rational" figures, such that their sacrifice by staying behind is internalized as a necessary one to achieve upward mobility for the family and for the next generation. Husbands, on the other hand, rationalize the split householding decision by describing their decision as "wise." When the roles of husbands and wives are categorized based on gendered personality traits, it reinforces the "inside/outside" divide in migration and householding decisions. This categorization contributes to the most common household splitting pattern identified in this research, which involves husbands becoming the sole migrant while wives stay behind with their child(ren), with childcare assistance from either maternal or paternal grandparents.

Ms. Yun and Mr. Lun split their family in 2021. Mr. Lun is a 33-year-old sole migrant who works for a state-owned company as a sales manager. Mr. Lun justified his decision to move to Hong Kong and later Beijing as a pursuit of promotion opportunities, which according to him, has made visible, positive impacts on the family, including enabling them to purchase a second apartment. Mr. Lun characterized his migration decision as a "rational" one, as split householding would bring material benefits to their household. However, he dismissed his wife's concerns over separating the family, such as absentee fatherhood, as "emotional." Despite her concerns, Mr. Lun successfully persuaded Ms. Yun to accept his sole-migrating decision. Ms.

Yun is a 34-year-old product analyst who stays behind with their five-year-old daughter. According to Ms. Yun, she decided to support her husband because she and her mother believe that letting Mr. Lun migrate alone to pursue his career endeavors would spare him from feeling regret over missed opportunities.

In split households like that of Ms. Yun and Mr. Lun, traditional gender values were invoked to facilitate a gendered migration pattern, in which the man's outside role and the woman's inside roles are emphasized, even though, like Ms. Yun, most of the families interviewed for this research have free childcare labor from the grandparents' generation. Further, the frequent usage of dichotomous gendered phrases like "rational/emotional" in the household structuring decision also shows and perpetuates unequal power dynamics, in which "rationalization" is linked with "outside" financial considerations and social status interests, while "emotionality" is conditioned to be associated with "inside" domestic issues such as marital and parent-child relationships. By prioritizing "rationality" over "emotionality" in these negotiation processes, women's legitimate concerns are sidelined and subjugated to the priorities of their husbands. Meanwhile, despite having received higher education and maintaining professional statuses, stay-behind wives like Ms. Yun seem to have internalized such unequal gender dynamics by relying on the "inside/outside" framework. When Ms. Yun was asked if she would make the same decision as her husband if she were offered similar career opportunities, Ms. Yun replied with confidence that she would not:

> In most Chinese people's minds, women are supposed to be in charge of the inside…I am absolutely not able to leave my home and my child behind. I just can't do that.

After splitting the household, some husbands continue relying on a gendered division of emotions to maintain and manage split households. Ms. Xian's husband Mr. Li, who is a

32-year-old banker, stated, "My wife has strong emotional needs, so I do my best to meet them. If she wants me to come home, I try to make that happen." In response to women's "emotional" concerns over the split householding strategy, husbands like Mr. Li choose to relinquish some level of authority in order to maintain a harmonious long-distance relationship. However, by linking domesticity with emotion, husbands like Mr. Li from split households reduce the complexity of the "stay-behind" life into a singular dimension of emotional labor, positioning women's "emotional" and "domestic" work as something that needs to be constrained and managed.

Mr. Lun, for instance, discussed how he perceives the sacrifices his wife has made over the years since they split their household:

> She is a woman, and she has made many sacrifices for me… when it comes to splitting the household, she makes sacrifices on the emotion aspect…To appease the imbalance she feels about me migrating alone, I don't want to take away some of her authority in minor aspects of life [such as choosing what clothes to buy for my child]...No matter how rational my wife is, she is relatively easily influenced by her emotions.

For both Mr. Lun and Mr. Li, their wives' emotions are contrasted with "rationality," implicitly assigning gendered meanings to these words and implying that emotions are something that is inherently feminine and, by extension, undesirable in the process of pursuing long-term success for the family. During this process, the complex navigation of stay-behind wives between their domestic and professional responsibilities, as well as their negotiations with the older generation, are often reduced to a single dimension–that is, the assumption that the wives' complaints and struggles are solely driven by their emotions.

By delegating some level of authority to his wife, Mr. Li believes that his wife's "emotional" concerns are contained and controlled, which leads to a perceived improvement of the conjugal relationship:

> [After splitting the household,] firstly, I think our empathy level has improved due to our understanding and recognition of the sacrifices we have made for each other. Secondly, I think [my wife] has become more rational after splitting the household…

When sole-migrant husbands like Mr. Lun and Mr. Li essentialize the challenges faced by their wives as "emotional," they delegitimize the significant domestic labor that their wives undertake, such as caring for their children as a *de facto* single parent while also working as full-time professionals, and the difficulties they may face in coparenting with grandparents.

Biological Traits

While husbands like Mr. Lun rely on phrases like "emotions" and "irrationality" to negotiate a temporary split household, other husbands may emphasize women's biological traits. When the Covid-19 pandemic struck China in 2020, Ms. Huang (32-year-old) and Mr. Shi (32-year-old study-abroad consultant) made the decision for Ms. Huang to resign from her job as a digital designer in Shanghai–even though Ms. Huang's salary was 15% higher than Mr. Shi's at the time–and relocate with their new-born daughter to Changsha, Hunan to live with Mr. Shi's parents. The primary reasons for this move were to receive free maternity care from Mr. Shi's parents and to alleviate the financial pressures of living in a high-cost city like Shanghai. While Ms. Huang expressed her desire to remain in Shanghai and keep the family together, Mr. Shi favored settling down in Changsha for the long-term. As such, they strategically decided to temporarily split the family while Mr. Shi stays in Shanghai to continue accruing personal and financial capital. To justify the sacrifice his wife had made by moving, Mr. Shi rationalized the decision-making process from the perspective of their child's biological needs:

> In our family, we are in a unique phase as we have an infant. During the early stages of infancy, the bond between the child and the mother is naturally stronger. Psychologist Carl Jung suggests that fathers are

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perceived as threats by infants during this period, and they often feel like a third party between the mother and child. Therefore, I believe that during this phase, fathers should take charge of external matters, while mothers should be responsible for the internal affairs of the household. I think this arrangement is linked to [human] nature.

Mr. Shi's statement regarding the dynamics of parenting during the early stages of infancy indicates a strong adherence to the gendered division of labor, where women and men are physically prescribed to operate within their own designated spheres. Mr. Shi's reference to Carl Jung attempts to draw on Western psychology to justify the household decision he made, presenting the split household setup as both a necessary and well-informed decision. Meanwhile, by not specifying a particular period when a father's presence is crucial in a child's growth, Mr. Shi has postponed his return to the family indefinitely. When asked when he is planning to return to Changsha, Mr. Shi replied that "right now our child needs her and she maybe [should] spend more time with domestic responsibilities…So I am dedicating more time to the outside…As for the future, we will negotiate more."

"Father Is an Indispensable Part of the Family"

Perhaps due in part to gendered discourse, such as the "inside/outside" framework and the "left-over" women narrative, many wives believe that they are not as "strong," "rational," or "independent" as their husbands, questioning their ability to act as a "proper" role model for their children in the absence of a father figure.

Ms. Qi has led a split-household life with her husband for the past decade due to the nature of both partners' work. Ms. Qi is 34 years old and works as a regional bank manager. Like other interviewees, she describes her husband as a "rational" type and believes that he should take a dominant role in cultivating good values and moral beliefs for their son. However, living

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in a split household, Ms. Qi occasionally feels anxious that her son is not spending enough time

with a male figure:

> My son is a boy and he should spend more time with his dad. I think I indulge my son. Men are more rational than women, and I want my husband to be the mentor for my child in terms of value-forming, decision-making abilities… For instance, when we traveled to Inner Mongolia, I would keep my distance from them. I would carry water and clothes for my son and leave ample space for my son to communicate with his dad. I noticed that my son would be braver and more masculine [when he spends enough time with his dad.] On the contrary, he appears to be hesitant when he spends a lot of time with me.

