BEING SINGLE IN THE CITY

Cultural Geographies of Gendered Urban Space in Asia

Christiane Brosius, Jeroen de Kloet,
Laila Abu-Er-Rub, and Melissa Butcher
Editors

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ORCID®

Christiane Brosius https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1942-5381

Jeroen de Kloet https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2314-5424

Melissa Butcher https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5010-9133

Cover illustration: Mural by Ranjit Dahiya. BOLLYWOOD FEARLESS FIFTIES, the actress
Nadira from the Hindi film Shree 420 (by Raj Kapoor, 1954). Street Art Festival Delhi,
Shahpur Jat, Delhi. 2014, photo by Christiane Brosius, 2014.

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Acknowledgements

Christiane Brosius ⬤, Jeroen de Kloet ⬤,
and Laila Abu-Er-Rub

Introduction: On Being Single in Urban Asia

There is something tainted about the single female body. Popular descriptions of women as "leftover," "off-the-shelf ladies," "vamps," and "spinsters" (or "old maids")[1] abound, while cultural icons such as the Indian movie star Helen Jairag Richardson, the late Hong Kong pop diva Anita Mui 梅艳芳, or Bridget Jones *(Bridget Jones' Diary)*, Carrie Bradshaw *(Sex and the City)*, and Jodie Comer *(Killing Eve)* portray the single woman as remarkably self-reflexive, unmoored and unprotected, standing outside what Bella DePaulo and Wendy Morris describe as the "cult of the couple."[2] This cult, in conjunction with social and national concerns that are mapped out on the female body, results in a proliferation of ambiguous discourses surrounding single women from across the social strata (men are hardly considered in this field): from the subaltern migrant woman to the high-end professional, from the widowed wife to the divorced homemaker. There is an ambivalent fascination with the single woman as a new type of empowered, pleasure-seeking, competent lifestyle-surfer, and dedicated career-maker. And yet, the single woman is, at times, also stigmatized and isolated, discriminated against (through "singlism"[3]), or stereotyped as an odd, if not provocative person who deviates from or challenges social norms.

New social types do not emerge out of the blue, of course, and this book will trace how place matters in the context of new social formations. The contributions in the volume focus on the urban fabric of Asia, India, mainland China, and Hong Kong, in particular, for it is here that social, economic, cultural, and political transformations manifest and new possibilities of living are tested and vividly contested. As explored by the authors in this book, urban transformation is enabling the formation of new cultural

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1 Ranjay Vardhan, *Single Women: A Study of Spinsters* (Delhi: Indian Publishers' Distributors, 2008).
2 Bella M. DePaulo and Wendy L. Morris, "Singles in Society and in Science." *Psychological Inquiry* 16, no. 2–3 (2005).
3 The term "singlism" was coined by Bella M. DePaulo and Wendy L. Morris to underline the discrimination against singles (male and female) as self-centered, anti-social, and socially unproductive. See Bella DePaulo and Wendy Morris, "The Unrecognized Stereotyping and Discrimination Against Singles," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 15, no. 5 (2006).

geographies, spaces, and biographies for single women. Through explorations of urban imaginaries, experiences, and everyday lives, these essays highlight different notions of the public and private at work, references to "world-class cityness," and concerns with safety, smartness, diversity, informality, order, and well–being, all of which impact how single women are perceived and how they access the city.

In our research initiative "Creating the 'New' Asian Woman: Entanglements of Urban Space, Cultural Encounters, and Gendered Identities in Shanghai and Delhi," the findings of which inspired this book, we addressed the emerging visibility of the urban single woman by zooming in on the booming cities of Shanghai and Delhi. For this volume, we also extend our focus to Kolkata, Mumbai, Beijing, and Hong Kong.[4] Our approach takes the importance of studying transcultural entanglements in their embedded, local contexts seriously. We see in this transcultural, localized approach, a possibility to capture the dynamics and fluidity of relationalities without the compartmentalization that often results from national and culturalist reductionism.

Surprisingly, there is still a scarcity of research about single women in the "Global South" (with some notable exceptions),[5] even though, as we would propose, economic liberalization in China and India has facilitated a broader spectrum of singlehood, adding to that of the pre-liberalization eras. China, as Xiangming Chen underlines in a special issue on Chinese and Indian megacities, "has a clear policy of urban acceleration,"[6] while India has long pursued urbanization as part of its nation-building project,

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4   We acknowledge, however, that much interesting research on singles in contemporary Asia has taken place—for instance, in Japan (e.g., Kumiko Endo, "Singlehood in 'Precarious Japan': Examining New Gender Tropes and Inter-Gender Communication in a Culture of Uncertainty," *Japan Forum* 31, no. 2 [2019]; Richard Ronald, Oana Druta, and Maren Godzik, "Japan's Urban Singles: Negotiating Alternatives to Family Households and Standard Housing Pathways," *Urban Geography* 39, no. 7 [2018]), Cambodia (Heidi Hoefinger, "'PROFESSIONAL GIRLFRIENDS'. An Ethnography of Sexuality, Solidarity and Subculture in Cambodia," *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 2 [2011]), Indonesia (Karel K. Himawan, Matthew Bambling, and Sisira Edirippulige, "The Asian Single Profiles: Discovering Many Faces of Never Married Adults in Asia," *Journal of Family Issues* 39, no. 14 [2018]), and Malaysia (Rozita Ibrahim and Zaharah Hassan, "Understanding Singlehood from the Experiences of Never-Married Malay Muslim Women in Malaysia: Some Preliminary Findings," *European Journal of Social Sciences* 8, no. 3 [2009]). However, due to the project's goals, this research remained outside our remit.
5   See Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, *Why Loiter: Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011); Jyothsna L. Belliappa, *Gender, Class and Reflexive Modernity in India* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Sarah Lamb, *Being Single in India: Stories of Gender, Exclusion, and Possibility* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022); E. Kay Trimberger, "Single Women in India: Rarer, Riskier, and Happier Than in the U.S. (2008)," *Unmarried Equality*, Acessed August 15, 2022, https://www.unmarried.org/single-women-in-india/; Chowkhani, Ketaki and Craig Wynne (eds.). *Singular Selves: An Introduction to Singles Studies* (London: Routledge, 2011).
6   Xiangming Chen, "Introduction: Why Chinese and Indian Megacities?" special issue, *City & Community* 8, no. 4 (December 2009):364.

which now includes a smart city agenda.[7] In China, the number of single women aged thirty and above has almost tripled within a decade (from 0.92 % in 2000 to 2.47 % in 2010 according to the national census).[8] In 2018, Wang Feng, a Brookings Institution demographer, estimated that there were seven million women who had never married, aged between twenty-five and thirty-four, residing primarily in China's urban centers of Beijing, Shenzhen, and Shanghai. These estimates suggest that the proportion of urban single women in China is approaching 30 %, compared to less than 5 % in 1982.[9] In 2011, there were approximately seventy-four million single women in India (ca. thirty million were widowed, while ca. fourteen million never married). This indicates a growth of 40 % within ten years, with the number of urban single women rising from 17.1 million in 2001 to 27 million in 2011.[10] A government survey found that the proportion of unmarried women increased from 13.5 % in 2011 to 19.9 % in 2019.[11] The survey also indicated an increasing age of first marriage for women: in 2005–2006, 72.4 % of women were married by the age of twenty, while that number dropped to 52.8 % in the years 2019–2021.[12] Other Census data show that the percentage of females remaining single in different age groups has been rising steadily (though not evenly across India).[13]

Cities such as Shanghai and Delhi form the backdrop to changing family patterns and the unraveling of "traditional" social contracts as a result of migration, new work opportunities, delayed marriage, divorce, open homosexuality, and a growing leisure and consumer society. As a result, single women are becoming increasingly visible in public, be it through (social) media representations, or everyday practices, and mobilities. Indicative of this is a 2017 headline in China proclaiming, "The single society has

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7 See Melissa Butcher and Srilata Sircar, "Localizing India's Smart Cities: A Multi-Scalar Analysis of Cities Yet-to-Come," *Urban Geographies* (forthcoming); Jennifer Robinson, "Cities in a World of Cities: The Comparative Gesture," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35, no. 1 (January 2011).

8 Wanning Sun, "'My Parents Say Hurry up and Find a Girl': China's Millions of Lonely 'Leftover Men.'" *The Guardian*, September, 28, 2017. Accessed October 2, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/sep/28/my-parents-say-hurry-up-and-find-a-girl-chinas-millions-of-lonely-leftover-men?CMP=share_btn_url; see also Wei-Jun Jean Yeung and Adam Ka-Lok Cheung, "Living Alone: One-Person Households in Asia," *Demographic Research*, no. 32 (June 2015).

9 Roseann Lake, *Leftover in China: The Women Shaping the World's Next Superpower* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018).

10 Prachi Salve, "71 Million Single Women, 39 % Rise Over A Decade," *The Wire*, November 14, 2015. Accessed September 5, 2020. https://thewire.in/gender/71-million-single-women-39-rise-over-a-decade.

11 *Livemint*, "More Indians Prefer to Stay Unmarried, Finds Survey," *Livemint*, July 14, 2022. Accessed November 1, 2022. https://www.livemint.com/news/more-indians-prefer-to-stay-unmarried-finds-survey-11657809573372.html.

12 Livemint, "More Indians Prefer to Stay Unmarried."

13 While in 1961, 6 percent of women in India in the age group of 20–24 remained single, the numbers were 23 percent in 2001 and 37.3 percent in 2011. In the group of women aged 25–29, the number of singles rose from 6 percent in 1961 to 12.2 percent in 2011. The study does not differentiate between urban and rural settings. See K. Srinivasan and K. S. James, "The Golden Cage: Stability of the Institution of Marriage in India," *Economic & Political Weekly* 50, no. 13 (2015).

come!"[14] There is also a market logic behind this focus on single women: The Chinese online retail store Alibaba used Singles' Day (*guanggun jie* 光棍节), observed on November 11 ("1111" looks like four bare sticks, that is, single men), for a "crazy sale" similar to Black Friday in the US, promoting the acceptability of being single and a desire for single people to reward themselves.[15] Books, magazines, television and films, advertising, and online social media reflect as well as influence the single woman as an "independent entity," serving as a soundboard and repository to "make" and discuss this "new" Asian woman and the potential lifestyles that come along with her.[16] This increasing presence has made the phenomenon more visible, and "graspable," or "bespeakable," as Lisa Lau argues.[17] In the Indian context, this material includes essayistic reflections on single-dom among urban middle-class women,[18] film and media studies scholarship on single women,[19] as well as (still scarce) sociological studies with

14 Chow Yiu Fai, *Caring in Times of Precarity: A Study of Single Women Doing Creative Work in Shanghai* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
15 Jeremy Berke, "How Alibaba Turned an Obscure, Made-up Chinese Holiday into a $14.3 Billion Shopping Extravaganza That's Bigger than Black Friday," *Business Insider*, November 14, 2015. https://www.businessinsider.com/how-alibaba-made-143-billion-on-singles-day-2015-11.
16 See Kinneret Lahad, "Singlehood, Waiting, and the Sociology of Time," *Sociological Forum* 27, no. 1 (2012); 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); Kinneret Lahad, "The Single Woman's Choice as a Zero-Sum Game." *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (2014); Lisa Lau, "Literary Representations of the 'New Indian Woman': The Single, Working, Urban, Middle Class Indian Woman Seeking Personal Autonomy," *Journal of South Asian Development* 5, no. 2 (2010); Fritzi-Marie Titzmann, "The Imagery of Indian Matchmaking: Representations of Community, Class and Gender in a Transnational Online Matrimonial Market," in *India and its Visual Cultures: Community, Class and Gender in a Symbolic Landscape*, ed. Uwe Skoda and Birgit Lettmann (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2018); Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis and Šarūnas Paunksnis, "Masculine Anxiety and 'New Indian Woman' in the Films of Anurag Kashyap," *South Asian Popular Culture* 18, no. 2 (2020).
17 Lau, "Literary Representations." Here, we take note of, but have not focused on, the very interesting genre of "chick-lit" (or "bobo-bourgeois-bohemian–pop-culture"), that is, the growing number of predominantly romantic and often light-hearted novels on singlehood that proliferated in the US in the 1990s and arrived in the Indian and Chinese societies after 2000 (for example, the works of Wei Hui and Mian Mian). Another interesting field of research that we have not been able to include is that of documentary films being made on topics such as single motherhood etc. (for example, Savita Oberoi's film *Single in the City* [Delhi: Public Service Broadcasting Trust, 2008], with which this book shares the title).
18 Sunny Singh, *Single in the City: The Independent Woman's Handbook* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000); Bhaichand Patel, *Chasing the Good Life: On Being Single* (Delhi: Penguin, 2006).
19 Anupama Arora, "Nobody Puts Rani in a Corner: Making of the New Indian Woman in Queen (2014)," *South Asian Popular Culture* 17, no. 2 (2019); Sampada Karandikar, Hansika Kapoor, Saloni Diwakar, and Feryl Badiani, "She Did It Her Way: An Analysis of Female Rebellion in Contemporary Bollywood Movies," *South Asian Popular Culture* 19, no. 2 (2021); Surbhi Malik, "The Provincial Flâneuse: Reimagining Provincial Space and Narratives of Womanhood in Bollywood," *South Asian Popular Culture* 19, no. 1 (2021).

a focus on urban socio-economic agents more broadly.[20] In China, studies on single women centered around urban-dwelling and middle-class categories largely report a similar level of marginalization to that found in Western contexts, though this is ascribed to resilient discourses articulating Confucian values, state propaganda, and parental pressure.[21]

This increased visibility of unmarried women is informed by repertoires of cultural change, globalized media landscapes, and aspirations to ideals of urban cosmopolitanism. Urban spaces offer opportunities for autonomy, and yet the resulting subjectivities of singleness are precarious, marked by asymmetrical power relations.[22] Gendered imaginaries of emancipation are contested through a variety of cultural practices that constrain women's choices and impact their multiple lifeworlds. In this introduction, we posit that single women in urban Asia must strike a balance between neoliberal opportunities, and aspirations for autonomy, and cultural norms that dictate women's respectability. Highlighting the tight rope that single women walk between autonomy and respectability, we draw attention not only to the resultant precarity that these women face, but also to the new urban world they create and shape.

In order to explore these tensions and shifts in practice and discourse, this introduction first outlines our understanding of the notion of singleness, clarifying our focus on middle–class, urban women, and introducing the paradox of agency and respectability that single women must navigate. In the second section, we connect our notion of singleness to being single in the city. In this section, we explain our choice of a transcultural approach and its significance for understanding how single women shape and are shaped by the city. We demonstrate the role of the city in creating the paradox that single women negotiate between autonomy and respectability. In the third section, we explore how single women navigate this paradox, how they learn to "be urban" in both formal and informal ways, and thus create new urban socialities. We conclude by presenting an overview of the chapters in the volume.

Studying singleness

In this volume, we argue that singleness is a complicated process rather than a fixed category. We reject binaries such as choice–no choice, agency–oppression,[23] or modern–traditional, instead emphasizing the multiplicity of single women's experiences in urban Asia and the complexities of this emerging subjectivity.

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20 Vardhan, *Single Women*.
21 Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zed Books, 2014).
22 Paula Banerjee, *Debates over Women's Autonomy* (Kolkata: Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2005).
23 Lahad, "Single Woman's Choice."

We use a broad definition of singleness to include women who are not in a long-term relationship, maybe due to being divorced,[24] or widowed,[25] separated from family for long periods of time (as is the case of migrant workers), or due to performing singleness to facilitate a queer lifestyle. We understand singleness to involve both voluntary and involuntary choices and conditions,[26] and to signal both temporary and long-term lifestyles, as some single women may decide not to get married, while others may see singleness as a temporary condition until marriage, and others still may seek to delay their marriage.[27] We acknowledge that "being single" is a nuanced identity that different women use to signal varying developments in their subjectivities. They may even be in and out of relationships, if "being single" helps to frame singleness as part of the formation of new biographies for women—a subjectivity emplaced in aspiration towards, or experiences of an independent life, a career, or an educational path in a new city or abroad, for instance. Singleness can be the sign of changing family patterns, of open homosexuality, of having a partner but not sharing the same household, or of being a single mother.

For this volume, we have predominantly assembled authors who focus on professional urban women belonging to the middle classes[28] or seeking

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24 Kirti Singh, *Separated and Divorced Women in India: Economic Rights and Entitlements* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2013).

25 Sarah Lamb, *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes: Aging, Gender, and Body in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

26 P. J. Stein categorized states of being single based on an element of choice (voluntary and involuntary) and permanence (temporary and stable). Voluntary temporary singles refer to single people who are open to marriage but place a lower priority on searching for mates than on other activities, such as education, career, politics, and self-development. Voluntary stable singles are single people who are satisfied with their choice and do not intend to marry or remarry. Involuntary temporary singles are those who would like to be married and are actively seeking mates. Involuntary stable singles are primarily older singles who wanted to marry or remarry but did not find a mate and have now accepted their single status. P. J. Stein, "Understanding Single Adulthood," in *Single Life: Unmarried Adults in Social Context*, ed. P. J. Stein (New York: St Martin's Press, 1981), 11, quoted in Augustina Situmorang, "Staying Single in a Married World: Never-Married Women in Yogyakarta and Medan," *Asian Population Studies* 3, no. 3 (2007): 288–289.

27 Singh, *Separated and Divorced*; see also Shilpa Phadke's work in this volume.

28 The authors acknowledge that "middle class" is not a homogenous category. This term is used in the context of this book as a means of highlighting the role of class in the formation of discourses of respectability. Despite their seeming growth in numbers and influence, empirical descriptions of India's middle class are vague, and sound ethnographic work is sparse. See Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray, ed., *Elite and Everyman: The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011); Christiane Brosius, *India's Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014); John Harriss, "Middle-Class Activism and the Politics of the Informal Working Class: A Perspective on Class Relations and Civil Society in Indian Cities," *Critical Asian Studies* 38, no. 4 (2006); Anne Waldrop, "Grandmother, Mother and Daughter: Changing Agency of Indian, Middle-Class Women, 1908–2008," *Modern Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (2012). For scholarship on gender and class aspirations in urban India, including how middle-class women navigate tradition and modernity, see Jaita Talukdar and Annulla Linders, "Gender, Class Aspirations, and Emerging

the affective dimension of aspirational "middle-classness" (desiring the feeling of belonging to the middle class). There are historical single figures in both the Indian and Chinese contexts, such as the courtesan *(tawaif)*,[29] the figure of the seductive vamp, the stigmatized widow, or the unmarried "spinster" whose presence still impact present-day conceptions of single women.[30] However, in this study, we focus on a type of singlehood that has emerged in the context of urban transformation and economic liberalization in two of the most rapidly growing economies in what can arguably be called the Global South: India and China. The spatial aspect of the city that we have chosen in this book and that we discuss in the next section is relevant because the multiple lifeworlds that enable new biographies for women are often possible particularly in metropolitan contexts—and yet these lifeworlds differ in every city.

We emphasize the gendered aspect of "being single," for it is the single woman, more so than the single man, who is perceived as—or perceives herself as—different from the "normal mainstream," that is, from those participating in heteronormative marriage and the foundation of a nuclear family, or integration into a joint family. From a feminist perspective, the idea of "singlehood" is not solely connected to whether a woman is in or out of an intimate relationship with a partner.[31] Singleness also relates to queer theory, insofar as singlehood allows for a questioning of conventional heteronormative relations.[32] We recognize the significance of alternative social networks that single women form and maintain in contrast to, or in addition to, heteronormative family structures. Tandace McDill, Sharon K. Hall, and Susan C. Turell note that single women form their own "family" structures with extended social networks.[33] According to Augustina Situmorang, women in Indonesia are not necessarily alone in the same way that women in Europe or the US are.[34] Extended family relationships can be weaker, but there can be closer ties to immediate family, for example.

While singleness holds the potential to reject heteronormativity and foster women's agency and even empowerment, we also recognize the

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Fields of Body Work in Urban India," *Qualitative Sociology* 36, no. 1 (2013); Liz Mount, "Saris and Contemporary Indian Womanhood: How Middle-Class Women Navigate the Tradition / Modernity Split," *Contemporary South Asia* 25, no. 2 (2017).

29 All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are our own.

30 Vardhan, *Single Women*.

31 Nivedita Menon. *Seeing like a Feminist* (Delhi: Penguin, 2012).

32 Rekha Pappu, "Reconsidering Romance and Intimacy: The Case of the Single Unmarried Woman," in *Intimate Others: Marriage and Sexualities in India*, ed. Samita Sen, Ranjita Biswas, and Nandita Dhawan (Kolkata: Stree, 2011); Sohini Chatterjee, "The 'Good Indian Queer Woman' and the Family: Politics of Normativity and Travails of (Queer) Representation," *South Asian Popular Culture* 19, no. 2 (2021).

33 Tandace McDill, Sharon K. Hall, and Susan C. Turell, "Aging and Creating Families: Never-Married Heterosexual Women Over Forty," *Journal of Women & Aging* 18, no. 3 (2006).

34 Situmorang, "Staying Single."

intense vulnerability and precarity of single women, who face challenges ranging from symbolic to structural stigmatization, from exclusion to physical and psychological violence—despite legal reforms, or critical media reports, and civil debates.[35] As several of the sparse studies on singleness suggest,[36] this is a stigmatized subjectivity that is seen as disreputable when the person is young and as something to be pitied when she is older. Kinneret Lahad further argues that "it is still quite socially acceptable to treat singlehood as a legitimate target for suspicion, mockery, or even public humiliation."[37]

Thus, while the notion of agency is embedded in much of the existing literature on single women, related to the ability to choose a state of singleness as an integral part of the modern, reflexive self,[38] we follow Lahad's critique that this focus on choice can adopt a celebratory tone that is not always reflected in reality.[39] The notion of choice may seem overly optimistic for the single women in Situmorang's study, for example, who still see marriage as the norm but have no choice but to remain single.[40] The idea of choice is complex, too, for the women Jesook Song studied in South Korea, who choose marriage in order to escape overcrowded natal homes, and gain greater independence and privacy.[41] McDill, Hall, and Turell find that, despite expressing satisfaction with their lives, more than half the women in their study would marry for companionship, intimacy, or financial security.[42] Structural, social, and biographical variables can impact the decision to be single; these variables include, as McDill, Hall, and Turell note, "the influence of family values, the importance of work, the valuing of independence, and the importance of social support."[43] Choices, then,

35 See Maribel Casas-Cortés, "A Genealogy of Precarity: A Toolbox for Rearticulating Fragmented Social Realities in and out of the Workplace," *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture and Society* 26, no. 2 (2014); Singh, *Separated and Divorced*.

36 Kanchan Gandhi, Harsh Mander, Agrima Bhasin, Radhika Jha, and Sejal Dand, "Living Single: Being A Single Woman in India," in *India Exclusion Report II* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2016); Penn Tsz Ting Ip and Esther Peeren, "Exploiting the Distance between Conflicting Norms: Female Rural-to-Urban Migrant Workers in Shanghai Negotiating Stigma around Singlehood and Marriage," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5–6 (2019); Situmorang, "Staying Single"; DePaulo and Morris, "Unrecognized Stereotyping."

37 Kinneret Lahad, *A Table for One: A Critical Reading of Singlehood, Gender and Time* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 50.

38 Penny Gurstein and Silvia Vilches, "The Just City for Whom? Re-Conceiving Active Citizenship for Lone Mothers in Canada," *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 17, no. 4 (2010); McDill, Hall, and Turell, "Aging and Creating Families."

39 Lahad, "Singlehood"; Lahad, "Single Woman's Choice."

40 Situmorang, "Staying Single."

41 Jesook Song, "'A Room of One's Own': The Meaning of Spatial Autonomy for Unmarried Women in Neoliberal South Korea," *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 17, no. 2 (2010).

42 McDill, Hall, and Turell, "Aging and Creating Families."

43 McDill, Hall, and Turell, "Aging and Creating Families," 39.

are still circumscribed by socio-economic status,[44] and, we would add, age, ethnicity, gender, and the regulation of cultural norms.

