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Finding Mr. Right: Single Professional Women Imagining Ideal Masculinities and Negotiating Femininities in Contemporary China

Abstract In China, the universality of marriage has remained largely unchanged in spite of the country's dramatic social transformations since the reform and opening up began in 1978. However, since the mid-2000s, there has been a noticeable trend of delayed marriage among younger generations, particularly among urban educated women. Through an analysis of the self-narratives of single professional women collected through interviews of ten focus groups, conducted in Shanghai in 2015, I argue that this group of women desire marriage, yet they do not easily succumb to the immense pressure to get married. They regard marriage as a means of pursuing personal happiness rather than as a necessary component of a woman's life course. Finding personal happiness through marriage for these women, first and foremost, depends on finding "Mr. Right." By examining their conceptualization of the ideal man, I contend that their constructions of ideal femininities and masculinities are intricately intertwined. In envisioning an egalitarian companionate marriage, single professional women denounce and valorize different masculinities. These negotiations are vital not only to their self-identification as independent, modern women, and to challenging dominant gender paradigms, but also to their self-regulation of desires.

Keywords single women; masculinities; marriage; China

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Introduction[1]

Finding Mr. Right (also *Anchoring in Seattle*, *beijing yushang xiyatu* 北京遇上西雅图, 2013), written and directed by female filmmaker Xue Xiaolu 薛晓路, is one of the most successful romantic films targeting urban young women in recent Chinese cinema.[2] The film centers on the self-transformation and romantic pursuits of its young female protagonist, Wen Jiajia 文佳佳, who is initially a mistress of the wealthy married businessman Old Zhong 老钟 in Beijing and goes to Seattle to deliver their illegitimate child. In Seattle, Jiajia comes to know Frank, who works as a part-time driver for postnatal care centers. As Frank helps Jiajia settle down in Seattle, it is revealed that Frank used to be a renowned surgeon in Beijing but chose to become a house husband when his family relocated to the United States, thanks to his wife's promotion at work. Jiajia is deeply touched by Frank's willingness to sacrifice his personal successful career for the happiness of the family, as well as the closeness between Frank and his daughter, even though the local Chinese community belittles Frank's domestic role. When Old Zhong runs into trouble in Beijing and terminates his financial support, Jiajia gradually abandons her lavish lifestyle, instead working diligently to support herself. With Frank's assistance and care, Jiajia successfully gives birth to her son, and her feelings for Frank intensify.

Suddenly, Old Zhong, now divorced, shows up and proposes to Jiajia. Returning to Beijing, Jiajia becomes Old Zhong's legal wife and presides over a palatial yet always empty house. She calls Old Zhong to break up. Old Zhong first rhetorically asks, "What man who stays home every day can have achievements, and what man who carries out big business outside can accompany and talk to his wife and child every night?" He then threatens not to give Jiajia any money if they divorce. Jiajia calmly replies, "It has nothing to do with money," and ends the marriage. Then, Jiajia starts her own business, making use of her past working experience as an editor, and turns herself into an independent and happy single mother in Beijing. Meanwhile in the US, Frank, also officially divorced, returns to practicing medicine in New York. After both Jiajia and Frank have gotten their own lives back and embarked upon promising career paths, they finally meet again at the top of the Empire State Building and appear to be a perfect match.

Finding Mr. Right unequivocally posits Frank as the ideal man, characterized by his dedication to his family and his caring and considerate nature. This forms a contrast with Old Zhong's preoccupation with wealth accumulation and lack of affective involvement in the family. Moreover,

1 This paper is a modified version of a chapter of my doctoral dissertation "Questioning Norms: Single Professional Women in Shanghai in the 2010s," which will be published in 2024 on heiDOK, the repository of Heidelberg University.

2 *Finding Mr. Right's* box office earnings reached 519 million Chinese yuan (approximately 66 million euros), making it the best-selling romantic film in China to date.

in the film, concomitant with Jiajia's self-reflection on who her "Mr. Right" could be, is her self-transformation from a materialistic mistress into an independent career woman, exposing that the constructions of ideal femininities and masculinities are intricately intertwined, rather than isolated from each other. Taking these themes further, this chapter examines how the young generations of urban women in contemporary China negotiate masculinities in intimate relationships, and how such negotiations interact with their shifting femininity formations.

To explore the subjectivities of professional, single Chinese women, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Shanghai in 2015. First, through my social network, I recruited ten single, professional women as informants; then, I asked them to invite their single female friends to form a group of two to four people for my face-to-face interviews. Altogether, twenty-five single women participated in my ethnographic study.[3] All were born between 1981 and 1991, had received at least, an undergraduate university education, and held white-collar jobs. The majority of them were the only child in the family and of urban origin. About half were Shanghainese, while the other half had migrated to Shanghai for education or employment. The discussions I had with the ten groups were semi-structured, lasted between two and four hours, and revolved around what the informants thought about their single status, marriage, partner selection, and gender equality, as well as, their relevant experiences.

Through an analysis of my informants' narratives, I contend that single professional women regard marriage as a means of pursuing personal happiness rather than a necessary component of a woman's life course. Furthermore, the ways in which they denounced and valorized different masculinities were vital not only to their self-identification as independent, modern women and to challenging dominant gender paradigms, but also to the self-regulation of desires.[4] By exploring the notion of the ideal man for single professional women in Shanghai, this chapter strives to shed light on how gender configurations have shifted among the younger generations. This shift affects especially the ways in which young urban women exert agency in the intimate sphere amid strong patriarchal gender norms in contemporary China. At the same time, the chapter also draws attention to how young women participate in reinventing, regulating, and

3 The majority of the twenty-five informants were not in a relationship, though some of them had boyfriends. All of the women but one, who had doubts about her sexual orientation, identified themselves as heterosexual during my fieldwork.

4 Lisa Rofel contends that "the social field of 'desire'… [has become] the most explosive and powerful realm for constructing novel citizen-subjects…in China's reconfiguration of its relationship to a postsocialist world." Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 2. Desire, in Rofel's definition, is "a historically, socially, and culturally produced field of practices" that covers a wide range of sexual, material, and affective aspirations, needs, and longings. See Rofel, *Desiring China*, 14. To become the desiring subject in postsocialist China involves not only emancipating desires, but also regulating and disciplining them.

disciplining their femininities. The following section explores emerging attitudes to marriage, before examining how these women conduct their search for "Mr. Right" while being guided by these changing attitudes.

The emergence of single professional women and their reimagining of marriage

The rise of extended or permanent singlehood has been developing into a global phenomenon during the past few decades, due to the rising status of women, the communications revolution, mass urbanization, and the longevity revolution.[5] Among the expanding single population, the SPW, that is, the single professional woman,[6] surfaces as a puzzling figure that disrupts the conventional cognitive association between the unmarried and the so-called "unattractive and unsuccessful."[7] Single women attract both stigmatization for transgressing heteronormative femininity and celebration for obtaining independence and autonomy.[8] Undeniably, single professional women are redefining women's gender roles, and social positions, as well as creating new individual life trajectories and biographies.