In Ms. Qi's case, to make up for the time missed by her son from living separately from his

father, Ms. Qi tries to make herself invisible when her husband visits. By highlighting her belief

that her son has become "braver and more masculine" after spending more time with his father,

Ms. Qi implicitly reinforces the idea that bravery and masculinity have a gendered attachment to

men only, and that masculinity is superior to femininity in a boy's growth and development. In

this sense, split householding heightens women's insecurity derived from a gendered division of

domestic labors and emotion, leading women to question their ability to nurture and provide for a

male child.

Ms. Weiwei, a stay-behind wife who is 33 years old with two toddlers, works in the

foreign trade industry, and has been living apart from her husband since 2019, shares Ms. Qi's

concerns about the negative impacts of an absent father figure. While Ms. Weiwei indicated that

household splitting creates a healthy space between her and her husband, enabling her to focus

more on her career pursuits and relieving her from placing too much attention on her husband's

"annoying" behaviors in the house, she also expresses a lack of confidence in her own parenting

abilities in the absence of a husband/father figure:

> There needs to be a father figure in my children's growth. My husband has a better temper than me. I am erratic and short-tempered. I feel like

my children have inherited many of my undesirable traits. I want them to be more influenced by their father. My husband is a very principled and calm person.

Ms. Weiwei's comments highlight her concerns over her children's development without the physical presence of a male figure, positioning men as better-suited for certain roles and as better role models for the children. For example, Ms. Weiwei's comparison between herself–"erratic and short-tempered"–and her husband–"principled and calm"–indicates her belief that men (not least her own husband) are better at providing stability and discipline whereas women are positioned as unstable and emotional figures. Ms. Weiwei does not directly express it, but it is conceivable that her husband is afforded the luxury to be calmer and more rational in their separated household because he is not constantly dealing with the chaos and demands of family life.

Chapter II Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how long-standing gender norms and values that govern gender relations based on the "inside/outside" divide are perpetuated by husbands and wives in their negotiations and maintenance of splitting the household. Specifically, the following patterns are observed: gendered expressions of emotion during and after the household structural negotiations; reliance on perceived "biological traits;"; and the perception of the fatherly role as indispensable. In this process, traditional gender norms and values are reproduced as the roles of husbands and wives are categorized based on gendered personality and physical attributes.

During the migration negotiation phase, husbands may justify their desire to migrate alone and leave behind their wives and children by employing language such as "wise" and "rational." Some other sole-migrant husbands rationalize the decision-making process from the

perspective of their child's biological needs, in which fathers are "scientifically perceived" as threats to the mother-child relationship during the early stages of infancy. Correspondingly, wives may ultimately buy into this narrative and view their husbands as "rational" figures worthy of deference. This dynamic contributes to the predominant household pattern observed in this research, with husbands becoming the sole migrant working towards their career and personal development goals, while wives take on the relatively subordinate role of staying behind with their children and grandparents.

In maintaining a long-distance relationship, husbands and wives from split households both engage in a discourse that positions the roles of husbands and wives on opposite ends of the spectrum. For some husbands, by linking domesticity with emotion, women's responsibilities and obligations associated with the "stay-behind" role are conveniently reduced to a singular dimension of emotional labor. To "control" and "manage" such emotions, some husbands delegate some level of authority (such as minor parental decision making) to their wives, which led to perceptions of improved marital relationships for some husbands. This essentializing process simultaneously contributes to the delegitimization of the significant domestic labor undertaken by stay-behind wives.

Some stay-behind wives may also perpetuate gender stereotypes on multiple axes. Not only do they position their husbands as principled and brave role models for their children, while denigrating their own "undesirable" traits, also they prioritize the qualities and traits associated with masculinity over femininity when it comes to child-rearing, especially when those children are males.

Overall, this chapter explored the intersection of domestic migration with broader discourses surrounding family and women. It examined the discursive relationships between men

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and women and traditional Chinese patriarchal values, accounting for the historical and sociopolitical complexities involved. Despite the continuing prevalence of traditional Chinese patriarchal values in the split households interviewed for this research, there is some evidence that these notions are being challenged, albeit only at the margins. In many cases, stay-behind wives like Ms. Xian choose to live with their own parents rather than their in-laws, and they do not consider split householding as a negative living arrangement that places them in a subordinate position. The next chapter delves into how split households enable stay-behind women, many of whom are educated urbanites with professional aspirations, to regain a level of autonomy and independence that might be impossible within traditional nuclear households.

Chapter III: Regained Autonomy for Stay-Behind Women & Emotionality for Sole-Migrant Men

While the last chapter discussed how husbands and wives engage in various gendered patterns in the process of negotiating and maintaining a split household, this chapter suggests that split households concomitantly challenge some foundational concepts of the traditional Chinese family structure by recognizing that conjugal relationships do not have to conform to traditional gender expectations. For instance, many urban split households do not feel obligated to carry on the family line through sons and do not plan to have a second child after giving birth to a daughter. This directly challenges the patrilineal aspect of the traditional Chinese family structure, blurring the division between the roles that sons and daughters traditionally take in a family. In response to questions about the traditional "inside-outside" divide, the majority of respondents, including both husbands and wives, expressed disagreement with this philosophy to varying degrees. Many husbands acknowledge that there is no clear dividing line between domestic responsibilities for husbands and wives and that wives may be as successful as

husbands on the outside. Many wives who stay behind highlight the double burden they face in balancing their professional aspirations with their domestic duties to their children and grandparents, which are seen as being part of the "inside" of the household.

While some female babies born outside of the quota under the One-Child Policy may have faced abandonment and discrimination, leading to fear, shame, and restricted access to public services such as healthcare and education (Attane, 2013; Bortherms, 2019), many urban female-only children may have received unexpected benefits from this policy. For instance, urban families who were allowed to have only one child invested more in the education and non-gendered treatment of their daughters (Fong, 2004; Lu & Treiman, 2008; Tsui & Rich, 2002) compared to rural families, many of whom were allowed a second child if the firstborn was a female. Consequently, this resulted in greater availability of resources for only children, including female children both before and after marriage. Many women in this study have received significant educational investments from their parents and aspire to become independent, strong-willed professionals, in addition to taking on the roles of wife and parent. Moreover, parental support for these women does not stop with marriage, as grandparents continue to play a key role as caretakers for their daughters' children. By forming close bonds between maternal grandparents and grandchildren, these split households confront the patrilocal aspect of the Chinese patriarchy, challenging and transforming the constitution of the traditional Chinese family structure that revolves around the male side of the family.

The majority of stay-behind wives in split households may appear to be in a less favorable position compared to their husbands who have migrated away. They are deprived of potential career advancement opportunities that could have been available had they moved to or stayed in a bigger city. However, some evidence from this research paints a more complex

picture. The examples provided below are interconnected and consistently reflect stay-behind wives' concerns about autonomy, including the pursuit of self-improvement and career advancement, as well as the phenomenon of lessening intramarital conflicts in split household setups. These examples illustrate how stay-behind wives negotiate their roles and responsibilities within split households while striving for personal fulfillment and agency.

In this chapter, I first outline the implementation of the One-Child Policy and its influence on parent-child relationships in China. Second, I explore the dynamic of stay-behind families and discuss the consequences of split households, shedding light on how a shift in household responsibilities and roles results in options, albeit limited, for wives to renegotiate their relational power and strive for alternative lifestyles. Third, I discuss ways in which sole-migrant husbands' emotions are made visible in the space of split households.