Even when women do choose to be single, they face repercussions that force them to navigate a paradox between autonomy and respectability. If a woman is single by choice, possibly permanently, then her body quickly becomes pathologized and deviant. We argue that it is this depiction of singleness as disrespectful and anti-normative that generates a moral governance which requires single women to navigate censure and codes of respectability in order to access and move through public space. For women who choose to be single, their agency and power are often undermined: their satisfaction with their lives is viewed as fake; they are merely "pretending" to be happy and hiding their "true" desire to be centered within a family with a heteronormative partner. There is thus an expectation for singleness to be temporary. Society often robs single women of agency by claiming that those women who choose to be single permanently merely have bad luck and are pretending to choose singleness. Through this negation of the single woman's agency, as Lahad argues, "terms such as 'chronic singlehood' or 'the single woman's short shelf-life' come to designate *a loss of agency* and a vastly diminished capacity to act and determine one's life trajectory."[45]

The expectation for singleness to be a temporary phase before marriage points to the importance of addressing temporality when studying single women. From the dominant standpoint, singleness is most often portrayed as a temporary or transitory phase, reflecting "a partial and incomplete subjectivity"[46] that is only made complete with marriage.[47] Studies on singlehood stress this ideological gravitation towards heteronormative relationships grounded in family and reproduction which reinforces gender stereotypes.[48] However, singlehood can be prolonged,

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44 Gurstein and Vilches, "Just City."
45 Lahad, *Table for One*, 79; emphasis original.
46 Lahad, "Single Woman's Choice," 240.
47 Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (Michigan: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Meenakshi Thapan, "Embodiment and Identity in Contemporary Society: Femina and the 'New' Indian Woman," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 38, no. 3 (2004).
48 See Yue Qian and Zhenchao Qian, "Work, Family, and Gendered Happiness among Married People in Urban China," *Social Indicators Research* 121, no. 1 (2015); Waldrop, "Grandmother, Mother and Daughter." Attention is also paid to how the social type of the single woman relates to gender equality, patriarchy, and nation-building. See Himawan, Bambling, and Edirippulige, "The Asian Single Profiles"; Yingchun Ji, Xiaogang Wu, Shengwei Sun, and Guangye He, "Unequal Care, Unequal Work: Toward a More Comprehensive Understanding of Gender Inequality in Post-Reform Urban China," *Sex Roles* 77, no. 11–12 (2017). Other studies would connect this to changing work patterns, including sex work (Eileen Yuk-ha Tsang, "Neither 'Bad' nor 'Dirty': High-End Sex Work and Intimate Relationships in Urban China," *The China Quarterly*, no. 230 [2017]), and labor migration (Susanne Y. P. Choi, "Gendered Pragmatism and Subaltern Masculinity in China: Peasant Men's Responses to Their Wives' Labor Migration," *American Behavioral Scientist* 60, no. 5–6 [2016]), to structural poverty and violence (Padmini Iyer, "'Due to All This Fear, We're Getting Less Freedom': Young People's

permanent, or clustered across the lifeline and distributed (for instance, if a woman lives independently in a work migration context but also has a husband or partner elsewhere). Temporalities are relevant, too, in relation to intergenerational differences in attitudes towards singleness and marriage and age-related changes in the lives of single women, including changing social and familial pressures, and the changing potentials of women's lifestyle choices as they age.

In relation to the temporalities of singleness, we take seriously the time before marriage and the careful choreographies women shape "before" getting married, seeing this phase as more than "just" liminal and to be coped with. In this regard, choosing to be single is not mutually exclusive with the desire to be married. Marriage is now reconceptualized as an "option" instead of a "must." In this way, an apparent erosion of traditional family patterns does not necessarily lead to a decline in the importance of family relationships, but instead restructures them. We observe that, even though much attention has been paid to the "new Asian woman," most studies produced in this context still attend to married women—with marriage as the key narrative and force that shapes lives—as if this is the "natural" way for a woman to live. Though we do not reject the power of the marriage norm, the questions for us are: What kinds of lives are possible, shaped, and contested by single women in relation to, and sometimes also independently of, marriage? What alternative possibilities are ignored, silenced, or rendered invisible when the "unattached," pathologized single woman is viewed simply as the individual in the waiting room en route to married life (or out of it)?

Focusing on the Indian context, we note that many fears and moral panics are linked to the single woman. These include the fears that filial piety might surrender to individualism, that gerontocracy may be discredited, and most of all, that caste boundary transgression will ultimately lead

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Understandings of Gender and Sexual Violence in New Delhi, India," *Gender and Education* 31, no. 2 [2019]; Yichao Wu and Qi Di, "A Gender-Based Analysis of Multidimensional Poverty in China," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 23, no. 1 [2017]) or to leisure practices and media use (Xiaoxu Chen and Chadwick Wang, "Migrant Gaming Girls in Beijing: Urban Solitude, Play, and Attempts to Integrate," *Ethnography* 22, no. 1 [2019]; Soma Sengupta, Urna Sarkar Dutta, and Anjan Sen, "Re-Inventing Household Shopping Patterns and Buying Roles: Exploring the 'New Women' in Urban India," *Akademos* [2018]). Limited research has been conducted on single mothers in Asia. Research on changing gender models, pre-marital sexuality, feminism, and homosexuality is slowly growing (see Kabita Chakraborty, "Unmarried Muslim Youth and Sex Education in the *Bustees* of Kolkata," *South Asian History and Culture* 1, no. 2 [2010]; Fincher, *Leftover Women*; Shuaishuai Wang, "Living with Censorship: The Political Economy and Cultural Politics of Chinese Gay Dating Apps" [PhD diss., University of Amsterdam, 2019]) as well as, studies on placemaking and mobilities (Mallika Gupta, "I (Don't) Walk a Lonely Road: A Study of Women Seeking Leisure in a Public Park" [PhD diss., CEPT University, 2020]; Hilda Rømer Christensen, "Gendering Mobilities and (In)Equalities in Post-Socialist China," in *Integrating Gender into Transport Planning: From One to Many Tracks*, ed. Christina Lindkvist Scholten and Tanja Joelsson [Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019]).

to the weakening of high-caste monopolies, patriarchy, and caste-based and male-based laws of inheritance. This field of tensions underlines the idea that singlehood is not only about love and marriage but, at least in the Indian context, about the rules and claimed rights of access and restriction beyond the relationship of two people. One good example of how single-ness can be used to claim rights surfaces in Sarah Lamb's work,[49] which describes a social movement formed by marginalized, low-class women who used the term *Ekal Nari* ("single or solo woman") to help women gain access to land, property, and respectability in a way which is different from the respectability defined under patriarchal rule.[50]

Lamb further explores numerous iterations of the single woman in India, including her remarkable work on elderly women and the widow as forms of spatially and socially outlawed single women, and more recent and diverse conceptions of the single woman "as a means to illuminate emerging possibilities and constraints of selfhood for women in contem-porary India."[51] She stresses the importance of an intersectional approach towards studying single women in relation to class, caste, and kinship.[52] She further mentions that there are different historical phases to be con-sidered when speaking of single women and points to the study of Indian feminist and lesbian activists who, in the 1990s, used the subjectivity of the single woman to organize lesbianism and to challenge patriarchal and state-based discrimination against unmarried women.[53]

In the Chinese context, single women (*danshen nüxing* 单身女性) share many of the concerns and struggles mentioned earlier. However, in China, it is not so much caste, or rather class, but Confucianism (*rujia sixiang* 儒家思想), in particular its family-oriented values, in conjunction with the party-state apparatus and ideology, that poses further challenges for single women. Family ideology is not only articulated through patriarchy—the rows of men during a Party congress testify to this—but also, if not more so, through the demand to produce offspring. This puts single women, more so than men, under enormous pressure. Many women dread the family gathering occasioned by the Chinese New Year reunion, when their marital future is inquired about and their single lives interrogated. The pos-sibility to rent a boyfriend to pass the challenge testifies to the burden of familial pressure.[54] Similarly, for queer people (*kuer* 酷儿), special websites

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49 Lamb, "Being Single in India: Gendered Identities, Class Mobilities, and Person-hoods in Flux," *Ethos* 46, no. 1 (2018).
50 See also Ketaki Chowkhani, "Mobilising Single Women in India: The Case of Majlis and Ekal Nari Shakti Sanghatan," *Single Women in India, Organizing and Supporting One Another(Blog): Guest Post by Ketaki Chowkhani*, November 19, 2019. Accessed June 22, 2024. https://www.academia.edu/41533245/Mobilising_Single_Women_in_India_The_Case_of_Majlis_and_Ekal_Nari_Shakti_Sanghatan; Menon, *Seeing like a Feminist*.
51 Lamb, "Being Single in India: Gendered Identities," 49–51.
52 Lamb, "Being Single in India: Gendered Identities," 49–50.
53 Lamb, "Being Single in India: Gendered Identities," 51.
54 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*.

and applications help to connect them for a marriage of convenience, ideally aiming at producing offspring, so as to pacify both families.[55] The one-child policy (*yihai zhengce* 一孩政策) that was in place between 1979 and 2015 further intensified this pressure, as many single women do not have siblings and bear the reproductive burden squarely on their single pair of shoulders.

The one-child policy is just one example indicating the omnipresence of the State and the Party in everyday life. Especially since Xi Jinping 习近平 came to power in 2012, the space for public activism or other possibilities to express discontent has decreased. The slapstick photo-blocs by supporters of the Feminist Five (*nüquan wujiemei* 女权五姐妹) in Chinese cities are hardly conceivable now, not to mention the high-profile protests against sexual harassment in public transport before the Feminist Five. Allegedly, the leaders of the protests were arrested in 2015.[56] Similarly, the performance of the "Vagina Monologues"—that took place in quasi-public venues under the slightly different title of "V Monologues" in 2009—is unthinkable under the current regime. What is more striking in the Chinese context is this paradox: officially sanctioned feminism is replacing activist and feminist practices, as can be identified in other geocultural contexts. The Women's Federation of China introduced the term "leftover women" (*shengnü* 剩女) in 2007 as a discursive tool to drive young single Chinese women towards marriage and reproduction. More recently, in 2017, it sought to banish "feminism" (*nüquan zhuyi* 女权主义) from China with the argument that feminism is promoted by the "hostile West".

While activist practices may find their way discreetly into society, popular culture is probably the realm where gender politics in general, and single womanhood in particular, may play out and present contestations in the Chinese context. The 2016 hit series *Ode to Joy* (*HuanLe Song* 欢乐颂), featuring five single women in Shanghai, unsettled representations of single womanhood.[57] In 2022, a Chinese retirement game sparked off heated debates on gender stereotypes and sexualized womanhood between male and female gamers.[58] The increasing official attention to and interference with popular culture attests to its growing impact on gender politics. A recent instance is that the state has cracked down on boy bands and related celebrity fan cultures for being unruly and chaotic; specifically, "effeminate men"（*niangpao* 娘炮）are deemed part of an "abnormal

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55 Shuzhen Huang and Daniel C. Brouwer, "Negotiating Performances of 'Real' Marriage in Chinese Queer *Xinghun*," *Women's Studies in Communication* 41, no. 2 (2018).

56 Margaret Hillenbrand, *Negative Exposures: Knowing What Not to Know in Contemporary China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

57 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*.

58 See for instance this media report: Youxizixun Bot, "Zhizao Xingbie Duili? Guochanyouxi 'Tuixiu Moniqi' Zao Chaping Paohong" 制造性别对立?国产游戏《退休模拟器》遭差评炮轰 [Creating Gender Hostility? China-Made Game "Retirement Simulator" Receives Strong Critique], *Xiaoheihe,* 2022. Accessed June 22, 2024. https://api.xiaoheihe.cn/maxnews/app/share/detail/2564917.

aesthetics" (*jixing shenmei* 畸形审美). Consequently, earrings worn by male celebrities were pixelized in entertainment shows.[59] In short, what we have observed is this distinction between China and India in terms of the possibilities for an overt expression of a feminist politics. In China, feminism has gradually moved from the public towards the private space, and from the political towards the cultural realm. As we discuss further subsequently, women connect with one another through cultural means, like *kunqu* (昆曲) opera. Also, dating shows are platforms to negotiate gender norms, just as idol shows are domains to experiment with gender fluidity.

As Lahad writes, "singlehood is a contingent notion."[60] This prompts her to argue for the inclusion of relationship status and singleness in feminist discussions of intersectionality. In addition, this book argues that context, or place, also needs to be taken into account when discussing the contingency and subjectivity of singleness. In the following section, we flesh out the importance of studying urban space in relation to single women, noting that urban imaginaries create the conditions both for single women's agency and for their restrictions, and that single women's navigation of these conditions then, in turn, impacts urban life.

The urban single

This book explores everyday, urban lifeworlds, asking how the single woman shapes and reflects transcultural placemaking in the city.[61] The positionality of the single woman helps us to think about how we learn to be urban and how we navigate the city from a position of difference, often in affective ways, both in terms of pleasure and fear. A transcultural approach, taking account of the particular experiences and situated knowledge of single women, is especially important with respect to the often heightened presence of cultural diversity and social transformation in urban environments related to gendered (im)mobilities—to migration and dwelling, displacement and patterns of belonging.[62] Cities offer what Ulf Hannerz has referred to as diversity of access and access to diversity;[63]

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59 Geng Song, "'Little Fresh Meat': The Politics of Sissiness and Sissyphobia in Contemporary China," *Men and Masculinities* 25, no. 1 (2022).
60 Lahad, *Table for One*, 3.
61 See also Melissa Butcher and Kate Maclean, "Gendering the City: The Lived Experience of Transforming Cities, Urban Cultures and Spaces of Belonging," *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 25, no. 5 (2018); Vinnarasan Aruldoss and Sevasti-Melissa Nolas, "Tracing Indian Girls' Embodied Orientations towards Public Life," *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 26, no. 11 (November 2019).
62 Butcher and Maclean, "Gendering the City"; Saraswati Raju ed., *Gendered Geographies: Space and Place in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).
63 Ulf Hannerz, *Exploring the City: Inquiries Toward an Urban Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

they can be intense "contact zones"[64] of transcultural entanglement and relationality that impact, and are impacted by, the different forms of being single in the city. We ask to what extent the single woman is involved in the shaping of an urban habitus and habitat. We map new urban topographies of encounters with strangers and potential friends, new work opportunities, and leisure that pave the way for the aspirations and anxieties, strategies, and tactics of being single in the city, and of having or claiming a right to the city.[65]

Arguing that aspirations and practices shape places and allow for new communities and groups to form, architect Jeffrey Hou asks, "how can we re-envision the process of placemaking in the context of shifting cultural terrains?"[66] We proceed from this question—with a focus on single women's role in these "shifting cultural terrains," their aspirations and anxieties, freedoms and limitations—to examine how single women shape new urban socialities and explore new ways of living a good life.

In taking a transcultural approach, we are reluctant to use a framework of "container cultures" (e.g., South Asia, East Asia, India, China, "Indian," "Chinese") because they are often based on reified notions of identities nested in methodological nationalist frameworks that sideline dynamic entanglements and relationalities. Similarly, we take a critical stance towards the concept of "hybridity" as something that is an arbitrary mixture of these container cultures (local and global, West and East, modern and traditional), thus still insisting on something of "pure origin" and "more authenticity."[67] Therefore, in the context of rapidly transforming, increasingly diverse cities such as Shanghai and Delhi, a transcultural lens has proven to be productive, addressing dynamic processes of cultural encounter and exchange with respect to gender, class, ethnicity, and urban space.[68] As Hou has argued, a focus on transcultural placemaking "recognizes the instability of culture(s) and the emergent nature of cultural formation,"[69] encouraging a focus on the strategic and scalar uses of cultural practice.[70]

As we trace these new cultural formations in the city, we argue that a complex mixing of cultural change—including emergent neoliberal ideals—with

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64 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation,* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2007).

65 David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27, no. 4 (2003); Reena Patel, *Working the Night Shift. Women in India's Call Center Industry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

66 Jeffrey Hou, "Your Place and / or My Place?" in *Transcultural Cities: Border-Crossing and Placemaking*, ed. Jeffrey Hou (London: Routledge, 2013), 13.

67 Laila Abu-Er-Rub, Christiane Brosius, Sebastian Meurer, Diamantis Panagiotopoulos, and Susan Richter, ed., *Engaging Transculturality: Concepts, Key Terms, Case Studies* (London: Routledge, 2019).

68 Nina Glick Schiller and Ayşe Cağlar, ed., *Locating Migration: Rescaling Cities and Migrants* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

69 Hou, "Your Place," 7.

70 Schiller and Cağlar, *Locating Migration*.

extant traditional norms impacts single women's role and place in the city.[71] In China, even the Maoist years did not constitute a rupture in the discourse of respectability as centered on the bodies of women; rather women were positioned "as the guardians of reproductive health, family stability, and marital harmony."[72] Single women must balance aspirations to autonomy, that is, independence from former social relations such as family, with the pressures of respectability, that is, collective social norms that attempt to govern the presence of women in the city. Single women seek to navigate the demands of these aspects of subjectivity within contexts of precarity, both material and cultural. For example, autonomy can come with insecurity in terms of labor as well as in terms of love, just as the demand to be respectable makes single women walk a precarious moral tightrope between desire and threat. This book traces the ways in which single women navigate this autonomy–respectability balance and the resultant precarity, and how that navigation creates new ways of inhabiting the city and new urban lifeworlds.

We contend that urban spaces—in particular, Asian cities—are fundamental to the balance that single women try to strike between autonomy and respectability because they foster neoliberal and middle-class aspirations. This shapes the desire for agency under the specter of traditional, familial (and gendered) expectations, which create the burden of respectability. These interconnected themes of neoliberalism, autonomy, respectability, and precarity combine in nuanced ways, according to local particularities, to shape the rhizomatic social networks and complex place-making that single women create in the city.

In the city, we argue, there is a conflation of ideals of greater autonomy and neoliberal models of freedom of choice. Neoliberalism situates agency and choice as not only an ideal to strive for but also a moral imperative to achieve. Indeed, the burden of happiness seems particularly heavy for single women, who face pressure to uphold neoliberal, urban ideals of independence and selectivity in lifestyle and choice of partner. As Lahad discusses in her study of social media for singles,[73] the choice to be single legitimizes women who resist traditions and family norms but simultaneously generates constraints by placing the burden of the "wrong choice" on their shoulders, following the idea that self-management is the foundation of a "good life" in a neoliberal context.[74] For Lahad, this constitutes the myth of liberty within the freedom of choice that underlines the concept of singlehood, particularly for urban singles.

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71 For literature on how these cultural norms, emanating from and reinforced within the home and family, continue to shape the everyday experiences of women in urban space, see Aparna Parikh, "Politics of Presence: Women's Safety and Respectability at Night in Mumbai, India," *Gender, Place & Culture. A Journal of Feminist Geography* 25, no. 5 (2018).
72 Harriet Evans, "Sexed Bodies, Sexualized Identities, and the Limits of Gender," *China Information* 22, no. 2 (2008).
73 Lahad, "Single Woman's Choice."
74 Lahad, "Selective Single Woman," 24.

Yet, even as middle-class ideals influence single women's aspirations for autonomy, it is within the cultural discourse and practices of the middle classes that the boundaries of respectability are maintained. Thus, this notion of respectability is not only gendered but also intersects with class.[75] While it is recognized that the middle class needs to be examined as a heterogeneous formation with different degrees of agency, researchers have argued that this cultural cohort has taken on the task of ordering cities, resulting in class and gendered segregation.[76] The discourse of respectability continues a trajectory of circumscribing the use of public space by women, a practice designed not only to protect the "worth" of a woman, but also in some circumstances to delineate the gendered image of the nation itself. Urban space generates contradictions and tensions as the presence of the independent, single woman in public becomes part of legitimizing a city's claim to modernity and cosmopolitanism, even as women's rights to the city are controlled to construct a patriarchal image of the nation. The continuous force exerted on these extant cultural frames of reference is concentrated in the urban as a space that enhances intergenerational disjunction and that values the body of the woman as a liberalized commodity and as a projection of "culture" and "tradition."[77]

This book demonstrates, and moves forward from, the idea that the impact of neoliberalization in China and India must be differentiated from neoliberalism in the West, as evident from the seemingly contradictory impact of neoliberalism on autonomy and tradition outlined earlier.[78] While neoliberalism has impacted both India and China profoundly, unlike the West this has not always resulted in a waning role of the nation state. In the case of China, the nation state remains deeply implicated in processes of economic reform, resulting in its re-emergence rather than retreat. In India, the enmeshment of political leadership with business interests similarly binds economic reform to the state, though perhaps not as formally as in China's case. As Peter van der Veer asserts, "[i]t is unclear to me what is exactly 'neoliberal' in India and China, except for the fact that at the governmental level one finds a global managerial language that is primarily

75 Smitha Radhakrishnan, *Appropriately Indian: Gender and Culture in a New Transnational Class* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); see also Rachel Heiman, Carla Freeman, and Mark Liechty, ed., *The Global Middle Classes: Theorizing Through Ethnography* (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2012).

76 For their work on urban transformation, see Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong, ed., *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011); Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria, "Guardians of the Bourgeois City: Citizenship, Public Space, and Middle-Class Activism in Mumbai," *City & Community* 8, no. 4 (2009).

77 Melissa Butcher, *Transnational Television, Cultural Identity and Change: When STAR Came to India* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2003).

78 For more scholarship on the impact of neoliberalism on urban women in India, see Ipsita Chatterjee, "Feminism, the False Consciousness of Neoliberal Capitalism? Informalization, Fundamentalism, and Women in an Indian City," *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 19, no. 6 (2012); Srijani Ghosh, "The New 'New Liberal Indian Woman': The Glocalization of Chick Lit," *South Asian Popular Culture* 20, no. 2 (2022).

produced in the United States."[79] The importance of caste in India and of friendship and family in both India and China are, in his view, social factors that are hard to fit within the rubric of neoliberalism. Yet, as this book demonstrates, in both China and India, neoliberal ideas converge with traditional moral pressures in middle-class imaginaries. We explore the impact of neoliberalism outside of a Western context to understand how liberalization has created new ideals, even as it extends traditional ones. It is important, then, not to be overly celebratory of kinship networks such as family as standing in opposition to individualistic models of neo-liberalism. As we have shown earlier, these collectivities are also complicit in reproducing cultural tropes, such as respectability, that limit agency.

Scholarship on India and China highlights the contradictions and combinations of neoliberal promises with existing cultural norms. In her work on gender distinction and knowledge workers in the IT (information technology) sector in Bangalore, South India, Smitha Radhakrishnan argues that the supposed meritocracy of this sector, reflected by a discourse of equal and fair access in the professional workplace, is underlined by tensions of inequality centered on moral discourses of caste, religion, and gender, which female IT workers must somehow navigate.[80] The contradictions between the desire for agency and the reality of cultural constraint can be seen in Waldrop's account of women in urban India achieving increasing levels of agency over the twentieth century and in the twenty-first century, which takes into account social structures (such as education) as well as economic shifts (for example, employment in a globalized IT industry).[81] Yet such movement can be brought to a shuddering halt by the boundaries of respectability that still appear to lie at the heart of cultural legitimacy for women.[82]

In China, the trope of respectability revolves around safeguarding the domain of love and family life, "decent" public behavior, and a rejection of materialism—efforts that often clash with the aspirations of single, urban professionals. Moral discourses have included calls for "proper dressing,"[83] but in recent years they have also expressed an increasing anxiety around the category of *shengnü*, or "leftover women." This term refers to urban women, generally highly educated with professional jobs, who are older than twenty-seven and still unmarried. The state has initiated a campaign—using, among other strategies, cartoons, television shows, and newspaper columns—to pressure these women into giving up their

79 Peter van der Veer, *The Value of Comparison* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 151.
80 Radhakrishnan, *Appropriately Indian*; see also Lau, "Literary Representations," 272.
81 Waldrop, "Grandmother, Mother and Daughter."
82 Shilpa Phadke, "Unfriendly Bodies, Hostile Cities: Reflections on Loitering and Gendered Public Space," *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVIII, no. 39 (2013); Sanjay Srivastava, "Masculinity and Its Role in Gender-Based Violence in Public Spaces," in *The Fear That Stalks: Gender-Based Violence in Public Spaces*, ed. Sara Pilot and Lora Prabhu (New Delhi: Zubaan Books, 2012).
83 Fincher, *Leftover Women*.

career ambitions and marrying instead. Doing so often means forfeiting their savings, as the property they are expected to buy with their spouse will be in his name.[84] Harriet Zurndorfer writes in dismay that "young Chinese women are in a no-win situation. If they develop themselves and earn enough to live independently, they are condemned for their ambitions. In contrast, if they seek a successful man, they are labeled 'gray,'"[85] again breaching cultural boundaries of respectability. To illustrate this point, Zurndorfer refers to a scandal generated by the popular TV dating show *If You Are the One* (*Feicheng wurao* 非诚勿扰) in which a young female contestant publicly proclaimed that she would rather cry in a BMW car than laugh on the back of a bike. As Leta Hong Fincher reminds us, such sound bites are frequently quoted in news reports and academic studies, are clearly scripted, and are meant to provoke discussions with a view to circulating and promoting the program.[86] However, this articulation of a desire for wealth resulted in the intervention of government censors who deemed such content inappropriate and imposed a change in the show's format.[87]

Urban infrastructures in the cities studied in this book reflect the seemingly contradictory ideologies of autonomy and restriction for single women. On the one hand, cities offer new opportunities for single women. For example, cities provide a platform in the global restructuring of labor that has established new workspaces, which employ women across classes in areas such as leisure, hospitality, manufacturing, call centers, or business-process outsourcing. Such work not only contributes to household income but also to what these women want to "become." New infrastructures for work and leisure have both facilitated and responded to the growing presence of the single, independent woman as a social category. An increasing number of travel agents in India, for example, specialize in holiday packages for single women.[88] Similarly, single clubs have emerged in cities like Mumbai and Beijing to cater to professionals.[89] Besides new institutionalized forms of socialization, a host of new places are available for women aspiring to an independent, and purportedly world-class, lifestyle, be it gated communities, shopping malls, restaurants and cafes,[90] fitness centers, business districts, or theme parks. On the other hand, restrictions that stem from respectability tropes challenge women's place

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84 Fincher, *Leftover Women*.
85 Harriet Zurndorfer, "Men, Women, Money, and Morality: The Development of China's Sexual Economy," *Feminist Economics* 22, no. 2 (2016): 16.
86 Fincher, *Leftover Women*.
87 Fincher, *Leftover Women*.
88 Sowmya Aji, "Single Indian Women of Today Can Do Without the Chivalry," *India Today*, April 9, 2012. Accessed October 1, 2020. https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/society-and-the-arts/story/20120409-single-indian-woman-of-today-can-do-without-the-chivalry-757912-2012-03-31.
89 Sanghamitra Chakraborty, Labonita Ghosh, Sugata Srinivasaraju, and Saumya Roy, "Two's a Crowd," *Outlook India*, February 2, 2022. Accessed April 4, 2024. https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/twos-a-crowd/226348.
90 Teresa K. Platz, "Café Culture: Socio-Historical Transformations of Space, Personhood and Middle Class in Pune, India." (PhD diss., Durham University, 2012).

in the city, especially through residential infrastructure for singles, which is poorly developed in many Asian cities.[91] Access to an independent apartment may be restricted by landlords or housing associations that enforce strict rules based on marital, as well as financial, social, ethnic, or religious criteria. Such restrictions suggest a politics of enclosure that governs how women access urban space. The body of the woman, especially the emancipated, single woman, has the capacity to generate subjective confusion, ambiguity, and threat in urban spaces when normative boundaries are breached.[92] To avoid this ambiguity, the body is enclosed through instrumental directive, for example, through curfews that forbid the presence of women in particular spaces at particular times. This is the case, for instance, with student hostels in cities like Delhi, where strict rules restrict female students' mobility after nightfall in order to "protect" them. Enclosure also occurs through affective responses, such as shame, that are collectively generated when respectability is breached.[93]

In Shanghai, the main restriction on living a good life lies in access to work and residential spaces, and manifests in battles around property market prices and high rent, making the choice to live alone and lead an independent life less feasible.[94] And, as already mentioned, state-encouraged discourses of "leftover women" further disparage urban single women seeking autonomous lifestyles. Yet, despite—or perhaps even because of—such restrictions, housing space in different cities across Asia is being reappropriated to suit the growing focus on independent lifestyles for young people, including singles. Also, in China, a discourse on home interior and living the good life is proliferating, resulting in a trend for candle-lit home dinners with friends, and the emergence of numerous magazines, websites, and shops devoted to home interior improvement, even if these homes must still be shared with friends rather than family due to a lack of affordability. Such endeavors reflect the new forms of sociality, belonging, and living in and with the city that are fostered by the amalgamation of opportunity and restriction that singleness in the city offers women.