In China, the universality of marriage remains more or less unchanged, as the rate of the unmarried has not significantly gone up since the reform and opening up (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放) started in 1978. Additionally, compared to other developed countries, the Chinese tend to get married at a younger age. The 2010 national census showed that the nationwide average age of first marriage was 24.8 years for men and 22.8 for women; at the same time, the average age of first marriage (not differentiated by gender) was twenty-nine in Japan, thirty in Australia, thirty-one in Germany and thirty-two in France.[9] However, attitudes towards, and practices of marriage among China's urban youth are undergoing far more drastic transformations. According to Yong Cai and Wang Feng's calculation, "for urban

5 Eric Klinenberg, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).

6 Linda Berg-Cross, Anne-Marie Scholz, JoAnne Long, Ewa Grzeszcyk, and Anjali Roy, "Single Professional Women: A Global Phenomenon Challenges and Opportunities," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 5, no. 5 (2004).

7 Kinneret Lahad, "'Am I Asking for Too Much?' The Selective Single Woman as a New Social Problem," *Women's Studies International Forum*, no. 40 (2013).

8 Anne Byrne, "Singular Identities: Managing Stigma, Resisting Voices," *Women's Studies Review*, no. 7 (2000); Ellen Kay Trimberger, *The New Single Woman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005); Jill Reynolds and Stephanie Taylor, "Narrating Singleness: Life Stories and Deficit Identities," *Narrative Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (2005); Bella DePaulo, *Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006); Jill Reynolds, *The Single Woman: A Discursive Investigation* (London: Routledge, 2008); Kinneret Lahad, "The Single Woman's Choice as a Zero-Sum Game," *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014).

9 Anqi Xu and Yan Ruth Xia, "The Changes in Mainland Chinese Families During the Social Transition: A Critical Analysis," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 45, no. 1 (2014): 42–44.

China as a whole…[i]n 1995, only 10 percent of women aged twenty-five to twenty-nine had never married. By 2008, the share increased to 27 percent. Even among those aged thirty to thirty-four, the share of never-married women increased from 2 to 6 percent."[10] In Shanghai, the average age of first marriage in 2015 was 30.3 for men and 28.4 for women, a respective increase of five years and 5.4 years from 2005, showing a strong trend of delaying marriage.[11]

It is against this backdrop that the emergence of single professional women in China constitutes a relatively new phenomenon. Since the 2000s, this group has become more and more visible in major metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai, engendering great public confusion and anxiety. Single professional women in their thirties or even still in their twenties (mostly born in the 1980s, commonly referred to as the post-eighties generation, *balinghou* 八零后)[12] are called "leftover women" (*shengnü* 剩女), having three "highs," namely, high education, high income, and high quality, yet no marriage. Chinese mass media have indulged in various stereotypical and derogatory definitions and depictions of "leftover women," exhorting, "[S]ingle, educated, urban women: stop working so hard at your careers; lower your sights and don't be so ambitious; don't be so picky about whom you marry."[13] Matchmaking agencies, markets, websites, and television shows are booming and becoming a strikingly profitable industry, accentuating the abundance of single women and intensifying the anxiety of being unmarried.[14] On the one hand, single professional women

10 Yong Cai and Wang Feng, "(Re)Emergence of Late Marriage in Shanghai: From Collective Synchronization to Individual Choice," in *Wives, Husbands, and Lovers: Marriage and Sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Urban China*, ed. Deborah S. Davis and Sara L. Friedman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 108.

11 Wei Peng 彭薇, "The Average Age of First Marriage for Women Has Exceeded 28: Big Data Reveals Changes for Shanghai Women over the Past Four Decades女性初婚年龄已超28岁，大数据揭示40年来上海女性的这些变化," *Shanghai Observer* 上观, November 27, 2018. Accessed August 18, 2019. https://www.jfdaily.com/news/detail?id=118728.

12 The Chinese government officially started the Reform and Opening Up in 1978 and the one-child policy in 1979. Therefore, the post-1980s generations' life trajectories have been profoundly structured by the family planning policy, economic privatization, and marketization, as well as, intensifying globalization. For a general discussion of various issues related to the post-1980s generations, see Chunling Li 李春玲 and Yunqing Shi 施芸卿, *Experience, Attitudes, and Social Transition: A Sociological Study of the Post-80's Generation* 境遇、态度与社会转型:80后青年的社会学研究 (Beijing 北京: Social Sciences Academic Press 社会科学文献出版社, 2013); for an ethnographic study of the urban singletons, see Vanessa L. Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). It is worth pointing out that, although the primary goal of the one-child policy was not to empower women, urban daughters have benefitted from the policy in terms of gaining more education and work opportunities. See Vanessa L. Fong, "China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 4 (2002).

13 Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zed Books, 2014), 15–16.

14 See Peidong Sun 孙沛东, *Who's Coming to Marry My Daughter: The Match-Making Corner and Parental Match-Making* 谁来娶我的女儿:上海相亲角与"白发相亲" (Beijing

have to cope with the accompanying stigma in their everyday lives and the pressure exerted by parents, relatives, and friends, as well as colleagues.[15] On the other hand, their high social and economic status often turns out to be an obstacle in the highly patriarchal marriage market, as women are expected to be the less accomplished and less assertive party in a relationship, in order to sustain male dominance.[16] Thus, in Shanghai, the highly educated women are the cohort among women most likely not to marry, a predicament not shared by their male counterparts.[17]

Despite the hostile social environment and predicament in the mainstream marriage market, my ethnographic study demonstrates that the younger generations of urban women do not easily succumb to the enormous pressure to get married, as Leta Hong Fincher implies.[18] Instead, they try to carve out new femininities within and beyond marriage; they envision more equal marriage or prolonged singlehood.[19] Indeed, marriage still looms large in the self-narratives of the single professional women in my study. It would be hasty to assume that, since they want to get married, "most of the Chinese professional women had fairly traditional views about marriage and considered marriage to be their ultimate goal."[20] My single professional women informants do not reject marriage; they desire it. However, more importantly, they also endeavor to assemble their own visions of marriage, and as such, imagining or reimagining becomes a key site for the ways in which they navigate gender norms and subjectivities.

Lan Ting 兰婷 is a thirty-year-old architect.[21] She is from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. She likes talking about her extremely busy and demanding work, her passion for cultural activities in Shanghai, and her self-care regimen. It takes her quite a while to reveal that she works hard to remain confident and carefree, as her parents and friends constantly urge her to marry. She feels disappointed, especially in her mother,

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北京: China Social Sciences Press 中国社会科学出版社, 2012) for thorough research on the matchmaking market in the People's Square in Shanghai.

15 Aiping Luo 罗爱萍, Feng Wang 王蜂, and Yu Jiang 江宇, *Survey of Chinese Leftover Women: The First Investigation of Leftover Women's Real Living Experiences in China* 中国剩女调查：国内第一部剩女真实生活图景调查实录 (Guangzhou 广州: Guangdong People's Press 广东人民出版社, 2014).