This chapter aims to explore the impact of sociopolitical contexts on the experiences of individuals, particularly the Only-Child Generation, in split households. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: How do the identities of the Only-Child Generation influence women's experiences as stay-behind members of split households? How do men and women challenge traditional gender expectations and norms in the practice of split householding? Lastly, how do women navigate their stay-behind lives without the husband?

The Only-Child Generation

It is important to first understand the background that contributes to the socio-cultural identities of stay-behind wives. This not only contextualizes the transformations resulting from split householding practices for these women in relation to their gender subjectivities, but also helps to highlight broader social and cultural shifts taking place within the context of split

households, shedding light on how stay-behind family members adapt to changes in household structures.

Although urban gender gaps have widened and women's opportunities and potential in the public sphere have narrowed, other social conditions, as described in detail below, appear to defy the trend that subjugates women to a submissive and secondary role in the family. In the Reform Era, decollectivization, massive rural-to-urban migration, and a socialist market economy "empowered the young… [and] weakened parental power in the countryside (Yan, 2021, p. 5)." These social changes along with the implementation of the One-Child Policy allowed young people to enjoy autonomy and freedom to an unprecedented extent, despite their parents' efforts to retain their authoritative position in the household. This policy dramatically altered the intergenerational dynamics of millions of Chinese families, making the child(ren) the locus of family life, a phenomenon Yan (2016) has referred to as descending familism (*ibid.*:6). The practice of descending familism has "shifted the experiential meaning of life from glorifying the ancestors to enabling the grandchildren, a complete inversion of the previous order in family values (*idem.*)."

As might be expected, urban women of the Only-Child Generation have received unprecedented educational investment compared not only to their mother's generation, but also to their rural counterparts. As a result of the implementation of the One-Child Policy under China's socialist market economy, many parents imprinted their own upward mobility goals onto their only child, which has translated into generous educational investment by the parents (Yan, 2021, Liu, 2017) and few housework responsibilities for the child (Liu, 2017). Consequently, unlike some of their mothers' generation, whose education was interrupted by the Communist Party's revolutionary agenda, many urban and educated women of the millennial era were able to

pursue their academic and career aspirations, partially owing to China's economic reforms and increasing access to higher education opportunities. For example, Chinese women's enrollment in university education increased from 23% in 1980 to 51% in 2010 (Fincher, 2014). Indeed, all 20 female subjects from this research have at least one college degree, and three hold master's degrees from overseas universities.

Higher education has also fueled the career ambitions of women. As mentioned earlier, in the Mao era, urban women were a major part of the production force, a phenomenon that became the precursor for women's high labor participation rate in the twenty-first century: as of 2023, Chinese women of working age made up 61% of the working force, in contrast with 58% in the UK and 56% in the USA, 54% in Japan, and 23% in India (International Labor Organization, 2023). Research (Wang, 2000) has shown that national projects in the Mao era prompted women to establish a working identity and made being a housewife an undesirable social image. Such narratives are not only preserved but even elevated in the lives of today's young women. For instance, all stay-behind female interviewees in this research are full-time professionals, with occupations ranging from teachers to managers to product analysts.

State-administered public culture may have also contributed to the "independent and driven" image of young urban professional mothers, encouraging young mothers to maintain their working identities and leverage different resources to minimize a stigmatized impression associated with housewives.

For example, the magazine, *Women of China*, which was established in 1949, suspended in 1966, and revived in 1978, is the flagship publication of the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) and serves as a representation of the "historical rupture between state socialism and state capitalism" (Wang, 2017, p. 250). Following the publication's revival, *Women of China*

became influenced by the discourse of modernization modeled after Western capitalist countries and its editors began to focus on catering to urban elite women. This resulted in the "complete erasure of peasants, factory workers, women employed in the service sector, and ethnic minority women in visual representation" (Wang, 2017, p. 250), all of whom were the key figures featured on the covers of *Women of China* before 1999. Out of the 228 issues published between 1999 and 2008, 164 covers featured entertainers, while the remaining covers showcased successful entrepreneurs and celebrities. By doing so, *Women of China* promotes the concept of capitalist modernity as a society devoid of social classes, wherein material abundance is attainable for all through individual endeavors. Simultaneously, it actively engages in and reinforces the public narrative that encourages women to embrace autonomy, self-confidence, and self-improvement.

Subsequently, terms like "Bailing Liren" "La Ma" and "Gui Fu," literally translated as "white-collar beauty," "hot moms" and "ladies of quality and wealth," prevailed in popular culture promoting youth, beauty, and materiality, traits endorsed and embraced by the market economy. It is evident that these terms are gendered, as there are no equivalent terminologies that describe similar traits in male professionals and fathers.

Influenced by public culture, the desire to maintain qualities of youth and intelligence is also manifested in women's own marital and parental decisions. Almost all of the women from this research did not give birth to their first child until they were close to the age of thirty, with the majority having little or no intention of giving birth to a second child in the future despite the relaxation of the One-Child Policy since the mid-2010s. When asked why they do not intend to have a second child, most women's answers revolved around a few themes: their own wellbeing in terms of balancing work and family lives; capital resources; promotion opportunities; and the availability of quality time with their child.

In addition to their pursuit of a high quality of life, women from the Only-Child Generation exhibit a strong desire to eliminate gender inequalities. Unlike women of previous generations, these women had greater access to resources through their natal families and did not experience explicit gender bias during their early years of development (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005). However, as they advanced through the education system and entered the workforce, women witnessed a gradual erosion of their extensions for equal opportunities and fair treatment, exacerbated by explicit biases that persistently favor men in both domains (Zhang et al., 2008).

The clash of experiences, according to Wu and Dong (2019), has unintentionally cultivated new gender subjectivities among women that prioritize personal desire and freedom of choice while rejecting gender inequalities. Consequently, new strands of made-in-China feminism have emerged, in which women leverage available resources and cultural narratives to negotiate better marital and professional outcomes in a country that is ingrained with patriarchal values (Wu & Dong, 2019).

Urban and educated stay-behind wives from the Only-Child Generation, despite being placed in a householding situation that is typically viewed as disadvantageous, exhibit resilience and flexibility to make the best of their situations. Although collective feminist activism by women against a top-down patriarchal order has so far been unable to survive under the authoritarian state (Dong, 2021; Fincher, 2014), stay-behind wives challenge the hegemonic order in the private domestic sphere, albeit indirectly and unintentionally. The following sections illustrate how stay-behind wives strive for independence beyond their traditional roles as wives and mothers, and how split householding unintentionally creates a limited yet significant opportunity for women to assert autonomy and pursue personal aspirations. In order to

understand why the stay-behind space allows women to explore an alternative lifestyle, discussion about these women's backgrounds will follow, delving into the contributing factors behind this phenomenon.

Regained Autonomy and Independence

In most split households, the absence of a husband/father brings about spatial and symbolic changes to the family structure. When a household is first split, the absence of the husband can be a painful and difficult experience for the family. The husband, who was once physically present in the home, suddenly becomes a distant figure. The physical absence of the husband can create an immediate sense of emotional upheaval, particularly for the child. However, some stay-behind wives' experiences differ from the conventional belief that the physical absence of husbands leaves wives in an emotionally vulnerable position with more domestic responsibilities.

The phenomenon of absentee husbands, in some wives' opinions, opens up more freedom to navigate the moral scripts governed by the inside-outside framework, particularly in relation to gender roles and expectations. When the husbands are around, some wives might feel more obligated to attend to their husband's physical needs, such as cleaning up after them and taking care of their personal hygiene. Consequently, much of the wives' attention and time is spent on their husbands to conform to "*xianqi liangmu*" (wise mother, good wife) expectations. Splitting the household, on the other hand, may lend limited space to allow women to regain a degree of autonomy and independence and be more dedicated to their own wellbeing and personal lives.