In the case of Delhi, landlords appear reluctant to rent or lease apartments to single women and often rent out flats at substantially higher rates. Similarly, it remains difficult for single women to obtain loans to purchase homes. Younger women can access guest accommodation, which is usually a shared hostel-type arrangement or a room within a family home. Yet this type of accommodation can be highly restrictive, policing female students who must seek permission to leave the hostel at night, and thus

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91 See also Song, 'A Room of One's Own.'
92 Melissa Butcher, "Defying Delhi's Enclosures: Strategies for Managing a Difficult City," *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 25, no. 5 (2018).
93 See Sunalini Kumar, "Does Democracy Stop at the Doorstep of the Women's Hostel?" *Kafila: Collective Explorations since 2006*, March 24, 2012. Accessed September 6, 2014. https://kafila.online/tag/hostel-rules/.
94 Fincher, *Leftover Women*; for Singapore, see Karlien Strijbosch, "Single and the City: State Influences on Intimate Relationships of Young, Single, Well-Educated Women in Singapore," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77, no. 5 (2015).

turning the pleasures of mobility in the city into an ongoing source of con-testation and moral illegitimacy. Such mobility restrictions are connected to the discourse surrounding safety and violence (from so-called Eve teas-ing to rape, from the aesthetics of fear to the right to the city)[95] and related discussions of men's domination of public spaces. These discourses are much stronger in Delhi than in other cities discussed in this volume. In India, it has been argued that a moral panic underpins this approach to managing the tensions between sexual violence and the desire for greater autonomy among young women, related not only to issues of personal safety but also to national pride and male honor.[96]

As in Shanghai, the search for affordable housing for the single has created new spaces and forms of sociality in Delhi as well.[97] One such example is the reappropriation of the *barsātī* (rooftop apartment on bun-galow-style houses). This architectural type of rooftop room on a bunga-low that was designed in post-Partition India in the late 1950s and 1960s was once the preserve of servants, a "transit" room for male bachelors working away from their parental home, or an area to dry washing or enjoy the cool breeze during the monsoon season. Beginning in the 1970s, and especially since the liberalization of the 1990s, the *barsātī* gradually became both gentrified and diversified. It was affordable, compact, and independent from the main house. Artists, journalists, musicians, and, increasingly, single women would search for these spaces to retain auton-omy and yet be emplaced in "respectable" middle-class neighborhoods.[98] Other new interstitial spaces have emerged to accommodate alternative creative lifestyles,[99] and thus, also for the single woman, in the increas-ingly popular habitats of urban villages in India. The urban village falls

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95 See Christiane Brosius, "Regulating Access and Mobility of Single Women in a 'World Class'-City: Gender and Inequality in Delhi, India," in *Inequalities in Creative Cities: Issues, Approaches, Comparisons*, ed. Ulrike Gerhard, Michael Hoelscher, and David Wilson (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016); Ipshita Chanda, *Selfing the City: Single Women Migrants and Their Lives in Kolkata* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2017); Lipi Begum and Ravinder Barn, "Crossing Boundaries: Bras, Lingerie and Rape Myths in Postcolonial Urban Middle-Class India," *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 26, no. 10 (2019).
96 See Shari Daya, "Embodying Modernity: Reading Narratives of Indian Women's Sexual Autonomy and Violation," *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 16, no. 1 (2009).
97 See Anshul Dhamija and Shrabonti Bagchi, "Single Women in India Are Investing in Real Estate for Stability," *The Economic Times*, November 12, 2011. https://eco nomictimes.indiatimes.com/realty–trends/single–women–in–india–are–invest ing–in–real–estate–for–stability/articleshow/10702391.cms?from=mdr.
98 Butcher, "Defying Delhi's Enclosures"; Sangeeta Ojha, "Real estate trends: Will the sector witness a rise in women homebuyers in 2024?" *MINT*, December 5, 2023. Accessed April 4, 2024. https://www.livemint.com/industry/real-estate-trends-will-the-sector-witness-a-rise-in-women-homebuyers-in-2024-experts-decode-11701744685630.html.
99 See Christiane Brosius and Tina Schilbach, "'Mind the Gap': Thinking about in-between Spaces in Delhi and Shanghai," Introduction to the special issue, ed. Christiane Brosius and Tina Schilbach, *City, Culture and Society* 7, no. 4 (2016).

under different urban policies *(lal dhora)* that kept some of the real-estate pressure out for a while and allowed for more experimental forms of residential, commercial, and cultural life to take place (for example, start-ups, flat-sharing, alternative art galleries, and festivals). Such an environment also invites experiments with new gender roles or professions.[100]

Building on these shifting cultural frameworks of autonomy and respectability that are impacting women's lives in cities in India and China, this book explores the resulting precarity that single women face. Currently, literature often assumes a causal relationship between neoliberalization and precarization and connects the idea of precarity exclusively to work and labor conditions.[101] We extend the causality of precarization beyond economic factors to include social and cultural conditions like singleness. The precariat's association with post-Fordist flexible production and post-welfare states[102] is called into question when pushed beyond its Euro-American-Australian comfort zone and towards China and India.[103] We draw inspiration from Yiu Fai Chow's book *Caring in Times of Precarity*: *A Study of Single Women Doing Creative Work in Shanghai*.[104] Chow asks whether "for these Chinese women, precarity is a human condition known to them, suitable for them, and available to them? Perhaps 'precarity' is a male-centric and Western-centric notion?"[105] This inspires him to "argue for the limits of the politics of precarity, and to propose [instead] an ethics of care."[106] This line of questioning urges Chow, as it urges us, to unpack everyday life struggles and pleasures of single women through grounded case studies that defy victimization yet remain wary of an uncritical celebration of agency.

We do not only aspire to push the concept of precarity beyond its geographical Western comfort zone, but also beyond its primary articulation alongside labor insecurity, thus opening a space to see its intersections with wider changes in social life. The essays in this volume engage with precarity beyond the economic aspects of the availability of an apartment or the security of a job, asking where and how to love in times of precarity, as well as how precarious love itself is in twenty-first century urban living. As this book will show, precarity and singlehood can be understood as a place-specific balancing act between compliance and change, between autonomy and respectability, and between hope and despair.

100 Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).
101 Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016); Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).
102 Nancy Ettlinger, "Precarity Unbound," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 32, no. 3 (2007).
103 Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Soveriegnty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
104 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*.
105 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*, 4.
106 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*, 4.

Navigating the city

To understand the single woman's place in the city without either victimizing or valorizing her, we must both appreciate the challenges and paradoxes she faces, as outlined in the previous section, and look beyond them to recognize the rich worlds that single women create and participate in, in the city. In doing so, we acknowledge the profound importance of women's rights to the city, particularly their right to be single when living in and moving through the city.[107] To appreciate these new urban lifeworlds, this volume also asks: How do single women navigate the forces and tensions of their urban lives? In the previous section, we have already hinted, through a discussion of housing infrastructure, that the autonomy–respectability balance leads single women to create new social networks. In this section, we mention some more examples of how urban women in India and China navigate the city through both formal and informal processes of contestation and skills development. We emphasize the socialities and affective geographies this navigation creates.

Young women in urban spaces are contesting social and economic constraints, both collectively and informally in their daily lives. In Delhi, young women (primarily middle- and upper-middle-class women) are engaging in new forms of protest, including adopting and adapting forms used in cities in the Global North, such as the "Take Back the Night," "Slut Walk," or "My Dress is Not a Yes" campaigns.[108] As mentioned before, China has hosted anti-sexual harassment campaigns such as "I Can be Slutty Yet You Cannot Harrass Me," and performances of the "V Monologues." But, perhaps more importantly, it is in everyday practices that such contestation is taking place. Designated places of consumption and leisure, for example, the mall or the nightclub, may limit access but also provide a space for "legitimate" displays of sexuality and desirability for young middle-class women.

The city then becomes a site of ambiguity, of opportunity and constraint that provides platforms for the performance of new subjectivities as well as the pain of not fitting in. The possibilities of the city require particular competences or skills, acquired formally through training in order to gain entry into the new economic arenas on offer (hospitality, retail, business-process outsourcing, creative industries), and informally by learning how to "be urban," including strategies of navigating the city and new cultural and social codes. There are clearly class implications inherent in these processes, as it is primarily women from lower classes and rural areas that are perceived as lacking the skills needed to be urban.[109]

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107 Kalpana Viswanath and Renagh O'Leary, *Building Safe and Inclusive Cities for Women: a Practical Guide* (New Delhi: Jagori, 2011).
108 See Lucie Bernroider in this volume; Ratna Kapur, "Pink Chaddis and SlutWalk Couture: The Postcolonial Politics of Feminism Lite," *Feminist Legal Studies*, no. 20 (2012).
109 See Jeroen de Kloet and Penn Tsz Ting Ip in this volume.

However, women are also often willing to undertake formal training to gain access to economic advantages as well as an imagined desirable and cosmopolitan lifestyle.

Formal processes of learning are generally provided by employers and training centers in both Delhi and Shanghai, reproducing similar skill sets, appearances, and models of customer service that replicate a global model of emotional labor adapted for localized conditions. For example, in post-reform China, Confucian doctrines are used by Shanghai businesses as a tool to train rural migrant workers to be "good" employees. In Penn Tsz Ting Ip's study of the hospitality industry,[110] women are trained to learn respect, to work without complaint, and to submit to a subaltern role. Employers and management staff play the role of a father to train their employees to become obedient, affirming the neo-Confucian conception of public order in the workplace.[111] In Delhi, female taxi drivers from low-income or marginalized backgrounds are trained by a local NGO not only to drive (an important skill that opens up the possibility of accessing the city in ways impossible to women who must rely on public transport), but also to provide customer service. They are offered communication classes, an overview of women's rights, first aid, English, self-defense, basic computer training, and classes on how to deal with harassment or provocation. The aim of this coaching is to develop transferable life skills, including confidence building, to enable engagement with the city and its inhabitants.[112]

Chenying Pi's ethnography of the Shanghai-based Love Club, included in this book, offers another example of formal skills training for single women in the city. This example describes the forerunner of the emerging love training businesses in China's big cities. The Love Club offers a three-month training course, including consultation, therapies, lectures, and social activities, "to help single men and women who have difficulties in love improve their love intelligence, clear their misunderstandings of love, and strengthen their socializing capabilities," as noted in its brochure. Most of the clients are single professional women who experience social and familial pressures as a result of their single status. What the Love Club and its trainers provide is not just knowledge of relationships and sex, skills of interpersonal communication, and methods of self-reflection, but a vocabulary to talk about themselves, to elaborate on their discomforts, confusions, and fears, as well as their desires, determinations, and hopes.

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110 Penn Tsz Ting Ip, "Desiring Singlehood? Rural Migrant Women and Affective Labour in the Shanghai Beauty Parlour Industry," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4 (2017).
111 Cara Wallis, "Technology and / as Governmentality: The Production of Young Rural Women as Low-Tech Laboring Subjects in China," *Communication and Critical / Cultural Studies* 10, no. 4 (2013).
112 Chiellini cited in Melissa Butcher and Laila Abu-Er-Rub comp., "Single Project Report November 2016," *SINGLE*, 2016. Accessed June 22, 2024. https://www.hera-single.de/project-report/.

Single women also learn how to navigate the city through informal means, that is, through friends and peers, and through face-to-face communication and social media. This kind of learning includes instrumental guidance: how to use public transport, where to shop, how to dress, how to carry themselves in public spaces, how to stay safe, where to socialize. A variety of technological means have been developed that aid women in navigating the city, including mobile apps (applications) for emergency calls, interactive maps, and cab services whose routes are traceable online. Social media is also used to share information both with an eye to security and to locating sites of leisure activities. In Ip's 2017 study of the beauty industry,[113] for example, workers learned from each other how to build trust with their clients through their own body modifications, and also how to manipulate their clients in order to bring in more business to the salon.

Single women's informal contestations for urban space, as well as the networks of mutual learning they develop in trying to "be urban," form affective geographies that highlight the sensory experiences of the city and the universality of embodied responses to encounters with others, the built environment, and shifting cultural frameworks. An example of the formation of affective community comes from Chow's case study of the followers of *kunqu* (昆曲), a regional form of opera in China.[114] As fans, as apprentices, as teachers, as organizers, or as promoters, the women create and share an intimate and exclusive space beyond work and love. Building on the category of community constructed and maintained by what Richard Sennett calls informal sociality,[115] this network of women evolves and revolves around the creative practice of *kunqu*. Originating in the late Yuan dynasty, *kunqu* is generally considered one of the oldest forms of operatic arts in China. Yet, as Chow discovers, single women in Shanghai's contemporary creative industries, often known to each other, are also active in the *kunqu* scene as part of creating a "good life" beyond work. *Kunqu* enables this community of informal sociality to come into being, engendering shared passion and friendship through creative practice.

Such communities, constructed and maintained by women, centering on particular shared activities, whether biking or opera, provide an antidote to the discomfort of being single in a family-centric context. Affective solidarities and sensory experiences of the city, in addition to the different forms of training noted above, are also examples of how thematic and relational points of comparison between cities can be generated. Both formal and informal strategies highlight why the dichotomy of victim versus empowered needs to be challenged, as it traps women into roles that do not capture the complex negotiations involved in constructing a life of one's own in these cities.

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113 Ip, "Shanghai Beauty Parlour Industry."
114 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*.
115 Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

About this book

Exploring the social worlds of urban single women in East and South Asia, the previous sections have argued for a conceptual framework that intertwines autonomy, respectability, and precarity, suggesting that women who have acquired a certain degree of independence may be framed as less respectable and simultaneously be forced to navigate both precarious jobs and social lives. In understanding the wider changes in which singleness is perceived and enacted, we never lose sight of the power relations embedded in these concepts that also act as forms of governance. Keeping this framework in mind, the following chapters address specific contexts from diverse disciplinary backgrounds to understand not only the lives of single women but also the wider contexts of urban change in which they live.

In the first chapter, Kinneret Lahad draws on her years of research on singlehood to show how "the continuous stigmatization of single women in terms of lack and excess produces an ongoing global moral panic about the growing population of single people." She expands on our conceptualization of society's tendency to pathologize single women, showing how women who remain unmarried past a certain age are deemed no longer respectable, and are thus pushed into social precarity. Lahad also argues that singlehood can help us develop new conceptual and political possibilities for thinking about women's life trajectories and alternative gendered orders.

Lucie Bernroider engages with what she calls "the productive tensions between singleness and interdependency" in the second chapter. She draws on her fieldwork in Delhi in the early teens of the new millennium, to give voice to single women and show how this label or stigma tends to ignore and erase their multiple interdependencies and sociabilities. She also reflects on the practice of anthropological fieldwork, remembering the intimacies and vulnerabilities she became entangled with as a researcher and which guided her into a humbler state of intimate proximity.

The third chapter sees Penn Tsz Ting Ip and Jeroen de Kloet focus on domestic helpers living in Shanghai who may be married or engaged, but lead, as the authors argue, a single life in the city. Through honesty, professionalism, and care, these domestic helpers negotiate trust with their employers and try to mitigate the risk of sexual harassment. This imbues their precarious position with a sense of agency.

Shilpa Phadke probes the pervasive and invasive nature of "marriage talk" in India in chapter four. In many cases in India, women are confronted with the narrative of desirability of the institution of marriage by family members or friends. Phadke subsequently engages with "the ways in which women push back against the tactics of shaming and the infantilizing of unmarried women," for example, through education and employment, or by being "a difficult daughter."

In chapter five, Chenying Pi studies how professional (middle-class) single women in Shanghai imagine the ideal man and negotiate femininity.

Transforming gender configurations, they continue to look for "Mr. Right," though more as a possible option now, than as a necessity. In this process, they work to reinvent, regulate, and discipline their femininities. Pi's work demonstrates that singleness does not preclude desires for partnership and marriage, thus expanding our notion of singleness within a localized context.

Chapter six brings us to the artwork of the Chinese contemporary feminist artist Guo Qingling. In this interview with Yiu Fai Chow, we come to understand why she often portrays single women in her paintings and why they are often painted from behind. Reflecting on *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, Guo Qingling explains how feminism has settled into a background force in her artwork, but also how she tries to avoid being labeled a female artist or a feminist artist. Instead, she aspires to draw our gaze to the work of migrant women and to the weaknesses we all face as human beings, namely our vulnerability and precarity.

Paromita Chakravarti, in chapter seven, explores the topography of eighteen women's hostels of varying fabric and origins across Kolkata to better understand how single women navigate the city and shape their careers and lifeworlds. This chapter shows how younger hostelites use the space and their time there to try out various life options, whereas the hostels' older inhabitants establish alternative forms of communities. In both cases, the hostels provide a safe space away from violence to balance the desire for autonomy and the demands of respectability.

Lucetta Kam, in chapter eight, interrogates definitions of singlehood and shows how transnational mobility allows for a queer single life away from the scrutinizing eyes of parents and peers, thus constituting a move from precarity to possibility and autonomy. The rubric of singlehood affords a queer lifestyle, as Kam argues, showing "how singleness can be a form of public (mis)recognition or representation for queer women in a heteronormative society."

In the ninth and final chapter of this book, Sanjay Srivastava returns our attention to the gendered city and mobilizes the concepts of postnationalism and moral consumption to analyze three different "technotopias": the idea of the smart city, the anonymized app he calls *citysafe*, and the *safe campus* initiative. All three of these involve a management and policing of space, "a new kind of urban spatial discipline," and are entangled with gendered narratives of postnational modernity and moral consumption.

The chapters in this book attest to the fact that this project, which began as a comparative study of single women in Shanghai and Delhi, has branched out to involve different forms of singlehood, ranging from queer mobilities to contemporary art. While most chapters focus on one locality, the logic behind this volume is very much a comparative and relational one. We do refrain from clear-cut comparisons between China and India, not just to steer away from a possible methodological nationalism, but also in order to account for more complex forms of entanglement involving local histories, national mythologies, and global mobilities, to name

but a few. However, we do insist on the comparative logic that underpins this book and that manifests not only in our juggling of different concepts at different localities, but also in the inclusion of different cases and different sites. This comparative, relational, and transcultural viewpoint helps us to move away from the nation state as the unit of analysis, which we hope will add to a "more fragmentary, but better, analysis of the societies that make up our contemporary world."[116] This is a world in which being single is not viewed as a state of waiting for "Mr. or Ms. Right," a world in which the cult of coupledom is at least approached from an ambiguous distance, a world in which alternative intimate modes of being are explored and played with.

ORCID®

Christiane Brosius https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1942-5381
Jeroen de Kloet https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2314-5424

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116   Van der Veer, *Value of Comparison*, 153.

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Kinneret Lahad ⓘ

Acquiring a Divine Composure: Singlehood, Excessiveness, and the Changing Gendered Order

Abstract   Singlehood scholars have long noted that single women are often portrayed as leading lonely, empty lives as well as being too selfish, too educated, and too successful. This paper contributes to the growing field of singlehood studies by proposing a theoretical framework that explores these images through the duality of lack and excess as well as the concept of moral panic. By exploring the notions of excessiveness and lack, moral panic, and moral respectability, I explore the new ways in which stigmas of female singlehood are bestowed with discursive force and power. The first part of my chapter examines this conceptualization in the North American and European contexts; the second part scrutinizes these themes further in an Asian context and more specifically, in relation to China's "leftover" ideology.

China's "leftover" discourse illustrates how this category has become a concept through which singlehood, families, and collective national life are imagined. One's status (single or married, with or without children) and age become important axes of signification distinguishing between surplus and non-surplus populations, the condemned and the praised respectively. Accordingly, single women are perceived as personally responsible and accountable for their surplus status and the lack of a man in their lives. Thus, my proposal is that the contemporary global discourse about female singlehood should be explored as a significant discursive site, a place where images of women's autonomies and life choices are circulated and evaluated. In this light, I argue that contemporary studies of female singlehood should be situated in the broader framework of gendered forms of oppression and new modes of subjection.

Keywords   singlehood; leftover discourse; moral panic; excess; lack

Introduction

The opening lines of Manju Kapur's lyrical novel *The Immigrant* depict the protagonist's frame of mind as she approaches her thirtieth birthday:

> Nina was almost thirty. Friend and colleague consoled her by remarking on her radiant complexion and jet black hair, but such comfort was cold. Nina's skin knew it was thirty, broadcasting the fact at certain angles in front of the mirror. Her spirit felt sixty as she walked from the bus stop to the single room where she lived with her mother. Her heart felt a hundred as it surveyed the many years of hopeless longing it had known.
>
> And her womb, her ovaries, her uterus, the unfertilised eggs that were expelled every month, what about them? They were busy marking every passing second of her life.
>
> Had she been married, thirty would have been heralded as a time of youthful maturity, her birthday celebrated in the midst of doting husband and children. A body could feel young in these circumstances, look forward to the gifts, the surprises, the love.
>
> Instead this would be the moment that announced her diminishing prospects to a judgmental world....
>
> ...Hour by inexorable hour, her twenty-ninth year was ebbing away. Tomorrow thirty, thirty, thirty. What brightness could any dawn cast on her existence?[1]

Kapur, a well-known feminist author from India, succinctly captures in this moving extract, many of the themes that underpin the experience of midlife singlehood. One common thread running through many depictions of the single woman of "marriageable age" is the fact that it—singlehood—becomes one's "master status."[2] Here, Nina has succumbed to a specific form of the birthday blues, the age-anchored expectations of marriage still unfulfilled. There is also a hint of existential angst, anchored by physical uncertainty: the fear that, at the age of twenty-nine, she is on the verge of losing the things that are commonly considered to be a woman's social assets: youthful beauty and reproductive potential.

Kapur's observation that if Nina "had been married, thirty would have been heralded as a time of youthful maturity,"[3] is a vivid depiction of what the anthropologist Haim Hazan and I have described as the "accelerated aging process" associated with single women.[4] This symbolic process constructs different timetables and rhythms for older single women, compared

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1 Manju Kapur, *The Immigrant* (London: Random House, 2008), 5–6.
2 Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 2008), 24–25.
3 Kapur, *The Immigrant,* 5–6.
4 Kinneret Lahad and Haim Hazan, "The Terror of the Single Old Maid: On the Insolubility of a Cultural Category," *Women's Studies International Forum* 47 (2014);

to, for example, the youthful bride and young mother of the future. This construct is a potent example of how we are "aged," boxed in by rigid taxonomies of ability and utility, as well as by culture,[5] which demonstrates how perceptions of the aging process are determined by age norms and social timetables. Thus, single women who have failed to fulfil their potential for marriage and motherhood are deemed to "age faster" than their non-single peers.

This chapter invites the reader to consider anew a set of interrelated questions. Why do these assumptions about age continue to bear such discursive force? How do these popular mediated representations reflect deep–seated assumptions about the social value of the single woman, and how do these interact with patriarchal and family–centered ideological presumptions about the place, character, and self–worth of women—with or without a male partner? I will explore these questions by considering interrelated notions of lack and excess as manifested in conventional representations of female singlehood. I will then move on to examine the role that these notions play in an ongoing global moral panic about the growing population of single people.