16 Wei Luo and Zhen Sun, "Are You the One? China's TV Dating Shows and the Sheng Nü's Predicament," *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 2 (2015); Sandy To, *China's Leftover Women: Late Marriage among Professional Women and Its Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2015).

17 Cai and Feng, "Late Marriage in Shanghai," 109–111.

18 Fincher, *Leftover Women*.

19 See also Arianne M. Gaetano, "'Leftover Women': Postponing Marriage and Renegotiating Womanhood in Urban China," *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 4, no. 2 (2014); Lynne Y. Nakano, "Single Women and Cosmopolitan Re-Imaginings of Gendered Citizenship in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Tokyo," in *Transnational Trajectories in East Asia: Nation, Citizenship, and Region*, ed. Yasemin Nuhoğlu Soysal (New York: Routledge, 2015).

20 To, *China's Leftover Women*, 30.

21 In this chapter, all the names of my informants are pseudonyms, and the ages and occupations indicated, correspond to their situation in 2015 during my fieldwork.

a high-achieving university professor, for not comprehending that she is, and can be content with her current life without a partner. The way she conceptualizes marriage is representative of many of my informants.

> [If I find the right person,] it would be wonderful if we get married, pay property mortgage together, and buy a car together. We would experience everything together, live *happily* every day, and take care of each other. This is a very *happy* status… However, there are also people who are obviously discontent with their marriages, yet they still push me to get married as soon as possible. I simply cannot understand. (Emphasis mine)

For my informant, marriage is like a "neutral container"; only when it is filled with happiness will it become desirable for her. More precisely, what attracts her are the potential benefits of marriage, like love, intimacy, reciprocity, and companionship, not the marital status per se that her unhappy married friends firmly value. Similarly, for Li Yifan 李伊凡, a twenty-eight-year-old financial analyst, she would rather explore other life options if she cannot find the right person.

> Only when I feel certain that I can live a happy life with this guy will I get married. I would rather not marry than reluctantly marry. If there is a bright future lying ahead, I am willing to marry. If not, I would think every person's life is limited. Some dedicate their lives to love, experiencing life as a mother. *If I don't get lucky like that, I can dedicate my life to something other than family life, or I can create other meanings of life.* I can become a different kind of person. Maybe later in my life I can think of or do things that married people cannot. Maybe I can read many books and visit many places. (Emphasis mine)

In this way, my single women informants unequivocally desire a type of marriage that is predicated on romantic love, mutual respect, and support. Marriage is imagined as a means to pursue personal happiness—for some, a very important means—but not necessarily the only gateway to a better and happier life. However, they often find that their conceptualization of marriage as an option instead of a must of one's life course, conflicts with the notions of their parents, peers, and society in general.

Jiang Xin 蒋欣, a twenty-five-year-old public relations specialist, Liz, a twenty-nine-year-old financial analyst, and Dong Dong 冬冬, a twenty-five-year-old financial analyst are three Shanghai-born professional women who became friends through attending concerts in Shanghai. They share similar interests and travel abroad together. They all live with their parents and frankly admit that such an arrangement allows them to spend as much money as possible on what they call a "hedonistic" way of life. Liz, with an annual income of 300,000 Chinese yuan (approximately

thirty-eight thousand euros), confesses that her lavish spending on cultural events and travel has scared away some blind dates. Jiang Xin and Liz say that they believe in feminist causes but would not easily discuss gender issues with others because they feel that society is generally hostile to feminism. During the group discussion though, they feel safe to vent their discontent and disillusionment. Asked about their opinions on the "leftover women" discourse, Jiang Xin and Liz conclude that the mainstream value system in Chinese society treats life as a checklist where everyone is expected to conform to a normative life course, which unfolds in a strict linear sequence of study, work, marriage, and children. Their single status, especially for Liz who is approaching thirty, is a deviation from the norm, and thus they are often considered a "failure." Furthermore, they are well aware that their predicament is exacerbated by the fact that they are women, or more fundamentally, by the middle-class gender paradigm in China nowadays that considers "marriage…more essential for the female than the male life course".[22] Having looked through the patriarchal ideology behind the "leftover women" discourse, Jiang Xin and Liz unequivocally state that they have decided to defy this social norm and the mainstream values, while keeping the option of getting married open.

At the same time, it has to be admitted that many of my informants do not associate this normative life course with a patriarchal social structure, nor do they make it clear that this norm is more limiting for women. Instead, they tend to interpret the constraints and pressures they experience as results of the clashing of different values, mostly intergenerational.[23] What they want to challenge most is the idea that one has to be married by a certain age. As daughters, my single women informants reluctantly accept their parents' insistence because, in their opinion, their parents' generation is generally unable to imagine other life paths due to the social circumstances in which they were raised.

Li Yifan is from Shanghai and works in a company "full of single women." In addition, because the staff turnover is high in her company and colleagues tend not to forge close bonds, she does not suffer from untoward comments on her personal life in the workplace. In her opinion, her parents are the only source of pressure. In the past, Li Yifan tried to persuade

22 Jun Zhang and Peidong Sun, "'When Are You Going to Get Married?' Parental Matchmaking and Middle-Class Women in Contemporary Urban China," in *Wives, Husbands, and Lovers: Marriage and Sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Urban China*, ed. Deborah S. Davis and Sara L. Friedman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 128.

23 In chapter four of this book, Shilpa Phadke explores how marriage is talked about between single women and their natal families as well as, their extended families, in contemporary India. Her empirical data vividly demonstrates the pressure Indian single women experience from their natal families. Parents, especially mothers, resort to shaming or infantilizing their daughters, to get them married. Education and employment provide single women with some defenses against these forms of pressure. The conflicts between single Indian women and their families, the strategies of their parents, and young women's negotiations are echoed in my interviews with single Chinese women.

her parents to understand her views on marriage. Now she has given up and concedes that it is probably best for her and her father to stick to their separate views. Her explanation of her parents' insistence that she gets married, is echoed by many other informants.

> For the elder generations, the world changes too rapidly. When they were young, they, including my parents, got married when they were supposed to do so. They didn't really marry out of strong desires; instead, they got married for objective reasons like housing, or for physical needs. Nowadays, we can meet so many different people, and contemplate on ourselves so much. When my parents were my age, they probably didn't think about what they really wanted to do, didn't reflect on the meaning of life, and hadn't seen as much as we have now. Their values have not kept abreast of social developments.

In Li Yifan's opinion, the difference between her parents' generation and hers lies in the question of whether marriage is an individual choice or not. She seems to believe that the institution of marriage was a means for her parents to access housing and sex. In contrast, nowadays, sexual intimacy has been delinked from marriage;[24] moreover, education and career have freed women from economic dependence on a future spouse. For Li Yifan and my other informants, marriage is no longer considered imperative, thanks to social transitions.