Ms. Sansan, for instance, is a 32-year-old stay-behind wife who works as a nurse in Changsha, Hunan. Ms. Sansan has been living with her 4-year-old daughter and her in-laws, having lived separately from her husband since they were married in 2016. Her husband works as an architect in Guangzhou and comes to visit Ms. Sansan and their four-year-old daughter about once a month. When asked how she would describe her life living together with and apart from her husband, Ms. Sansan remarked with a rather energetic tone:

> When I am physically living with him, we tend to have more conflicts. When he is at home, he may help out with the childcare work, but I prefer living alone with my child…No one controls or imposes on me when we are living separately. When he comes back…I don't like picking up after his mess and that annoys me a lot. Sleeping alone is not bad.

In the space of her split household, Ms. Sansan is freed from the physical labor associated with the "wifely duties" of taking care of her husband, such as making the bed and doing laundry for her husband. However, although Ms. Sansan has expressed that splitting the household allows her to maintain the lifestyle she desires, it does not necessarily mean that she does not want to reunite with her husband. For instance, when asked what her ideal state of living would be, she said, "I would really like us to be able to afford the downpayment for a condo in Guangzhou [so we can reunite as a family]...If it is too expensive, we should not put too much financial stress on ourselves."

However, the fact that they have been living apart for over six years suggests that there are reasons beyond economic interest that contribute to the decision to maintain the separate living arrangement. When asked why she does not want to relocate to Guangzhou or have her husband move back to Changsha, Ms. Sansan explained that they own a condominium in Changsha and she holds a stable job there. Additionally, her husband's profession as an architect

offers ample project opportunities and high salary prospects in the dynamic market of Guangzhou. As a result, reuniting in either Guangzhou or Changsha requires either Ms. Sansan or her husband to make some professional sacrifice. For Ms. Sansan, moving to Guangzhou would mean living in a cramped space with her child and possibly her in-laws, on top of the stress of finding a new job, which would be a costly and time-consuming process. If Ms. Sansan's husband, on the other hand, were to quit his job in Guangzhou, it would result in a significant reduction in their family's income and financial stability.

Ms. Sansan's comments about her stay-behind life suggest that she finds some enjoyment in the split lifestyle. For example, splitting the household helps her achieve her financial and professional goals, as both partners have stable jobs that provide a consistent income. Split householding also frees her from the burden of conforming to traditional gender roles, such as being a "good wife" who devotes a significant amount of time and care labor to her husband.

It is worth noting that Ms. Sansan's comments may not necessarily suggest that she enjoys the split lifestyle unconditionally. As mentioned, she longs for a family reunion so as to preserve the image of an "ideal" family setup. Furthermore, without the husband, Ms. Sansan indicated that her negotiation power with her parents-in-law is very limited. The fact that her longing is not supported by her actions perhaps indicates that Ms. Sansan's personal comfort, such as living in a more spacious place and being free of the burden of caring for her husband, outweighs the importance of preserving an "ideal" family image, at least in the short term.

Ms. Xiong, who works as an accountant, is a 32-year-old stay-behind wife who has lived separately from her husband since the onset of their marriage in 2019. Her comments resonate with Ms. Sansan's remark over the liberating effects of splitting the household:

> I have been an independent person most of my life. I do not enjoy sharing. Living separately is a good arrangement for me. My husband snores a lot and it affects my sleep quality. He is also a somewhat sluggish person. For example, it usually takes him a couple of hours to finish cooking, which always leaves me hungry for a long time. When I complain, he does not like that. Our working and sleeping schedules are also different, he overtimes a lot and sleeps late. Sometimes I would find him wide awake at 2 am and that annoys me a lot. When we are separated by long distances, we don't have many conflicts.

Ms. Xiong met her husband through a blind date arranged by her mother. Although Ms. Xiong's marriage may have been motivated by the common pressure to marry before turning 30, Ms. Xiong has maintained a very positive long-distance marital relationship. Ms. Xiong describes her husband as someone who is "considerate…motivated…[and] not into unhealthy habits such as drinking and smoking."

Despite facing challenges in conceiving, Ms. Xiong and her husband have chosen to engage in the strategy of split householding since the beginning of their marriage. This structural set up, in which they maintain separate households, will continue even after they have a child. They have made this choice for a few reasons. The first is to maintain their professional career standing that guarantees stable income for the household. As an interior designer, Ms. Xiong's husband believes that there are better job opportunities for his profession in the provincial capital of Hunan, Changsha, as compared to the smaller city of Yiyang, also in Hunan. Giving up his job would not only compromise financial security for the family but also his own career prospects. For Ms. Xiong, her identity as an accountant working for a local company in Yiyang provides her with a sense of stability and purpose. Second, by splitting the household between Changsha

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and Yiyang, Ms. Xiong is able to maintain an independent lifestyle, without having to constantly make accommodations to her husband's lifestyle and habits. This allows her to have more control over her own daily routines and pursue her own mode of living without feeling constrained by the demands of a traditional marriage. This is reflected in Ms. Xiong's statement that "after living together for a while, you can become tired of certain habits of his." Additionally, the distance between Changsha and Yiyang (approximately one hour by bullet train) is not perceived as insurmountable by Ms. Xiong, who sees her husband as often as once a week.

As a result, splitting the household, in Ms. Xiong's eyes, is not an issue to be resolved, but rather an arrangement that allows both partners to maintain autonomous ways of living while still being able to maintain a long-term marital relationship.

Relieved Emotional Burdens

Split householding not only reduces the physical burden on women who stay at home, but also frees them from the emotional labor of dealing with their husbands' "nagging" and "criticism," in the words of some interviewees. In this process, stay-behind wives are able to create a sense of boundaries and autonomy. Ms. Yun, for example, is a 34-year-old mother living in a small-sized city in Hunan. Her husband, Mr. Lun, first moved to Hong Kong and then to Beijing within a span of 2 years; both relocations were initiated by Mr. Lun in pursuit of promotions within the same company. Although Ms. Yun voiced her disapproval toward her husband's decision to physically separate from her and their 5-year-old daughter, split householding has empowered her to regain a sense of control of her life and parenting style:

> When [my daughter's] dad is around, he nags and criticizes how I parent. When he is not around, I have more freedom to make decisions on what my child wears, how I communicate and interact with my child, and what I want to buy…

It can be inferred from Ms. Yun's remarks that there was a shift in authority following the splitting of her household. Prior to this household change, Ms. Yun found herself needing to negotiate within expectations set by her husband, such as the types of clothes she chooses for her daughter and her shopping habits, as Mr. Lun later shared.

However, as demonstrated in Ms. Yun's conversation, despite Mr. Lun's efforts to continue exerting influence from afar, she is able to feel a sense of respite from his nagging and criticism and regain some form of autonomy and freedom over her life choices and her parenting style. Furthermore, this regained sense of independence spills over to her social life and enables her to develop identities beyond the roles of wife and mother. For example, Ms. Yun talked about how she spends her spare time when her husband is not around:

> I have many hobbies. I love handicrafts…When my husband is here, I spend more time with him. When he is not around, I go camping with my child and my friends.