The increase in the number of single women in the general population is conceived, as a matter of course, as a threat to men, the gendered social order, and even the strength and future of the nation. The reasons for this are often located within the achievements and the supposedly "rebellious character" of the single woman. Indeed, long–term singlehood is still commonly presented as a negative or an absence: a lack, an incompleteness. The synonyms used to describe single persons—unmarried, unpartnered—define them in terms of what they are not. Singlehood, thus, is commonly conceptualized as a "deficit identity,"[6] indicating a personal deficit and consequently a life of loss and pain.[7]

In popular culture, images and narratives of single life as empty and lonely are ubiquitous. In Hebrew, for example, the etymological root of the word for singlehood is *reik*—emptiness, a void. It is no surprise that many single women seek to distance themselves from these pejoratives. The figure of the single woman is also imagined in terms of excess: a surplus, abject identity embodying excesses in personal character. Single women are labeled as "too educated," "too successful," or "too lazy," which places them out of social bounds. They waste their time and live wasted lives, while their married peers are accumulating time and life achievements.[8] As

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Kinneret Lahad, *A Table for One: A Critical Reading of Singlehood, Gender, and Time* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

5   Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

6   Jill Reynolds, *The Single Woman: A Discursive Investigation* (London: Routledge, 2008).

7   Anne Byrne, "Singular Identities: Managing Stigma, Resisting Voices," *Women's Studies Review* 7 (2000); Lahad, *A Table for One*; Jan Macvarish, "What is 'the Problem' of Singleness?," *Sociological Research Online* 11, no. 3 (2006).

8   Lahad, *A Table for One*.

such, this identity category of excess is presented as a pathology—based, although not acknowledged as such, on patriarchal and heteronormative timelines and schedules.

The following analysis draws on a variety of global cultural resources, including online columns, films, news headlines, and "expert" advice. From these diverse sources, I attempt to outline the meaning-making processes of singlehood and perceptions of excessiveness and lack. The first part of my chapter examines this conceptualization in the North American and European contexts; the second part explores these themes further in an Asian context. Another goal of this chapter, thus, is to extend the scholarship on singlehood beyond a Western perspective. To accomplish this, I will build on recent scholarly works on female singlehood in Asia and more specifically, on China's "leftover" ideology.

While research on singlehood has flourished over the last two decades, much of this body of literature is overwhelmingly focused on the experiences of the white, urban, and upper-middle-class milieus, paying scant attention to singlehood beyond the North American and European contexts (one notable exception is Japan). Significant steps have been taken to extend the literature on female singlehood in Asia, particularly in China, India, and Japan.[9] These studies have opened a rich mine of knowledge, generating new questions about the lived experience of female singlehood. This body of work stresses the need to adopt an intersectional approach to singlehood, noting that single female identities often intersect with other social axes, including race, sexuality, class, ableness, and geographical location.[10]

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9 See, for example: Akiko Yoshida, *Unmarried Women in Japan: The Drift into Singlehood* (London: Routledge, 2016); Christiane Brosius, "Regulating Access and Mobility of Single Women in a "World Class"-City: Gender and Inequality in Delhi, India," in *Inequalities in Creative Cities: Issues, Approaches, Comparisons*, ed. U. Gerhard, M. Hoelscher, and D. Wilson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Melissa Butcher, "Defying Delhi's Enclosures: Strategies for Managing a Difficult City," *Gender, Place, and Culture* 25, no. 5 (2018); Chow Yiu Fai, *Caring in Times of Precarity: A Study of Single Women Doing Creative Work in Shanghai* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 2014); Penn Tsz Ting Ip and Esther Peeren, "Exploiting the Distance between Conflicting Norms: Female Rural-to-Urban Migrant Workers in Shanghai Negotiating Stigma around Singlehood and Marriage," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, nos. 5–6 (2019); L. Crystal Jiang and Wanqi Gong, "Counteracting Indirect Influence: The Responses of Single Chinese Women to Prejudicial Media Portrayals of Single Womanhood," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 9, no. 3 (2016).

10 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*; Jiang and Gong, "Counteracting Indirect Influence"; Ip and Peeren, "Exploiting the Distance."

The "Bridget Jones generation" and acquiring the divine composure

Over the years that I have researched the conceptualization of female singlehood, I have been continuously surprised to discover the violent and degrading labels still applied to single women around the world.[11] To a large extent, narratives of single women content with this status are scarce, both in academic research and in media culture. "Too selective," "too desperate," "too frustrated," or simply "too lazy" are but a few of the stigmas commonly attached to single women today. Despite the growing population of single people, pejorative expressions like "old maids," "left-over women," "parasite women," and "loser dogs" continue to loom large.[12] Bella DePaulo sees these expressions as a form of "singlism"—a stigma and prejudice directed towards single people.[13]

Stereotypical portrayals of the single woman are rearticulated and incorporated into both explanatory systems and conventional cultural scripts. These are formulated as both scientific and popular quandaries. Examples include the ever-popular rhetorical question, "Why are so many women still single?" and popular advice columns and listicles with headlines like "The top 10 reasons you are still single." The trend, exacerbated by social media discourse, reduces the complexity of everyday experience and knowledge into quizzes, self-tests, and checklists. These self-tests can be construed as a part of the prevailing ethos of therapy and self-help, which, as Eva Illouz has correctly observed, is "characterized by an intense introspectiveness and reflexivity."[14] Indeed, would-be experts present their range of cures for what they consider to be overly extended singlehood. Take, as an example, a popular article entitled "12 Reasons You're Still Single" (CBS News):

> It seems everyone you know is paired off. So how come you're still single? There are lots of possible reasons. Here are 12 biggies from Dr. Amir Levine, a psychiatrist in New York City and the co-author of *Attached: The New Science of Adult Attachment*.[15]

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11 Lahad, *A Table for One*.
12 Laura Dales, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Single: Reading Agency in the 'Parasite Single' Issue," in *The Agency of Women in Asia*, ed. Lyn Parker (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2005); Fincher, *Leftover Women*; Arianne M. Gaetano, "'Leftover Women': Postponing Marriage and Renegotiating Womanhood in Urban China," *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 4, no. 2 (2014); Yingchun Ji, "Between Tradition and Modernity: 'Leftover' Women in Shanghai," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77, no. 5 (2015); Lahad, *A Table for One*; Eriko Maeda, "Relational Identities of Always-Single Japanese Women," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 25, no. 6 (2008).
13 Bella DePaulo, *Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006).
14 Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 150.
15 CBS, "12 Reasons You're Still Single," *CBS News*, February 9, 2011. Accessed July 5, 2017.

My argument is that an extended singlehood carries with it the label of a problematic and "empty self" in need of being completed and fixed.[16] Extending Philip Cushman's analysis, one sees that these columns and listicles all point to this lack, underpinned by the common assumption that finding a partner is the solution to it.

A similar rhetoric is echoed in the popular American self-help genre, in books bearing titles like *This Is Why You're Single*,[17] *Single No More: Why You're Not Attracting the Partner You Want (And What to Do About It)*,[18] and *If I'm So Wonderful, Why Am I Still Single?*[19] These titles all embody a disruption articulated in personalized terms, endorsing a therapeutic and medicalized rhetoric. It is striking how notions of lack and excess are reformulated into deficient behaviors that do not align with traditional forms of female identity. Continuing this line of analysis, the assumption that "there is a reason why everyone is paired off with a perfect partner except you," becomes an accusation of inadequate self-management; urgent self-transformation is needed, with the goal of fulfilling and completing oneself—with the help of the right partner, of course.

According to this discourse, irresponsible and unbalanced subjectivity can be corrected through careful self-scrutiny and a commitment to self-work. An example of this can be found in the opening scene of the global box-office hit *Bridget Jones's Diary*, which presents a list of resolutions that the eponymous heroine must address in the new year: quit smoking, drink less, lose weight, start a successful career—and get a boyfriend. Her single status is tied here to a lack of self-governance, manifested by her unregulated behavior and dubious personal traits. Indeed, it is these notions of excessiveness and unruliness that emerge as the dominant framework shaping the representations of female singlehood. In the guise of taking control of one's life, it becomes the duty of the single woman to eliminate her excessiveness and to comply with a more restrained and bounded subjectivity. In her seminal work on post-feminism, Angela McRobbie asserts that the figure of Bridget Jones

> portrays the whole spectrum of attributes associated with the self-monitoring subject; she confides in her friends, she keeps a diary, she endlessly reflects on her fluctuating weight, noting her calorie intake, she plans, plots and has projects. She is also deeply uncertain as to what the future holds for her. Despite the choices she has, there are also any number of risks of which she is regularly

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16 Philip Cushman, "Why the Self Is Empty: Toward a Historically Situated Psychology," *American Psychologist* 45, no. 5 (1990).

17 Laura Lane and Angela Spera, *This Is Why You're Single* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2015).

18 Nick Breau, *Single No More: Why You're Not Attracting the Partner You Want (And What to Do About It)* (self-pub., 2017), Kindle.

19 Susan Page, *If I'm So Wonderful, Why Am I Still Single? Ten Strategies That Will Change Your Love Life Forever* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2002).

reminded; the risk that she might let the right man slip from under her nose (hence she must always be on the lookout), the risk that not catching a man at the right time might mean she misses the chance of having children (her biological clock is counting). There is also the risk that partnerless she will be isolated, marginalised from the world of happy couples.[20]

In one memorable scene from *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the guests at a dinner party—where she is the only unpaired person—demand that Bridget account for her status.

Married Man:	You really ought to hurry up and get sprugged up, you know, old girl? Time's a-running out. Tick–tock.
Bridget Jones:	Yes, yes...
Married Man:	Seriously, though. Offices full of single girls in their thirties—fine physical specimens, but they just can't seem to hold down a chap.
Married Woman:	Yes. Why is it there are so many unmarried women in their thirties these days, Bridget?
Bridget Jones:	Oh, I don't know. Suppose it doesn't help that underneath our clothes, our entire bodies are covered in scales (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 2001).[21]

It could be argued that rhetorical statements such as "Why is one *still* single?" or the suggestion that single women are single because they are unable to "hold down a chap," trace out the single woman's inability to follow heteronormative requirements—an inadequacy on her part, in short. The conundrum comes with ancillary questions: Is the single woman too willing—or too unwilling? Is she too picky? Overly fearful? Overly obsessive? Is the single woman an active seeker or a passive one? Is she just lazy—or entirely hopeless? The imperative to understand and improve oneself does not tolerate such traits, which hint at personal excess. The desired subjectivity is dependent upon intensive self-monitoring, which will not allow for any loss of self-control.

Another theme underlying these discursive formations is the issue of panic, specifically "time panic."[22] As Diane Negra claims, "one of the signature attributes of postfeminist culture is its ability to define various female life stages within the parameters of 'time panic.'"[23] In a sense, the social concern surrounding the idea of long-term singlehood (often tantamount

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20 Angela McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (November 2004): 261–262.
21 *Bridget Jones's Diary*, directed by Sharon Maguire (United Kingdom: Universal Pictures, 2001).
22 Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009).
23 Negra, *What a Girl Wants*, 47.

to moral panic, as I will discuss later) is mediated through the discursive categories of free will and self-control, which sketch out neoliberal trajectories of normative life scripts.

In my research on singlehood,[24] I have argued that these representations should not be brushed off as merely witty anecdotes typical of popular culture, lacking in actual substance. Rather, they should be engaged with seriously, as discursive constructs illuminating how power relations, forms of knowledge, and female subjectivities are constituted and reified. Within this context, in her study on singlehood in popular culture, Anthea Taylor presents another astute analysis of the stigmatization of professional and highly-educated single women.[25] She contends that the common representation of the single woman is as a figure of discursive unease, conceptualized as both a professional success and a personal failure.[26] Building on Taylor's observation, my study here examines how the interplay of lack and excess lends more discursive heft to these sexist and patriarchal modes of representations. Bridget Jones's new-year resolutions also refer to specific threats of overflow and lack, liable to becoming tangible, if one does not subscribe to the gendered norms of respectable femininity. As such, the body of the single woman represents an excess of wrong habits and traits. Hence, I suggest that this very interplay presents single women as bearers of an *unbalanced subjectivity.* In the next section, I explore these themes in relation to the discursive construct of the "leftover" single woman in China.

"Leftover women" as excessive and lacking subjectivities

As an Israeli scholar writing about singlehood mainly in the Israeli and Anglo-American contexts, I have followed the unrestrained preoccupation of mass media in the Western world with singlehood in Asian countries, with growing unease—due to the somewhat essentialized and exotic depictions that characterize these portrayals. From such coverage in English and Hebrew, it has become evident to me that unmarried Asian women—mainly Chinese and Japanese single women—have become subjects of popular media attention in the West. Beyond the general fascination with singlehood, this expansive coverage may also be attributable to the general allure that East Asia holds for these forms of mass media. Even a small sample of headlines illustrates this trend. Take the examples of headlines which have been appearing in the *Quartz,* for example, "China's

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24 See Kinneret Lahad, "'Am I Asking for Too Much?' The Selective Single Woman as a New Social Problem," *Women's Studies International Forum*, no. 40 (September 2013); Kinneret Lahad, "The Single Woman's Choice as a Zero-Sum Game," *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (March 2014); Lahad, *A Table for One.*
25 Anthea Taylor, *Single Women in Popular Culture: The Limits of Postfeminism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
26 Taylor, *Single Women in Popular Culture.*

marriage rate is plummeting because women are choosing autonomy over intimacy,"[27] the *BBC News Online Magazine*, such as "China's 'leftover women,' unmarried at 27,"[28] or, of late (August 2019), in the *New York Times*—"Craving Freedom, Japan's Women Opt Out of Marriage".[29]

In what follows, I want to go beyond these catchy headlines and offer some theoretical observations about one of the most discussed topics in media coverage of single women in Asia today: the "leftover" single women of China. I will explore the ways in which this category is constructed and how these relate to popular representations of feminine subjectivity and feminine excess. The term "leftover women" was coined by the Chinese government in 2007 in an attempt to pressurize single women into getting married by condemning them for being too picky, or for lacking the attributes essential to catching the right partner. Targeting urban, educated women in their late twenties, the campaign was underpinned by the imperative of addressing the demographic gender imbalance created by China's decades-long official one-child policy,[30] which resulted in extreme sex discrimination in favor of male offspring and the elective abortion of female fetuses.

Existing scholarship on this issue attests to the symbolic violence underlying these mediated messages.[31] Hannah Feldshuh frames the "leftover" category as a "discursive construction" by the media. She writes:

> My study approaches "shengnü" ["leftover women"] not as an accepted demographic reality with a causal explanation, but as a process of discursive media construction. As a construction, this concept reflects more about the motives of the Chinese society than the status of "leftover women" themselves.[32]

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27 Xuan Li, "China's Marriage Rate Is Plummeting Because Women Are Choosing Autonomy over Intimacy," *Quartz*, October 13, 2016. Accessed June 30, 2023. https://qz.com/808617/chinas-marriage-rate-is-plummeting-because-women-are-choosing-autonomy-over-partnership.

28 Mary Kay Magistad, "China's 'Leftover Women,' Unmarried at 27," *BBC News Online Magazine*, February 21, 2013. Accessed June 30, 2023. https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21320560.

29 Motoko Rich, "Craving Freedom, Japan's Women Opt Out of Marriage," *The New York Times*, August 3, 2019. Accessed July 2, 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/world/asia/japan-single-women-marriage.html.

30 Fincher, *Leftover Women*.

31 See Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*; Hannah Feldshuh, "Gender, Media, and Myth-Making: Constructing China's Leftover Women," *Asian Journal of Communication* 28, no. 1 (2018); Fincher, *Leftover Women*; Luzhou Li, "'If You Are the One': Dating Shows and Feminist Politics in Contemporary China," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 5 (2015); 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).

32 Feldshuh, "Gender, Media, Myth-Making," 39.

In a similar vein, Jun Zhang and Peidong Sun correctly argue that the term is sexist in itself, as it is only directed at single women and not at single men.[33] They note that although the term "surplus men" is used to describe poor, unmarried men from rural China, it does not extend to the archetypal single urban man—men who instead are described as "golden bachelors" and "diamond single men."[34] Exploring this context further, it is important to note that the "leftover" category does not apply to all Chinese women in the same way. As L. Crystal Jiang and Wanqi Gong contend, in order to understand the oppression of single women, one must pay careful attention to the specific social structure in which it takes place.[35] Penn Tsz Ting Ip and Esther Peeren exemplify this when writing about the experiences of rural-to-urban migrant women in China.[36] In their insightful work, they underscore the importance of migration and citizenship status in negotiating the potential stigma of singlehood. Rural migrant women, for example, feel excluded from Shanghai's "marriage market" because of their provincial origins.[37]

These scholarly contributions assist in shifting our attention from the "leftover" category itself to the ideological regimes and discourses that produced it. One example is the numeric demographic discourse, along with its casual explanations. This lends the discourse on "the time left" for "leftover" women a seemingly neutral and deterministic tone, while, in fact, obscuring its sexist and ageist undertones. This very discourse pivots around numbers, statistics, and the pseudo-neutrality of the dating market, and it is expressed in tones of urgency and determinacy. It corresponds to what Sharada Srinivasan and Shuzhuo Li call a "demographic reductionism"—"the assumption that demographic processes are the sole determinants of how the situation unfolds."[38]. According to Srinivasan and Li, demographic reductionism has severely limited engagement with the implications of the sex ratio imbalance in China and India.[39]

As I have argued elsewhere,[40] the marriage market is represented as a place with its own laws and dynamics that determine ("objectively") the social and temporal value of women. Through the integration of the age-graded, market-based rationality, the social and *temporal* worth of single women are constantly measured and evaluated. Drawing on Sarah

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33 Zhang and Sun, "Parental Matchmaking," 125.
34 Zhang and Sun, "Parental Matchmaking," 125.
35 L. Crystal Jiang and Wanqi Gong, "Understanding Single Womanhood in China: An Intersectional Perspective," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Intersectionality in Public Policy*, ed. Olena Hankivsky and Julia S. Jordan-Zachery (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
36 Ip and Peeren, "Exploiting the Distance."
37 Ip and Peeren, "Exploiting the Distance," 672.
38 Sharada Srinivasan and Shuzhuo Li, "Unifying Perspectives on Scarce Women and Surplus Men in China and India," in *Scarce Women and Surplus Men in China and India: Macro Demographics versus Local Dynamics*, ed. Sharada Srinivasan and Shuzhuo Li (Cham: Springer, 2018), 8.
39 Srinivasan and Li, "Unifying Perspectives," 8.
40 Lahad, *A Table for One*.

Sharma's conceptualization of temporalities and temporal worth, I suggest that her reflections are relevant for understanding the ideological production of the "leftover" category:

> Temporalities are not times; like continually broken clocks, they must be reset again and again. They are expected to recalibrate and fit into a larger temporal order. Temporalities do not experience a uniform time but rather a time particular to the labor that produces them. Their experience of time depends on where they are positioned within a larger economy of temporal worth. The temporal subject's living day, as part of its livelihood, includes technologies of the self contrived for synchronizing to the time of others or having others synchronize to them. The meaning of these subjects' own times and experiences of time is in large part structured and controlled by both the institutional arrangements they inhabit and the time of others—other temporalities.[41]

While Sharma's work relates to the temporalities of neoliberal economies, her analysis also sheds light on the ideological structuring of time and the ways in which both she and other women must synchronize their life schedules with the collective rhythms imposed by the state. A woman's personal, temporal trajectory and livelihood are subsumed by the grand ideology, which has condemned them to "surplus lives"[42] or "wasted lives".[43] Existing research has shown the role played by state-run media organs in promoting and perpetuating these messages. A corresponding issue that arises from these studies is that the image of "leftover women" has, in itself, become a marketable commodity—a commodity that can be bartered in popular entertainment markets like dating shows, magazine websites, expert advice, and matchmaking services available in abundance.[44]

Luzhou Li notes that hashtags like "#areyouleftover" are increasingly visible in social media discourse.[45] This could be seen as a form of self-quantification and inadequacy, attesting to the power of the larger temporal social order. This form of self-reflection can also be seen as a form of self-interrogation— Do I fit in? Can I fit in? What is my social worth? How do I measure against time?—these all demonstrate how the "leftover" ideology plays out even on the most intimate of scales. In this way, the "leftover" campaign also demonstrates the dominance of the state in shaping and reproducing gender inequalities.[46] Ken Plummer's

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41 Sarah Sharma, *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 8.
42 Craig Willse, "Surplus Life: The Neoliberal Making and Managing of Housing Insecurity," (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2010).
43 Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).
44 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*; Li, "If You Are the One."
45 Li, "If You Are the One."
46 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*; Fincher, *Leftover Women*.

take of intimate citizenship[47] can be useful for understanding the effects of the idea of women as leftovers. He defines citizenship as a 'cluster of emerging concerns over the rights to choose what we do with our bodies, our feelings, our identities, our relationships, our genders, our eroticisms and our representations".[48] The state dictates the possibilities for "intimate citizenship" and thus, the rights of women to determine how they organize their intimate life and stake their own intimate identity.[49] According to Plummer, "intimate citizenship" is also about belonging to a place, context, or time, where "the personal invades the public and the public invades the personal."[50] The "leftover" campaign sends a clear message regarding the consequences of becoming a surplus citizen. It indicates that single women are not a part of the collective order, and that, at the same time, they threaten to destabilize it. Thus, public campaigns like this one place the responsibility for the demographic crisis on single women. Once again, women's bodies and personal lives are held responsible for the future of the nation. In other words, these new and old discursive strategies also reinforce the notion of the single woman as a threat to society, and reiterate the understanding that women's bodies and life trajectories should be controlled and publicly monitored.

Another common assertion is that the single woman is too greedy and overly materialistic.[51] A few years ago, local and global media explored in detail a reality TV scandal in China. A female contestant on the show *If You Are the One* declared: "I'd rather cry in a BMW than smile on a bicycle".[52] The ensuing scandal also caught the attention of scholars writing about singlehood in China, who pointed out, that in the wake of the scandal, China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) implemented a series of regulations requiring dating programs to carry out background checks on potential participants and to curb references to material wealth.[53]

Interestingly, the "BMW girl" scandal led to public debates, including discussions on gender representations and dating issues.[54] The blame that was heaped on the contestant in this case for being too greedy, is reminiscent of the heated debate in Japan, that followed the publication of

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47 Ken Plummer, *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).
48 Plummer, *Intimate Citizenship*, 17.
49 Plummer, *Intimate Citizenship.*
50 Plummer, *Intimate Citizenship*, 68.
51 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*.
52 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*; Shaohua Guo, "When Dating Shows Encounter State Censors: A Case Study of *If You Are the One*," *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2017), 487–503; Li, "If You Are the One"; Wanning Sun, "From Poisonous Weeds to Endangered Species: Shenghuo TV, Media Ecology, and Stability Maintenance," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44, no. 2 (2015), 17–37.
53 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*; Guo, "When Dating Shows Encounter State Censors."
54 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*; Guo, "When Dating Shows Encounter State Censors."

Masahiro Yamada's book *After Parasite Singles*.[55] In his book, the author claimed that single women were spoiled, choosing to live a pampered life at home with their parents and preferring a luxurious and materialistic lifestyle.[56] Single women were also criticized for their excessive consumption. Critical scholars writing about singlehood in Japan and elsewhere point out, that this attitude is inherently sexist and places the blame for Japan's economic and demographic difficulties squarely on women's shoulders.[57] Laura Dales writes that "Yamada's simplification and feminisation of this trend reinscribes notions of unmarried women as selfish, irresponsible and materialistic."[58] The common use of terms like "BMW girl" and "parasite women" indicates the widespread consensus about this supposed greediness as another realm of excessiveness— out of bounds, and therefore, a threat to the moral fabric of society.

One affective outcome of this ideology is a growing sense of failure; the sense that one lacks agency and thus, control over one's destiny. I would like to add to this scholarship by arguing that the violence embedded in this humiliating labeling is conveyed by depicting a feminine subjectivity characterized by lack (not married) and excess (surplus subjectivity). Indeed, prevailing representations of feminine excess have long been used as a means of limiting women's space, behavior, and sexuality.[59] Feminist scholars have contended that the superfluous femininity of women who are "too much" cannot be contained; thus, it must be regulated and controlled. In the case of the "leftover" narrative, such a label is used to ridicule and discipline this rebellious excessiveness. In a related vein, the hashtag "#areyouleftover?" can also be interpreted as an act of recognition—recognition of the excessiveness in oneself and in others.

Thus, being tagged as "leftover" marks a transgression of the socio-temporal order, and accordingly, marks one out as a threat to society in general. When features on state-run media outlets discuss the dating prospects of individual women,[60] they tend to highlight personal stories underscoring women's own responsibility for their single status.[61] We can see this

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55 Masahiro Yamada, *After Parasite Singles: The Real Story Behind Japan's Marriage Crisis* (Na: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2014).
56 Dales, "Lifestyles of the Rich."
57 Dales, "Lifestyles of the Rich"; DePaulo, *Singled Out*; Yoshida, *Unmarried Women in Japan*.
58 Laura Dales, "*Ohitorisama*, Singlehood and Agency in Japan." *Asian Studies Review* 38, no. 2 (2014): 225.
59 Lahad, "The Selective Single Woman"; Annukka Lahti, "Too Much? Excessive Sexual Experiences in Bisexual Women's Life Stories," *Subjectivity* 11, no. 1 (March 2018); Laurie Schulze, "On the Muscle," in *Building Bodies*, ed. Pamela L. Moore (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).
60 Feldshuh, "Gender, Media, Myth-Making"; 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).
61 Wanqi Gong, Caixie Tu, and L. Crystal Jiang, "Stigmatized Portrayals of Single Women: A Content Analysis of News Coverage on Single Women and Single Men in China," *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017); Jiang and Gong, "Understanding Single Womanhood."

discourse articulated in an individualized, personalized, and decontextualized language. However, the scholarship on singlehood in contemporary China shows how this category has been produced by a constellation of global and national forces, with some in conflict and others in cooperation. These forces include the neoliberal global market economies of work and consumer culture, together with traditional family values, Confucian values, and a patriarchal outlook on gender relations.