Wang Siyun 王思蕴 is a twenty-eight-year-old lawyer who comes from Zhejiang, an economically prosperous yet very traditional region where matchmaking is still the primary method of finding marital partners. There is not only a generational gap, as Li Yifan explains, but also what she calls a "regional gap," that is, a metropolitan and provincial divide. While many women like her are postponing marriage or prolonging singlehood in "global" Shanghai (as indicated by the average ages of first marriage between China as a whole, compared to those in Shanghai, mentioned earlier), Wang Siyun believes that in her hometown, "you would be castigated if you wished not to get married," and that her unmarried status is considered an offense. In stark contrast to her conservative hometown and her "judgmental relatives" there, Shanghai is a safe space for her. The city gives her the opportunity to be away from the family network of surveillance and compliance, and thus explore different life options and exercise more personal freedom. In her ethnographic study of young Chinese women studying in Australia, Fran Martin argues that time abroad creates

24 James Farrer, *Opening Up: Youth Sex Culture and Market Reform in Shanghai* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); James Farrer, "Love, Sex, and Commitment: Delinking Premarital Intimacy from Marriage in Urban China," in *Wives, Husbands, and Lovers: Marriage and Sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Urban China*, ed. Deborah S. Davis and Sara L. Friedman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

a "zone of suspension"[25] in both geographic and temporal terms (a "time out" from the normative life course), allowing for more possibilities and different life scripts. At the same time, we cannot ignore that the normative middle-class Chinese feminine life courses have also migrated with those young female students and continue to fetter their negotiations of gendered selves. For my non-Shanghai-born informants, migration to Shanghai similarly also "afford[s] a partial suspension of one's home society's norms of gender and sexuality."[26] However, this suspension never means a complete erasure of the traditional values they grew up with in their hometowns. Wang Siyun frequently mentions annual visits to her hometown and altercations with her relatives in her narrative, to accentuate the difference between the provincial and the metropolitan. To live in Shanghai and stick to her conceptualization of marriage as an option and a personal choice, is to resist and confront the normative feminine life course that orders women to marry and procreate in their twenties. Indeed, Wang Siyun and other single women have physically left their parochial hometowns. Nevertheless, the specter of traditional, normative femininity rooted in those traditional places looms large in so-called global Shanghai, where single women still have to constantly defend themselves against the stigmatizing label of "leftover women." It is therefore more accurate to see the cosmopolitan and single-women-friendly Shanghai portrayed by Wang Siyun as a rhetorical strategy.

Through the lenses of generational gaps and the metropolitan–provincial divide, single professional women implicitly construct a binary of traditional and modern values and adopt the conviction that the modern values they embody are more advanced than, and thus, destined to replace the traditional ones as society develops. At the same time, they reiterate that they understand and tolerate other opinions and values and emphasize that what they expect in return is for the elder generations, and society at large to tolerate and accept their different lifestyles. Marriage as an option instead of a necessity is one feature of an ideal diverse (*duoyuan* 多元)[27] society that, they imagine, will naturally materialize in the future, because society always progresses. No one envisions any collective action, for example, petition and protest.

Interestingly, my informants rarely evoked the theme of filial piety. In other studies that have examined the same cohort of single women,[28] filial obligation is often mentioned as a source of agony and guilt: single women blame themselves for disappointing their parents. However, I have not detected such self-doubt in my fieldwork. The single women I have interviewed tend to foreground the intergenerational conflicts of different

25 Fran Martin, "Overseas Study as Zone of Suspension: Chinese Students Renegotiating Youth, Gender, and Intimacy," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 39, no. 6 (2018).
26 Martin, "Overseas Study as Zone of Suspension," 694.
27 All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are by the author.
28 For example, Gaetano, "'Leftover Women'"; To, *China's Leftover Women*.

values and choices of lifestyles and do not regard their single status as unfilial. Rather than feeling guilty about not fulfilling their parents' expectations, they express dismay and even intense anger about their parents' interference, manifested, for example, in pushing them to go on arranged dates with potential partners, asking them to lower their standards in selecting partners, or through scolding them about how their singleness causes their parents to lose face. Some informants describe at length the tension between themselves and their parents, detailing, for instance, how their chats or phone calls with parents would always end in a quarrel. Even though they are frustrated or hurt by the pressures that parents exert on them to get married, they see their parents' motives as being in accordance with their own best interest, that is, their personal happiness. A sentence I have frequently encountered in conversations with my informants is: "the things parents do is meant for our own happiness."[29] From this emphasis, it is possible to discern a changing conceptualization of filial piety. My single women informants do not consider their disobedience to be unfilial.[30] As Yunxiang Yan observes with respect to the younger generations in China, "their happiness in life makes their parents happy and thus their pursuit of pleasure and comfort in life should be viewed as their way of fulfilling the duty of filial piety."[31] To sum up, marriage is desired by my informants mainly as a means to pursue personal happiness and a good life, instead of as a duty to fulfill. Indeed, the "leftover women" discourse belittles their achievements in education and career and consolidates the centrality of marriage in women's life courses, sparking emotions like anxiety and anger in them. By employing a traditional and modern binary discourse, these women identify as progressive, modern, cosmopolitan subjects, challenging the stigmatization of being labeled as "leftover women" and the social expectation of being married at a certain age. While they may not fundamentally resist the normative life course by deliberately opting for another life trajectory, like not marrying at all, they can also imagine prolonged or permanent singlehood as a way of life—a choice that expands women's life trajectories. Shanghai as a metropolis allows them to keep a distance from their social networks and their external pressure, making prolonged or permanent singlehood possible.

Furthermore, finding personal happiness through marriage, as Lan Ting's and Li Yifan's statements indicate, is first and foremost predicated

29 In her ethnographic study of the matchmaking corner in Shanghai's People's Square, Peidong Sun concludes that it is out of love, responsibility, and sometimes, guilt that parents wholeheartedly devote themselves to searching for marital partners for their children. They do not regard their children as unfilial because they are unmarried. See Sun, *Who's Coming to Marry My Daughter*.

30 However, some informants note that they consider their male counterparts to be under more pressure from filial obligations, as producing descendants to continue the family line is mostly considered a male responsibility within a Confucian worldview.

31 Yunxiang Yan, "The Changing Moral Landscape," in *Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person*, ed. Arthur Kleinman, Yunxiang Yan, Jing Jun, Sing Lee, Everett Zhang, Pan Tianshu, Wu Fei, and Guo Jinhua (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 37.

on finding "Mr. Right." The next question then becomes: What constitutes an "ideal partner" in the eyes of these single professional women? In single women's pursuit of a companionate marriage, socio-economic status and participation in family work (childcare and home chores) become the two prominent aspects of masculinities that single professional women must navigate vis-à-vis their self-identities as modern independent career women. In the following section, I will analyze how my informants construct their ideal masculinities within a heterosexual relationship amidst constraining gender norms.