Although this newfound autonomy is not necessarily a conscious or intentional outcome, women like Ms. Yun are resourceful in finding ways to leverage what may commonly be viewed as less-than-ideal circumstances to pursue their goals and aspirations. Similar to Ms. Yun, although Ms. Weiwei aspires to reunite her family as soon as possible, she simultaneously highlights the mental relief split householding offers:

> When my husband comes back to visit, I am not used to having another person living in the same space with me after having lived alone for a while. I feel [mentally] more restrained. He also loves nagging. Maybe sometimes it is better to live alone…I also think that when he comes home to visit, he should carry some housework burdens, such as cooking, spending time with the kids, helping out with the shower. He should not act like a "boss" when he is home, otherwise what's the difference between coming home and not coming home? It simply adds more work for me, right?

As demonstrated by Ms. Weiwei's case, split householding allows couples to pursue their

individual goals and interests while maintaining a sense of autonomy for stay-behind wives.

Admittedly, split householding may have compelled Ms. Weiwei to forgo a career she enjoyed in

Shenzhen, a place she describes as offering advantages such as "premium welfare" and "great

opportunities including business trips abroad." It is important to note that although Ms. Weiwei

does not have access to the grandparents that many other stay-behind wives do, split

householding nevertheless incidentally created space for her to escape from her husband's

nagging, albeit not by design.

In later conversations, Ms. Weiwei indicated that when her husband visits, her husband

would joke with their two children: "Why have you girls inherited more from your mom than

me?" Staying alone with her children perhaps not only spares Ms. Weiwei from nagging, but also

allows her more quality time with her daughters free from gendered interventions or biases from

their father. Ms. Weiwei's calling out of her husband as acting like a "boss" when he visits shows

that the reappearance of her husband reminds Ms. Weiwei of the imbalance of a gendered

division of housework, prompting her to evoke gender equality and challenge her husband to

carry more domestic work.

Additionally, leaving Shenzhen did not extinguish her passion for career pursuits. In fact,

split householding seems to have provided a juncture for Ms. Weiwei to devote more mental

effort to herself, as she indicated below:

> When I was living in Shenzhen with my husband, we were always arguing and
> fighting. We were stressed because we had financial obligations to our parents,
> especially my mother-in-law, who was not particularly healthy at the time. Both
> our first- and second-born were unexpected, and that brought great stress to us.
> We lived in a small space and we were very tired of each other…After returning
> to Changsha, our foci in life have shifted. He thinks about promotion potentials. I
> no longer put most of my energy into him. I am considering how to walk out of

this house [and find a better job]. So, we don't have as many conflicts or arguments.

As split householding temporarily suspends frustration towards the trivialities of married life, it also provides new room for women like Ms. Weiwei to reconsider career choices in a new city. In fact, Ms. Weiwei said she hired a nanny so she could continue to work, although what she is making in Changsha barely covers the fees to pay the nanny. Her determination to be a full-time professional was evident throughout the interview. She claims that "working makes a person become more positive and it doesn't matter how much a person makes at work, as it helps with one's peace of mind."

Availability of Grandparents

It is important to note, however, that the ability of many of these women to explore an alternative lifestyle without living with the husband is largely attributable to offers of free childcare labor by grandparents. In pre-modern China, Confucian familial ideologies sustained a generational hierarchy in addition to a gendered hierarchy, in which the mother-in-law acted as a supervisor to the daughter-in-law (Liu, 2017). However, in contemporary China, the prevalence of neo-local residence has led to a shift in this hierarchy. Parents and parents-in-law have now become childcare providers instead of supervisors, marking a significant generational shift in familial roles and responsibilities. Additionally, women from the Only-Child generation have benefited from "a demographic dividend" (*ibid*., p. 131) in which both mothers and mothers-in-law of parents are available to provide needed domestic labor, including childcare. Such an intergenerational transformation, in which a family's axis of attention is shifted from the seniors to the young, is captured in Yan's (2021) concept of inverted familism. In this concept,

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Yan (2021) attempts to capture the younger generation's increased bargaining power and support from the grandparents' generation. Indeed, the majority of the stay-behind wife interviewees from this study live with their own parents or their parents-in-law, who take care of most of the "dirty" work. For example, when asked how she shares housework with her mother at home while her husband is away in Beijing, Ms. Yun made it clear that her mother takes care of all house chores, including cooking, laundry, and dishes, and jokingly claimed that the only house duty she performs is to empty the Roomba trash bin.

Furthermore, unlike the grandparent generation, for whom parental support was often competed for between siblings based on a gendered hierarchy, the generational dynamic in Ms. Yun's generation is inverted so that grandparents are being selected to be secondary childcare providers. While Ms. Yun's mother is the only caretaker option for her, some other interviewees have gone through a selective process among grandparent "candidates." Ms. Cathay, who works remotely as an HR manager, is 32 years old and has lived separately from her husband as a stay-behind wife since June 2022. She remarked that both her mother-in-law and mother spent some time with her and her child shortly after she gave birth, and she eventually decided to choose her own mother as the main care provider, describing her mother as someone who "understands and supports [her] scientific way of raising children."

The "stay-behind" reconstructed household symbolically alters familial roles, with wives physically replacing the role of husbands and becoming the only visible symbols of "breadwinning" in the house, as the father figure becomes a distant one for the child(ren). This allows women to uphold their career and personal pursuits on the one hand and fulfill their parental responsibilities on the other. For example, when it comes to childcare labor, Ms. Yun said that her mom covers all the "dirty" work on the inside, and Ms. Yun is only responsible for

the "outside" part of the childcare work such as taking her daughter to different extracurricular activities and leisure events. Such an arrangement may help to assuage her disappointment and frustration towards her husband's decision to leave the family behind, as the childcare labor that would have been shared by Ms. Yun's husband is now transferred to Ms. Yun's mother. Thus, her mother's sacrifice in taking on the role of a full-time nanny allows Ms. Yun to maintain her full-time position at a state-owned company, her relationship with her husband, her personal pursuit of happiness with her hobbies and social activities, as well as her social image as a good mother.

Intergenerational Influence

Ms. Sansan and Ms. Xiong's experiences as teenagers might also shed light on their preference for living "alone." Ms. Sansan shared with me that she grew up as an only child with her mother, while her father worked in other cities and countries intermittently. This upbringing may have normalized the practice of split householding for Ms. Sansan, in which only mother and children are present at home and the father figure is a distant one. Ms. Xiong, on the other hand, started living separately from both of her parents in middle school when she was enrolled in a boarding school. This early independence required her to learn how to take care of herself, which may have led her to prefer a more independent lifestyle even after getting married. Split householding is thus a convenient setup for her to continue preserving her independence.

In an effort to make sense of their split householding circumstances, both Ms. Sansan and Ms. Xiong prioritize their career advancement and personal fulfillment over traditional family structures. As members of the Only-Child Generation, maintaining a full-time job is a crucial aspect of their identity-building process. Indeed, most women interviewed for this research revealed discontentment and anxiety about the possibility of giving up work and becoming a full-time housewife. Ms. Xiaofeng, a left-behind wife who is 32 years old with a one-year-old daughter who recently opened her own trading company in Dongguan, remarked:

> If women have the ability to make money, they'd better not stay at home and become a full-time housewife. [Being a housewife] would really make a person's life different…her state of mind would change dramatically…even if I do not have to consider financial stress, I still would not want to be a housewife…It is definitely no easy job!

Ms. Weiwei, who works in the foreign trading industry, echoes Ms. Xiaofeng. Ms. Weiwei detailed the downsides of being a housewife from the perspective of mental health and surrounding perceptions on the notion of full-time housewives:

> In fact, I think this society still looks down on full-time mothers, as if [being a full-time mother] means you have free time at hand and that you are lazy…Also, people might also think your education is wasted…They think if a middle-school graduate can find a job, why shouldn't you…I also think working makes a person become more positive. [Housewife work] is repetitive and it makes you grumpy. I lose my temper very often when my children are making a fuss…But working distracts my attention away from them…It doesn't matter how much money I am making at work. It helps with my state of mind.

Sole-Migrant Husbands' Emotionality

As mentioned earlier, some husbands evoked a gendered division of emotions during the migration negotiation process, describing their decision to migrate alone as "rational" and "wise" and their wives' concerns as "emotional." However, the following descriptions of husbands'

explicit emotions pose a stark contrast to their attempts to establish themselves as the "rational" figure in the family. Some sole-migrant husbands may, in contrast to stereotyped Chinese views of masculinity, experience strong emotions as they express the pain and regret at missing out on their child's growth and development.

In traditional Chinese families, an authoritarian approach to fathering is often observed, which is typically characterized by the father's close monitoring and supervision of his children (Holroyd, 2003; Ward, 1989). In child-rearing, traditional Chinese fathers are emotionally detached from their children, leaving emotional work to the mothers. Consequently, there is often a negative association attached to men expressing their emotions, particularly emotions that are associated with sentimentality and sadness, which can potentially harm their gender identity (Peng & Choi, 2016). However, in the space of split households, the culturally prescribed separation of masculinity and emotions for men is challenged and makes men's emotions visible. For example, after living separately from his family for 3 years, Mr. Zhu, remarked:

> Family reunion is something that many people strive for. Personally, I believe that being with family is a fundamental aspect of a person's life, but I have failed to maintain that status. I feel anxious and uneasy about it.

Mr. Zhu strongly believes that being with family is essential to a person's life, and he expressed a deep sense of wistfulness and loneliness for not being able to stay physically close to his loved ones. Similarly, Ms. Cao's description of her husband, who is 28 years old and works in the foreign trade sales as a sole migrant in Shanghai, highlights the complex emotions that sole-migrant husbands experience when they engage in split householding:

> My husband is a very family-oriented person. For example, whenever he leaves for Shanghai after a home visit, he cries…At first, my child would cry hard when his dad leaves home…But children are adaptable, when dad is not around, there are mom, grandma and other people to hang out with him…At the beginning, he would always ask me where is

dad…There was one night he asked himself where is dad and later answered himself that dad is in Shanghai. When I told this to my husband over the phone call afterward, he could not stop crying. My son is not as reliant on my husband as before. He doesn't even communicate with my husband over video calls, and that makes my husband sad.

The decision to split the household was based on two factors for Ms. Cao's family. The first reason was a decrease in the family's monthly income due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused Ms. Cao and her husband, both of whom work for e-commerce companies in Shanghai, to experience significant financial strain. Moving back to Hefei, Anhui to be with Ms. Cao's parents was expected to reduce this burden. Additionally, Ms. Cao's mother had been living with the couple in Shanghai for the past two years, helping with childcare and household chores. However, she expressed a desire to spend more time with her own husband and take a break. Moving back to Hefei would allow Ms. Cao's mother to do so, and also save the family money by not having to pay for monthly childcare to Ms. Cao's mother (about 4000-5000 yuan, approximately 570-710 USD) and reducing the overall cost of living. Ms. Cao's husband would continue to live and work in Shanghai while moving into a smaller apartment to reduce expenses and accumulate more savings.

However, as Ms. Cao emphasized, this separation is temporary and she longs to reunite with her husband. She shares that if her husband can make enough money to make a down payment on a condo by the end of 2023, Ms. Cao and their child would move back to Shanghai, where the whole family would prefer to live for the long term.

The capacity to provide financial support is a crucial factor in measuring one's fatherhood and masculinity in both Western and Eastern societies (Dermott, 2008; Brandth &Kvande, 1998). For Mr. Zhu and Ms. Cao's husband, maintaining their role as the economic provider is likely a very important aspect of identity, helping them to maintain the self-image of

a responsible and masculine father figure, even though it means they have to endure the pain of being separated from their families.

However, the moral obligation to provide for the family does not negate the emotional costs experienced by sole-migrant fathers due to long-term physical separation. As demonstrated in the examples above, some sole-migrant men openly express their pain and emotions to family members or outsiders. Although the "*wai*" (external) sphere is conventionally perceived as superior to the "*nei*," husbands' physical and emotional absence from the "*nei*" can trigger a deep emotional reaction for sole migrant men. They feel they are losing control and missing opportunities to establish relationships with their children, leading to a profound feeling of regret.

The experience of sole migration thus evokes intense emotions that destabilize the power structures within these families and, by extension, patriarchal values and norms in Chinese society. In negotiating and maintaining a split household, many husbands rely on a gendered division of labor and emotions. They often position their decision to migrate alone as "rational" and their wives' concerns as "emotional," thereby reinforcing the cultural inside/outside narrative. However, the visible emotions of sole-migrant husbands suggest that their intended maintenance of the ideal division of labor is not so ideal when they realize that they are excluded from the "*nei.*" In response to such a change, sole-migrant husbands manifest behaviors of critiquing their stay-behind wives: being emotional.

The juxtaposition of sole-migrant husbands' desires to maintain their masculine identity as financial providers and their visible expressions of emotions and pain challenges the conventional decoupling of masculinity and emotions, ultimately normalizing men's expressions of love and regret as husbands and fathers.

Chapter III Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the dynamics of intra-familial relationships when husbands and wives manage a long-distance relationship through split households. By deviating from traditional gender norms, split householding challenges Chinese patriarchal values, as both stay-behind wives and sole-migrant husbands navigate a transformed landscape.

Split householding can often place extra emotional and physical labor on wives left behind. Women may experience the pain of missing their husbands, struggle negotiating with the grandparents' generation as the only visible parent at home, and have to take care of their child(ren) alone after returning from work. On the other hand, split householding may also offer perceived benefits for stay-behind wives, such as a reduction in marital conflicts and newfound free time that was previously dedicated to their husbands.

In the absence of their husbands, split households provide a small but significant space for stay-behind women to regain a degree of autonomy and independence as they navigate their stay-behind life. Specifically, women often experience relief from the emotional burdens and "wifely duties" they previously carried, which allows them to maintain a more independent lifestyle. As a result, split householding has led the women in this research towards reclaiming some degree of emotional freedom and autonomy, which can result in expanded personal development opportunities and social circles. Such changes directly challenge the narrative that women should be submissive to men in accordance with the rules and expectations codified in the "Three Obediences" (*san cong*).

Additionally, the space of split households also lends insight into an often-neglected space between men and their families. Contrary to the cultural norm that fathers and husbands

should maintain an aloof image to preserve their authority in the household, sole-migrant husbands prioritize staying emotionally connected to their families alongside pursuing financial opportunities and career advancement. For them, participation in the "*nei*" is as important, if not more, as their commitment to the "*wai*" sphere to maintain their status as responsible family men. As such, split householding challenges the severance of masculinity and emotions, normalizing men's expressions of sadness and regret.

Conclusion

This research examines split urban and educated households in China, shedding light on how husbands and wives in this household arrangement experience or come to terms with their newly-adopted roles in the process of renegotiating relational powers, and contributes to the study of Chinese internal migration in several ways. First, by focusing on urban-urban migration–a subpopulation that has increased by 90.70% from 2000-2020, reaching 82 million in 2020–it bridges a gap in literature that has largely concentrated on rural-urban migration. Second, by using qualitative methods to explore intra-household dynamics, this paper's findings highlight hitherto neglected consequences of split householding, especially in terms of challenges to gender norms.

Although the patterns and migration mechanisms associated with urban-urban split householding share similarities with rural-urban households, there are noticeable differences. Most urban-urban split households from this research structure their family such that at least one parent remains behind with their child(ren), whereas it is customary for couples among rural-urban migrants to leave their children behind to be taken care of by grandparents. Although urban-urban migrants do split their family in pursuit of long-term financial stability, they are more concerned about their own personal advancement in a relatively holistic sense, as

manifested by their pursuit of higher education, promotion opportunities, and developing different hobbies, than in the case of rural-urban migrants whose primary motivations are generally improved earnings. Similar to rural-urban split households, the availability of grandparents is a key enabling factor contributing to urban-urban split householding. However, in urban-urban households, grandparents may play an even more pronounced childcare role, with grandparents at times competing to become childcare providers in the stay-behind family.

This research reveals that the split household arrangement highlights urban and educated women's struggles as they maneuver between two different discourses. Ji (2017) coined the term "mosaic temporality" to capture the new dynamics of the familial system in contemporary urban China, an era in which paradoxical ideologies are meshed together, as shown, for example, by the resurgence of patriarchal Confucian attitudes amid the emergence of Western feminist and individualistic ideologies, socialist and capitalist concepts of modernity, the desire to rewrite Mao's China, and the legacy from the High-Socialist Era. Against this background, on the one hand, a male-dominated discourse surrounding gender relations compels them to continue upholding patriarchal values and practices. Such discourse has emerged as a result of various post-Mao government measures aimed at promoting economic modernization, which, according to multiple studies, may have undermined the feminist progress made during the Maoist era. In this process, women's bodies and minds are recursively manipulated and instrumentalized in line with ever-shifting state agendas. Women in this research, taking on the role of stay-behind wives in split households, buy into the narrative that men are more "rational," and justify the split household arrangement as a necessary and wise decision while yearning for a reunion with their husbands and fearing that they are not good enough "masculine" examples for their children.

On the other hand, growing up as members of the Only-Child Generation, these women have received an unprecedented level of educational and parental attention and are influenced by a public culture that encourages them to pursue material abundance and value autonomy, self-confidence, self-improvement, and quality of life, all of which contribute to ever-growing aspirations in both personal and career development. This results in women not only defying the trend that subjugates them to roles subordinate to men, but also exhibiting a strong desire to challenge gender inequalities. Despite the government's efforts to suppress women's collective feminist movements in the public sphere, it is unable to eradicate the emergence of women's new subjectivities, which resist such repression. For example, in the context of split households, women are able to take advantage of a less favorable situation and find themselves inadvertently receiving more mental and physical freedom resulting from a reduction in wifely duties and criticism from their distant husbands. This creates space for women to invest more in their personal advancement and social circle.

Therefore, this research illustrates that the intersection of two contrasting discourses concerning women in China manifests itself in the realm of split households, where stay-behind wives must grapple with new identities and negotiate power dynamics with their distant partners. By navigating and upholding a split household, this space sheds light on women's everyday challenges and their agency in managing constantly evolving and often conflicting state policies, sociocultural expectations, and norms.

This research also demonstrates that sole-migrant men in split households, though spatially distant from the rest of the family, continue exerting their influence by employing tactics that rely on gendered expressions of emotion. By portraying women as "irrational" and "emotional" in opposition to their "rational" and "wise" image, sole-migrant husbands persuade

their wives to agree to and maintain a split household that keeps gendered power relationships intact. However, striving to be a "rational" and "wise" image does not prevent some sole-migrant men from exhibiting their emotions and regrets as they experience the pain from missing their family members. Ironically, their open expressions of emotion align with their own critiques of their stay-behind wives as being overly emotional. This juxtaposition between men's desire to maintain the role of financial provider and their visible expressions of emotions challenges the conventional decoupling of emotions and masculinity, highlighting the struggles of sole-migrant men in managing a split household.

Together, these findings suggest that household-splitting is not only a strategy in service of a family's economic goals, but also a site that potentially (re)shapes gendered values and norms. For instance, urban split households' indifferent views on the obligation to carry on the family heritage through sons indicate that patrilineality is no longer a hard requirement of an ideal family setup. This is further demonstrated by the close bonds formed between maternal grandparents and the grandchildren, resulting from stay-behind women choosing to live with their own parents when possible instead of their in-laws. Split-householding also incidentally serves as an outlet for women to gain a sense of respite from their "wifely duties" and discover new forms of autonomy and freedom, and for men to more freely express emotions of pain and regret, challenging the convention that emotions are associated only with femininity. While these newly constructed senses of autonomy and emotional expression are not a consciously designed result, these findings support the notion that gender relations in China are at a critical juncture, where deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs intersect with limited opportunities for non-conforming gender practices, indirectly destabilizing gendered narratives surrounding gender roles and the gendered division of labor among married women and men.

Appendix A: Descriptive Interviewee Statistics (n=30)

	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Male	10 individuals	33.3
	Female	20	66.7
Age	25-39	2	7
	30-35	25	83
	36+	3	1
Marital Status	Married	30	100
Children's age	6 months-3 (including 3)	11	55
	3-6 (including 6)	6	30
	6+	3	15
Educational Level	College	24	80
	Master's	6	20
Occupations (Split Households)	State-owned enterprises professionals	8	27
	Housewives	2	7
	Other professionals[8] (non state-owned)	20	66
Number of Children	0	1 household	5
	1	18 households	85
	2	2 households	10
Type of Household	Sole migrants	11 households	52
	Couple migrants	1 household	5
	Nuclear family migrants	8 households	38
	Multiple phrases of migration[9]	1 household	5
City of Residence	Small-sized city (1-2 million)	5 households	38

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[8] Occupations include: consultant, accountant, school administrator, foreign trade sales, AR manager, HR manager, teacher, nurse, program manager, lawyer, architecture designer, editor, and tour guide.
[9] 1 household went through different stages of migration, from sole-migrating to couple-migrating to reunification.

(Stay-behind members from Split Households)	Mid-sized city (8-15 million)	8 households	62
	Megacities (over 20 million)	0 households	0
City of Migration (from Split Households)	Small-sized city (1-2 million)	2 households	15
	Mid-sized city (8-15 million)	4 households	31
	Megacities (over 20 million)	7 households	54

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Interview Questionnaire (English)

Biographical questions:
- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
  - How old are you?
  - Where were you born?
  - Where did you grow up?
  - Where did you receive your undergraduate/master's education?
  - Where do you live now?
  - Do you work? If so, what do you do for work?
  - At what age did you get married? Where did you get married?
  - Does your spouse work? If so, what do they do for work? Where do they live right now?
  - Do you have children? If so, how old are they? Where do they live right now?
  - Are you planning to have a second/third/etc. child? If so, when do you think that will happen?
  - What do you do in your leisure time?

Intra-household structural Questions:
- How did you come to the decision of adopting one of the following house-splitting styles (sole-; spouse-; nuclear family-migration)? How long was the negotiation process within your family? What factors did you take into consideration? Did you involve anyone else outside of your household (e.g., parents) in this decision-making process?
- Can you share a little bit more about your child-caring process?
  - Who is involved in your child-caring process?
  - Who makes primary decisions regarding the children and if so, why and why not?
  - Do you have to pay your parents to take care of your child(ren), if applicable?
  - How do you usually engage with your children?
  - What do you think matters the most in child-rearing?
- Can you tell me a little bit more about how migration has changed your relationships with the people around you?
  - How has migration changed your relationship with your spouse?
  - (Sole & spouse migrants)
    - How do you make up with your spouse during conflicts that arise remotely?
    - What tactics do you use to maintain an intimate relationship with your spouse?
    - How do you alleviate conflicts between your left-behind spouse and your parents who are living in the same household with that spouse?

- - - Do you feel more free or more constrained being the left-behind one? Financially and mentally.
  - ○ How has migration changed your relationship with your parents?
  - ○ How has migration changed your relationship with your children? (If applicable)
  (Sole & spouse migrants)
      - - What tactics do you use to maintain an intimate relationship with your children?
- What do you think of the following statement? "A woman's place is 'inside' the family while men provide for the family 'outside?'"
    - - Do you think it is important to include wives' opinions in making important decisions?
    - - How do you share housework/childcare with your spouse?
- Can you tell me a little bit about your household's financial management?
    - ○ Who takes care of financial management in your household?
    - ○ Who makes more money, you or your spouse?
    - ○ How much do you make every month?
    - ○ How do you usually allocate your monthly salary? (Remittance (to whom is it sent? Do you support your spouse and children? Your parents?; rent; cost of living; insurance; entertainment; investment; savings; etc.)
    - ○ What is the difference between you and your spouse's salaries?

Institutional/hukou-related (Household Registration) questions:
- Can you share a little bit about your migration story?
    - ○ When did you move to where you are currently living?
    - ○ Why did you choose to move to this city?
    - ○ How often do you visit your hometown?
    - ○ How often do your parents come to visit you?
    - ○ What do you do for holidays? birthdays? how do you celebrate these or decide which ones to mark together. If children, who meets with the teachers? etc...
    - ○ Are you planning to move back to your hometown in the future?
- Can you tell me a little bit about your current *hukou* status?
    - ○ What do you think of the *hukou* system in general?
- For migrants with local *hukou*:
    - ○ Why did you decide to transfer your *hukou*?
    - ○ Was it easy for you to apply for a local *hukou*?
    - ○ What processes were involved in transferring your *hukou* to your current city?
- For migrants with non-local *hukou*:
    - ○ Are you planning to apply for a local *hukou*?
    - ○ Do you think it is easy to apply for a local *hukou*?
    - ○ What kind of governmental social welfare programs have you missed out on due to your non-local *hukou* resident status?
    - ○ What kind of social welfare support do you think is available for non-local residents in the city you are living in right now?
- Can you tell me a little bit more about your child-rearing experiences as an urban-to-urban migrant?
  (Nuclear family migrants)
    - ○ Does your child(ren) go to a public or private school?
    - ○ What kind of medical insurance does your child have?
    - ○ If applicable, what kind of governmental social welfare programs has your child(ren) missed due to non-local *hukou* resident status?
  (Sole & spouse migrants)

- ○ Are you planning to have your child join you in the future?
- ○ If the state provided health care and child care help, and if there were no *hukou* system, would you be living together in the same city?

Intergenerational-related questions:
- Can you share a bit more about your childhood?
  - ○ Who took care of you before you turned 18?
  - ○ Were your parent(s) working in a different city when you were young?
- Can you tell me a little bit about your extended family?
  - ○ Where were your parents born? Where do they live now? Do they live by themselves?
  - ○ What is the highest degree held by your mother/father?
  - ○ How many siblings do you have?
  - ○ Do your siblings have children? If so, do they live together?
  - ○ Do you have any cousins? If so, do they have children? Do they live with their children?
- How do you think your parents feel about absentee parenting?
- How do your parents feel about you not living with your spouse and your child?
- How do you feel about absentee parenting?

Interview Questionnaire (Chinese 中文)

个人简介问题：
- 您能告诉我一些关于您自己的事情吗？
  - ○ 您年龄多大？
  - ○ 您在哪里出生？
  - ○ 您在哪儿长大的？
  - ○ 您在哪里接受本科/硕士教育？
  - ○ 您现在住在哪里？
  - ○ 您工作了吗？如果是的话，您做什么工作？
  - ○ 您几几年结婚的？您在哪里结婚的？
  - ○ 您的配偶工作吗？如果是的话，他们做什么工作？他们现在住在哪里？
  - ○ 您有小孩吗？如果有，他们几岁？他们现在住在哪里？
  - ○ 您打算要第二/三/四个孩子吗？如果是的话，您打算什么时候要第二个小孩？

机构/户口相关（户籍）问题：
- 您能分享一下您的移民故事吗？
  - ○ 您是什么时候搬到您现在居住的地方的？
  - ○ 您为什么选择搬到这个城市？
  - ○ 您多久回一次您的家乡？
  - ○ 您的父母多久来看您一次？
  - ○ 您打算将来搬回您的家乡吗？
- 能简单介绍一下您目前的户口情况吗？
  - ○ 您现在的户口在哪里？
对于有当地户口的移民：
  - ○ 为什么决定转移户口？
  - ○ 您申请当地户口容易吗？

○ 将户口转移到当前城市涉及哪些流程？

对于非本地户口的移民：
- ○ 您打算申请当地户口吗？
- ○ 您觉得申请当地户口容易吗？
- ○ 您觉得因外地户口而错过了哪些政府社会福利项目？
- ○ 您认为您现在所在城市的外地居民可以获得什么样的社会福利支持？
- ● 您能告诉我更多关于您作为城市移民的育儿经历吗？

（家庭移民）
- ○ 您的孩子上公立还是私立学校？
- ○ 您的孩子有什么样的医疗保险？
- ○ 如果适用，您的孩子因非本地户口而错过了哪些政府社会福利项目？

（单身和配偶移民）
- ○ 您打算将来让您的孩子加入您吗？
- ○ 如果国家提供医疗和育儿帮助，如果没有户口制度，您和您的爱人孩子会一起在上海同居吗？

家庭内部结构问题：
- ● 能简单介绍一下您家的财务管理吗？
  - ○ 谁负责您家的财务管理？
  - ○ 您通常如何分配您的月薪？（汇款；租金；生活费用；保险；娱乐；投资）
  - ○ 谁赚更多钱，您还是您的配偶？
  - ○ 您和您配偶的工资有什么区别？
- ● 您如何看待以下陈述？"女主内，男主外"？
- ● 您认为在做出重要决定时纳入您配偶的意见很重要吗？
- ● 您如何与配偶分担家务？
- ● 您是如何决定采用以下分房方式之一（单身；配偶；家庭移民）？谈判过程多长时间？您考虑了哪些因素？您是否让其他人（即父母）参与了这个决策过程？
- ● 您能分享更多关于您的育儿过程吗？
  - ○ 目前来说，谁参与了您的育儿过程？
  - ○ 如果适用，您是否必须付钱给父母来照顾您的孩子？
  - ○ 您通常如何与孩子互动？
  - ○ 您觉得育儿最重要的是什么？
- ● 您能告诉我更多关于移民如何改变您与周围人的关系吗？
  - ○ 移民如何改变了您与配偶的关系？

（单身和配偶移民）
- ○ 在远程发生的冲突中，您如何与配偶和好？
- ○ 您使用什么策略来维持与配偶的亲密关系？
- ○ 如何缓解留守配偶与同居父母的矛盾？
- ○ 作为留守者，您觉得更自由还是更束缚？在经济上和精神上。
- ● 移民如何改变了您与父母的关系？
- ● 移民如何改变了您与孩子的关系？如果适用。

（单身和配偶移民）
- ○ 您使用什么策略来与孩子保持亲密关系？

隔代相关问题：
- ● 能多分享一下您的童年生活吗？
  - ○ 谁在您十八岁之前照顾您？
  - ○ 您小时候父母跟您生活在同一座城市吗？
- ● 您能告诉我一些关于您的大家庭的事情吗？

- ○ 您的父母在哪里出生？他们现在住在哪里？他们自己住吗？
- ○ 您母亲/父亲的最高学历是什么？
- ○ 您有几个兄弟姐妹？
- ○ 您的兄弟姐妹有孩子吗？如果有，他们住在一起吗？
- ○ 您有堂兄弟姐妹吗？如果有，他们有孩子吗？他们和他们的孩子住在一起吗？
- ● 您觉得您的父母如何看待留守儿童教育？
- ● 您的父母对您不和您的伴侣和孩子住在一起是什么感觉？
- ● 您如何看待留守儿童？

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