In his intriguing study on single women working in Shanghai's creative industry, Yiu Fai Chow examines the meeting point between a particular mix of Confucian values, heterosexual ideals, and global images of womanhood.[62] These often combine to create the heightened social pressures that many Chinese single women feel themselves to be subjected to. As Chow writes:

> The pressure manifests itself in many forms, most commonly when parents—usually mothers, as recounted by the single women—would privately enquire about their love life, with the more-or-less explicit mission of persuading or even coercing unmarried daughters into seeing someone. The most interventionist, often violent, manner is *xiangqin*. A term that finds its way into almost all of my conversations with the single women, *xiangqin* refers to practices involving gatherings arranged by parents, other family members, friends, or professional matchmakers, for single men and women to meet, hopefully leading to dating and marriage.[63]

The practice of *xiangqin* (blind dates) is carried out by parents, relatives, professional matchmakers—and is even sponsored by the government at times.[64] State-run media also plays a role in these matchmaking services, through the promotion of (admittedly) extremely popular dating shows. As Chow points out, pressure comes in many forms.[65] It fuses the personal with an official language that foregrounds issues of personal blame, familial relations, and national concerns.

Another focal point in the "leftover women" campaign is the suggestion that single women are being too selective, urging them to lower their expectations. However, selectiveness in this case is also rooted in heteronormative schedules, which themselves limit choices. When selectiveness is ascribed to a single woman over the age of twenty-seven, as is the case in China, it is a reconfiguration of a position, which at an earlier phase of life, could have just as well signified agency and choice. Now, however, it implies excessiveness, as well as the lack of self-control and social respectability. Thus, when the "leftover" category is presented as an

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62 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*.
63 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*, 155.
64 Luo and Sun, "Are You the One."
65 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*.

ongoing social crisis endangering "harmonious society," it reflects a socially conservative politics seeking to restore patriarchal control.[66] Excessiveness is wielded rhetorically as a tool for the regulation of women's autonomy, and to encourage her subjection to a particular social order.

The threat of ejection from the marriage market can be particularly offensive and humiliating. This derogatory status renders the single woman a figure destined for a "surplus" and "wasted" life, excluded and abandoned by society. This institutional violence is also articulated in moral terms, where the single woman is portrayed as defying accepted (and acceptable) norms of female respectability and social stability.

Singlehood, fear, and moral panic

The rhetoric of singlehood as a problem, along with its individualized explanations ("she is too selective," for example, or the quasi-explanation that she "falls for the wrong kind of men"), favors personal accountability over socio-political contextualization. From this perspective, single women are themselves to blame for their ineptness and for their excessive expectations from men. The inherent flaws of the single woman require drastic measures. This tone is well-demonstrated in contemporary global media, which produces and echoes postfeminist and conservative messages.[67]

It is no surprise that feminist analysts view Bridget Jones as a postfeminist icon, "a recognizable emblem of a particular kind of femininity."[68] Taylor suggests that Bridget Jones has become the epitome of what single women dread. Quoting a feature in the British newspaper, *The Independent*, Taylor references a Tory politician who claimed that the "'Bridget Jones' generation of career women," struggling to settle down and start a family, "is driving the breakdown of British society."[69] The rhetoric of the "Bridget Jones generation" resonates globally. In Japan, according to *The Telegraph*, "single women were once best known for their love of shoes and handbags. Now the country's Bridget Jones generation is snapping up special female-friendly flats as well."[70]

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66 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*.
67 Kinneret Lahad and Avi Shoshana, "Singlehood in Treatment: Interrogating the Discursive Alliance between Postfeminism and Therapeutic Culture," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 22, no. 3 (2015); Rosalind Gill, "Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising," *Feminism and Psychology* 18, no. 1 (2008); Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Taylor, *Single Women in Popular Culture*.
68 Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 227.
69 Taylor, *Single Women in Popular Culture*, 98.
70 Colin Joyce, "Single Women Fuel Craze for 'Female-Friendly' Flats in Japan," *The Telegraph*, June 3, 2005. Accessed June 30, 2023. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/japan/1491324/Single-women-fuel-craze-for-female-friendly-flats-in-Japan.html?onwardjourney=584162_v3.

One major concern that this conservative perspective engenders—a concern accentuated by the global reach of social media—is that this current generation is to blame for the breakdown of the traditional family, and that, it thereby poses a serious demographic threat to the future of the nation. Thus, the "leftover woman" becomes a cautionary tale, an imminent threat to the moral fabric of society. The geographic extent of this violent imagery is astounding. We can see how this figure of unbalanced and out-of-control subjectivity manifests in China's conceptualization of "leftover women". These headlines correspond to prevailing interpretations of ideas that are presented as demographical truths, especially that of a uniform image of middle-class and educated single women, who are unmarried, and therefore, untrustworthy citizens.

Descriptors such as the "Bridget Jones generation," the "leftover" women of China, and the "parasites" of Japan are old-new mediated categories, invented and discursively distributed by governmental and media agencies. As Chow comments, the generational paradigm is paramount when discussing single women in China, as is evident in the ways that the participants in his study spoke about themselves.[71] He suggests that this is a way to talk about oneself and others in a collective manner. Here, I would argue that the generational paradigm is used to convey heightened levels of collective concern and bleak demographic scenarios. In what follows, I suggest that this generational paradigm, along with its alarmist representations of the future, is intensified through exaggerated fear-mongering and reactionary moral messages.

In her work on single women in China, Luzhou Li argues that the discourse on singlehood is a subliminal expression of moral panic, engendered by the growing liberation of highly educated professional women from the domestic sphere.[72] She claims that:

> The incitement of discourses by a variety of social institutions including family and media creates a social fear among women that they will become spinsters if they cannot get married before the age of 30, thereby bringing into play the working of power, which effectively regulates single women who choose not to take on domestic responsibility at the expense of their professional pursuits right away.[73]

Lisa Eklund develops this line of analysis by drawing on Stanley Cohen's seminal research on moral panic, which drew on perceptions of street crime in England during the 1970s.[74] According to Eklund, the "leftover woman"

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71 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*.
72 Li, "'If You Are the One,'" 525.
73 Li, "'If You Are the One': Dating Shows and Feminist Politics in Contemporary China," 525.
74 Lisa Eklund, "The Sex Ratio Question and the Unfolding of a Moral Panic? Notions of Power, Choice, and Self in Mate Selection among Women and Men in Higher

stands at the center of a moral panic in China. One of the ramifications of this panic is that single women are scapegoated and subjected to public hostility. The creation of social anxieties has intensified the urgency to marry.[75] I wish to extend these interesting observations by drawing the reader's attention to the recurring motifs of these discourses, such as the fear of dying alone, and the familial and collective language in which they are presented. I agree with Eklund's contention that these popular narratives cast single women as "folk devils"[76] accountable for endangering the moral fabric of society. In this way, the narratives project collective fears of aging and loneliness, as well as the "inherent" strength and unity of the family. Take for example, the following article published by the BBC:

> One of the greatest fears of Chinese parents is coming true: China's young people are turning away from marriage. The trend is also worrying the government....
>
> But in a culture that puts great value on family, parents are alarmed by even the tiniest likelihood that their offspring will remain unmarried and childless. They fear the breaking of family lineage, or that there will be no one to look after their unmarried children when they're gone.[77]

Unpacking this linkage of phenomena and outcome results in the conclusion that not only is the single woman harming herself, but she is additionally portrayed as deficient in morality, accused of respecting neither her parents nor the collective common good. Accounts of this nature tend to be coupled with the notion of singlehood as defying the set idea of the good and respectable daughter. Here we see yet another example of singlehood conceived as a morally charged category, evaluated through binary distinctions of good and bad, right and wrong, respectable and non-respectable. Drawing upon a rhetoric of risk and blame, single women are presented as "folk devils", posing a threat to the well-being of their families, their communities, and the nation. These dramatic narratives confirm Cohen's revealing assumption that moral panics are products of cultural strain and ambiguity.[78] Such discourses, he asserts, are intensified by the fundamental demographic changes which invariably underlie them and which create a fertile territory for sensationalism in media accounts and political rhetoric.

Education in China," in *Scarce Women and Surplus Men in China and India: Macro Demographics versus Local Dynamics*, ed. Sharada Srinivasan and Shuzhuo Li (Cham: Springer, 2018); Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (London: MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1972).

75 Eklund, "The Sex Ratio Question"; Fincher, *Leftover Women*.

76 Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*.

77 Xuan Li, "Why People Aren't Getting Married in China," *BBC*, August 5, 2017. Accessed July 7, 2023. https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20170804-why-people-arent-getting-married-in-china.

78 Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*.

Indeed, an abundance of media articles circulate dire predictions about "the problem" of single women. This is, in fact, another way of decontextualizing the socio-economic factors contributing to the declining fertility rates—the high cost of living and a refusal to submit to patriarchal norms. As Maya Heins puts it, "Much of the blame for the falling birth and marriage rates in the country is being placed on single women. However in reality, it is a complex set of cultural and economic factors that are responsible for the diminishing fertility rate."[79]

Another form of moral panic attached to singlehood is the narrative of aging and dying alone. Neta Yodovich and Kinneret Lahad show how the stigma of the single woman as an "old maid" can fuel moral panic.[80] Our analysis demonstrates how long-term singlehood is associated with a lonely—and therefore terrifying—social existence. Indeed, one could claim that the "old maid" figure threatens, by its very presence, social values and the collective social good.[81] All these narratives cast the single woman as a "folk devil" responsible for endangering the moral fabric of society.

These notions establish the extent to which this rhetoric depicts and rewards (or punishes) women's life choices, and they cohere with what Adrienne Rich describes as "compulsory heterosexuality".[82] This logic promotes the assumption that the status and social worth of women are dependent upon and defined in terms of their relationships with men, or, alternatively, the conviction that the primary role of a woman is to care for family members. In a sense, these narratives constantly question women's claims to autonomy, casting aspersions on the supposedly suspicious and immoral experience of living alone.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this study has deconstructed some of the deeply rooted assumptions and understandings of singlehood. Singlehood, as it emerges here, is still, largely perceived as a transitory and temporary life phase, a prelude to marriage and motherhood, and nothing more. Accordingly, when singlehood extends for longer than expected, the ensuing implication is that there is an urgent need for self-transformation, in order to find the "right one." Above a certain age, singlehood constitutes—contradictorily—both a lack and an uncontained excess.

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79 Maya Heins, "Going Solo: A Qualitative Comparison of Single Women in Japan and Colombia," (Undergraduate Honors Thesis, University of Colorado (Boulder), 2017), 7.
80 Neta Yodovich and Kinneret Lahad, "'I Don't Think This Woman Had Anyone in Her Life': Loneliness and Singlehood in Six Feet Under." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 25, no. 4 (2018).
81 Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 9.
82 Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980).

By exploring the notions of excessiveness and lack, moral panic, and moral respectability, I have attempted to shape an understanding of the new ways in which patriarchy is bestowed with discursive force and power. Thus, my proposal is that the contemporary global discourse about female singlehood should be explored as a significant discursive site, a place where images of women's autonomies and life choices are circulated and evaluated. In this light, I argue that contemporary studies of female singlehood should be situated in the broader framework of gendered forms of oppression and new forms of subjection. As we see here, the very personal and decontextualized forms through which singlehood is discussed, underscores the need to extend the conceptual framework of this field.

China's "leftover" discourse illustrates how this category has become a concept with which singlehood, families, and collective national life are imagined. One's status (single or married, with or without children) and age become important axes of signification, distinguishing between surplus and non–surplus populations, the condemned and the praised respectively. Accordingly, single women are perceived as personally responsible and accountable for their surplus status. The category of the single woman is embedded in prevailing conceptions of an essentialized and normalizing gendered social order, an order that underscores conservative sets of assumptions and reinforces the resurgence of gender inequalities. From this perspective, couple culture and the cult of motherhood exemplify the promise of the aspired and moral life trajectory. However, the study of singlehood should not be restricted to exploring the lives of single women alone; it can also reveal a story about social assumptions of good and respected female subjects and the desired social order. Bearing this in mind, studying singlehood has wider theoretical and empirical implications beyond conceptualizations of singlehood alone. As Srinivasan and Li state in their study of macro demographics and local dynamics in China and India:

> The core of the problem is gender discrimination; analyses will have to address key elements shaping gender discrimination and the implications of the impacts of female deficit and male surplus at the very least for women's wellbeing, gender relations, patriarchy and hegemonic masculinities.[83]

The brutality of this discourse in China, India, and elsewhere is an important reminder of why demographic reductionism should not be accepted as a given. One way of challenging this creeping orthodoxy is by theorizing the study of singlehood across different disciplines and geographical locations. My purpose in this chapter has been not just to offer a critical account of singlehood, but also to develop new conceptual and political possibilities for thinking about women's life trajectories and alternative gendered orders: a line of thought relevant to this book. Exploring singlehood in Asia

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83 Srinivasan and Li, "Unifying Perspectives," 10.

is a new and much-needed field of research with the potential to revital-ize this field of study. Singlehood presents a unique prism through which macro-social processes and social changes in Asia—and elsewhere—can be re–evaluated and, hopefully, continuously challenged.

These contributions create a critical space for the voices and experi-ences of single women and thus, support a much-needed intersectional perspective for studying singlehood. What is clear from the accounts that populate this chapter is the importance of moving beyond a one-dimen-sional definition of singlehood, shifting our scholarly gaze to multiple sites of inequalities and privileges. As a number of scholars studying single-hood in Asia have shown, singlehood cannot be studied as distinct from the intersections of class, race, civil status, profession, and age.[84] From this viewpoint, the subject position of the single woman is constructed through multiple positions of oppressions and privileges that are rooted in sexism, marriage norms, ageism, and patriarchy.

ORCID®

Kinneret Lahad ⬤ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1266-8457

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84 Chow, *Caring in Times of Precarity*; Jiang and Gong, "Counteracting Indirect Influence."

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Lucie Bernroider

Landscapes of Loneliness and Interdependence: An Essay on Urban Alienation, Friendship, and the Modalities of Anthropological Fieldwork

Abstract   Discussions of singleness contain images of pathological loneliness and stigmas of unbound individualism. As such, they reflect residual ambivalences surrounding the (gendered) consequences of urbanization and globalization. But do such portrayals really capture the subjectivities and lived experiences of single women in cities? Drawing on fieldwork among middle-class single women in Delhi, this essay argues that singleness can rather signify an engagement with different conditions of interdependency. The essay takes the somewhat unusual track of reflecting back on the intersubjective nature of anthropological fieldwork to offer glimpses into the different kinds of sociality that characterized both the lifeworlds of single women and the research process itself. In doing so, it is structured in three parts: The first examines notions of urban alienation in relation to urbanization, arguing that they are limited in what they can tell us about the emplaced social dynamics of urban life. The second part presents some research findings on the subjectivity of female singleness, highlighting different relationalities—to others and the city. The final part confronts the practice of fieldwork itself, including an attempt to think through the implications of friendships to remind researchers of our own multiple dependencies and accountabilities.

Keywords   singlehood; urbanization; gender; fieldwork; feminist methodology

Changes to family patterns, such as the rise of single households and a late average age of marriage, are increasingly grabbing headlines around the world. The topics of such discussions range from "leftover women" (and, more recently, "leftover men") in China,[1] to changing housing demands due to the rise of single-person households in Australia, to speculations surrounding the future political power of single-women voters in the US. In India, internet memes shared on social media sites poke fun at inquisitive relatives' insistent questioning along the lines of "Shādī kab karogī?" ("When will you get married?"), while bloggers vigorously debate the virtues and dangers of living alone. Some of these discussions of singleness are celebratory in tone; they speak of the triumph of individual choice and of new possibilities for journeys of self-exploration, especially for women. Unencumbered by the demands of relational womanhood, that is, feminine-coded roles that task women with the responsibility of preserving and nurturing the social relations within a social group, a solitary state is seen to harbor significant potential for women to realize their own creative projects. Yet, popular discourse surrounding singlehood and delayed marriage has often warned of the potentially harmful consequences of singleness, framing it in pathological terms. Indeed, if media coverage is to be believed, loneliness, as a "social epidemic" and a "giant evil of our time," is currently sweeping the planet, particularly in metropolitan settings.[2] Such discussions do not merely offer a commentary on current social and demographic trends but are haunted by the specter of "urban alienation," that is, persistent anxieties and residual ambivalences surrounding the (gendered) consequences of urbanization for social organization. Urban singleness as a pathological imaginary evokes images of loneliness, social fragmentation, and the adverse effects of excessive individualism, such as a lack of intimate connection or a diminishing capacity for empathy. In a different context, feminists have warned that even seemingly liberatory formulations of independence, choice, and empowerment have today become implicated with tropes of self-actualization and self-responsibility, which run the risk of stripping them of their original meaning and political urgency.[3] This associative field in which (female) singleness, as the absence of a (romantic) partner or as solitary living, lies suspended, hints at some of

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1   See the chapter by Chenying Pi in this volume for an in-depth examination of these terms.
2   Anushka Asthana, "Stories of Loneliness: Two MPs Tell of 'Social Epidemic' in UK," *The Guardian*, January 3, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jan/03/stories-of-loneliness-overwhelm-labour-and-conservative-mps.
3   See, for instance, Angela McRobbie, "Young Women and Consumer Culture: An Intervention," *Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5 (2008); Rosalind Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 6 (2017). These works underscore the cultural, aesthetic, and affective technologies of "postfeminism," and the contemporary uses of languages of choice and individualism to deflect from systemic constraints, while placing the responsibility of navigating uncertainties produced by late-capitalism onto the individualized subject.

the lingering questions and uncertainties surrounding metropolitan life in growing and globalizing cities.

But does this field really reflect the actual subjectivities and lifeworlds of women living alone in metropolitan settings?[4] In 2015, I traveled to Delhi to investigate female singleness among middle-class women for my doctoral thesis. Specifically, I had come to document the impact of social change on practices such as delayed marriage, and the formation of single house-holds, as well as on young women's attitudes towards work, family, and leisure. While I conducted my anthropological field research, I certainly encountered feelings of loneliness and solitude—those of my research par-ticipants, as well as my own. I also witnessed strengthening commitments to values of independence and personal autonomy, as life trajectories, understandings of family, and conceptions of individual purpose that had previously been taken for granted were thoroughly re-examined. However, as I was listening to these accounts, singleness also seemed to revolve just as much around the continued relevance of (familial) connections, the process of re-evaluating bonds and forging new ones, as well as around different notions of care, for the self and for others. The concept therefore expressed as much, if not more, about linkages, attachments, and a rec-ognition of interdependency as it did about disconnection and isolation. It thereby troubled images of loneliness as pathology and rejected the stigma of unbound individualism that frequently accompanies (female) sin-glehood. What may have revealed the most to me about the ways my inter-locutors perceived themselves as being alone, either in a fleeting or more permanent sense, were the different modes through which they related to and depended on others, as well as the city they lived in.

While I discuss the results of my fieldwork in more depth elsewhere,[5] in this essay, I will guide my discussion with the help of an autoethnographic perspective. There are numerous reasons why I think this could be a produc-tive track. As a methodological approach, autoethnography focuses on forms of intersubjective engagement during the research process and centers the notions of self-reflexivity and interpersonal experience in ways that can chal-lenge "canonical ways of doing research and representing others,"[6] while also underlining the potential of research as a political force. In my case, however, "autoethnography" does not refer to a form of self-representation of the insider who possesses the particular cultural identity under study in

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4   The term lifeworld (from the German *Lebenswelt*) is used in the social sciences and philosophy to denote the domain of everyday life, everyday knowledge, and common-sense social reality. It encompasses both cultural and social structures, as well as individual experience. The concept was first introduced by Edmund Husserl (drawing on Martin Heidegger) and was further elaborated upon by Alfred Schütz, Jürgen Habermas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and others.
5   Lucie Bernroider, "Single Female Tenants in South Delhi—Gender, Class and Morality in a Globalizing City," *Gender, Place & Culture* 25, no. 5 (2018).
6   Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Over-view," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2010): 1.

the way the term is most commonly understood. Rather, I want to scrutinize the process of fieldwork itself, offering glimpses into the different kinds of sociality and intimacy that characterized both the particular lifeworlds of urban single women and my own research process, in order to illustrate my thoughts on urban gendered subjectivity and what I came to understand as the productive tensions between singleness and interdependency. On the one hand, I thereby hope to foreground the intersubjective, bodily, and affective dimensions of what it means to move through the specific place and time of the city as a single woman. Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford credit such inventive methodologies with accounting for "the sensory plenitude afforded for knowledge and action,"[7] adding that "[s]uch methods enable us to acknowledge that we are in *medias res*, in the middle of things, in 'mid-stream, always already embedded in a situation, one both settled and unsettled.'"[8] On the other hand, this approach allows me to think through the feminist potential (and pitfalls) of fieldwork and scholarly representation. The intersubjective practice of anthropological fieldwork itself, after all, constitutes an effort to immerse oneself and to build empathetic connections, even friendships, all while grappling with one's own positionality and registers of difference and distance. The end of this essay therefore includes a preliminary attempt to think through the implications of friendships built during fieldwork and the possibilities of research as a relational act of responding, while also accounting for the different positions and identities taken up by me as a foreign researcher and those emplaced in "the field."

This essay is thus structured in three parts. To set the terms of this interrogation, I will start by examining figurations of urban alienation, and the landscapes of fragmentation and solitude they project, as these are the images my later discussion hopes to disrupt. Not only have these narratives captured the public imagination, but they also occupy a firmly established place in academic contemplations on metropolitan life. However, as I will lay out below, they tend to defy the specificity of actual urban locales and are, therefore, limited in what they can tell us about the emplaced social dynamics that characterize single living.

Secondly, I will present some of the findings of my research on the subjectivity of female singleness, arguing that it should not be seen merely as an individualistic rebuttal to the concept of relational womanhood mentioned earlier, but rather as a concept that deeply engages with conditions of interdependency and connection, and indeed with the nature of community in the metropolitan landscape. The particular urban flavor of angst-ridden imaginaries of a creeping loneliness epidemic can be linked to fears over the city's perceived failure to develop an ethic of neighborliness

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7   Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford, "Introduction: A Perpetual Inventory," in *Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social,* ed. Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 19.

8   Paul Rabinow, *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 8, quoted in Lury and Wakeford, *Inventive Methods*, 19.

and a mode of sharing without being part of the same community. In this respect, doubts arise about the capabilities of the mass-mediated publics of cities to form empathetic and ethical relations. I will, therefore, relate my thoughts to questions of ethics, interdependence, and inter-relationality within the making of new urban and gendered subjectivities. Narratives of sociability, friendship, and care, both for the self and for others, have the potential to tie in with notions of self-care as a feminist ethic of habitation, a recognition of dependency, and the acknowledgement of the self's innate vulnerability as the basis for connecting with others.

The third part involves a more explicit confrontation with the practice of fieldwork itself. Out of my personal experience of conducting research with women of a similar age to myself, I continue my exploration of feminist ethics with reflections on the subjectivity of the researcher, the deeply intersubjective nature of anthropological fieldwork, and the possibilities of "working with friendship" as an approach that crucially reminds us as researchers of our multiple accountabilities. To talk about subjectivity and feminist ethics by way of the modalities of anthropological fieldwork may seem like an unnecessary detour, but I have come to realize that the very nature of the fieldwork encounter—its frustrations and joys, the bonds and trust of friendships formed, the dilemmas of distance and immersion, and its confrontation with positionality and representation—resonates with much of what I have to say about interdependency and a humbling of the self, as well as with the ethical and political possibilities of such encounters. Notwithstanding feminism's "awkward" relationship with anthropology,[9] I conclude with a few thoughts on how research encounters and their ontological commitments might relate to a discussion of transnational feminist knowledge (co)production and politics, suggesting the possibility of building solidarities in an interconnected world through a deeper engagement with the modalities of friendship, dependency, and vulnerability.

Imaginaries of urban alienation and social change

The theme of urban alienation and depersonalization has a long history in debates on urbanization and urban sociality. For early urban theorists like Georg Simmel,[10] the modern capitalist metropolis figured as the paradigmatic site of strangerhood. While the anonymity of the city would

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9   Marilyn Strathern, "An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology," *Signs* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1987). Strathern famously defined the relationship between anthropology and feminism as "awkward," an attribute that, Jeanette Edwards has more recently argued, should be maintained in order to establish a productive, mutually testing relationship. Jeanette Edwards, "The Body, Beauty and Botox: Revisiting the 'Awkward Relationship' Between Feminism and Anthropology" (lecture, Department for Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, December 12, 2018).

10 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, [1905] 1950).

offer new freedoms from the coercive obligations of "little" community and small-town prejudice, an onslaught of sensory stimuli, coupled with the rationalization inherent in capitalist labor, would imprint upon the urban dweller a detached, "blasé" attitude that could lead to feelings of "worthlessness."[11] Imaginaries of urban alienation and isolation have gained renewed momentum in depictions of the postmodern urban landscape of late capitalism. Images of urban alienation and loneliness often employ a familiar contrast: interminable rows of housing blocks or apartments stacked on top of each other in high-rises towering into the sky, while an unending stream of people come and go. The solitary figure in the insulated apartment unit is, meanwhile, envisioned as an alienated urban dweller, one among countless anonymous others to whom s/he is a stranger with no kinship or other intimate identification. The intensified spatial proximity of densely populated urban landscapes heightens this imaginary of disconnect, while uneasy discourses surrounding new digital technologies and media warn of the ways these technologies may enhance disconnection among city dwellers.

Suggesting the loss of meaning and attachment, "the fluctuating postmodern city," as literary theorist Deborah Parsons writes, "risks becoming a signless place of directionless nomads"[12] in which "'we cross nothing to go nowhere.'"[13] Populated by what Marc Augé (1995) called "non-places,"[14] this conception of the "signless" city further evokes the supposedly homogenizing impact of global capital flows. In academic discourse, this idea also finds resonance in Saskia Sassen's notion of the global city, a model of urban development embodied in New York, London, and Tokyo.[15] The global city is conceived of as a node in de-territorialized flows of media, capital, and commodities—as a site of destabilization of local and national cultures—rather than as a place of localized production. Moreover, late capitalism is discussed as a destabilizing force that undermines the definitional power of older cultural systems of differentiation in a process that is informed by "institutionalized individualism,"[16] as well as by recurring efforts to salvage what is perceived as a more stable identity. Anxiety, then, not only arises from the potential lack of connection to a "signless" space and its alienated inhabitants, but also from the projection of an uncertain

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11 Simmel, "Metropolis and Mental Life," 415.

12 Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9.

13 Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 185–186, quoted in Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis,* 9.

14 Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity,* trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995).

15 Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1994).

16 Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002).

future, as the institutions through which residents previously used to understand themselves, appear unsettled.[17]

Such discourses are of course not without merit. They speak to changing socio-economic arrangements shaped by late capitalism and the new sets of uncertainties and contradictions this system produces, as it "requires its subjects, as *individuals*, to operate on hope, aspiration, and images of the good life while its financial, actuarial, and algorithmic instruments increasingly render us *dividuals* who are indexed by our profiles as bearers of risk, disease, debt, or dysfunction."[18] The discourse of the globalizing city makes important contributions to a theorization of the impact of a global capitalist system on urban landscapes; however, it tends to produce a view of urban development as dominated by a unified and unidirectional force, namely the law of capitalist globalization, that generates more or less identical sets of effects and problems in different cities around the world. Yet, as critics of this approach have convincingly argued, urban transformation takes place within the particularity of a specific, situated urban setting and, therefore, generates variable outcomes. For instance, in his discussion of Dubai, Chad Haines acknowledges that much of the city's spaces, such as gated communities and malls, may be seen as non-places.[19] At the same time, he notes the need "not to slip into free-floating notions of disconnected, alienated people and spaces," instead arguing that everyday lives, dreams, and contestations of urban dwellers are very much "grounded in territorialized spaces, defined by state projects as much as by global capital flows."[20] Thus, despite late capitalism's association with transnational flows, urban dwellers still experience its contradictory effects within the very concrete conditions of their specific urban settings.

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17 The cinematic language of Hollywood has often deployed the images of glassed high-rises in East Asian cities as backdrops for the visual dramatization of urban alienation (see, for example, the films *Lost in Translation* and *Babel*). Indeed, as Timothy Yu points out, European and North-American dystopian science fiction in literature and cinema has, from the 1970s onwards, routinely drawn on Orientalist tropes and signifiers to depict the dystopian city of the future. Fantasies of Asian cities are, Yu argues, used to displace "alienation and anxiety generated by the structures of global capitalism." Timothy Yu, "Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: 'Naked Lunch, Blade Runner,' and 'Neuromancer,'" *MELUS* 33, no. 4 (2008): 47. Urban studies and planning discourses have, meanwhile, popularized a dichotomy between so-called First World models and Third World megacities as sites of imminent catastrophe, crisis, and chaos. See, for example, Mike Davis's apocalyptic vision of megacities as "planet[s] of slums" in Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2007). Ananya Roy has thoroughly criticized this constellation, pointing towards the need to acknowledge the existence of multiple, different epistemologies of planning in cities of the Global South, see Ananya Roy, "Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71, no. 2 (2005).
18 Arjun Appadurai, "Moodswings in the Anthropology of the Emerging Future," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 2 (2016): 2; emphasis original.
19 Chad Haines, "Cracks in the Façade: Landscapes of Hope and Desire in Dubai," in *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global,* ed. Aihwa Ong and Ananya Roy (Np: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 161.
20 Haines, "Landscapes of Hope and Desire in Dubai," 162.

In India, the themes of urban alienation and strangeness are embedded in historical conventions of community and caste segregation, as well as in what Thomas Bloom Hansen has called an "overdetermination" of space.[21] Hansen argues that Simmel's writings presume an (at least somewhat) unmarked character of the city—"a context of relative visual homogeneity."[22] The South Asian city, on the other hand, is characterized by incessant practices of social inter-reading for a "recognizable set of diacritical marks that place strangers in a known category, and, thus, make it possible to place them in a hierarchy of social status and appropriateness".[23] Moreover, like other cities in which capitalism and neo-liberalization have contributed to an increase in competition and precarity, as well as to a shift towards consumer-citizenship, urban development in India is increasingly molded by elite residents' desires to control their social environment and recognize themselves in its landscape in an ever-narrowing sense.[24] Strategies to manage fears of the stranger and the desire for sameness have (as elsewhere) involved mobilizations against different categories of outsiders, such as diasporic populations and the urban poor, accompanied by a retreat into regulated environments of gated residential complexes that offer both privatized infrastructure and an exclusive mode of sociality.[25] While gated enclaves have been most prominently linked to new aesthetics of urban securitization and (upper-)middle-class fears of crime, literature on the Global South has highlighted the way these spaces also speak to desires of the affluent to detach themselves from local urban landscapes marred by an inefficiency of public services and a range of "nuisances," and to take part in globally projected elite lifestyles.[26] In the South Asian context, authors have, moreover, linked this shift towards self-organization to a "bourgeoisification" of Indian cities that prioritizes the interests of middle-class constituencies while abandoning collective responsibilities towards the marginalized and underprivileged sections of

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21 Thomas Bloom Hansen, "Strangers, Neighbours, and Political Order in the South Asian City," in *Interrogating India's Modernity: Democracy, Identity, and Citizenship*, ed. Surinder S. Jodhka and Dipankar Gupta (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

22 Hansen, "Strangers, Neighbours," 31.

23 Hansen, "Strangers, Neighbours," 28.

24 Lata Mani, "Sex and the Signal-Free Corridor. Towards a New Feminist Imaginary," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 6 (2014).

25 Gated residential enclaves are indeed part of a worldwide trend. See, for example, Teresa P.R. Caldeira, "Fortified Enclaves: The New Urban Segregation," in *Theorizing the City: The New Urban Anthropology Reader*, ed. Setha M. Low (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999) on Latin America; Steven Robins, "At the Limits of Spatial Governmentality: A Message from the Tip of Africa," *Third World Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2002) on South Africa; Christiane Brosius, "The Enclave Gaze: Images and Imaginaries of Neoliberal Lifestyle in New Delhi," in *Images That Move*, ed. Patricia Spyer and Mary Margaret Steedly (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2013) on India; Andrew Nelson, "Betrayed by the Neoliberal State, Neglected by the 'Jangali' Company: The Anxiety of Autonomy in an Elite Housing Colony in Kathmandu, Nepal," *City & Society* 29, no. 1 (2017) on Nepal.

26 Brosius, "Enclave Gaze," 76.

society.[27] Seclusion, securitization, and the reproduction of visual coherence in urban space have been described by Sharon Zukin as the "aestheticisation of an anti-urban lifestyle,"[28] decidedly opposed to visions of urban life in which trust among strangers might be built through social interdependence and solidarity. Rather than focusing solely on the dissolution of older forms of social integration and community, questions regarding urban alienation and the possibilities of empathy and connection in the city may then do well to engage in a discussion of current global trends involving the privatization of collective urban spaces. For my purpose, however, the more relevant point is that discussions of strangeness, of the (in)comprehensibility of space, and a potential lack of connection, must account for the embedded nature of such terms, as well as the distinct spaces and forces (including the state, labor regimes, cultural discourses, and local histories) that characterize the specific social environments in which they are experienced.

In the context of my research, such a consideration necessitates a look at the practices and modes through which middle-class women reach for a sense of place and belonging in a city marked by social segmentation and transnational flows. Delhi's shifting cultural geography as a site of commercial and cultural exchange is associated with the extension of value horizons that also offer new possibilities within the realm of gender and sexuality. Here, challenges can be mounted to the fixity of gendered role expectations, such as the idealized female identity of wifehood and motherhood. This could enable temporary deferment from, or, potentially, a more lasting modification and resistance to preexisting systems of regulation.[29] These changes are enabled in part by encounters with new sites and contexts, including university campuses and friendships. Such hopes are also entangled with consumerist markers that have come to define aspirational middle-class status in India.[30] Iconic images of singleness are now inspired by American television shows: the image of a solitary customer sitting in a café no longer reads as an emblematic picture of loneliness, as

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27 See Amita Baviskar, "Cows, Cars and Cycle-Rickshaws: Bourgeois Environmentalists and the Battle for Delhi's Streets," in *Elite and Everyman: the Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*, ed. Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray (London: Routledge, 2011); D. Asher Ghertner, "Nuisance Talk and the Propriety of Property: Middle Class Discourses of a Slum-Free Delhi," *Antipode* 44, no. 4 (2012); Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). The latter had been part of earlier Socialist visions of Indian city-life in the 1960s and 1970s; see Brosius, "Enclave Gaze."

28 Sharon Zukin, "Urban Lifestyles: Diversity and Standardisation in Spaces of Consumption," *Urban Studies* 35, no. 5–6 (1998): 836.

29 For a discussion of the gendered possibilities inherent in hybridized zones, see Michiko Mae, "Auf dem Weg zu einer transkulturellen Genderforschung," in *Transkulturelle Genderforschung: Ein Studienbuch zum Verhältnis von Kultur und Geschlecht*, ed. Michiko Mae and Britta Saal (Wiesbaden: VS, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007).

30 See Ritty A. Lukose, *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

long as it shows a young inner-city dweller, whose favored workplace is the local leather-couched coffee shop, as she types away while sipping a cappuccino. This new working culture was cited by my research participants as a sign that the city is now on par with the hip metropolitan centers around the world. Thriving on the creative energies of the young, particularly on their consumerist and entrepreneurial drives, the city finally appeared to be "freed" from conservative and more austere notions of city-life that had governed the Delhi of the past.

Possibilities of both female privacy and female participation in the city's social and economic life, however, remain heavily constrained by systems of containment and regulation designed to mitigate anxieties over cultural destabilization, which are often explicitly focused on gendered norms and perceptions of "immorality." On a national level, a movement towards religious conservatism has, moreover, accompanied urban changes, further circumscribing the possibilities women can make use of in the city.[31] Cultural discourses, for instance, formulate notions of "female respectability" as a prerequisite of middle-class identity and a mode of self-governance,[32] determining how "good" middle-class women ought to engage with the wider landscape of the city, which places they can legitimately be in, at what time, and in what kind of attire. Metropolitan femininity is, hereby, formulated as an attribute of the determined, respectable (upper-)middle-class woman, capable of handling multiple roles as a career woman, a respectable daughter, wife, and mother. While women's engagement with public space is certainly shaped by that which Hansen described as the multiple social codes prevalent in South Asian cities,[33] it is additionally affected by the experience of fear and the public discourse on women's safety. In this respect, single women living alone are deemed particularly vulnerable.[34] A safety discourse focused on containment and technological surveillance can be seen as further stifling middle-class women's participation in public life beyond the segregated and privatized spaces of consumption and work, even as recommended safety precautions tend to define the work of keeping oneself safe as a woman's own responsibility.

In summary, the context in which singlehood is lived in Delhi is far removed from imaginaries of a vast expanse of "signless" space and the supposedly de-territorializing forces of globalization. While the urban setting described above still suggests certain elements of fragmentation and

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31 See the essay by Sanjay Srivastava in this volume.
32 See Jyothsna Latha Belliappa, *Gender, Class and Reflexive Modernity in India* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Smitha Radhakrishnan, *Appropriately Indian: Gender and Culture in a New Transnational Class* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
33 Hansen, "Strangers, Neighbours."
34 This point is usually made with reference to common sense rather than statistics, as most gender-based crimes are still committed by perpetrators known to the victim rather than unknown intruders. See *Crime in India 2012 Statistics* (New Delhi: National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, June 2013).

withdrawal, themes of isolation, connection, and (in)dependence took on different, often unexpected expressions during my research. I now turn to a discussion of these alternatives and of what they may tell us about the inherent potentials suggested by a different conception of urban subjectivity.

Subjectivities of singleness

> *I didn't stay too long. I shared an auto-rickshaw with Tannistha,[35] she did all the price negotiations as usual. We talked about how people sometimes let their guard down a bit in autos and taxis, like they let go of their composure or are simply exhausted and can't hold out until they're home, although, of course, there is the driver to consider. We had to raise our voices above the onslaught of honking cars and speeding motorcycles. Then, there are enough reports on unsafe taxi rides too, though I haven't had too bad experiences myself. I used to be way more apprehensive about staying out too late or going back home on my own. I'm much more comfortable now. When I got home, I could hear Neha shout up to my apartment from her balcony, asking if I was alright. Tannistha soon messaged me to let me know she had got home alright too. Neha and I shared a night cap on the balcony and spotted a couple lying next to each other on a blanket on the patch of dried-up grass in the square park bordering our apartment block. The night might have veiled them in darkness, were it not for the orange-yellow glow of the streetlight allowing their rare display of public intimacy to be in full view. Every morning some boys play cricket in the same park. We often watch them from my window, while I make us coffee. (Notebook excerpt, 5th January, 2016)*

The women I worked with were acutely aware of the potential pitfalls of their "way of life," as it removed them from the social (and financial) security offered by the middle-class family or a marital home.[36] Whether these women had perceived the environment of the parental home as nurturing or oppressive (or a combination of both), it had at least supplied familiar coordinates of social belonging. In a context in which, despite women's increased visibility in public life, prolonged singlehood and solitary living can come to stand in for Westernized lifestyles and identities, transgressing the "safe" timetables and spaces dictated by social conventions could exacerbate this sense of risk and precarity. Experiences of judgement could trigger feelings of isolation and doubt, even as stigmas evoking immorality,

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35 All names used are pseudonyms.
36 My target group were working, middle-class women, mostly living alone (a small percentage lived in flat-shares), in the age group of twenty-five to forty years old.

selfishness, or pity could feel particularly wounding.[37] My research participants, moreover, felt that any hardships they faced were interpreted as direct consequences of having made unconventional choices, and, therefore, had to be shouldered (at least publicly) without complaint. The new transnational language celebrating single professional women as an embodiment of a new kind of empowered femininity also seemed to have ambivalent implications.[38] Several women indicated that this image in fact made it more difficult to address vulnerabilities and moments of doubt, as it had introduced a new type of shame—one associated with not being tough, self-sufficient, or empowered enough to satisfy the role of the independent and emancipated woman.

Yet, their struggles did not have to be shouldered alone. As women (and men) extend the period before marriage, or strike out in alternative trajectories, and live financially independent lives, friendships in particular gain new weight. In countless instances, my participants cited the value of friendships and newfound solidarities, or, as some called them, their "chosen families." These friends spent a great deal of time together—mostly in each other's apartments, going out together, or on occasional trips out of the city. Significantly, they all claimed that independent living had changed the nature of sociality in their lives. Not only could they participate more freely in these activities as they were removed from the social control of the family, but these friendships also formed important emotional as well as material support systems that were integral to managing life in the city. They exchanged resources, lent each other money, supplied contacts for work opportunities, and helped each other find housing. Having friends nearby could help dispel feelings of vulnerability. When a stranger had come to her front door in the middle of the night, one of my participants (a thirty-two-year-old documentary producer) had called her friend who lived nearby. When I asked her why she had not called the police, she commented, "I could call and police would have just come in some time, but I wanted to see someone I know, so that's why I called her and I wanted to feel protected, that's why I called her."

Friends were also involved in more elaborate plans of deception to circumvent social controls. Another of my participants (a twenty-eight-year-old shop assistant) was living with a boyfriend without her parents' knowledge. When I asked her what she did when her parents came to visit, she told me, "One of us crashes at a friend's place, that's how we do it here. Everyone deals with some kind of stuff from home and your friends help you out." A co-operative spirit, then, became a moral imperative among friends as a response to generational conflicts and fissures that were seen as affecting most people in the same age bracket—such as parents disapproving of their lifestyles, marital pressures, and stigmas surrounding

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37 See the essay by Kinneret Lahad in this volume.
38 See the introduction to this volume.

"alternative" ways of living beyond heteronormative conjugality.[39] The social pressures my respondents faced could intensify their dependency on each other as well as their reliance on reciprocity. In order to effectively extract themselves from authorities who would see their activities as morally transgressive, social groupings needed to share common value orientations. Many had met like-minded people through college or work, and they also stated that their own values and personal development had been fundamentally shaped by these interactions. As another participant (a thirty-year-old photographer) told me, "Friends are so important for how much you change in life. Of course, parents have brought you up, but then it's really who you are surrounded by later."

Given Delhi's disastrous reputation regarding women's safety, many women gravitated towards safety in numbers, traveling in groups, and coming up with informal security precautions, such as notifying each other when they had arrived home safely. Ordinary walks to the market or the park together could establish familiarity and comfort through modes of sociability in the open, serving to boost women's spatial confidence in male-dominated public spaces.

In the Indian context, friendship is often overlooked in favor of marital or familial relations, as relations of kin and community have historically structured social interactions and support networks.[40] In relation to consumer cultures, friendship is, moreover, often sketched as a temporary and unstable relation linked with individualism, and the seeking of temporary affiliation and excitement during adolescence.[41] Several of my respondents indeed expressed uncertainty about whether their friendships would remain as close later in life, especially as some might still get married and have children and, therefore, have less time on their hands. It should, moreover, be noted that friendships entail forms of peer regulation and can also depend on the individual's ability to participate in collective consumption and leisure activities, which require both financial resources as well as sufficient social and cultural capital to fit in. Nevertheless, friendships enabled singleness to become a space of greater autonomy and self-exploration, as they allowed individuals to contemplate alternative sites of social belonging beyond a dependency on a (male) partner or relative. Friendships and mutual care therefore became central modes through which belonging was established in the city. After all, as

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39 See Cari Costanzo Kapur, "Rethinking Courtship, Marriage, and Divorce in an Indian Call Center," in *Everyday Life in South Asia*, 2nd ed., ed. Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) for an example of how social networks formed in call-center workplaces help women to manage the difficult process of divorce.
40 Henrike Donner, *Domestic Goddesses: Maternity, Globalization and Middle-Class Identity in Contemporary India* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Patricia Uberoi ed., *Family, Kinship, and Marriage in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).
41 Nita Mathur ed., *Consumer Culture, Modernity and Identity* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2014).

Lauren Berlant writes, "intimacy builds worlds."[42] Indeed, it helped build spaces to nurture "unconventional" existences by establishing new, valued sites and relationships to "have 'a life.'"[43]

Another source of connection was provided by the city itself. Going out could offer a sense of release from the (at times) claustrophobic spaces of small one-bedroom apartments. Occupying common spaces of the city could be a source of great pleasure,[44] engendering a sense of participation and submersion in the currents of the city's public life.[45] The well-known environments of one's neighborhood could offer a shared sense of familiarity, like places in which shopkeepers knew your favorite cigarette brand and vegetable vendors kept you updated on seasonal goods, while roadside food stalls offered valued opportunities for public sociality. These single women then actively took part in the kind of convivial co-production that shapes a city's public social life, likely much more than previous generations of middle-class women, for whom engagement with public spaces was a more troubled and contested affair.[46]

Certainly, there were also lingering ambiguities and moments of doubt present in the narratives I listened to during my months of fieldwork in Delhi. While navigating the city and carving out spaces of belonging could generate a sense of participation, this connection remained somewhat brittle. Personal experiences of sexual harassment and intimidation restricted a sense of connection and trust in the city's public spaces. Through their experiences in the city, my interlocutors had become experts in navigating the various ways the body could be read in public (and in private too). This did not entail a strict list of dos and don'ts, but was situational, the outcome of flexible reassessments. It was, moreover, heavily dependent on the individual's socio-cultural location within categories of belonging, such as class, community, origin, religion, and caste. While traveling through the city, alone or in company, could be a daunting experience, this knowledge often came to inform a new sense of self-confidence. In our last interview, one of my respondents (the before-mentioned thirty-two-year-old documentary producer) told me, "Delhi makes you. People say Delhi is not a safe city for girls, but I think Delhi really makes you, the city really makes you strong in a true sense, in how a woman can conduct herself alone, while walking on the road and living alone. You know it's not easy, you've been in Delhi, it teaches you every single day!" In these instances, the panorama of dense urban habitation, so often viewed from the quiet vantage point of one of the many balconies and rooftop terraces that grace Delhi's

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42 Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 282.
43 Berlant, "Intimacy," 285.
44 Shilpa Phadke, "If Women Could Risk Pleasure: Reinterpreting Violence in Public Space," in *Nine Degrees of Justice: New Perspectives on Violence Against Women in India*, ed. Bishakha Datta (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010).
45 See also the chapters by Paromita Chakravarti and Shilpa Phadke in this volume.
46 Anne Waldrop and Sissel Egden, "Getting Behind the Walls and Fences: Methodological Considerations of Gaining Access to Middle-Class Women in Urban India," *Forum for Development Studies* 45, no. 2 (2018).

apartments as the day draws to a close, was not a sight that overwhelmed the beholder. Anonymity did not designate alienation and loneliness but rather new possibilities of self-worth, and of new connections with others and the wider social landscape of the city. With this image, I do not want to succumb to overly celebratory accounts of female singlehood. Rather, I want to highlight how single women handle multiple social relations in the complex cultural geography of the city they live in, and how these multiplicities inform their subjectivity. As young women and men move to cities for work and education, increased mobility, coupled with greater economic independence, and increased exposure to mass media have combined to create changes in middle-class social spheres and gendered attitudes—no doubt including significant impulses towards greater personal autonomy and individualization. Yet, these changes are crucially negotiated within local contexts and systems of meaning which do not altogether lose their relevance. As noted above, significant constraints, systems of regulation, and stigmas remain, and single women routinely encounter different forms of precarity. However, as the women I encountered tried to make sense of and negotiate their place in a changing world, they reached for new forms of recognition and affiliation, and modes of gendered disciplining, though certainly constraining, remained partial and incomplete. The sense of self that my interlocutors articulated, appeared adept at forming and managing multiple social relations, attachments, and spatial belonging.

Ethics of interdependence and inter-relationality

What might this mean for a discussion on subjectivities of singleness, of images of isolation and excessive individualism? Many of the observations above echo postmodern concepts of subjectivity (such as the "hybrid" or the "nomadic" subject), which, in an effort to counter essentialist conceptions, aim to acknowledge the heterogeneity of human experiences, attachments, and desires. In Rosi Braidotti's terms, a "nomadic" subject reveals a "non-unitary and multi-layered vision, as a dynamic and changing entity"[47] that "actively yearns for and constructs itself in complex and internally contradictory webs of social relations."[48] Such concepts indeed reflect the diversity of attachments I encountered as well as the modes in which unified systems of regulation were continuously disrupted. While recognizing the need to blur the unitary bonds of sex, race, class, and nation, the "hybrid" subject of postmodernity, however, runs the danger of suggesting a radical focus on the self, potentially producing, as Leela Gandhi puts it, a "crippling solipsism," thereby hampering a positive reconstruction

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47 Rosi Braidotti, "Writing as a Nomadic Subject," *Comparative Critical Studies* 11, no. 2–3 (2014): 176–177.
48 Rosi Braidotti, "Writing as a Nomadic Subject," 181.

of the social fabric.[49] Gandhi argues that the subject of postmodernism, with its evocation of polymorphous desire, represents a subjectivity of relative social privilege and affluence that "is encouraged to approach the world / social fabric simply as the source of her enjoyment,"[50] and therefore, gravitate towards an "ethics of excess."[51]

However, the narratives of sociability and emplacement I listened to are much more relational in nature, reflecting a deep-seated mutuality and an openness to acknowledge fundamental vulnerabilities and dependencies. They resonated with the kinds of selfhood portrayed in the work of urban sociologist Martina Löw, who wrote one of the first studies on women living alone in Germany.[52] Löw found echoes of her participants' experiences and practices in a Foucauldian culture of the self, particularly in its description of a form of self-care which is used as a crucial basis for sociality. This type of self-care simultaneously valorized the time spent alone as well as the practices of exchange and attention given to society (in fact, it saw the first as a precondition for the latter). The forms of individualism and sociality observed by Löw were, moreover, enabled by a specifically gendered subjectivity: young women are trained to exercise different modes of care as a part of childhood socialization. Capacities to manage different social relationships, and to tolerate uncertainty and tension, thereby become part of feminine identity construction. My aim here is not to imply the merit of naturalized constructions of feminine emotionality or to reinforce the image of women's innate giving nature, which are often used to justify their supposed suitability for nurturing roles in paid and unpaid labor. Rather, I suggest that the practices I encountered contained attempts to link an awareness of one's own fragility and vulnerability with the ability to build empathy and connect with others in ways that could underscore (emotional) dependency over notions of self-sufficiency. This seemed particularly tied to a context in which young women found themselves "humbled" by being in conflict with established social expectations and having to forge new and unsettling paths.[53] Moreover, their engagement with the urban landscape, as described earlier, demonstrates that the city, rather than promoting only excessive individualism, can itself offer possibilities of connection that challenge city dwellers to contemplate "[w]hat kinds of constraints are integral to our interdependence and inter-relationality and thus in need of being woven into our conception of freedom and choice."[54]

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49 Leela Gandhi, "Friendship and Postmodern Utopianism," *Cultural Studies Review* 9, no. 1 (2003): 14.

50 Gandhi, "Friendship and Postmodern Utopianism," 13.

51 Gandhi, "Friendship and Postmodern Utopianism," 14.

52 Martina Löw, "'Ich sorge für mich selbst.' Alleinwohnende Frauen und die Kunst der Existenz," *Zeitschrift für Frauenforschung* 12, no. 1–2 (1994).

53 See also Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004) on the recognition of vulnerability, not as a disparagement of the self, but as a necessary precondition for the establishment of ethical relationships.

54 Mani, "Signal-Free Corridor," 29.

These observations may trouble the images of alienation and disconnect I described at the beginning of this essay, though it might be questioned whether they have any implications for the political and ethical possibilities the city's social life may harbor. It is critical to remember that many of the affiliations, friendships, attachments, and the elective communities city dwellers seek out, for the most part enact a search for sameness—for association with others of similar sexual, intellectual, and political alignment. The pull of similitude privileges the capacity to form empathetic relationships only with those proximate to one's own social group, thereby undermining the ethical and political commitments to the community.[55] The political potential of community requires the subject to acquire an openness to forms of sociality that allow for unpredictable interactions that, in turn, estrange the subject from her "own" domain, thereby "exacerbating the condition of its insufficiency."[56] While these are crucial limitations to keep in mind when looking at new affiliations and the possibilities for wider (political) solidarities in the city, it is important to remember that many of those coming to big cities to form new friendships, attachments, and communities often do so having escaped (or having been cast out from) what was once "their own."[57] In the city, as Richard Sennett wrote of a potentially modern sense of place, they are therefore inevitably encouraged to "expose, acknowledge and address the discordant parts of themselves and one another."[58] Though friendships can certainly reaffirm old norms and categories of difference, they can also be central to unlocking this potential of the city as a site of new recognitions and hopeful subversions. Grounded in a recognition of dependency, mutuality, and vulnerability, friendships offer a degree of dynamism, potentially enabling new, unexpected interactions across difference that may gradually extend the reach of empathy beyond those closest in taste and disposition to ourselves.

While engaging similar themes of friendship, mutuality, and vulnerability, the last section of this essay shifts towards an interrogation of these terms as central experiences characterizing both the practice of fieldwork and the subjectivity of the researcher. I argue that friendship, dependency, and vulnerability, as modes of relating to one another, should

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55 Drawing on Derrida's politics of friendship, Gandhi proposes that the renegotiation of subjectivity and community could be tackled via the trope of "guest-friendship," a conception of friendship that explicitly involves a love and an openness for what is foreign, "strange." This idea, she continues, represents a fundamentally utopian concept, as it necessarily takes the form of a deferred friendship: "a utopian mentality shows the way forward to a genuine cosmopolitanism, always open to the risky arrival of those not quite, not yet, covered by the privileges which secure our identity and keep us safe." Gandhi, "Friendship and Postmodern Utopianism," 19.

56 Gandhi, "Friendship and Postmodern Utopianism," 19.

57 See Lucetta Kam's chapter in this volume for an equally valid argument that mobility itself can be seen as a privilege not everyone can afford.

58 Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 354.

not be regarded as drawbacks hampering scientific objectivity. Rather, they can themselves be seen as methodologies that have the potential to decolonize and pluralize knowledge production.[59] In keeping with (feminist) scholarship which is increasingly exploring new modes of collaboration and co-authorship in order to "trouble diverse spaces and positions from where knowledge is made, mobilized,...and remade,"[60] working with friendship underscores our multiple accountabilities, as well as the different kinds of vulnerabilities that arise out of our unequal social locations. I argue that in an interconnected world, these cues prove vital to the making of new feminist alliances across borders and fields of practice.

The subjectivity of the researcher and the feminist possibilities of fieldwork

A significant part of anthropological fieldwork, and its core methodology of participant observation, rely on the modalities of friendship. Participant observation functions as a form of intimate emplacement, "a *long-term* intimate engagement with *a group of people* that were once *strangers to us* in order to know and experience the world through their perspectives and actions in as *holistic* a way as possible."[61] Participant observation "moves along with," suggesting the need for both proximity and time. Its principle relies on the prospect of getting to know people intimately, engaging in daily habits and routines, in an effort to understand how people apprehend their social worlds, and how meanings are continuously embedded and reproduced in everyday life. Immersion is seen as an essential component to understanding people's actions within their specific context. The intimacies of fieldwork as long-term engagement involve experiences of instability and rupture; they contain many emotional states, such as happiness, frustrations, and tensions. As the women I worked with helped me to slowly become acquainted with the city, the lessons I learnt were not only illuminating for my research, but also had implications for my own decisions concerning everyday mobility in the city. My own body, its markers of social class, age, gender, ethnicity, and nationality also defined my experience of the city and the interactions I had while out and about. I learnt

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59 Priti Ramamurthy recently highlighted this potential in a lecture delivered at the RC21 conference in Delhi. See Priti Ramamurthy, "'Delhi' of Dostis (Friends): What Kind of Brotherhood?" (Antipode RC21 Lecture, presented at the International Sociological Association Research Committee on Urban and Regional Development annual conference, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, India, September 2019). Drawing on her work on friendships among working-class male migrants in Delhi, she argues that working with friendship unsettles some of anthropology's predetermined foci, such as its "obsession" with kinship.
60 Richa Nagar, Özlem Aslan, Nadia Z. Hasan, Omme-Salma Rahemtullah, Nishant Upadhyay, and Begüm Uzun, "Feminisms, Collaborations, Friendships: A Conversation," *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 2 (2016): 507.
61 Alpa Shah, "Ethnography? Participant Observation, a Potentially Revolutionary Praxis," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (2017): 51, emphasis original.

about the many forms of embodied knowledge involved in ordinary navigation and dwelling in the city, through the sociality of fieldwork—the many transport rides that shuttled us across the city of Delhi, countless joint excursions, shared moments of elation and surprise, discomfort, and tiredness. There are inevitable vulnerabilities that emerge out of unfamiliar surroundings—vulnerabilities that are often compensated by those nearby. My interlocutors yelled at auto-drivers who had overcharged me or the men who had brushed up against me on the street.[62] In one instance, friends made sure I got home safely and had the chance to see a doctor when I had suddenly felt dizzy at one of the biggest student protests, surrounded by thousands of people, in central Delhi. In this way, research participants became friends, and emotional trials were negotiated together. Among many movements in and out of the field, becoming accustomed to the new rhythm of a place, and settling into a shared daily life, I was dependent on the ways others accepted me into their social worlds, as well as their help, whether in material or emotional forms, for coping in a new environment. "[O]ver time," Alpa Shah writes, "we will be profoundly intimate with the people we study, sometimes become kin, certainly no longer strangers, and will be able to maintain that productive-but-difficult tension between involvement and detachment as friends and scholars."[63]

At the same time, proximity and the privilege of being accepted into others' daily lives also entail a set of ethical commitments on behalf of the researcher. These are especially poignant in the context of anthropological fieldwork, in which research outcomes may depend on the creation of various forms of intimacy, trust, and empathy, and the relationship between researchers.[64] Moreover, field research demands a degree of abstraction in order to be able to question what is taken for granted and to relate practices to larger contexts of social and historical formations. Regarding these simultaneous processes of immersion and estrangement that accompany fieldwork, anthropologist Didier Fassin states that "[t]he combination of presence and distance thus has the consequence that familiarity is never devoid of alienation."[65] Despite feeling pleased with how my fieldwork was going, I had to ask myself what to make of such measures of closeness and distance. How could I address the way my own (gendered) bodily and emotional states shaped the fieldwork experience and the knowledge it

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62 In a context where women's access to public space is challenged, the drawbacks of being a female researcher include threats of harassment, increased surveillance, or restrictions on mobility.

63 Shah, "Participant Observation, a Revolutionary Praxis," 51.

64 Feminist scholarship has made significant contributions to highlighting the ethical complexities of such relationships, noting how demands for scientific detachment can result in objectifying and exploitative relationships. See, for instance, Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Ann Oakley, "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms," in *Doing Feminist Research*, ed. Helen Roberts (London: Routledge, 1981).

65 Didier Fassin, *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), xii.

produced, without overburdening the narrative and taking away from the different worlds of risk other women are exposed to? Most importantly, how could I practice genuine accountability towards my friends and inter-locutors? Central to these commitments were certainly transparency and reciprocity. I made an effort to always state my research objectives explic-itly and offer my own personal information in order to enter into a more reciprocal flow of information. The women I maintained long-term rela-tionships with frequently made off-hand references to my study. When I was staying next door to one of my participants, who had become a close friend, she jokingly told a common friend, "She's living right at the source now. I'm basically on-tap." She quickly assured me that she did not mind the occasional question; we often spoke about my progress, and I prom-ised to share my work, once finished. Still, I continue to struggle with my accountabilities towards those who shared their time with me and to grap-ple with the fraught politics of representation in my writing practice. I have to routinely check my notes to establish what was shared in what context, so as not to breach anyone's trust. How peculiar it is now, after the field-work has ended, to analytically dissect friends' lives, or to discuss insight gained from them, at conferences.[66] These thoughts sharpen my commit-ment to representational fidelity, to be true to my fieldwork experience and to what our conversations and my reflection have led me to believe. I wish to account for the complex and intricate terrains of other people's lives, which are interminable and most importantly, irreducible. Flattening them out by turning them into objects of case studies would, as Tim Ingold put it, constitute a betrayal.[67] There is, moreover, a need to acknowledge that the stories the researcher hears in the field, are themselves transient. They are, after all, the kind of fluctuating stories we tell ourselves about ourselves at different junctures in time. The sharing of friendship and trust during fieldwork, therefore, most crucially underscores a responsibility to continuously interrogate the issues of authorship and representation in knowledge production.

Due to their intensity and affectivity, research encounters themselves could then constitute a dislodging that could be seen as a "nomadic shift," "a creative sort of becoming… that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction, experience and knowledge."[68] The intensity of interactions in the field confronts the researcher with her own dependencies and accustoms her to what Daniel Miller described as the

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66 See Asha L. Abeyasekera, "Ethics and the 'Indigenous' Anthropologist: The Use of Friendship in Ethnographic Fieldwork," in *Sage Research Methods Cases Part 1*, ed. Nathan Emmerich (London: SAGE, 2017) for the similar, if not more complex, questions that the indigenous anthropologist faces when she works with friend-ships that predate fieldwork.

67 Tim Ingold, "Anthropology Contra Ethnography," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (2017).

68 Braidotti, "Writing as a Nomadic Subject," 182.

"humbling experience of ethnography."[69] As a form of sympathetic listening, this "humbling" ideally contributes to a more receptive state of empathetic proximity, forcing us to fully recognize the co-dependency of knowledge production, while simultaneously reminding the researcher/writer of the various structures (capitalist, patriarchal, [neo]colonial, racialized, etc.) she is herself embedded in.[70] This understanding of scientific subjectivity as a self-questioning one that recognizes its ethical accountabilities, as well as the contextual nature of the researcher's beliefs, enables knowledge to become pluralized, defying expectations and prefigured assumptions.[71]

The need to interrupt the mostly unacknowledged universalization of parochial (Eurocentric) theoretical paradigms has been well-established within feminist scholarship. The task to continuously re-examine categories of feminist scholarship is particularly pertinent due to feminism's "dual character as both an *analytical* and a *politically prescriptive* project."[72] In a similar vein, Marilyn Strathern argues in *Before and After Gender* that the aims of Western notions of feminism cannot be separated from the culturally specific conceptions of personhood prevalent in Western societies, in which the gendered inequalities they seek to address, are grounded.[73] I take from this a need to remain attentive to culturally and historically formed images of emancipation and resistance so as to review my own understanding of ideology, and to the fact that the terms of feminist projects are not universal but rooted in particular intellectual traditions. Saba Mahmood concludes that it is not enough to be "faithful to the desires and aspirations of 'my informants' and [urges her] audience to 'understand and respect' the diversity of desires that characterizes our world today."[74] Rather, she argues for the need to highlight that "the political project of feminism is not predetermined but needs to be continually negotiated

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69 Daniel Miller, "Anthropology is the Discipline but the Goal is Ethnography," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (2017): 30.

70 See Nagar, Aslan, Hasan, Rahemtullah, Upadhyay, and Uzun, "Feminisms, Collaborations, Friendships."

71 This understanding also stands in stark contrast to what Gillian Rose called a "social-scientific masculinity." Rose describes this masculinity as one that "peers into the world, denying its own positionality, mapping its spaces in the same manner in which Western white male bodies explored, recorded, surveyed and appropriated spaces from the sixteenth century onwards: from a disembodied location free from sexual attack or racist violence." Gillian Rose, "Women and Everyday Spaces," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), 365. She goes on to quote Donna Haraway's description of the "'West's' escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space." Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 151, quoted in Rose, "Women and Everyday Spaces," 365.

72 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 10, emphasis original.

73 Marilyn Strathern, *Before and After Gender: Sexual Mythologies of Everyday Life* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2016).

74 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 38.

within specific contexts."[75] There is great potential in an open-ended inquiry into the variety of "empirical workings of gender" to dismantle the "hubris of much contemporary politics, which, in sublime ignorance of the past, not only naturalizes the present but limits the possibilities of the future."[76]

Finally, a question that remains unanswered is how to address the conditions brought about by intensified globalized cultural exchange, international migrations, transnational mass media, and consumer cultures, amid varied processes of local translations and re-interpretation.[77] In short, the question is how to investigate the constitution of gender difference under conditions of interconnected lifeworlds, "[f]or somewhere along the way, the meaning of 'struggle' and 'fight' as well as that of 'difference' and 'others' and 'us' have all transformed beyond recognition."[78] The challenge is no longer to render the unknown understandable but to recognize the multiplicity and entanglement of cultural configurations. There is a need, then, to examine the mutability of cultural categories under conditions of cultural change, while simultaneously highlighting internal heterogeneity and diversity. Cities, in this regard, can be seen as spaces of intense deconstruction and redefinition, yet they also demonstrate the persistence of gendered orders and their reconstitution under new conditions of globalized consumer capitalism. These developments have further implications for the ethics of feminist research and writing.[79] They call for a style of writing in which ethnographic co-presence is preserved and the sensibility of participant observation, as a mode of correspondence intent on understanding yet recognizing the researchers' positionality, is accounted for. We may tie these requirements to existing formulations of feminist writing practices that do not claim to speak *for*, but to speak on the basis of inquiries and reflection, in order to arrive at a dialogue that others can respond to (see, for instance, Audre Lorde's notion of "responsible writing"[80] and Trinh T. Minh-ha on "speaking nearby"[81]). Moreover, in order to mount challenges to the status quo and to create possibilities

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75 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 38.
76 Mrinalini Sinha, "A Global Perspective on Gender: What's South Asia Got to Do with It?" In *South Asian Feminisms: Contemporary Interventions*, ed. Ania Loomba and Ritty A. Lukose (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 370–371.
77 As Braidotti writes, "one of the features of our present historical condition is the shifting grounds on which periphery and center confront each other, with a new level of complexity which defies dualistic or oppositional thinking." Braidotti, "Writing as a Nomadic Subject," 180; see also Mae, "Auf dem Weg zu einer transkulturellen Genderforschung."
78 Annemarie Mol, "Differences within: Feminism and Us," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 3 (2016): 406.
79 They also demand a redressal of power imbalances within academia, and the facilitation of a greater degree of exchange, as well as a reallocation of resources to other modes of knowledge-making that reach other audiences.
80 Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983).
81 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Georgetown University Press, 1989).

for dissenting and diverging voices to be heard, we need to formulate our arguments out of engagement between interconnected realms. As forms of relational sociality that force us to critically confront our vulnerabilities and accountabilities, the modalities of friendship may well guide us in such a project to generate "situated solidarities across locations,"[82] which ask us "to recognize and share our most tender and fragile moments, our memories and mistakes in moments of translation, in moments of love."[83] Correspondence, interdependency, and engagement with difference are, after all, creative processes that challenge us to respond more adequately to changing conditions and imagine new (political) possibilities.

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82 Nagar, Aslan, Hasan, Rahemtullah, Upadhyay, and Uzun, "Feminisms, Collaborations, Friendships," 514.
83 Nagar, Aslan, Hasan, Rahemtullah, Upadhyay, and Uzun, "Feminisms, Collaborations, Friendships," 514.

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Penn Tsz Ting Ip 🅳 and Jeroen de Kloet 🅳

The Precarity of Trust: Domestic Helpers as "Working-Singles" in Shanghai

Abstract   In this chapter, we analyze the working conditions of domestic helpers *(ayi)* and coin the term "working-single" to refer to their affective experiences in laboring in the private urban households, where they are being isolated, and, arguably, alienated. Whether married or not, the *ayi* usually lives a single life in the city. Focusing on the ways in which *ayis* build trust with their employers, we present an ethnographic study of *ayis* in Shanghai, based on nineteen interviews. We begin by outlining the reasons why rural-to-urban migrant women have chosen to work as *ayis*. Then, we follow Arlie R. Hochschild's theorization of "emotion work" and emotional labor to explore the tactics that Shanghai domestic helpers use to gain their employers' trust. Three main tactics are identified: honesty, professionalism, and care. These tactics enable *ayis* to attain moments of agency and create a sense of reciprocal intensity that shapes the production of emotional labor as well as the employer–employee relationship. We argue that the *ayi*–urban employer relationship is dynamic and intense. In this sense, the process of trust-building should be reconsidered as a power game in the context of rural migrant women's job security and work safety.

Keywords   domestic workers; emotion work; care; reciprocity

> *In the beginning, I was not used to it. I was shy. Also,*
> *some people guard against (fang 防) you. (Yaoyao*
> *Ayi, thirty-seven years old, Henan, part-time)*[1]

Yaoyao Ayi, a domestic helper in Shanghai, shared with us that some of her employers have the tendency to *fang* her, meaning that they act as if they were guarding against a theft. In China, there is a common phrase that runs as follows: "one should never anticipate to do harm to others, yet one shall guard against the harm others might do to one" (*hairen zhixin bukeyou; fangren zhixin bukewu* 害人之心不可有，防人之心不可无). The domestic helpers we interviewed repeatedly mentioned that their employers *fang* them. This gesture of mistrust makes it more difficult for them to do their work.

Central to this chapter are the lived experiences of the domestic helpers in Shanghai, culturally called "aunties" (*ayis* 阿姨), and the ways they manage to build trust in a climate of mistrust. As reported by *China Credit*, the president of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Xi Jinping frames the domestic service industry as a "sunrise industry" that plays a crucial role in the development of the care economy. However, the industry is facing problems, for instance, the lack of standardization and legal restrictions, which require governmental attention to protect the workers' safety and rights.[2] *Ayis* are forced to deal with the problem of mistrust of their employers, who might perceive them as potential thieves or sexual seducers.[3] In some extreme cases, domestic helpers endure sexual abuse and violence when working in the employers' homes.[4]

In this chapter, we analyze the working conditions of domestic helpers and coin the term "working-single" to refer to their affective experiences in laboring in the private urban households, where they are being isolated, and arguably alienated. Mindful of the fact that rural migrant women commonly work in the cities without the company of their spouses and children,[5] we also aspire to broaden the term "working-single" to incorporate married women living away from their husbands and / or children. This "working-single" status contributes to the precarity and fragility of the

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1   Biographical information about domestic workers is presented following the sequence of their family name, age, and hometown, together with their job type, and the family type of their employers. All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are by the authors.

2   Mengyu Liu刘梦雨, "The Ecology of Household 'Trust': A Record of Promoting the Standardization of Domestic Service Industry in China家政'信'生态——我国推动家政服务业规范化标准化发展纪实," *China Credit* 中国信用, no. 2 (2020).

3   Arianne M. Gaetano, *Out to Work: Migration, Gender, and the Changing Lives of Rural Women in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015); Wanning Sun, *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

4   Mei Cong, "A Study of Domestic Helpers' Social Support Challenges 家政女工的社会支持问题研究." (M.A. diss., University of Jinan, 2019).

5   Penn Tsz Ting Ip and Esther Peeren, "Exploiting the Distance between Conflicting Norms: Female Rural-to-Urban Migrant Workers in Shanghai Negotiating Stigma around Singlehood and Marriage," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5–6 (2019).

trust-relationship with the employers.[6] How do *ayis* build a sense of trust in low-trust familial workplaces? How do they navigate the social and sexual politics in private home spaces? How do they behave and perform domestic labor under the suspicious gazes of their demanding employers?

Focusing on the ways in which *ayis* build trust with their employers, we present an ethnographic study of *ayis* in Shanghai. This chapter begins by outlining the reasons why rural-to-urban migrant women have chosen to work as *ayis*. Then, we follow Arlie R. Hochschild's theorization of "emotion work"[7] and emotional labor[8] to explore the tactics that Shanghai domestic helpers use in order to perform emotional labor to gain their employers' trust. Three main tactics are identified: honesty, professionalism, and care. First, *ayis* express their sense of honesty to gain trust through verbal language and bodily gestures.[9] Second, *ayis* employ professionalism in the form of "face-work"[10] to build trust with their employers. Third, *ayis* perform care, an attribute essential to carrying out emotional labor and building a trust relationship with their urban employers. Focusing on the tactics they employ to build trust in low-trust workplaces, we explore and illustrate the ways in which these strategies enable *ayis* to attain moments of agency and create a sense of reciprocal intensity that shapes the production of emotional labor as well as the employer–employee relationship. Based on our analysis, we argue that the *ayi*–urban employer relationship is dynamic and intense. In this sense, the process of trust-building should be reconsidered as a power game in the context of rural migrant women's job security and work safety.

Certain scholars have pointed out that domestic helpers and their employers are situated in a reciprocal social relationship similar to that of lords and servants. Historically, as Esther Peeren proposes, "while servants are dependent on their masters, the reverse is also true: masters need their servants both for assistance with practical everyday matters and to maintain their social status."[11] Following Peeren,[12] we stress the reciprocity of the employer–employee relationship: *ayis* are not easily replaceable, unlike factory girls or waitresses, because employers have no choice but to put their trust in the employed domestic helpers, a process that takes time and requires affective labor on the part of the helpers. In the sociocultural context, *ayis* are generally portrayed as sexual seducers by China's media,[13]

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6   See, for example, Arlie R. Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1983] 2012).
7   Arlie R. Hochschild, "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure," *American Journal of Sociology* 85, no. 3 (1979).
8   Hochschild, *Managed Heart*.
9   Cecilia Wee, "Xin, Trust, and Confucius' Ethics," *Philosophy East and West* 61, no. 3 (2011).
10 Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967).
11 Esther Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 87.
12 Peeren, *Spectral Metaphor*.
13 Sun, *Maid in China*.

and therefore these working women have to trust that their (male) employ-ers are decent gentlemen (*zhengrenjunzi* 正人君子) who would not sexu-ally harass or abuse them. Conversely, they must convince their female employers that they can be trusted with their husbands. Unlike factory girls, waitresses, or beauty service workers, *ayis* are forced to deal with spa-tial isolation in the workplace that renders them precarious and puts them at risk of sexual harassment, abuse, and violence. Whereas the Chinese mass media predominantly neglects the precarity of the female rural–urban migrant domestic helpers, this chapter explores how these women find ways to work with their demanding employers. We have chosen to focus on the rural-to-urban migrant women in the study because they are considered as a particularly vulnerable and unstable group, being part of the "floating population," referring to the ways rural migrants cannot settle in the cities and have to travel between their rural homes and the urban workplaces.[14] Because the urban middle class tends to exhibit higher levels of pride and prejudice, and thereby discriminate against rural migrants, the means through which the rural-to-urban domestic helpers build trust with the employers in Shanghai, are more challenging and precarious.

This chapter builds on a qualitative study involving fieldwork research conducted in Shanghai between September and December 2014, between May and July 2015, and in October 2016, by one of the authors, Penn Tsz Ting Ip. During her fieldwork, she conducted in-depth inter-views with nineteen domestic helpers working in Shanghai. To establish a more comprehensive understanding of the domestic service industry (*jiazheng fuwuye* 家政服务), the researcher also conducted an in-depth interview with a thirty-year-old businesswoman, Madam Ma from Zheji-ang, who owns a domestic service company in Shanghai. In addition, the researcher interviewed two women—one from Shanghai and one from Hong Kong—both of whom had hired domestic helpers in Shanghai, to obtain a sense of employers' experiences of employing *ayis* in their homes. Altogether, twenty-two interviews were conducted, twenty of which were audio-recorded after obtaining consent from the interviewees. For the two interviews without audio recordings, detailed notes were taken during the interview. The research participants, aged from thirty-seven to fifty-four at the time of their interviews, were asked to use pseudonyms for themselves during their interviews in order to protect their privacy.

Trust, face-work, and emotional labor in performing domestic service

Historically, domestic helpers were of lower social rank in the Chinese com-munity and worked for rich families. This changed after the Communist Party took over control in 1949. As Hairong Yan writes,

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14 Sun, *Maid in China*.

After 1949, domestic workers were no longer called by any of the old terms for servants. The early classical terms *baomu* (保姆—literally, "protecting mother") and, alternatively, *ayi* (literally, "auntie") became categorical terms for all domestic helpers regardless of their specific responsibilities... In both the Mao and post-Mao eras, rural migrant women were the main source for domestic workers.[15]

Despite their associations with family life, according to Yan,[16] *ayi* or *baomu* still became degrading terms for rural-to-urban domestic helpers. In the present as well, rural women in China travel from rural regions to the cities to do the "dirty work" of supporting the economic growth of urban China.[17] This phenomenon, embedded within social inequality, is constituted by the rural–urban divide under the household registration (*hukou* 户口) system.[18] Generally, rural women are considered to be of "low quality" (*suzhidi* 素质低) by the urban population.[19] This creates a precarious situation in which rural women must contend with discrimination in urban homes and grapple with the everyday problems created by mistrust.[20] Hence, Wen and

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15 Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 19.

16 Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*, 19.

17 For the conception of "dirty work," see Bridget Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work? The Global Politics of Domestic Labour* (London: Zed Books, 2000).

18 Penn Tsz Ting Ip, "Desiring Singlehood? Rural Migrant Women and Affective Labour in the Shanghai Beauty Parlour Industry," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4 (2017).

19 Ann Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi)," *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004).

20 This situation is not unique to China. For example, foreign domestic helpers are of paramount importance for the working population of Hong Kong and face severe discrimination. See Adam Ka-lok Cheung and Lake Lui, "Hiring Domestic Help in Hong Kong: The Role of Gender Attitude and Wives' Income," *Journal of Family Issues* 38, no. 1 (2017); Nicole Constable, "Jealousy, Chastity, and Abuse: Chinese Maids and Foreign Helpers in Hong Kong," *Modern China* 22, no. 4 (1996); Nicole Constable, "Sexuality and Discipline among Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong," *American Ethnologist* 24, no. 3 (1997); Nicole Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Julian M. Groves and Lake Lui, "The 'Gift' of Help: Domestic Helpers and the Maintenance of Hierarchy in the Household Division of Labour," *Sociology* 46, no. 1 (2012); Hans J. Ladegaard, "Demonising the Cultural Other: Legitimising Dehumanisation of Foreign Domestic Helpers in the Hong Kong Press," *Discourse, Context and Media* 2, no. 3 (2013). Globally, migrants from the Global South perform "unwanted household tasks" or what is known as "dirty work" for families in the Global North. See Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work*; Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie R. Hochschild, "Introduction," to *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, ed. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie R. Hochschild (New York: Metropolitan Press, 2002); Pei-Chia Lan, *Global Cinderellas: Migrant Domestics and Newly Rich Employers in Taiwan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Helma Lutz, *The New Maids: Transnational Women and the Care Economy* (London: Zedbooks, 2011); see also Rosie Cox, *The Servant Problem: Domestic Employment in a Global Economy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Leslie Salzinger, "A Maid by Any Other Name: The Transformation of 'Dirty Work' by Central American Immigrants," in *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*,

Wang write, "The negative perceptions held by urbanites and migrants toward each other, the consequent hostility and mistrust between the two, and a persistently segregated economy and labor market for migrants jointly work their way to pose a real challenge for migrants to socialize with urbanites on a friendly and equal footing."[21]

Wanning Sun shows that urban residents in China often find themselves caught in a situation where they feel they cannot trust their maids (*baomu* 保姆), yet have to put them in charge of their household, which involves a great degree of intimacy, responsibility, and confidentiality.[22] The specific nature of the job performed by *baomu* puts migrant women in "the boundaries of the public and the private, the paid and the unpaid, and those of the family."[23] Sun vividly criticizes mainstream newspapers for depicting the *baomu* negatively, for example, as stealing money from their urban employers, being negligent of the babies in their care, or seducing the man of the household.[24] Due to this bias in media representation, "migrant women—cast in the light of difference, however sympathetically—suffer a reproduction of their deprivation that is both social and discursive."[25]

This chapter conceptualizes trust in relation to domestic service work and Erving Goffman's "face-work."[26] Hence, before analyzing how *ayis*, as working-singles, affectively negotiate trust in such a difficult—if not hostile—environment, it is crucial to reflect on the notion of trust itself. Building up trust is a slow process that involves both a verbal as well as a performative dimension. It requires speech acts in which one expresses trust to another, but it also requires movements, behavioral patterns, and gestures through which trust is articulated.[27] The performative dimension

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ed. Michael Burawoy, Alice Burton, Ann Arnett Ferguson, and Kathryn J. Fox (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

21 Ming Wen and Guixin Wang, "Demographic, Psychological, and Social Environmental Factors of Loneliness and Satisfaction among Rural-to-Urban Migrants in Shanghai, China," *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 50, no. 2 (2009): 155–182. https://www.doi.org/10.1177/0020715208101597.

22 Wanning Sun, "Indoctrination, Fetishization, and Compassion: Media Constructions of the Migrant Woman," in *On the Move: Women and Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China*, ed. Arianne Gaetano and Tamara Jacka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 117.

23 Sun, "Media Constructions of the Migrant Woman," 117.

24 Sun, "Media Constructions of the Migrant Woman," 117.

25 Sun, "Media Constructions of the Migrant Woman," 125.

26 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*.

27 Interestingly, in Confucian ideology, integrity (*xin* 信) is one of the five virtues of the gentleman. Baiyun Gong, Xin He, and Huei–Min Hsu, "Guanxi and Trust in Strategic Alliances," *Journal of Management History* 19, no. 3 (2013): 363. According to Cecilia Wee, "One significant feature of *xin*, suggested by the character itself, is that *xin* is primarily concerned with speech acts. The character is comprised of a radical, *ren* 人, linked to *yan* 言, speech. This suggests that the person with *xin* (the 'trustworthy person') is one who does as she has said she would." She also comments, "The notion of *xin* is frequently taken to be largely isomorphic with the notion of trust, and passages involving *xin* are commonly translated in terms of 'trust' (and its cognates)." Wee, "Xin, Trust, and Confucius' Ethics," 516–517.

is related to what Goffman calls "face-work."[28] Face, in his definition, refers to

> an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—
> albeit an image that others may share...
>
>   ...One's own face and the face of others are constructs of the
> same order; it is the rules of the group and the definition of the
> situation which determine how much feeling one is to have for face
> and how this feeling is to be distributed among the faces involved.[29]

"Face" thus depends on the rules and values of both a particular society and the situation in which the social interaction is embedded. As Goffman further elaborates, "By face-work I mean to designate the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face. Face-work serves to counteract 'incidents'—that is, events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face."[30] He additionally explains that a social relationship is a way in which the person is "forced to trust his self-image and face to the tact and good conduct of others."[31] In this sense, to build a good social relationship, a person has to first trust his/her self-image in which he/she has to perform "self-trust" before gaining trust from others. This is important for this study because trust is performative: prior to gaining trust from the urban employers, an *ayi* first has to trust her own self-image and ability to perform as a trustworthy domestic worker; they can build "trust" only based on the performance of trusting themselves.

Resonating with the performative nature of "trust" are the notions of "emotion work" and emotional labor developed by Arlie Hochschild.[32] Hochschild's "emotion work" builds upon Goffman's approaches to emotive experience and his concept of "acting," in which acting is read as the direct management of behavioral expression and the management of feeling.[33] Hochschild explains Goffman's theory by using the actor playing the role of King Lear as an example, to suggest that the ways an actor focuses on outward demeanor and the constellation of minute expressions to perform an emotion, are known as "surface acting," whereas the technique of another actor who calls out his memories and feelings to elicit the corresponding expressions of his role, is known as "deep acting."[34]

To Hochschild, emotional labor in service work is produced in two basic ways: first, through "surface acting", referring to the facial and bodily adjustment of the workers to disguise their feelings. In her words, "We are

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28 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*.
29 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 5–6.
30 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 12.
31 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 42.
32 Hochschild, "Emotion Work"; Hochschild, *Managed Heart*.
33 Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), quoted in Hochschild, "Emotion Work," 558.
34 Hochschild, "Emotion Work," 558.

capable of disguising what we feel, of pretending to feel what we do not—of doing surface acting."[35] She stresses that the goal of performing "surface acting" is to provide service with a smile: "In surface acting we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves."[36] "Deep acting" refers to the mobilization of workers' emotions to provide service work according to the company's projected images, a form of social engineering that permits customers to enjoy better service experiences.

The notion of emotional labor has been used to analyze the tertiary industry of China, in particular the domestic work sector.[37] Xiao Mei emphasizes that through either "surface acting" or "deep acting," workers have different degrees of autonomy when performing their services, enjoying the freedom to choose how to, and not to, perform labor.[38] Based on a Marxist feminist perspective, Yihui Su and Annie Ni propose to capture the autonomous nature of acting and argue that female service workers' working experiences are encapsulated within both patriarchal suppression and the exploitative nature of domestic service.[39] Some scholars suggest that the industry of domestic service should be regularized to protect workers' rights, whereas some studies argue that the unstable working hours and the non-contract based working conditions of this specific industry allow more freedom and power for the service workers from a neoliberal economic perspective.[40] In this chapter, we take the middle ground, recognizing exploitation in service work but also acknowledging a certain autonomy in emotional labor.

Working as an *ayi*

There are different types of domestic helpers in Shanghai. Since different job types determine not only the working hours but also the work environment, requirements, and expectations of both the employers and the employees, these different types of domestic helpers perform differing forms of emotional labor and face-work to build trust with employers

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35 Hochschild, *Managed Heart*, 33.
36 Hochschild, *Managed Heart*, 33.
37 Xiao Mei梅笑, "Positive Experiences in Emotional Labor: Deep Acting, Symbolic Boundaries, and Labor Autonomy 情感劳动中的积极体验：深层表演、象征性秩序与劳动自主性," *Society: Chinese Journal of Sociology* 社会 40, no. 2 (2020); Yihui Su 苏熠慧 and Annie Ni倪安妮, "An Analysis on the Gender Mechanism of Emotional Labor of Maternity Matron for the Newborn: Taking Shanghai CX Domestic Service Company as an Example 育婴家政工情感劳动的性别化机制分析——以上海CX家政公司为例," *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies* 妇女研究论丛 6, no. 150 (2016); Chaoguo Xing 邢朝国, "The 'Hyper Precarity' of Informal Employment Under the COVID-19 Pandemic and Workers' Coping Strategies: Taking Postpartum Doulas in Beijing as an Example 疫情之下非正规就业的 '超不稳定性' 及主体应对——以北京市月嫂为例," *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies* 妇女研究论丛 3, no. 165 (2021).
38 Mei, "Positive Experiences in Emotional Labor."
39 Su and Ni, "Gender Mechanism of Emotional Labor."
40 Xing, "'Hyper Precarity' Under COVID-19 Pandemic."

in their households. First, domestic helpers can be categorized by their job types: *zhongdiangong* 钟点工 (literally, part-time), *zhujia* 住家 (live-in), *quanzhi* 全职 (full-time), *shewai* 涉外 (for foreign families), *xiaoqu* 小区 (working for the district, usually residential district), and *yuesao* 月嫂 (maternity matron, or care-giver for a new mother and her newborn infants). Concerning these job types, twelve of the research participants in this study worked as part-time *ayis* (earning RMB 20–50 per hour, ca. EUR 2.50–6.30), one was a live-in *ayi* (earning RMB 3,000 per month, ca. EUR 382), one was a full-time *ayi* (earning RMB 5,500 per month, ca. EUR 700), one a *xiaoqu ayi* (earning RMB 6,000–7,000 per month, ca. EUR 760–890), and three were *yuesaos* (earning an average of RMB 10,000 per month, ca. EUR 1,270). At the time of the interviews, the *ayis* worked for various types of families in Shanghai. Eight worked for foreign families (including those from Hong Kong and Taiwan), six worked for Shanghai families, and five worked for Chinese families from other provinces. Some of the *ayis* had worked in different job type(s) for different family type(s) in the past.

Based on the interviews with the interlocutors outlined above, the present study seeks to answer the following questions: Why have rural–urban migrant women chosen to work as *ayis* when they are free to choose other jobs in post-reform China? How do they opt for a specific job type and family type? What role does their own status as single, married (but perhaps living apart from their spouse), or divorced play in the decision-making process regarding the job types?

First, when asked why they chose to be an *ayi*, divorced women shared similar motives. Yao Ayi, a forty-five-year-old divorcée from Jilin, said that after filing for divorce from her husband, she traveled to Shanghai to meet her elder sister, who was working there as a waitress. Her sister told her that working in a restaurant was a harsh occupation and suggested that she might prefer to work in the domestic service industry instead. Thus, Yao Ayi began to work as a live-in *ayi* for her first migrant job in Shanghai, earning RMB 1,000 per month, in 2006. Since she was divorced, she was flexible in terms of her living arrangements. She chose to work as a live-in *ayi* because the employer was able to provide a room and meals for her. After eight years of being a live-in *ayi*, Yao Ayi had saved enough money to rent a small apartment in Shanghai, and she then changed her job to work as a *shewai* for foreign families.

Yao Ayi's friend, Li Ayi, said that she also came to Shanghai after her divorce. Her younger sister was already in Shanghai by that time, working as a domestic helper. Therefore, Li Ayi followed her sister's lead and began working as a live-in *ayi*. After ten years, she remarried and changed to working as a part-time *ayi*. Relationship status thus affects the type of *ayi* work migrant women prefer to do. When asked about her experiences as a live-in *ayi*, Li Ayi said, "I was lucky when I first came to Shanghai. I met a very good old Shanghai couple and their daughter and son-in-law. They treated me incredibly well. The young couple worked and so were not at home during the daytime. I lived with the old madam in her bedroom.

We even slept in the same bed. She treated me very well." (Li Ayi, forty-nine years old, Heilongjiang, part-time, Shanghai and foreign families). Although she found sleeping in the same bed as her employer acceptable, being a live-in *ayi* was stressful overall. "You lived at [the employer's] home twenty-four hours a day. It was highly stressful. I haven't worked as a live-in *ayi* for almost five years. If you asked me to work as a live-in *ayi* now, I might not be able to adapt to that kind of life again." (Li Ayi, forty-nine years old, Heilongjiang, part-time, Shanghai and foreign families).

Li Ayi chose to work in Shanghai not only because of her divorce, but also because she wanted to make some money for her child, who was now also living in Shanghai. In this way, she gained financial resources by working as a single mother—or, as we like to term this, as a "working-single." Likewise, Wu Ayi, a *yuesao* as well as a trainer of *yuesaos*, came to work in Shanghai after her divorce.

> I didn't need to rent a place [due to being a *yuesao*]. Usually, *yuesao*s are single [Researcher's note: meaning they are divorcees]. They work because their children go to school, or their children need to buy a house to get married. Like me, I became a *yuesao* because my son is going to get married. We need some income. (Wu Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangsu, *yuesao*).

Although the demand for emotional management is more intense among *yuesao*s than with other *ayi* job types, divorced women often choose to work as *yuesao*s because they can live at their employers' homes for a month during their service. Additionally, if they are also mothers, they are more likely to be hired as *yuesao*s due to their personal childcare experience, which helps them to gain trust from their employers.

Unlike divorced women, married women did not mention their marital status as a reason for working as domestic helpers; rather, their motives were diverse, and they seemed to have more flexibility in choosing their job type. Xiaocao Ayi, a forty-five-year-old *yuesao* from Jiangsu, shared that she chose to be a *yuesao* because she liked babies and she felt young when she was with them, instead of out of an urgent need for a place to live in Shanghai. She explained that she came to work in Shanghai out of boredom: "People like us feel bored at home, right? It's hard to join other industries, which is not easy. This is the only good option, right?" (Xiaocao Ayi, forty-five years old, Anhui, *yuesao*).

Married migrant women shared that they had few professional skills and little education, and that therefore the relatively well-paid occupation of domestic helper was not a bad way for them to make money:

> [I] have no [professional] skills. When I first arrived [in Shanghai], I was worried. Anyways, I have been trained in the past few years. Yes, I don't have any skills. Also, I like to work for a family. ... For farming, you have to work under the sun. I like to work at home to

help with cleaning and cooking. (Guiqiao Ayi, forty years old, Shanxi, part-time, Shanghai families).

I did not have any skills and I was unfamiliar with everything in Shanghai. So, I followed [a friend from my hometown] and worked for a Taiwanese family. (Wang Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families, families from other Chinese regions, and foreign families).

As we can see from these quotes, it was boredom, and financial need, together with the fact that they lacked professional skills, that led these married women to work as domestic helpers in Shanghai.

However, although research suggests that these women have to come to terms with the drudgery of domestic work,[41] some *ayis* mentioned that they found their work either comparatively easy compared to factory or farm work, or "not tough at all." As one interviewee states, "I started working as a domestic worker more than ten years ago, so I don't want to make a change. If I worked in a factory, I would have to work overnight. Now, I work eight hours a day and it's not tough at all." (Hu Ayi, forty-one years old, Anhui, full-time, *xiaoqu*).

Similarly, Yao Ayi's sister told her that working as a domestic helper was less harsh than working in a restaurant. Nonetheless, being a domestic helper may mean limited opportunities for work-promotion or upward social mobility. More intensely, as "working-singles," *ayis* face a struggle over trust and must constantly navigate negative stereotypes. As Ke Ayi, a forty-three-year-old part-time domestic helper from Anhui, said, "Every family is different. A bit of *shouqi* 受气 [being bullied] is unavoidable. It is impossible to have none."

In sum, a range of different reasons makes migrant women in Shanghai prefer the job of *ayi*, including that it provides income, relieves boredom, demands relatively little education, and is perceived as being less strenuous than other jobs available to their social group. These women's narratives suggest that the informal service sector allows a certain degree of workers' autonomy and is therefore preferred by some women, particularly for its flexibility.[42] Nevertheless, it remains a precarious job where trust must be constantly negotiated, as observed by Chinese Marxist feminist scholars.[43] In this range of attractions and constraints, we perceive both the flexibility and precarity of domestic work. An *ayi* can, to some extent, select her employer: They can choose both the preferred job and family types. But in the end, the employer holds the power to fire or dismiss the *ayi*, especially as there is often no formal work contract. After their careful selection from among the various types of domestic work, how do *ayis* give

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41 See Sun, *Maid in China*.
42 Xing, "'Hyper Precarity' Under COVID-19 Pandemic."
43 Su and Ni, "Gender Mechanism of Emotional Labor."

both themselves and their employers face by building up trust, especially as a bit of *shouqi* seems unavoidable? In what follows, we elucidate how *ayis* build trust with their employers and consequently reduce their precariousness by performing three distinct modes of emotional labor: honesty, professionalism, and care.

Honesty

Being honest, or, more precisely, performing honesty is one of the most effective ways to produce emotional labor for trust-building in an employer–employee relationship, particularly between domestic helpers and their urban customers.[44] Zhou Ayi explicitly stated that some of her employers would leave something in their house as a test to see if she would steal it. The "test" given by the employers is a test of an *ayi*'s honesty and can be read as a rather explicit type of face-work—a process of image construction built on one's integrity and trustworthiness.

> They [the employers] tested me. Do you understand? They put money here [in the house] and then left. Some old people do that; even young ones do that. (Xuexue Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, Shanghai families).

The face-work of trust requires time, as Wang Ayi also explains:

> [The female employer's] domestic helper stole her stuff and [the male employer's] money. So, she looks down on *ayis*. Her husband convinced her by telling her that, "Look at Wang Ayi. She has been working for us for a long time. She is an honest person, and she won't [steal]." In the beginning, she looked down on me. From my perspective, their *ayi* was not being nice because they trusted her and gave her their house keys, but she stole things from them. It's not all right ... Her husband explained to her that I am an honest person. Since I have been working for them, their home hasn't lost anything. You do your own work; she does her own business. When you finish work [cooking], you tell her to eat. After some time, she knows [I am honest and not a thief]. (Wang Ayi, forty-seven years old, Chongming, part-time, families from other Chinese regions).

When some *ayis* are perceived as showing poor conduct and breach the trust of their employers, it takes more effort, as well as time, for the "honest" *ayis* to build trust. Urban employers worry about money being stolen from their homes by their domestic workers. Nonetheless, domestic services usually include buying groceries or other household products, an act

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44 Hochschild, *Managed Heart*.

that necessarily involves money. In this sense, *ayis* literally have to "touch the money." However, some *ayis* try to avoid receiving money from their employers:

> [The potential employer] said he would give me money for the groceries. I told him, "If I work for you, I won't help with the groceries because I will have to 'touch' the money. It's complicated." Many *ayis* can't gain trust from their employers because of the grocery money. They steal from the grocery money. It's real. I have met many *ayis* who do that. (Zhou Ayi, thirty-nine years old, Zhandong, part-time, shewai).

Another woman said: "No, I don't buy groceries. After a long time, it's hard to make it clear." (Hu Ayi, forty-one years old, Anhui, full-time, *xiaoqu*).

In Zhou Ayi and Hu Ayi's experiences, avoiding situations in which your honesty may be questioned, in this case when buying groceries, is the best way to avoid mistrust from their employers, revealing that trust is a highly sensitive issue in urban families, especially when it comes to monetary matters. This resonates with Goffman's observation that avoidance is a basic form of face-work.[45]

Nonetheless, some *ayis* do have to help with the groceries. Hence, to establish a trust-relationship, these *ayis* proactively create tactics to deal with this sensitive matter. "I feel that the employers trust me. I use my own money to buy groceries. I give them back the invoices. Then, they give me the money." (Xuexue Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, Shanghai families). Wang Ayi meticulously handles the grocery money, keeps the invoices, and carefully talks about her "writing" practice to her employer. In this way, she has successfully gained trust.

> No matter how well [the female employer] treated me, I had to position myself properly. My father said, "When my children go to work, their personality is the most important. It doesn't matter how much they earn, but they can't be thieves." I remember what he told me. *Ayi* is *ayi*. I don't touch other people's stuff. The madam trusted me deeply. From the beginning until the end, I have been keeping their house keys … My education level is low, but I used a notebook to write down everything for her. However, she had never read the notebook. Anyways, I feel comfortable to write things down. Otherwise, I wouldn't know where the money goes. I heard that other *ayis* take their employers' grocery money. (Wang Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families, families from other Chinese regions, and foreign families).

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45 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 5–7.

Thus, marking down the expenses became a practice that Wang Ayi used as a tactic of guarding against future accusations of dishonesty. Full trust seems impossible; what is established is a semblance or performance of trust behind which mistrust (or, for the *ayi*, fear of being mistrusted) lingers.

Besides shopping, the issue of the treatment of household items also requires trust-establishing face-work. Objects in the home, such as glasses, mugs, or vases, can be fragile. Additionally, it is not uncommon for Shanghai families to store cash and valuable items such as jewelry at home. As Ke Ayi said, the Hong Kong family she had been working with for thirteen years, trusts her a lot because she does not break things. When she fell ill and quit her job, the family hired another *ayi.* But the family found the new *ayi* difficult to tolerate because she frequently broke their kitchenware. When *ayis* clean and tidy the house, they have to be extra cautious. In some cases, *ayis* try to cater as much to the needs of their employers as possible in order to secure their jobs. "I put things back in the same places... I won't leave a mess. I won't leave the employers to arrange their stuff. I put them back as they were." (Xuexue Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, Shanghai families).

> No, I won't [put things back in the same positions]. I work for them, and I tidy everything up. But I won't put things randomly. It's because sometimes his stuff is quite messy and so he expects me to help tidy up his house. If I put them back in the same positions, he feels like I haven't worked at all. (An Ayi, ca. forty years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families and foreign families).

Due to the variety of preferences on the part of different families, *ayis* have to learn to observe the everyday practices of their employers and understand how they want the jobs to be done. While some employers want their *ayis* to help with tidying up their houses, others request their *ayis* to put things back in exactly the same positions that they found them.

Most *ayis* in this study said that when their employers gave them the house keys, it could be seen as a gesture of trust. "I have six pairs of house keys. Some families have elderly relatives at home; therefore, they don't have to give me the house keys. After you work for a while, they trust you and give you the keys." (Hu Ayi, forty-one years old, Anhui, full-time, *xiaoqu*). When asked about the practice of receiving house keys, most *ayis* said that their employers gave them keys after a period of observation. Xuexue Ayi described the effort she made to show her honesty before she received the keys. "You have to behave and cannot take people's stuff. I never take anyone's stuff. I have worked for a family for more than ten years and they don't change [hire another *ayi*]." (Xuexue Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, Shanghai families).

Moreover, some *ayis* receive the house keys on the first day they start working because their employers' acquaintances or friends referred them, which shows how trust is transferrable:

> The families gave me the keys when I arrived the first day. It's all the same. I haven't met any family that doesn't give me keys. It's because they trust you. I am referred by their acquaintances. They trust me. If I was referred by an agency, [the employers] might have to reconsider doing this. (Zhou Ayi, thirty-nine years old, Zhandong, part-time, *shewai*)

Zhou Ayi's experience reflects the fact that by referring an employee to his / her social network, the employer becomes a *zhongjianren* 中间人 (intermediary), which is a key role in the establishment of a trust relationship in Chinese culture. It is because the "Chinese place a premium on individuals' social capital within their group of friends, relatives and close associates" that a *zhongjianren* "is vital to gaining even initial admission or introduction to connections."[46] However, keeping the house keys is a huge responsibility. Therefore, these *ayis* have developed a cautious way to be the guardian of the keys. As Zhou Ayi said, she puts the house keys in a separate bag instead of in her own key chain as her way to protect the keys. Although receiving keys is a gesture of trust, some *ayis* are reluctant to keep their employers' house keys: "No, they may say they would give me the keys. But I said no. If you take their house keys, it's not so good, right? It doesn't feel right." (Xiaocao Ayi, forty-five years old, