

## Embodying Middle Class Gender Aspirations

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GENDER, SEXUALITIES AND CULTURE IN ASIA

# Embodying Middle Class Gender Aspirations

Perspectives from China's  
Privileged Young Women

Kailing Xie



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# Embodying Middle Class Gender Aspirations

Perspectives from China's Privileged Young Women

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*This book is dedicated to my beloved parents, Zhou Jin and Xie Jianhua, in appreciation of all the love, unconditional support they gave and all the values they taught that have made me the woman I am.*

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I started this project with a tormented feeling that perplexed me at the juncture of turning twenty-seven, the age from which China's state media officially labelled me as a 'left-over woman'. I boarded my flight to the UK in the spring of 2014 to pursue a Ph.D. at the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York. It started my journey to look for answers to the questions of that time: What does it mean to be a woman and why, to a large extent, I and many of my friends feel being shackled by the unspeakable sense of destiny that seems to have been prescribed to every Chinese woman I know. This journey also grants me precious opportunities in the quest for the definition of a meaningful life outside of the Chinese societal norm for girls, which needed constant resistance and renegotiation. It is a journey sprinkled with a mixture of emotional struggles: moments of pride spurred by intellectual enlightenment, waves of profound self-doubts that drove me to momentary depression that required consolation from a gentle soul. It is precious, risky, but a necessary journey of self-transformation. I want to acknowledge a host of intangible and inexpressible factors that came together in a cosmically fortuitous constellation that contributed to my completion of this journey. The stories and reflections accumulated through it resonate with the tensions experienced by many women of my time. I want to share these stories in this book with integrity and authenticity. I hope it can add something valuable to the journey of others.

I will always remember the feeling of sitting next to my supervisor, Professor Stevi Jackson, on her sofa, drinking English tea with the exact right amount of milk, while talking through her feedbacks on my final drafts before my thesis submission. Those moments somehow bizarrely resemble my imagined image of Mary sat at the feet of Jesus, listening to her master's teaching. It was intimate, inspirational, and fun. The difference is, there was no clear division between housework and the intellectual work that needed to be done, as Stevi's kitchen table covered by working papers indicated. These meetings often lasted from early afternoon till dark during a time when her wrist was badly injured. Stevi's dedication to work and support for her students set a great example of what kind of academic I want to become. My co-supervisor Dr. Sian Beynon-Jones has also offered precious reassurance that kept me going since the early stages of my research. When I had no clue what I was doing and constantly felt ashamed by reading my own scruffy drafts, Sian has always been encouraging with her most constructive feedback. All of these meant a lot to me to find my feet in what I am doing. I could not hope for better supervisors. The wonderful Professor Harriet Evans gave me a big hug before my viva and provided sharp and incisive comments for me to improve this project.

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## Researching China's Lucky Generation: The Post 80s

The phrase *fu mu zai, bu yuan you, you bi you fang* (父母在, 不远游, 游必有方, when parents are still alive, one shall not travel far, if one does there must be a clear place to go to) kept reappearing in my mind during the years when I was completing my PhD in England. It is a famous instruction given by Confucius in the analects, and means that while one's parents are alive, the son may not go far away. If he does go abroad, he must have a definite place to which he goes. There has been much debate about what exactly *fang* refers to: is it a fixed place? Is it that parents can be reassured of being able to contact the son when needed, or does it mean a clear goal to strive for in order to make his parents proud? Either way, it has been a classic saying that reflects the Chinese moral values instilled into a child's mind from the earliest years: one's filial piety to one's parents and the unbreakable ties between them. As the only child in my family, this verse speaks straight to my heart. It carries the deepest sentiment of a Chinese child's feelings towards their parents. Without a brother, I know that it is my job to make my parents proud, but the guilt of being far away from them is a lingering shadow cast over my mind.

Despite the continuing influence of son preference under China's patrilineal family tradition, scholars have observed the increasing importance of daughters in Chinese family life. A combination of the One-Child

Policy, changing marriage practices and more diverse economic opportunities have elevated daughters' status to an unprecedented level in their natal family, and this is reflected in 'parents' increasing focus on their daughters' upbringing, as well as in maintaining a good relationship with them both before and after marriage' (Evans 2008, p. 20). Fong (2002) notes that empowered urban single daughters are able to defy disadvantageous gender norms while using equivocal ones to their advantages. In contrast to the old saying that 'a married daughter is like spilt water' (*jia chu qu de nü er, po chu qu de shui*, 嫁出去的女儿, 泼出去的水), W. Zhang's (2009) research on married women in rural China reveals a strengthened relationship with their birth parents. Similarly, Liu, F. (2008) reveals that only daughters unanimously express the imperative of assuming the filial duty towards their parents that was traditionally prescribed for sons. All these trends indicate that a change in family practices is occurring in contemporary China.

I embark on this research project with questions about the contradictions I had observed since my mid 20s as one of China's only daughters. Born as the only child of my family in a small Chinese city, I remember that my *waipo*<sup>1</sup> (maternal grandmother, 外婆) used to tell me affectionately that I was living in a *mi guan guan* (local dialect for honey jar, 蜜罐罐) compared to China's previous generations. I did not quite understand why at that time. But I do know that my own mother had to cook for the whole family after school when she was young, because *waipo* was always busy at work throughout the 1960s and '70s. My mother also remembers that her parents used to lay her at their feet while sleeping, but held her younger brother between them in their bed. This, somehow, has become her symbolic memory of the unfair treatment she experienced growing up as a daughter, which has made her struggle to feel intimate with her own mother. Maybe this experience influenced her determination to give me a different childhood. I grew up spending a lot of time with my mother, which made me never doubt her love for me. Evans (2008) identified the communicative bonds that have built up between mothers and their only daughters in contemporary urban China, which is distinct from previous generations. I have to say that this intimate bond with my own mother laid a solid foundation for my sense of security and self-worth as a person, which makes me feel forever grateful to her.

<sup>1</sup>The word *wai* signals distance compared to the paternal grandmother, according to patrilineal custom.

Like many urban daughters born under the One-Child Policy during the 1980s, as my parents' *zhang shang ming zhu* (a precious pearl on the palm, 掌上明珠), I used to see no constraints in being a girl and believed that I was free to become whoever I strove to be. Maybe, to some extent, I am indeed lucky. Growing up during a period of time when China was experiencing rapid social and economic transformations under the economic reform, I have seen my own home city expanding, with many tall commercial apartment blocks shooting up like bamboo shoots in spring, and bicycle-flooded streets washed over by private vehicles. Our family home moved from the initial two-room flat allocated by my mother's *danwei* to bigger places purchased with money made by my father's business. I grew up witnessing our surroundings becoming physically transformed by visible material wealth accumulating alongside dire poverty scattered at the edges of our city, which served as a warning sign to remind people to keep running fast in this market race to avoid the misfortune of lagging behind.

For a child born into an urban family with means, life was not lacking. With both parents working, throughout my school years, I was taken care of by hired nannies, who were either redundant factory workers or rural migrants. Together with other boys and girls from my school, I was taught the idea that there is only one way forward: we must study hard and enter a good university, so that we can become successful in our work, therefore 'giving back' to our parents and *zu guo* (motherland, 祖国). Fierce competitions that must be won through individual efforts and deliberate self-cultivation were instilled as the norm from our earliest school years, as this was the only way for one to deserve a bright future.

Gender was not significant in my imagination of the future at that time. It seemed that everything would just happen 'naturally' as we grew up. As much as I never doubted that I would have a career, I equally never questioned that one day I would marry a man and have a family, because surely everyone will do the same, both boys and girls. It is just a normal part of life! Although dating was forbidden during my school years, my girlfriends often gathered together to discuss boys while entertaining each other with romantic imaginings of a married future. At that stage, none of us had a clue about how our lives might differ from those of our male peers.

It was only when I finished my university degree and 'entered society' for the first time at the age of 22, that I started to realise the gendered reality that I had to face as a young Chinese woman. It felt as though,

overnight, the topic of ‘settling down’ in a good marriage had become the priority that concerned many of our parents. Parents suddenly seemed to no longer be cheering on our academic achievements or career aspirations, but to be worrying about our marriage prospects instead. It seemed that the season had come and ‘flowers need to blossom’ as my father jokingly put it. The idea that *nan da dang hun, nü da dang jia* (women and men should marry when they grow up, 男大当婚, 女大当嫁) had taken effect. This posed a particular problem for women from my cohort who had the privilege of higher education and believed in equal opportunities for boys and girls. The expectation on us to find a good man suddenly appeared to be more urgent than the lesser pressure on men to marry early. If she fails to marry, regardless of her other achievements, a woman is still seen as somehow failing in her life. Women are believed to have a much shorter ‘expiry date’ than men in the dating market; single men over 30 are said to be diamonds in high demand, whereas women over 27 are described as ‘leftover’. The emotional stress attached to being a single woman makes many go on blind dates hoping to shed the shame. Simultaneously, overt gender discrimination in the job market and restricted career choices makes having a ‘reliable’ husband sound like not such a bad idea for young women, presuming that they are able to find one. More importantly, our loving parents, to whom we feel closest, have become the champions of trying their best to ensure that our lives are not going ‘off track’. As one of my participants, Stella, commented: ‘*Nowadays, we can ignore other people’s opinions, colleagues and friends alike, but our parents’ feelings are the most influential and difficult to ignore*’. The fear of failing to live up to what is expected as normal and desirable generates constant anxiety for many young women of my cohort.

Liu, Jieyu (2017b) points out that the unilateral emphasis on the framework of filial obligations in examining Chinese family life fails to address the complexities of doing family relationships and deprives individuals of agency and autonomy. Therefore, she applies the practices of intimacy (Jamieson 2011), focusing on the practices that foster the subjective sense of closeness among Chinese family members. This shift of focus is illuminating, particularly at a time when the Chinese government is placing great weight upon family obligations in the context of a rapidly ageing population and limited state welfare provision, reinforcing duty by appealing to ‘natural feelings’ among family members. As a result of the gendered division of labour in the domestic sphere and gendered notions of emotionality, women are often the key actors in forming family

bonds. Jamieson (2011) argues that 'practices of intimacy can re-inscribe inequalities such as those of age, class and gender as well as subvert them'. The strengthened bond between only daughters and their parents results from the changing family practices in contemporary urban China, which must have interlocking impacts on both the only daughters' gendered subjectivities and their practices of intimacy in adult life.

Young women freshly graduated from universities are coming to an age when they have to reconcile multiple and often conflicting expectations from family and society. As the only child, you know that you are the only future hope of the family, therefore you should perform well as a 'substitute son' to make your parents proud.<sup>2</sup> However, it seems equally un-filial or wrong if you completely forgo your gendered identity as a 'woman'. It feels as though, once a woman finishes her education, a different set of gendered requirements suddenly appears as her reality. Fully aware that parents are genuinely concerned about our future happiness and that we feel the same about their peace of mind as their good daughters, it is indeed a struggle to find a balanced solution. At this point, I wondered for the first time whether, instead of a honey jar, perhaps a pretty fish tank is better suited to describe the lives of China's privileged daughters, including myself: it appears to have no boundaries until you hit the invisible glass walls.

To better equip oneself to compete in a market economy, studying abroad has become a popular choice for the children of many Chinese families with means. It was also this experience that enabled me to 'swim in different water' and gain exposure to different schools of thought and political ideas, and this led me to re-examine the taken-for-granted norms and perceptions of my Chinese life. Working and living in both China and the UK enabled me to notice the different gender realities existing in these two social contexts. One day, as though it was my destiny, I came across an article on China's white-collar professional women and how gender affects them in their workplace (Liu, J. 2008). It felt as though a magic door had opened to me, and I could not resist stepping through it to seek an exciting new world. My instinct told me that this path

<sup>2</sup>I use the term 'substitute son' here to highlight the parental expectation on the only daughter to do well in life, as traditionally it was the son's duty to bring honour to his patrilineal family, and took care of aging parents. This by no mean implies that parental expectations on their only child are not gendered, as research has suggested otherwise, see more in Wang and Fong (2009), Evans (2010), and Liu, F. (2006).

might lead me to the answers to the many questions I had accumulated throughout the years about the contradictions in women's experiences in China.

### WHY PRIVILEGED WOMEN?

Many might ask: why focus on these clearly privileged women, who in many ways are considered the winners in the economic reform, while there are many categories of Chinese women still suffering from disadvantaged social and economic conditions, who therefore need more urgent attention? It is true that my research cohort does not face imminent oppression like the rural migrant women who work in military-style factories (Chan and Pun 2010; Pun and Chan 2012; Pun and Smith 2007) or as domestic workers (Gaetano 2015). However, compared to the large volumes of existing research dedicated to these causes, there is not much written on well-educated, middle-class Chinese women. In fact, the first generation of privileged only daughters is still currently going through critical life stages, such as establishing a career, marriage, and motherhood. Given these women's privileged position, looking into their experiences in a contemporary urban Chinese context will enable me to throw gender inequality into sharp relief. I am interested in women who fall into the following three categories of social privilege, which I believe places them in a much better position to compete in the market economy than the majority of Chinese women.

### PRIVILEGED THROUGH URBAN BIRTH

China has a long-standing rural–urban divide, which has been growing since the economic reform. This reform has generated contrasting experiences for urbanites and rural dwellers due to the partiality of China's development policy with its uneven distribution of public spending, which has long prioritised urban development (Lu and Chen 2004). Despite the loosening of the *hukou*<sup>3</sup> (household registration) system during the reform, which allows people to move more freely, holding a city *hukou* still means enjoying various privileges that are not accessible to rural residents; for example, better education, good healthcare, and a minimum

<sup>3</sup> *Hukou* is China's residence permit or household registration system, which gives the government the power to decide its citizens' mobility between village and city.

level of income protection. This system creates a social hierarchy, which continues to separate the urban privileged and the rural poor from the start of their lives, through job opportunities (Choi and Peng 2016) and even their marriage prospects (Lui 2016; Gaetano 2008).

Meanwhile, parents in the countryside and in the cities responded differently to the One-Child Policy. Due to the strong resistance against this policy in the countryside, which generated catastrophic effects, including the reappearance of female infanticide in certain extreme cases (Zeng et al. 1993; Human Rights in China 1995; Wasserstrom 1984), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) issued special documents during the 1980s that allowed exceptions for rural couples with only a daughter to have two children (Greenhalgh 2008, p. 33). Besides, as Croll (1995) pointed out, during the early reform era, parents in the city were more likely to be subject to closer government control in implementing this policy through their state-owned *danwei* (work unit, 单位) compared to their countryside counterparts, who could rely on their land. The availability of pensions and other benefits provided through the *danwei* framework also gave urban parents economic reasons to be relatively free from the traditional idea of *yang er fang lao* (raising a son to prevent old-age poverty, 养儿防老) that still prevailed in the countryside. Consequently, different production models led to different attitudes to the gender of the only child. Research has shown that the One-Child Policy affected girls who were born in the countryside differently from their urban peers, as the urban communities share a strong belief and interest to educate their only child regardless of the child's sex (Fong 2002; Veck et al. 2003; Croll 1995; Tsui and Rich 2002). As a result, many of these urban only daughters have made their way through China's university entrance exam and obtained a bachelor's university degree or above.

## PRIVILEGED THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

The government reopened its universities in 1977, and higher education in China has expanded at a rapid rate since the early 1990s. The *bing gui*<sup>4</sup> (a combination/merger of two tracks—a unification of state-funded and self-funded programmes in HE, 并轨) policy was introduced in 1995 and

<sup>4</sup>The *bing gui* policy was a substantial reform in recruitment, fee-charging, and job assignment in higher education in China. A direct effect of this policy was an increase in the number of students enrolled in higher education.

was adopted throughout all the provinces and different types of universities by the late 1990s and early 2000s. It has resulted in a rising number of provincial higher education institutions, which have greatly increased the opportunities for participation overall (Liu, Y. 2015a). As a result, enrolment in higher education rose from 1.15% in 1980 to 29.7% in 2013 (Liu, Y. 2015b).

Figure 1.1 illustrates the scale of the expansion of higher education by comparing the progression rates at various selection points of the educational career of selected birth cohorts. Liu, Ye (2016, p. 154) points out that the combination of the One-Child Policy and the expansion of higher education has significantly increased girls' participation, which made 'the female-to-male ratio in higher education enrolment rise to 1.00 in 2010'.

Despite the sharp increase compared to previous age cohorts in terms of the progression rate into higher education for the 1985–1987 cohort, to 21%, since the *bing gui*, it still only consists of a minority (Liu, Y. 2015a, pp. 110–111). In China, a four-year bachelor's degree is often the entry requirement to access white-collar professions, including working

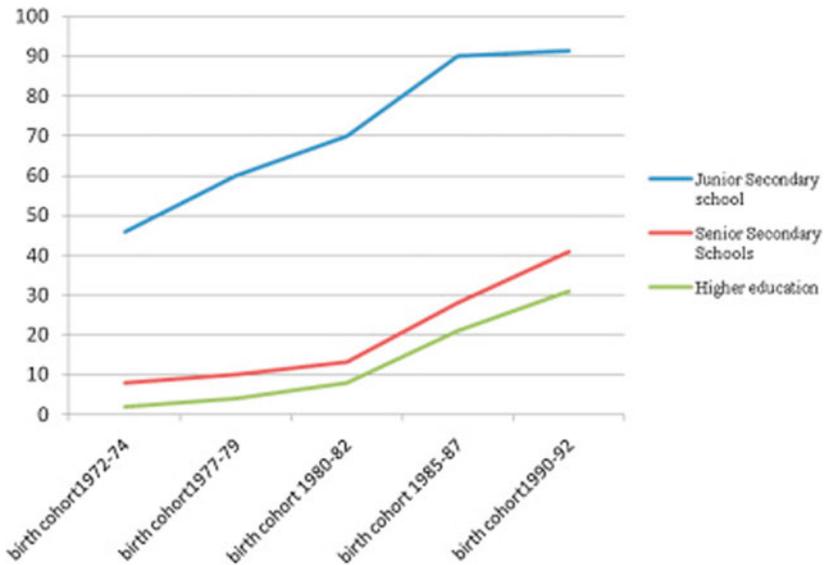


Fig. 1.1 The progression rates at various points of the educational career of selected cohorts (Liu, Y. 2015a, p. 111)

for the government or public institutions. These jobs are regarded as enjoying higher social status and better career prospects compared to three-year diploma courses (Sohu News 2017). This indicates that those receiving higher education are still a relatively small and privileged group. Therefore, I only focus on people who have gained a four-year bachelor's degree or above in my research.

### PRIVILEGED AS THE RISING MIDDLE CLASS<sup>5</sup>

As a result of China's booming economy during the reform era, urban households form the majority of the country's new rising middle class, which enjoys increasing spending power and growing influence in society (Tomba 2004; Zhou 2008). Most of my participants' parents are already established as part of the urban middle class, and their heavy investment in their children's education has also provided social capital for their children to start in an advantageous position. Even for the few participants whose parents are relatively poorer urban residents, their only child's higher education has functioned as an engine of upward social mobility (Lin and Sun 2010), which has enabled them to become part of China's growing middle class. In today's China, the class-coded masculinities and femininities are highly visible, as reflected in existing empirical researches from the top-end elite masculinities (Osburg 2013; Uretsky 2016) to the white-collar workers (Hird 2008; Liu, J. 2017a), and down to the rural migrants (Ngai 1999; Choi and Peng 2016). Therefore, the class characteristics and aspirations of this cohort are essential to understanding the nature of their gendered choices.

Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005), taking a broadly Foucauldian approach to modern biopower over life, argue that, in China, there are three categories of persons who form the site of such power and resistance, due to their centrality in the Chinese state's population projects: the reproductive woman, the quality single child, and the good mother. My participants potentially fit into these three categories, which makes them extremely interesting to look at. The intersection between market neoliberalism and political authoritarianism has created a particular type of governmentality in post-reform Chinese society, and these forces together are shaping its particular types of gendered subjects (Greenhalgh and

<sup>5</sup>I am aware that the term 'middle Class' is contested, especially in China. I will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.

Winckler 2005; Rofel 2007). The privilege enjoyed by the Chinese women of my research cohort illustrates their centrality to China's social engineering programme to build a strong modern nation, and they are set as exemplary norms for others to follow. Understanding these women's lives, which are not disadvantaged in any way other than by their gender, is a good test case for considering the degree to which gender inequality persists in China.

Initially, my research questions were very broad. Being part of my research cohort, I wanted to learn about the 'invisible walls' that have shaped the life course of those privileged daughters including myself. What does it mean to be a good woman in contemporary China? As my research went on, I formed more clearly focused research questions: living under the tension between the neoliberalism of the market and an authoritarian government, how do these privileged women respond to these governing powers? Do they accept them, or rebel against them? To what extent do they buy into the neoliberal ethos, and what does this mean for their gendered experiences? My analysis focuses on the contradictions experienced by these women as they go through life transition from student to young professional, in order to highlight the urgency of understanding the 'personal is political' at the historical juncture of China's proclaimed national revival.

In 2016, the One-Child Policy was replaced by the Two-Child Policy, which has added another dynamic to these women's lives in negotiation with their personal ambitions and external expectations. By listening to my participants' narrations of their hopes, fears, and everyday lives, I started to understand how I became the person I am now. Mills (2000, p. 196) argued that inward reflection drives the researcher's sociological imagination, and that you 'must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work, continually to examine and interpret it'. Critically reflecting upon my own experience and acknowledging that I am personally involved in every intellectual product that I work on helps me to become closer to what Mills described as an 'intellectual craftsman' (sic. Mills 2000, p. 196). With the naive hope that my research project could somehow contribute to finding answers to help move China forward towards a more egalitarian future, I could finally somewhat justify these years of separation from my beloved parents.

## RESEARCHING IN ONE'S OWN BACK GARDEN

As someone who is part of my own research cohort born during the 1980s in urban China, my research fieldwork carried out during February and March 2015 was also my own rediscovery of life back home. The familiarity of the social settings in my field gave me some confidence in navigating the Chinese context while conducting fieldwork. Meanwhile, it made me anxious as it took me on a reflective journey to re-examine my choice of living away from home. My initial profile for potential participants was women born under the One-Child Policy living in Chinese cities, who have obtained a four-year university degree. I also planned to interview some men with this background. Given my research participants' privileged status, these young women should have huge potential and autonomy to be successful outside the traditional domestic sphere. However, many scholars have pointed out that, under the economic reform, gender equality has lost its priority on the government's agenda under the rapid expansion of the market economy (Liu, J. 2008; Honig and Hershatter 1988). Consequently, young Chinese women are constantly negotiating with revived traditional ideologies (Liu, J. 2007). At the time of my fieldwork in 2015, the youngest among my research cohort was aged 25, while the oldest was 35. All of them have finished their bachelor's degrees and entered the job market. Some of them had experienced marriage, motherhood, or even divorce. Therefore, their life experiences were able to reveal the gendered reality of living in contemporary urban China. I intend to reveal their experiences of being daughters, mothers, wives, and workers, roles that are often prescribed to women in Chinese cities today. Furthermore, I wanted to know how they respond to gender-related issues in their day-to-day lives, especially when tensions arise from oppositional ideologies. Do they conform, negotiate or fight back? A supplementary aim was to explore the experiences of their male peers, as this might additionally reveal issues that women will confront in terms of marriage expectations. Last but not least, this research project is combined with my commitment to feminist activism.

Feminist ways of knowing challenge orthodox, male-defined epistemologies where knowledge is produced for women by men from a male perspective (Letherby 2003). As Simon de Beauvoir (1973, p. 18) puts it: 'he is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other'. Feminist epistemological approaches validate knowledge produced through knowing about women's own experience and emphasise the experiential and the

private as a way of confronting the male-authorised knowledge that is abstract and public (Letherby 2003). As a challenge to the traditional orthodox way of searching for objective truth, they allow consideration of different perspectives, employ multiple methods and methodologies, and pay attention to individual women's experience (Brooks and Hesse-Biber 2007; Maynard 1994; Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994). Furthermore, a feminist approach also requires the researcher to reflect on his or her own assumptions and presence, and how these relate to their research (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007; Letherby 2003; Neuman 2013). Brooks and Hesse-Biber (2007, p. 4) note that, from the theoretical to the practical, feminist research is a 'holistic endeavor' and raises 'awareness of sexist, racist, homophobic, and colonialist ideologies and practices' to emancipate and empower women. It is often used to advocate social change and to bring about social justice for women. All these coincide precisely with my original motivations for conducting this research.

Although it is widely agreed that no single method can be called 'feminist research', I find the definition of 'feminist research practice' suggested by Kelly (1988) to be most relevant. It distinguishes feminist research practice from others through the way in which questions are asked, the location of the researcher in the research process and the intended purpose of such research (Kelly 1988). Letherby (2003, p. 102) argues that feminists should employ methods that 'enable women's experiences and voices to be distinct and discernible...a flexible research approach which adapts to the emerging data'. These were the guiding principles in my research practice, which enabled me to emphasise women's life experiences and to understand women's issues from their own perspective (Maynard 1994; Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994). With the aim of collecting well-grounded data to reveal the subjective experience of gender among my participants, I used qualitative in-depth interviews to uncover participants' life stories, which could cast light upon issues affecting their experiences as women. My research does not aim to present a full picture of the women of this cohort, or of women's experience from this cohort, but it is intended to present key aspects of social realities as my participants experienced and recounted them in their own context.

As previous research in East Asian societies has revealed, personal networks, or *guanxi*,<sup>6</sup> are crucial for conducting successful qualitative research in a Confucian-influenced context, including accessing participants, gaining consent, and establishing rapport (Jackson et al. 2016, 2017; Liu, J. 2006; Park and Lunt 2015; Zarafonetis 2017). In a Confucian-influenced society, reciprocity is the key to maintaining harmonious relationships between people. This is apparent in day-to-day practices in China. People establish and maintain *guanxi* (relationships) through gift giving, which can be giving material gifts or doing somebody a favour. Accompanying these activities, one should also give the recipient *mianzi* (face), which signifies honour and respect for the other person. The expectation of the person who initially offers these things is that the other side will do the same in return in the future. Through this kind of giving and receiving, reciprocal relationships are established and maintained. The practice also draws the boundary between 'self' and 'others' in a collective sense, indicating the relational boundaries between different social groups. If a person needs help from someone with whom they have had no previous contact, it is important to find the right intermediary to initiate the first contact for both sides to build up *guanxi*.

Taking Liu, Jieyu's (2006) approach, I paid special attention to balancing western ideas and ethical approaches to qualitative research with the local specificity of my field. Since I intended to explore personal life experiences and discuss certain sensitive topics, such as sex and abortion with my participants, the level of trust between us was crucial. I decided to use snowball-sampling methods through my own *guanxi* network to start with. Snowball sampling, loosely defined by Noy (2008, p. 5) as 'accessing informants through contact information that is provided by other informants', which evolves in a 'snowball' effect, allowed me to utilise the established trusting relationships among my informants. Purposive sampling was added at a later stage to enrich the diversity of my sample, which allowed me to decide what still needed to be known and to find people who could and were willing to provide the information by virtue of their knowledge or experience (Bernard 2002). This sampling

<sup>6</sup>According to Yang (1994), the larger one's *guanxi* network and the more diversely it connects one to people from different occupations and positions, the better one will become in general manoeuvring in Chinese society and obtaining resources and opportunities.

strategy was not only efficient and effective, but was also suitable for my relatively limited time in the field.

I had been consciously building and maintaining *guanxi* and laying the groundwork for my research early on. Before I started my PhD project, in 2014, I spent three months doing a research project travelling around China, including all the cities chosen for my fieldwork. I took that opportunity to initiate contacts with several women who fit into my research category through my *guanxi* networks, such as families, old classmates, previous colleagues, and students, in order to deepen friendships and inform them about my upcoming research. Since reciprocity, harmony, and the importance of relationships are embedded in the Chinese way of conducting social life (Qi 2013; Park and Lunt 2015), it was crucial for me to renew these contacts in advance so that my asking for help later would not appear abrupt. For my peer group, I invited them out for a drink or a meal as well as bringing them small gifts from England. I invited family friends and senior relatives for family meals with my parents, because this showed proper respect in terms of the Chinese age hierarchy. From then onward, until commencing my fieldwork, I was in touch with them informally through Wechat throughout the year, such as sending out seasonal greetings, just to remind them of my friendly presence. In addition, two young women from Shanghai, whom I met in the UK, became my key contacts upon their return. Our close friendship *guanxi* was crucial for me to accomplish my fieldwork within the available time and budget. Both participated in my research, and they introduced some of their friends as my participants. They also provided accommodation for my stay in Shanghai. All my participants were recruited through similar *guanxi* networks.

Giving a customary gift when meeting or visiting is a sign of respect in China. However, the norm of reciprocity can easily turn this practice into a means of corruption or manipulation. While remaining culturally appropriate, I tried to avoid this problem by giving gifts in a slightly different way. I deliberately chose small items, such as speciality snacks from my hometown or unique perfume samples, which were nice enough to be a gift, but small enough not to impose further obligation. I waited until we had finished the interview to give it out in order to reduce participants' feeling of obligation to answer my questions. I am aware that the relationship between adopting the social norms to gain access to participants and holding firm to my political commitment is not always harmonious.

But, through an ongoing reflective process, I believe I was able to find a reasonable starting point.

As Zarafonetis (2017) found, most Chinese people are not willing to make appointments far in advance; therefore, I did not schedule any appointments before my departure. I intentionally chose the Chinese New Year holiday period to return to start my interviews in my home city, as frequent social gatherings during the holiday provided natural occasions for me to meet potential participants. This is also the time when most young people working in different cities return to their hometowns, which made it geographically convenient for me to interview them. I spread information about my research through social gatherings, which proved effective. Instead of email, most people prefer direct phone calls or messages through text or Wechat.<sup>7</sup> It is socially acceptable and fairly common to arrange meetings at short notice. Most people agreed to an interview based on a brief verbal introduction to my research, a personal relationship or through a common friend. The nature of our relationship was key to their consent. My impression was that they cared more about who you are or who introduced you than what you are actually going to do. Giving a friend *mianzi* (face) was many people's main reason for agreeing to my interview. The mixed effects of *mianzi* and *guanxi* on my research data in the Chinese context will be further discussed later.

### *The Choice of Cities*

Because of the main locations of potential participants from my networks, the research sites were Shanghai in the east and Chengdu in the west (See Fig. 1.2).

China can be characterised into three regions: eastern coastal, central, and western areas, with Shanghai being one of the municipal cities on the eastern coast and Sichuan located on the west. Coined in Deng Xiaoping's famous speech of 1985 'allowing a part of our people to become rich first', China's economic reform has deepened its regional inequalities, which are rooted in its historical disparity (Rozelle 1996; Yao et al. 2005; Schiavenza 2013). Measuring annual per capita income, urban disposable income, and rural income by province, all indicate that on top of the

<sup>7</sup>Wechat: the most popular phone app that is used by most Chinese people for communication purposes.



**Fig. 1.2** Geographical location of Chengdu and Shanghai. Sichuan province is highlighted in green

rural and urban divide, people are better off living in coastal regions than inland areas (Schiavenza 2013).

Shanghai is undoubtedly one of China's major economic centres, the top-ranked city in China in terms of concentration of 'quality population',<sup>8</sup> living standards, and cultural development. With a population of 24.15 million in 2016, Shanghai is the largest city in China. More than 39% of its residents are long-term migrants from different parts of China, a number that has tripled in ten years (NBS China 2017). The city is portrayed as the most globalised and cosmopolitan place in China with a unique urban culture, which attracts the country's most educated and

<sup>8</sup>The idea of quality population derives from the popular *shuzhi* discourse, which regards people with high education and high income as high-quality population, in contrast to poor, less-educated rural migrants who often work in low-paid jobs. A recent example is the mass eviction of rural migrants from their accommodation in Beijing after a fire when the government used the term 'low-end population' to justify its action (Huang 2017).

talented workforce and it is a popular destination for Chinese people returning from overseas (Zarafonetis 2017; Wasserstrom 2009). Therefore, Shanghai is also viewed by its people as more 'open' and 'modern' than the rest of the country (Farrer 2002).

Chengdu is the capital of Sichuan province in the southwest (See Fig. 1.2). In 2016, the population of Chengdu city was 7.8 million. However, the 2010 census showed its wider administrative area as having a population of over 14 million (World Population Review 2018). The city is known as a popular destination for investing in inland China, with 262 enterprises listed in the 'Fortune' Global 500. It is also known for its technology and innovation, industry and transportation. Consequently, Chengdu provides a good example of an urban context in western China.

I was aware of the relative economic development of these two cities, and it was not my aim to provide a comprehensive comparison between the two. However, including women from these two different cities allowed some space to reveal geo-economic effects on my participants' life experiences. It helped to enrich our understanding of the life of women from my research cohort.

Between 17 February 2015 and 17 April 2015, I carried out my fieldwork in these two cities. I conducted all my interviews in a one-to-one format, apart from two occasions, since some of my interview questions are designed to probe people's attitudes towards sex, abortion, female reproduction, homosexuality, and virginity, which are still relatively sensitive topics and are not often discussed in public even among friends. Therefore, I decided to use vignettes on these topics in my interviews. Jackson et al. (2016, p. 37) describe vignettes as 'mini-narratives or scenarios, usually centred on a problem or dilemma facing an imaginary protagonist, designed to elicit responses on what a person would or should do in the situation depicted'. Contextual information provided in such vignettes, instead of seeking participants' views in the abstract, allows for the recognition that 'meanings are social and morality may be situationally specific' (Finch 1987, p. 106). Widely used as a complementary method with other data-generating techniques, vignettes can be used to explore areas, which would otherwise be difficult to access (Barter and Renold 1999). They can tap general attitudes and beliefs about a specific situation, and are able to explore sensitive topics (Finch 1987). Meanwhile, vignettes enabled me to compare the differences between men and women, and their interpretations of a 'uniform' situation (Barter and Renold 1999). I changed the gender of the subject in each vignette to

mirror my participant. In this way, I was able to let them share with me their opinions from their own gender perspective in each scenario. This method proved successful as I noticed that the majority of my participants were willing to talk about these topics.

Since I was exploring my participants' life experiences and attitudes towards gender-related issues, the one-to-one interview was most suited to the type of questions I was asking. In the Chinese context, group harmony is important, which often makes people suppress differing views. Without a third person's presence, the one-to-one interview freed my participants from the pressure to conform to others' views and they could feel more relaxed about expressing their opinions. I also kept a field diary, in order to include all the details that I felt were worth noting down. It helped me to reflect and make improvements along the way and provided valuable background information for my data analysis.

By the end of my fieldwork, I had reached my target of interviewing 31 women and 11 men. All had obtained a degree, with some having completed their education at master's level or above, and there was also one current female PhD student. Nine women had the experience of overseas education. Not all of them were the only child in their family; five women and two men had at least one sibling. This reflects the different family sizes under the One-Child Policy, but remains within the main criteria of my sample selection: well-educated young urban professionals, who were born under the One-Child Policy. I believe that their family background and experience will help to reveal the social reality I am investigating from a different perspective. The average (mean) age of my female participants was 28.9 years old, whereas for the male participants it was 28.2. The median age of my sample is 28. None of my male candidates had children, but eight female candidates had one child each at the time of our interviews. The marital status of my participants, together with other characteristics, are shown in the following Tables 1.1 and 1.2.

Fifteen out of 31 of my female candidates were meeting me for the first time on the day of the interview but were all introduced by close friends or family relatives through snowball sampling. These women were interviewed during the later stages of my fieldwork in order to balance the diversity of my sample depending on their marital and parental status. Halfway through my fieldwork, it became apparent that more mothers over the age of 30 needed to be interviewed; hence, I used a purposive sampling method to enrich my data (Babbie 2013). At a later stage, divorcees with children and women who had obtained a PhD were needed

**Table 1.1** Characteristics of the 31 women

	<i>Number of women</i>
<i>Age (in years)</i>	
25–30	25
30–35	6
<i>Marital status</i>	
Single	6
In a relationship	5
Married or engaged	18
Divorced	2
<i>Educational level</i>	
BA/BSc	15
MA/MSc/MBA	15
PhD	1
<i>Number of siblings</i>	
Zero	25
One	5
More than one	1
<i>Number of children, including pregnant women at the time of the interview</i>	
Zero	21
Pregnant	1
One	9
More than one	0
<i>Sex of children, excluding pregnancy</i>	
Female	5
Male	4
<i>Age of children</i>	
<5 years old	5
>= 5 years old	4
<i>Overseas experience</i>	
Yes	10
No	21
<i>Party member</i>	
Yes	18
No, including those who quit	13
<i>Living in hometown</i>	
Yes	14
No	17

**Table 1.2** Characteristics of the 11 men

	<i>Number of men</i>
<i>Age (in years)</i>	
25–30	10
30–35	1
<i>Marital status</i>	
Single	5
In a relationship	1
Married or engaged	5
Divorced	0
<i>Educational level</i>	
BA/BSc	7
MA/MSc	4
PhD	0
<i>Number of siblings</i>	
Zero	9
One	2
More than one	0
<i>Number of children, including pregnant wives at the time of the interview</i>	
Zero	0
One	0
More than one	0
<i>Sex of children, excluding pregnancy</i>	
Female	N/A
Male	N/A
<i>Age of children</i>	
<5 years old	N/A
>= 5 years old	N/A
<i>Overseas experience</i>	
Yes	2
No	9
<i>Party member</i>	
Yes	6
No, including those who quit	5
<i>Living in hometown</i>	
Yes	1
No	10

to expand the depth of my data. Therefore, I interviewed several more participants fitting this category using purposive sampling. The name of each participant has been replaced by a pseudonym. Unless specified as male, they are female.

In terms of the relationship and distance between my participants and me, I divided them into direct contacts, including ‘close friendship, old work colleague, old schoolmates’ and no direct contact, including ‘introduced by key friendships, introduced by elder or participant’s partner’ (see Figs. 1.3 and 1.4).

### *Positionality of the Researcher*

There has been much debate about the researcher’s own position in the field (Cotterill 1992; Acker 2001; Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Taylor 2011; Liamputtong 2010). Sharing many similarities with my research participants, I am well aware of both advantages and disadvantages of my own positioning brought to my data. Being Chinese and speaking the same language as my participants, and their peers in terms of age and education, I do have the advantages of an insider. This can lead to deeper social insight, and quicker building of rapport and trust due to continuing contact with the field, summarised as being ‘empirically literate’ by Roseneil (1993, p. 189).

Nonetheless, taking one’s insider position for granted and failing to conduct a critical assessment of this position endangers the quality of data collected. Taylor (2011) has warned against possible knowledge distortion by an uncritical insider. My participants often assumed I knew what they meant, and I found I also had to guard against my own taken-for-granted assumptions of the meaning of their accounts. I tried to minimise this during my interviews by self-consciously playing the role of an outsider: pointing out I now live outside China, therefore needed more explanations. It worked well, as I showed genuine curiosity about their answers and eagerness to learn about their lives. Besides, despite similarities with my participants in terms of education and cultural background, our experiences as women could still differ massively. In particular, my exposure to feminism outside China has enabled me to seek life fulfilment outside conventional gendered expectations. I became very aware of this, because I was often surprised by so many of their responses, realising that I no longer shared the taken-for-granted view of the world as my contemporaries in China. Therefore, I tried to practice active listening and learn from their experiences while not taking my own experience as the unspoken norm for Chinese women.

Moreover, as a cultural participant, the researcher’s position as an insider or outsider is never absolute, but has a dynamic existence and

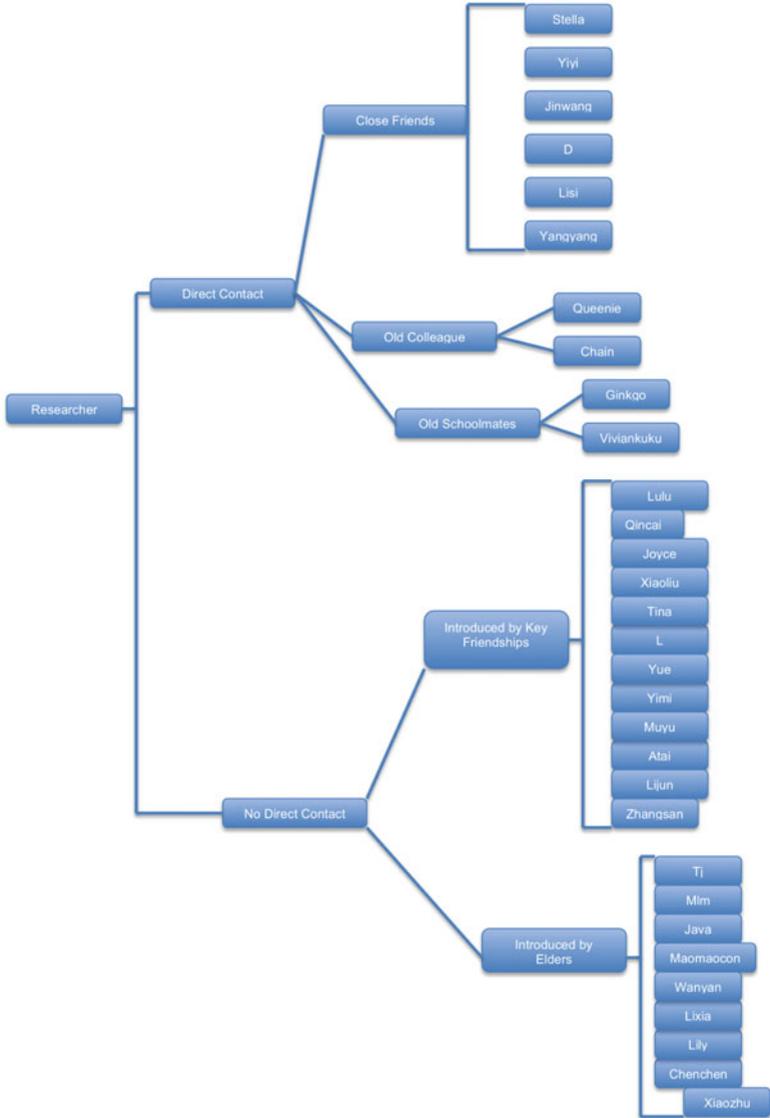
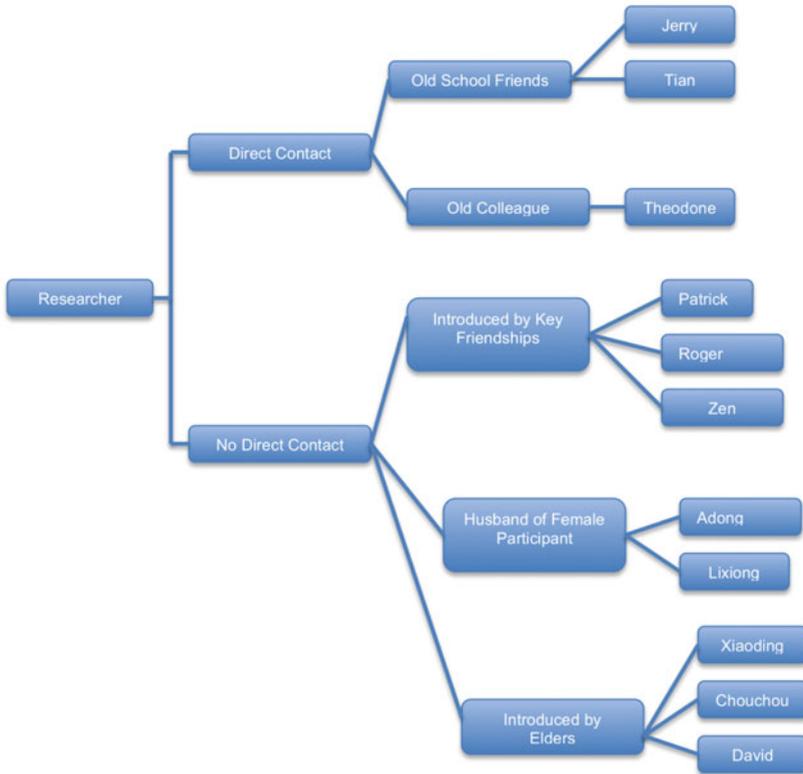


Fig. 1.3 Relationships between female participants and the researcher



**Fig. 1.4** Relationships between male participants and the researcher

open to negotiation between all parties, and can shift over the course of a single interview (Letherby 2003; Liamputtong 2010). I see myself occupying what Katz (1994) advocates as the ‘spaces of betweenness’. While I value the cultural background that I shared with my participants, I had also lived away from China for four years prior to my PhD, which provided me with a new perspective on the gendered experience of being a Chinese woman. It gave me what Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) called the combination of intellectual, emotional, and physical distance from my native field, which, as argued by Labaree (2002), is essential to give the clarity needed in my research practice. As I have intentionally distanced myself from Chinese culture and tried to embark on a completely different

way of life in the UK, I have unlearned those attitudes and values that are taken for granted and embedded in my own cultural background. This enabled me to be more critical of conditions of life in China.

As Liamputtong (2010) notes, socially constructed identities such as gender, class, age all have great role to play in the research process. Within the Chinese context, it is crucial to understand the interplay of these factors that determine how the researcher is perceived by their research participants, and therefore the quality of data collected. In all my interactions with participants, I tried to find a balanced role to play as an interviewer in each of these encounters, while being culturally sensitive yet not simply mirror the existing oppressive hierarchies within Chinese society, as illustrated in the examples below. The positionality between the researcher and my participants was explored with an ongoing reflective process throughout data collection and analysis.

Chinese society functions on a seniority system, whereby respect for elders is expected. One should show respect through the title one uses when addressing others, the manners one chooses when receiving them, or whether or not one obeys what they say. In this context, it was important to consider each participant's age in relation to my own age. Ten of them were younger than me (I was 28 at the time of the interview), six were the same age as me and sixteen were older. I used different tactics when interacting with them in order to facilitate data access. I used honorific titles such as *jie* (elder sister, 姐) and *ge* (elder brother, 哥) to greet participants who were older than me, when it was socially appropriate. In Confucian culture, being senior in age also signifies more responsibility in terms of looking after those who are junior. For example, Tj (aged 32, female) and Java (aged 30, female) were both older than me and are distant relatives introduced to me by elders in my family. They not only paid for the refreshments, but also took me out for a meal afterwards as a subtle way of fulfilling their Confucian duty as *jie*. During the interview, I made an effort to neutralise the age hierarchy by behaving in a professional manner in order to minimise the effect of what they might feel they should or should not say in front of a *mei mei* (younger sister, 妹妹). I asked participants who were junior in age to me to call me by my first name instead of using the elder sister's title *jie* from the start, hoping to make them feel more at ease with me like being with their peers. My judgement of whether or not to use linguistic symbols of age hierarchy in

each of my interviews is based on my principle of honouring my participants in the given context but also attempt to remove potential obstacles for open dialogue.

According to the population census, 49.7% out of China's total population of 1.34 billion in 2010 were urban residents (Yao et al. 2014). Due to the rapid urbanisation since the reform, it is sometimes hard to draw a strict line between those who are truly urban and those who are rural.<sup>9</sup> In the field, I encountered three participants who matched the main profile but had some kind of rural roots, which means that either they were sent to be educated in the city by parents who could be loosely classified as rural residents or their former rural family residence was incorporated into the city during urbanisation. Two women, Lixia and Muyu, and one man, Lixiong, who were introduced by intermediaries, are all established city residents, but introduced themselves as coming from the countryside. I decided to include them in my study, as it gave me the opportunity to discover how their family backgrounds affected their gender identity, especially when they have established their lives in the city through higher education.

Although 'class' remains a sensitive term in contemporary China, no one can deny China's economic landscape since the reform has dramatically reshaped its class structure. Although the class divisions in Chinese society are not the same as in Britain, the division between city and countryside through the *hukou* system is one of the many factors that has an impact on people's lives, like class. Due to China's entrenched rural-urban divide that stratifies people's life chances at birth, having a 'rural background' often means less privilege compared to their urban counterparts. Becoming an urbanite for many rural residents means upward social mobility. I am aware of my urban upbringing and overseas experience, which could appear as condescending to some participants who self-identified as having a 'rural background'. Therefore, I deliberately emphasised my respect to them by using honorific titles throughout our interview. I also draw on common experiences, such as similar educational backgrounds in China or childhood memories from the 1980s, to build rapport. This proved to work well, as they exhibited no difficulty in sharing with me openly about their life stories and feelings.

<sup>9</sup>In these three cases, my participants referred to their parents as peasants who had rural residence. I also had participants whose parents are successful self-made entrepreneurs through migration to the city.

Meanwhile, China's regional disparity in economic development also means that I could be perceived as inferior by my participants from more affluent coastal regions. Shanghai's privileged social and economic position has created a unique cosmopolitan culture and identity for its local residents, who are often proud of being Shanghainese. This identity is often associated with a sense of superiority compared to people from other parts of the country. There is a widespread joke on the internet saying that if you ask Shanghainese to draw a map of China, they will just draw wild grass all over China except Shanghai to show their perception of the rest of the Chinese people as their country cousins. Born and raised in Sichuan, geographically, I am from the Chinese 'West', which is often viewed as poor countryside compared to Shanghai. I went into my interviews with an awareness of these regional stereotypes and prepared coping strategies to minimise its negative impact on my data. I interviewed six women and one man who identified themselves as Shanghainese. I dressed smartly and interviewed them in standard Mandarin. We talked about our common friend whom I had met in the UK to build rapport. During these interviews, none of the Shanghainese participants showed any sign of superiority. However, Xiaoliu talked negatively about people who were not local Shanghainese during our interview, as though I were not one of them. Importantly, this might be because the intermediaries introduced me as their friend from the UK, which might elevate my social status in their eyes, as some people view the 'West' as being superior to China.

Among my 11 male participants, there were three men who were related to my female participants as fiancé or husband. Two men (Patrick and Roger) were my female participants' colleagues. Five of the 11 male participants were single at the time of interviewing. After building rapport at the beginning of the interview, I approached my key topics in a gender-neutral and non-judgemental tone to encourage self-disclosure. However, I found that it was nearly impossible for them not to perceive me as the other sex.

With all my male participants, I received generally kind and gentle treatment, which is regarded as socially appropriate for men from this cohort. Most of them offered some kind of help in order to show their good manner of looking after a girl. Theodore, David, and Chouchou paid the bill for our lunch after we had finished our interview in the restaurant. Theodore (29) and David (32) were both older than me, whereas Chouchou (25) was three years younger. Paying the bill in these contexts is less about age hierarchy and more about a way of displaying

their masculinity by taking care of finance. I interviewed Roger (28) on the evening of my arrival, when I had my suitcase with me. He naturally took over my suitcase when we started to walk out of the restaurant. Due to our similar age, and because some of the participants were my old friends from school, I did receive quite jokingly frank comments referring to me as *sheng nü* (leftover women, 剩女) or *nü hanzi* (tomboy, 女汉子). Although spoken with a friendly tone, their choice of such terms reflects an embedded misogynist attitude in Chinese society.

There were a few occasions when, based on their comments, I sensed that my male participants might be trying to present themselves as desirable partners. For example, David spent nearly 30 minutes from the beginning of our interview telling me how well travelled and financially secure he was. He particularly emphasised those characteristics, which he believed made him successful compared to his peers. It was hard at the beginning of this interview as it did take extra effort for me to guide him through the relevant topics. I found interviewing male participants like him, who showed a strong tendency to be dominant in a conversation, to be a challenge. There is a fine line to tread as a female interviewer in this kind of context, between not being pushy and making a man feel uncomfortable to talk, while at the same time keeping the interview agenda focused.

When my male participants expressed views about women, marriage, and sex, they all said similar things. This might be because they tended to give socially desirable answers, knowing that I am a woman who is doing research about Chinese women and gender equality. It might also be due to Chinese society's mainstream expectations of men, to which they felt a need to conform.

### *Power Dynamics*

The balance of power between researcher and participants within feminist research is a topic of great concern (Letherby 2003; Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994). I must confess my naivety when I went into the field, as I genuinely believed I could build an 'equal relationship' with my participants by subverting cultural hierarchy build on age, gender, and family background. It turned out to be more complicated than I had realised. The power-based dynamics inherent in my research did not only exist, but was actively negotiated in the research process by all parties

(Ribbens 1989). Therefore, I must acknowledge the interactivity of positionality, power, and knowledge in my research (Merriam et al. 2001). My effort to find a balance in order to accommodate participants' differences in terms of age, gender, and/or status (Cotterill 1992; Beoku-Betts 1994) is about the nature of power as well as access to power. I also realised that the close friendship I had with some of my participants rendered greater potential for me to exploit their trust (Stacey 1988; Finch 1984), which I attempted to resolve by sticking to the information they gave me within our interviews. Since feminist researchers have argued that self-disclosure can help to equalise and humanise the interview relationship (Oakley 2013), I disclosed myself as if it was in a friendly conversation but was consciously not to jeopardise the quality of my data. However, it is hard to tell exactly how much and what sort of disclosure is appropriate (Reinharz and Chase 2002). Therefore, researchers do need to think carefully in each case. Meanwhile, my participants also exercise a form of control over the information they choose to disclose or not, especially when they tended to give short 'official' answers or deliberately omit certain crucial information. As a researcher, I am aware that I do have the overall power over my research, particularly in interpretation. Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) state that interpretation is exercising power and our choices have consequences such that we need to be held to account. The varieties of life experiences of my participants really humble me and lead me to consider carefully when it comes to the interpretation and representation of my group of women. I made every effort to make sure that my research process reflects my feminist rigour, including promising to send them a summary of my findings in Chinese once I completed my project.

In order to avoid the problem of over-rapport in my interviews with this group, I also adopted what McCracken (1988, p. 23) called 'manufactured distance' through making a clear start to our interviews by going through the information sheet with them. In doing so I also tried to raise their awareness about protecting their 'rights' as participants and to establish a sense of 'professional boundaries', which I think the relationship-based Chinese society desperately needs, in order to avoid abuse of power on both sides.

*Playing a Double-Edge Sword—Using ‘Guanxi’ in a Chinese Context*

Using established personal networks, *guanxi* (关系) with trust already built in the Chinese context was the key element in my completing my fieldwork within the limited amount of time available. It benefited me in ways such as gaining fast-track access to potential participants and obtaining trust, which facilitated quality disclosure. Liu, Jieyu (2006) showed that the closer the links between the researcher and the interviewee, the more willing they are to share information openly. However, I argue that it is also important to take account of how people are related and the interests involved for different parties. Therefore, it is not merely the number of intermediaries involved that matters to the quality of data, but also the nature of the *guanxi* in use that is worthy of critical examination.

In most cases, my participants said ‘yes’ to the person who asked them to participate, as opposed to the interview itself. It became clear that it was more important for them to show trust in the intermediary and do them a favour than to know about the task in advance. For instance, although I offered participants my information sheet either by email or as a printed copy prior to the interview, approximately 90% of them attended without having read it, apart from vaguely knowing the topic and how I related to them in relation to the introducer. I was always careful to ask my intermediaries to introduce my project with enough professional information on my behalf in advance. But sometimes, the intermediary would use their autonomy and choose not to disclose certain information to ensure that they could do me a favour by securing me an interview. They also chose the parts of my research that they felt comfortable with and that seemed ‘right’ to disclose to my potential participants to make it socially appropriate for their relationship. The power dynamics in these personal interactions, intertwined with what was appropriate in this cultural setting, gave a certain level of control to the intermediaries, as I was relying on them for access to participants and in helping to build trust with them prior to the interview. It is also worth mentioning that, by using *guanxi*, one is tied into the reciprocity network and will be expected to ‘give back’ somehow at a later time.

In addition, I found that the definition of distance or closeness of *guanxi* between an interviewee and the researcher is not fixed, and thus should be open to critical reflection by the researcher in each case. Giving you *mianzi* does not guarantee the quality of your *guanxi*. It is just a

gesture showing that they are interested in maintaining *guanxi* with you. Therefore, the quality of *guanxi* might be affected both by the distance and the nature of your relationship. More specifically, the nature of Chinese *guanxi* can be affected by the hierarchical relationship involved, such as age, social status, gender, etc. All these factors affect the nature of *guanxi*, not only between the researcher and the intermediaries, but also between the intermediaries and the participant, and this ultimately influences the nature of *guanxi* between the researcher and participant. For my analysis of the nature and quality of my *guanxi* with my participants in this project, I divided them into direct contacts, including ‘close friendship’, ‘old work colleague’, ‘old schoolmates’ and ‘no direct contact’, including ‘introduced by key friendships’, ‘introduced by elder or participant’s partner’ (see Figs. 1.3 and 1.4). These categories indicate certain interests that might have caused my participants to agree to an interview in the first place. These rationales are crucial in determining the nature of your *guanxi*. All the above are important to consider, because ultimately the nature and quality of your *guanxi* will affect the quality of your data. Knowing this helps putting data into the cultural context where my participants might perform various social roles during the interview. It affects what participants can and cannot share with you. For example, what the researcher may regard as a close *guanxi* can be a problem when the other side is more concerned about maintaining *mianzi* according to the social role they prefer to perform in that given context. In this case, their close relationship does not always generate rich or good-quality data but hinders the authenticity of information given by participants when they try to make themselves ‘look good’ in front of the researcher. This requires the researcher to have a deep understanding, not only of *guanxi* as a concept, but also of how it is practiced in each social encounter. Moreover, one has to bear in mind the interpersonal dynamics while interpreting the data, especially one’s social positioning within these *guanxi* networks. It helps to see, not only what has been said, but also how things were said and why they were said or not said.

### *Activism in the Field?*

I am a feminist and I think everyone should be a feminist. Fully aware of my own political stance and my passion for convincing people of the importance of gender equality in China, I often allowed ten to 15 minutes after the interview to discuss relevant issues with my participants and to

answer their questions. This was beneficial for both sides, as it helped to balance the interview relationship (Ribbens 1989). It also as well as created a space to discuss issues of mutual concern. Many participants wanted to know whether they fitted into the normal range of people or not, which I found important and worthy of analysis. I used my fieldwork as an opportunity for networking and raising awareness of gender equality with my participants after the interview whenever they wanted to talk more.

Following the feminist tradition, I sought to understand my participants as they are, trying to listen and understand their stories from their perspective. I am also aware that I have my own assumptions about what I would like to discover in the field. Bearing all this in mind, I have to admit that it was a challenging as well as humbling experience for me. It saddened me when I heard my participants talk about their difficulties in life as women, then conclude by saying 'I don't think anything can change for us' or 'How can men look after a baby? We're born different, it has to be like this.' As much as I would like to step in and practise my activism, I had to be self-disciplined not to interrupt what they wanted to say. It was particularly hard to listen to views that are radically different from my own. Statements like 'I don't want to be feminist', 'I just like men who are stronger than me anyway' or 'I would rather stay at home being spoiled by my husband' made me feel uneasy. However, interview techniques that I had read about did help. I tried my best to follow their advice on how to respond appropriately and how to probe further, meanwhile maintaining a relaxed interview atmosphere (Fielding and Thomas 2008; Rubin and Rubin 2012). I used phrases like 'I see', 'this is interesting, do you want to explain more?' to allow them to speak without feeling judged. I find relief and encouragement in Millen's writing:

Individuals may not have a full awareness of the systems which surround and constrain them, and as researchers, we have a responsibility to illuminate these systems using their experiences, and illuminate their experiences using these systems. (Millen 1997, p. 35)

## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The following chapters are based on the main themes which emerged from my analysis: premarital sex and abortion, norms of marriage, perceptions of success and future aspirations, and their marital reality. The next

chapter explores the literature that informs the contemporary context in which the women of my research cohort live. I will introduce the significant policy changes, such as the economic reform and the introduction of the One-Child Policy, which have dramatically shaped the social and economic landscape of contemporary China. I discuss the revitalisation of the Chinese family under the reform in relation to contemporary governance. I will also discuss the mixed impact of these changes on Chinese women in general before narrowing my focus down to consider its implications for well-educated women. A brief discussion of the shifting connotations of gender equality in China is given at the end with the aim of contextualising its contemporary relevance.

There are four analysis chapters, which will mainly focus on issues around these women's premarital experiences and family life. In Chapter 3, I highlight issues around premarital sex, a prevalent practice under the reform among young people, to uncover how it creates new dilemmas for young women of this age as they negotiate between moralism and realism in terms of their premarital sexual conduct. I focus on their narratives about the stigma attached to premarital abortion and women's interpretations of 'responsible motherhood' in order to reveal the specific Chinese characteristics of their rationalisation of reproductive choice. Then I move on to the other side of the coin: if premarital pregnancy should be avoided at all costs, what does desirable motherhood look like? In Chapter 4, I explore social perceptions of responsible motherhood, which remains strictly naturalised within heterosexual marriage. I explore my participants' meaning making around childbearing and reveal the tensions that women face in order to fulfil the social and medical norms around reproduction within an intensified timeframe. In particular, I discuss the role that family members play in safeguarding the norm and its political implications in contemporary China. In Chapter 5, I look into women's constructions of their gendered subjectivity as China's exemplary middle class. I focus on their individual agency under a powerful neoliberal discourse of a desiring and enterprising self in seeking personal happiness through heterosexual marriage. By examining their criteria and practices in seeking a suitable marriage partner, I reveal the restrictive nature of these practices, which ironically make marriage into both a struggle and a solution for these women. I then discuss how their aspirations towards happiness help to realise the neoliberal ideal that fits within the governance framework of the party-state. After all these struggles to successfully embody the heterosexual married ideal, my final analysis

chapter uncovers the reality for those who are married and its implications for women in the workplace. The emphasis on a mother's primary responsibilities for domestic life, including bringing up the next generation of good-quality children, means intensified stress on working mothers. On the other hand, the neoliberal economy, which prefers workers who are free from other responsibilities, consolidates a male-centred public space that restricts women's career progression. Consequently, the multiple pull and push factors function together to place these women in a position that stabilises the economic and political status quo through consolidating their 'gendered nature'. Therefore, women's negotiation of equality is framed as an individualised private struggle under a powerful regime. In the conclusion, in pulling all of my analysis together, I aim to cast light on the gendered reality for these privileged women in the hope of illuminating the constraints that Chinese women need to cast off in seeking an egalitarian future.

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