Ideal men for single professional women

A major trend in the transformation of contemporary Chinese masculinities is that "with the redistribution of wealth and power and the emergence of the nouveau riche in postsocialist society, masculinity is increasingly being defined in terms of money."[32] A lack of wealth is disadvantageous for men seeking a spouse,[33] leaving less well-off men emasculated in China's new sexual economy, which "is dominated by wealthy and politically influential men[34] who consume femininity and sexuality."[35]

For instance, in the popular television matchmaking show *If You Are the One* (*feichengwurao* 非诚勿扰), the desirability of the male contestants as potential partners is predominantly constructed around materialism, namely affluence, income, and the possession of real estate and cars. This underscores the act of "making money as the only way to pursue personal happiness and find a girlfriend,"[36] and therefore, to assert masculinity. Therefore, Shuyu Kong contends that the controversies on the show over blatant celebrations of materialism underlie a male anxiety, namely the frustrations experienced by young men seeking to achieve an affluent life in contemporary China.[37] To further develop Kong's inquiry, I ask the following question: In the face of this male anxiety, how do single professional women position wealth in relation to their ideal masculinities and marriages, and how do they navigate this new sexual economy, as well as, the public anxiety and anger directed at young women?

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32 Geng Song and Derek Hird, *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary China* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 12.
33 John Osburg, *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality Among China's New Rich* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).
34 Cf. Old Zhong in *Finding Mr. Right*.
35 Harriet Zurndorfer, "Men, Women, Money, and Morality: The Development of China's Sexual Economy," *Feminist Economics* 22, no. 2 (2016): 4–5.
36 Siyu Chen, "Disciplining Desiring Subjects through the Remodeling of Masculinity: A Case Study of a Chinese Reality Dating Show," *Modern China* 43, no. 1 (2017): 106.
37 Shuyu Kong, "Are You the One? The Competing Public Voices of China's Post-1980s Generation," in *Restless China*, ed. Perry Link, Richard P. Madsen, and Paul G. Pickowicz (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

Possibly the most (in)famous fragment from *If You Are the One* is when Ma Nuo 马诺, a young, attractive female participant, rejects a male participant who makes around 3000 yuan (around 380 euros) per month, stating that she would rather cry in a BMW car than smile on a bike. When asked for their opinions on Ma Nuo and her statement, my informants generally think that it reflects reality to a large extent: Women prioritize men's "material condition" (*wuzhi tiaojian* 物质条件), that is, economic status, in partner selection. However, they find such a common view and practice in conflict with their own visions of a companionate marriage that is based on romantic love. Consequently, single professional women employ a material–spiritual (*wuzhi-jingshen* 物质–精神) dichotomy to differentiate themselves from the stereotype of a materialistic girl like Ma Nuo.[38] While the word "material" basically refers to wealth in my informants' narratives, the "spiritual" appears to be a vague concept. When they talk about spiritual compatibility, they refer to sharing similar hobbies, lifestyles, values, etc. Sometimes they use "spiritual" to refer to good communication with each other, while some clearly state that they are looking for their "soulmate." The articulation of the relation and hierarchy between the material and the spiritual provided by Xie Yun 谢云, a thirty-four-year-old real estate project manager, is quite representative of my informants' views.

> We [appearing to refer to the educated career women of the post-80s generation] have worked for a few years now. Materially, we may not be particularly well off, but we are in an acceptable condition. Of course, we hope our future partners can match our material condition, but we long for more spiritually. We are looking for someone who is spiritually compatible with us.

Similarly, the following exchange between Wang Siyun and her friend Ge Yunfei 葛云飞, a twenty-nine-year-old legal specialist from the same hometown, reveals doubts about men's use of money in a relationship, and wealth as a feature of ideal masculinity:

GE YUNFEI: *Can the woman who only cares about money [in partner selection] have a quality life? Besides money, can she really communicate with her husband?*

WANG SIYUN: *She doesn't need communication with her husband, and vice versa. Her husband likes this kind of woman because as long as he gives her money and buys her gifts, he is treating her well. But we are different, as we want communication [spiritual compatibility]; we are demanding.*

38 In the beginning of the film *Finding Mr. Right*, Jiajia acts like Ma Nuo. Both Jiajia and Ma Nuo can be read as archetypes of the materialistic girl that saturate the public imagination in contemporary China.

In this exchange, men's wealth is not understood as a guarantee of spiritual compatibility and is therefore considered insufficient to bring about desirable marriages and happiness. Ge Yunfei and Wang Siyun briefly denounce men who think they can win hearts with their wealth. They then go on to discuss at length, women who marry for money or who attach great importance to a man's economic status. Ge Yunfei and Wang Siyun, both of whom are not originally from Shanghai, share the view that there is a certain type of young Shanghainese woman who is materialistic and demands that her future husband own property. In addition to Ge Yunfei and Wang Siyun's discussion, this particular type also appears sporadically in other group discussions. Based on these brief mentions, the typical Shanghainese materialistic girl is portrayed as someone who shares a crowded home with her parents and thus, has a strong motivation to improve her living conditions through marriage. Moreover, this stereotypical girl has probably not graduated from a prestigious university, has a lackluster job, and revolves her life around finding a marriage partner. What some of my informants denounce is not her family background, as many of them come from backgrounds not dissimilar to hers, but rather her aspirations. Her overt appreciation of material goods disqualifies her from the pursuit of respectable middle-class femininity. She represents a morally dubious, if not outright corrupt, femininity. My informants depict such a figure as the other, against whom they demarcate themselves. Unlike the materialistic Shanghainese girl, they value spiritual compatibility over material success. Their criterion for evaluating men is thus loftier than that of the materialistic girl. Therefore, they embody morally proper or superior femininity. Yuan Lele 袁乐乐 is a twenty-five-year-old master's student of musicology who works part-time as a piano teacher to support her studies and life in Shanghai. She comes from a small city in Hunan province. Inspired and encouraged by her assertive mother, who runs a family business, Yuan Lele dreams of opening her own music school upon graduation. Yuan Lele regards independence as her key characteristic. In her opinion, prioritizing men's wealth, especially, looking formen who possess housing in partner selection, represents a "traditional" femininity from which she wants to distance herself. Dai Mengcheng 戴萌橙, a twenty-eight-year-old Shanghainese who quit her white-collar job in a multinational corporation and co-founded a theater troupe, speaks more critically of such traditional femininity:

> The idea that men need to own property in order to marry is inculcated in young women by their mothers. I think some women have not evolved well and thus do not have the capacity for independent thinking. Since their mothers have told them so, they accept the idea and never ask why they have to demand an apartment or how men could afford the property.

Many informants refrain from judging other women, as they see themselves as believers in social diversity and tolerance. Some express their

willingness to make do with rented apartments, while others proclaim their willingness to share the financial burden of purchasing property with their future partners. Lan Ting goes one step further, questioning the way men internalize the imperative of being the natural providers of housing in marriage.

> I find [that] most of the men I know accept their fate: no apartment, no wife. Why don't they find it unfair and unreasonable? I find it very unfair. They are my age and they have to buy apartments, but I don't have to... But I haven't heard any man complain about it. Each of them just diligently makes money. When work is very tiresome, they just say they are men and have to buy apartments.

The male anxiety over wealth does not strike a chord with my informants, who tend to consolidate their self-image as modern independent women by downplaying men's material condition in their partner selection. Moreover, my female interlocutors are sympathetic about the economic pressure suffered by their male peers. At the same time, some informants are also conscious of the male anxiety occasioned by the materialism of women. Jiang Xin, who closely follows feminist discussions on Chinese social media, questions the public anger and censure directed at Ma Nuo.

> The public opinion is that young women today are materialistic and have high economic demands on men. But I think the public has failed to realize that the very reason women have demands for men's wealth in the marriage market is that there is no other way for women to acquire such wealth and social status except through marriage.

Convinced of women's subordination in Chinese society, Jiang Xin refuses to morally judge women using marriage to achieve upward mobility. But as a career woman with her own income, able to live in a big city, she sees herself as privileged, as there is no need for her to rely on men to meet her economic needs. Instead, she can focus on searching for someone who will satisfy her spiritual needs. While Jiang Xin thinks more about women from lower social and economic strata, Qian Linlin 钱琳琳, a thirty-year-old architect who considers herself a moderate feminist, feels that public anxiety about materialistic women, is restricting women like her. She comes from the province of Henan and has been renting housing in Shanghai ever since she moved there. Experiences of being evicted by a landlord and the general lack of protection of tenants' rights in Shanghai have led her to desire a place of her own. She admits that her break-up with her boyfriend was related to the question of who should pay for the residential property. She questions why women cannot request future husbands to provide better for them economically, given that women generally sacrifice a lot of their previous independence and income for marriage and family. Both

Jiang Xin and Qian Linlin have noticed that male anxiety about wealth has morphed into female self-policing over propriety and respectability. This is also demonstrated by the way my informants distance themselves from the notion of the materialistic girl and strike a subtle balance between the material and spiritual demands they make of their future husbands.

Although my single women informants are very cautious about articulating the economic features of their ideal man, and they do not aspire to greatly enhance their social and economic status through marrying upwards, their imagined happy marriage is undoubtedly predicated on certain material conditions. These could range from buying an apartment and a car together, engaging in extensive traveling together, to sending their children abroad in the future. And while some people find the idea of a husband who is economically inferior to the wife acceptable, the idea remains rare, as demonstrated by the following conversation between Yuan Lele and her classmate Chen Jie 陈婕, a twenty-four-year-old master's student from Hubei province. Here it should be noted that both informants make around ten thousand Chinese yuan (approximately 1,300 euros) per month as part-time music tutors.[39]

THE AUTHOR: *Can you accept that your future husband makes less money than you do and his job is not as good as yours?*

YUAN LELE: *It depends on how much less... If the income difference is between one and two thousand yuan per month, I think I am fine. He can earn the same as I do, or earn a bit more. All in all, the difference had better be small.*

CHEN JIE: *It cannot be that I make ten thousand [yuan] a month and he makes only three to five thousand... But seven to eight thousand will do as long as he does more household chores.*

The openly stated reason for their comments is that they would find it unacceptable to lower their standard of living upon getting married. Their ideal is to find a male peer from similar social strata and strive for an affluent family life together. Such an imagining does not challenge the mainstream marriage pattern of homogamy or hypergamy in China's post-socialist era.[40]

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39 Most of the twenty-five single professional women I interviewed, earn a monthly income of around ten thousand Chinese yuan.

40 For analyses of the changing partner selection patterns in China and the formation of homogamy or hypergamy as the dominant pattern since the marketization and privatization of the 1980s, see Anqi Xu 徐安琪, "Mate-Selection Preferences: Five Decades of Changes and Causes 择偶标准:五十年变迁及其原因分析," *Sociological Studies* 社会学研究, no. 6 (2000); Yi Zhang 张翼, "The Continuation of Homogamy in China 中国阶层内婚制的延续," *Chinese Journal of Population Science* 中国人口科学, no. 4 (2003); and Yu Li 李煜, "Educational Assortative Mating: 50 Years of Changes 婚姻的教育匹配:50 年来的变迁," *Chinese Journal of Population Science* 中国人口科学, no. 3 (2008).

In a nutshell, through deploying a material–spiritual dichotomy, single professional women regulate their desires for a higher social-economic status in their future partners. By denouncing hegemonic Chinese masculinity and constructing an ideal of conjugal happiness that revolves around spiritual as well as material compatibility, single professional women position themselves in opposition to both the opportunistic materialistic girl and the traditional dependent woman, and assert their modern femininity as independent career women. As they seek to share economic responsibilities more equally with men, they expect men to embrace more egalitarian family roles.

"He should have a strong sense of family responsibility"

In *Finding Mr. Right*, in striking contrast to Old Zhong who assumes that merely providing a materially comfortable life means that he has fulfilled his responsibilities to the family, Frank should be seen as the latest incarnation of the "postmillennial new man" that is gaining visibility in media and public discourses,[41] especially in those catering to the expanding urban middle class. According to Geng Song and Derek Hird, the "new man" is constructed as "the egalitarian husband who believes in companionate marriage; the caring, engaged father; the emotionally expressive, sensitive man; and the educated, gentlemanly family man."[42] However, Song and Hird's ethnographic study of white-collar middle-class men in Beijing also reveals a discrepancy between the discursive ideal and everyday practices.[43] While many middle-class men embrace the rhetoric of egalitarian conjugal relationships, in everyday life they usually maintain much less progressive attitudes and behaviors. As a result, women still end up shouldering the lion's share of family chores and childcare responsibilities. Yifei Shen's study of multigenerational households in Shanghai underlines that younger women's "liberation" from tedious housework is achieved by transferring the responsibilities to older women, namely mothers and mothers-in-law, instead of through men's greater contribution.[44] Xuan Li's close reading of the "nursing dad" image constructed by the extremely popular television reality show *Dad, Where Are We Going?* (*baba qu naer* 爸爸去哪儿) (un)surprisingly reveals that the father's greater involvement in child rearing is celebrated in popular culture as "exceptional rather than quotidian."[45] Clearly, it is not really aimed at "alleviating their female counterparts from tedious everyday parental responsibilities."[46] It is therefore

41 Song and Hird, *Masculinities in Contemporary China*, 214.
42 Song and Hird, *Masculinities in Contemporary China*, 214.
43 Song and Hird, *Masculinities in Contemporary China*.
44 Yifei Shen, "'China in the Post-Patriarchal Era': Changes in the Power Relationships in Urban Households and an Analysis of the Course of Gender Inequality in Society," *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology* 43, no. 4 (2011).
45 Xuan Li, "The 'Nursing Dad'? Constructs of Fatherhood in Chinese Popular Media," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, no. 39 (2016): 8.
46 Li, "'Nursing Dad'," 9.

understandable that despite expanding discourses about new ideals of familial masculinities, the single women informants I engaged with find that an egalitarian relationship is yet to become the dominant paradigm in everyday life, and consequently emphasize that their future partners should have a strong sense of family responsibility.

Most of my informants' conceptions of family responsibilities center on raising children. When they describe their visions of an ideal marriage, children figure prominently and often appear in their narratives without my prompting. For the majority of my informants, wifehood and motherhood are regarded interchangeably.[47] When I mentioned that there are some informants who prefer not to have children, Yuan Lele, who labels herself as independent as well as non-traditional, first responded, as if reflexively, "Why don't they want children?" After a few seconds, as if sensing she had made a judgmental and probably inappropriate comment, Yuan Lele rephrased her words by saying that "it is really not easy for those women to have such an idea." The sequence of finding "Mr. Right," getting married, and then having a child, is often reiterated as the "natural" process, revealing the tenacity of what Harriet Evans calls the "natural mother" discourse, which is sustained by the "almost universal practice of marriage and motherhood in China, and the common assumption of a biologically grounded correspondence between marriage, sexual intercourse, and reproduction."[48] Most of my informants subscribe to a seemingly biologically pre-determined subject position of devoted wife and mother, believing that they, as women, innately have a strong sense of responsibility towards children and family. They have little doubt that once they are married, they will unreservedly dedicate themselves to the wellbeing of the family. They do not demonstrate a belief in a corresponding innate, strong commitment to family among men.

Moreover, in the traditional conceptualizations and practices of marriage, the division of labor between wives and husbands is unequal. The deep-rooted idea of "men control the outside, women control the inside" (*nan zhu wai nü zhu nei* 男主外女主内) remains strong despite the advances educated women have made in white-collar professions. Rather, this idea has "evolved" into an expectation that women will take care of the household as well as of their own careers, thereby assuming a double burden. Most of my informants clearly state that becoming a housewife

47 Currently, the Chinese state strictly regulates fertility, attaching it firmly to the institution of marriage and thus, depriving single women of the rights of reproduction. See Deborah S. Davis, "On the Limits of Personal Autonomy: PRC Law and the Institution of Marriage," in *Wives, Husbands, and Lovers: Marriage and Sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Urban China,* ed. Deborah S. Davis and Sara L. Friedman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014). While childless marriage, that is, DINK or "double income no kid" (*dingke* 丁克) has gained social visibility and is accepted as a matter of personal freedom by my informants, motherhood outside of marriage has yet to become an imaginable option and remains far from viable.

48 Harriet Evans, "Past, Perfect or Imperfect: Changing Images of the Ideal Wife," in *Chinese Femininities / Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, ed. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 348.

is an undesirable scenario for them. Analyzing her aunt's unhappy marriage, Chen Jie points to the predicament contemporary professional women find themselves in. On the one hand, "women need to take care of the child, clean the house, cook, and do all other housework, conforming to *traditional* ideas." On the other hand, "there is the *modern* notion that women should make money and be capable of everything" (emphasis mine). Although her aunt makes more money than her husband, she stills carries out more household chores than him. Chen Jie observes that her aunt acquiesces to such an unfair arrangement because she sticks to "traditional" values, believing women should obey their husbands. Similar examples of unhappy marriages proliferate in the narratives of other informants as well. For Chen Jie and others who similarly highlight their independence and rejection of traditional conceptualizations of wifehood and motherhood, such an unequal relationship is obviously unacceptable, and also considered avoidable. These women look for a responsible and compassionate man who is more progressive in gender relations and willing to share the double burden more equally with his wife.

Other informants concede that they are willing to perform the traditional "virtuous wife and good mother" (*xianqi liangmu* 贤妻良母) role on top of being a career woman. Many informants speak positively of this "virtuous wife and good mother" femininity because they believe it promises happiness and self-fulfillment within family life. It is worth pointing out that single women's proclaimed willingness to be the "virtuous wife and good mother" is also predicated on pessimism: They are pessimistic about transforming the social expectations of gender-based family roles and women's disadvantageous status in marriage. They accept that women will shoulder more family responsibilities but also insist that they do this out of love rather than out of obligation. It is important that their future husbands appreciate the sacrifices they will make to bring more happiness to the family. One potential sacrifice that is frequently mentioned is the risk of being deprived of social life and self-worth. Qian Linlin laments that, once women become mothers, their other identities outside of the family are less recognized, if not neglected, by society. She gives the example of a friend who is a famous amateur runner. Once this runner became a mother, all media reports referred to her as a mother, no matter how rarely she talked about her child. The media deemed her accomplishment in marathons unimportant in comparison to child-bearing and rearing.

Moreover, Qian Linlin is also saddened by how her married female friends tend to withdraw from old networks of friends and retreat into family. Even though Qian Linlin considers the loss of an active social life regretful, she has no confidence that she would not make the same sacrifice upon entering marriage because she also highly values family. Another sacrifice commonly anticipated is that of career progression. Many informants during my research observed that there is open and prevalent discrimination against women of reproductive age who apply for new jobs in Shanghai's white-collar job market. In the face of the negative impact that

reproduction might impose on their careers, women need to work especially hard to make themselves so outstanding that their employers find them irreplaceable, as Dai Mengcheng suggests. Alternatively, they have to accept an easy job that allows them to spend more time taking care of their children but offers limited prospects for future development because "the social structure dictates so," as Ge Yunfei proposes with resignation.

Finally, my informants are also concerned about the double standards revolving around infidelity in society, concluding that the status quo is that men face fewer social consequences than women do if they cheat on their spouses. When single professional women delve into the everyday life of marriage, they reveal a surprisingly bleak view of it, contrasting with their earlier narratives that described the free pursuit of greater personal happiness through marriage. They realize that their desires are constrained by social norms and reality; they feel that they must compromise and even sacrifice personal development in order to build a nuclear, child-oriented family.

At the same time, it must be emphasized that some informants' desires for a partner who champions gender equality, include not only the ideal of a more equal sharing of family responsibilities between husbands and wives, but also more flexibility in marital roles. Liz is the most vocal in calling for more radical conceptualizations of marriage. She has decided not to have children because she is "selfish" and unwilling to sacrifice her lifestyle for children. Family does not necessarily have to be child-centered, and wives do not necessarily have to become mothers, according to Liz. Her ideal model of marriage is practiced by a pair of her friends in Hong Kong. While the wife has a full-time job and provides for the family, the husband devotes himself to pursuing his hobbies, and the couple switches roles every few years. What she admires the most about this model is the fluidity and equality involved in (re)assigning family responsibilities. Additionally, in Liz's narratives, the "West" is frequently invoked. She proudly calls herself a xenophile, "blindly" worshipping foreign (western) things (*chongyang meiwai* 崇洋媚外). The "West" she admires and longs for is characterized by gender equality and more personal freedom. It is invoked as an inspiration to configure alternative gender relations and marriage scripts, and as the more advanced / progressive / modern Other as well. With this inspiration, Liz can address and criticize the restraints she experiences as a single woman in China. But unlike the Japanese professional women who imagine Western white men as their agents of professional, romantic, and sexual liberation from patriarchal constraints, as discussed in Karen Kelsky's study,[49] Liz has not come up with a strategy of searching for "Western" men to accommodate her desires for equality. Instead, immigrating to the West, either to Western Europe or North America, is envisioned as a more effective way to escape the constraints she experiences as a woman in China.

49 Karen Kelsky, *Women on the Verge: Japanese Women, Western Dreams* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

To summarize, most of my informants imagine a nuclear family, seeing children as a vital source of their future happiness. At the same time, they also resist the current dominant gender-based and unequal divisions of household labor, especially that of child rearing. Their ideal men should have (or acquire) a deep sense of family commitment, involvement, and responsibility, as the women themselves already have. Some concede that if men cannot be as family-oriented as they are, they should at least be understanding and feel grateful for women's sacrifices. Occasionally, children are not imagined as an essential part of marriage, and the boundaries between family masculinity and femininity are challenged and blurred.

Conclusion

A strong sense of discontent and resistance saturates the self-narratives of the single professional women I have talked to, and marriage is a fiercely contested site for them to construct their subjectivities. Lan Ting confesses, "Only in terms of marriage am I resisting the mainstream… As for other aspects of life, I have never thought too much about resisting [social norms]." Juxtaposing Lan Ting's introspection with Liz's contention that any deviation from the normative life course is negatively judged in China, I contend that by articulating their imaginations of marriage—viewing it as an option instead of an obligation of a woman's life course—and emphasizing their longing for more egalitarian conjugal relationships based on spiritual compatibility, single professional women question and challenge social norms, particularly gender norms. The binaries of the traditional and the modern, the provincial and the metropolitan, together with the concepts of personal happiness, diversity, and tolerance serve as significant discursive resources for them to refute constraining social expectations and assert their new femininities.

Yet, the discourse of marriage as a personal choice has several pitfalls. First, marriage and prolonged singlehood as life options carry different meanings for most of my informants. Most of them unequivocally desire marriage, and prolonged singlehood is implied to be acceptable, though not as optimal as marriage. Li Yifan's account, which was also quoted earlier, is telling:

> *If I don't get lucky like that, I can dedicate my life to something other than family life, or I can create other meanings of life*. I can become a different kind of person. Maybe later in my life I can think of or do things that married people cannot. Maybe I can read many books and visit many places.

This assumption, "if I don't get lucky like that," implies permanent singlehood as an insufficiency, as incomplete, as a deficient identity. But, instead of concluding that most of my informants unconsciously reinforce the centrality of marriage and family life to femininity, or questioning their sincerity

when they express their hopes for a diverse and tolerant society where women would not be judged for being married or single, I propose another interpretation. When my informants talk about marriage and family life, they never run out of topics—from mortgage to child rearing—or anecdotal stories of successful and unsuccessful marriages. But when they envision a prolonged or permanent single life, no vivid image or detailed descriptions emerge. Usually, the narratives halt abruptly after one or two sentences, like Li Yifan's. Occasionally some mention high-achieving single women they know in the workplace.

For this reason, I contend that single women are faced with a lack of discursive resources from either popular culture or real-life role models to imagine a life beyond marriage and family. Brian Heaphy eloquently explains the difficulty in conceptualizing and constructing life scripts around relationships like friendships, community, and partnerships other than marriage and family.[50] He argues that

> family is so 'naturalised' and taken for granted that its discursive and fictive nature very easily slips away from view. Its effectiveness as a form of relational governance is evidenced in how difficult it is for relational practices and displays to escape being viewed through the family frame: as family or not.[51]

Despite the enormous challenges associated with breaking with such a frame, Li Yifan and others like her may gradually develop alternative life scripts that do not revolve around heterosexual coupledom, reproduction, and domestic happiness, and more confidently disassociate singlehood from lacking. Their extended single lives may become an inspiration to future generations of women.

Secondly, single professional women regard both singlehood and marriage as life options, but most of them tend to see singlehood and marriage as an either-or situation: either they find "Mr. Right" and get married, or they do not find "Mr. Right" and stay single. Why cannot romantic relationships and coupledom take other forms like partnership and co-habitation? Why is marriage inevitably considered the telos of romantic relationships? Why is it not an option to find "Mr. Right" and then not marry him? Why is reproduction predicated on or only legitimatized by marriage, and why is single parenthood not a normal family constellation? These questions are seldom posed by my informants. They confront the social and parental pressure to get married by a certain age by elaborating on their visions of an ideal marriage. Their renegotiations and resistance again normalize marriage, as other ways of having romantic relationships and families are excluded.

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50 Brian Heaphy, "Critical Relational Displays," in *Displaying Families: A New Concept for the Sociology of Family Life*, ed. Esther Dermott and Julie Seymour (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

51 Heaphy, "Critical Relational Displays," 34.

Thirdly, although I have interviewed twenty-five single women, their imaginings of an ideal marriage are disturbingly similar. They reify marriage as a means to pursue personal happiness, which is defined by heterosexual romantic love, and this romantic love is based on spiritual and implicitly material compatibility. To pursue marriage for any other end, especially economic upward mobility, is the antithesis of the modern independent femininity they (aspire to) embody. But when the happiness they long for is concretized in their descriptions of a domestic life, these are shown to make up a conservative image of a middle-class nuclear family, marked by property ownership, dedication to children's education, and consumption.

In the face of structural constraints, that is, the modern double burden of both family and career, single professional women envision a countermeasure at the most personal level, that is, finding a "Mr. Right" who is open-minded, egalitarian, and progressive enough to accommodate their modern independent femininity. They predominantly regard children as essential to marriage, and consider child rearing to constitute the bulk of family responsibilities. The issues and the negative impact child rearing could have on professional women are predominately understood as purely private matters to be solved within the family, ideally with a spouse who has a strong sense of family responsibility. The ideas of autonomy and agency are key to single professional women's self-identity and self-worth, yet no discourse on rights is born out of their constructions of ideal femininities and masculinities in intimate relationships.[52] The potential of associating autonomy with rights, like demanding that the state as well as the corporate world tackle gender-based discrimination and improve social welfare, or exploring ways to expand women's participation in public policy-making, and making women's voices heard even in an authoritarian society remains an unexplored option.

Without fundamentally questioning the "natural, responsible mother" conceptualization, how can single professional women's imaginings of marriage and ideal masculinities transform the ideas of men, whom they perceive to be slower to change? Could they even find their "Mr. Right"? If not, are they going to compromise on their ideals, and how? Furthermore, without questioning the privatization of child rearing and calling for better social welfare, how can they cope with the evolving discrimination against women in the labor market?[53] Without collective actions and feminist movements, can society *naturally* progress, as they seem to believe it will? I cannot convince myself to be optimistic.

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52 Cf. Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk On Mumbai Streets* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011).

53 Since the new two-child policy, took effect on January 1, 2016, replacing the one-child policy, provincial governments have rapidly extended paid maternal leave without promising other assistance, for example, childcare facilities or protection against sex-based discrimination in the labor market. There is growing concern about women's career prospects, as employers assume female employees will take a long maternity leave, and thus, prefer male employees.

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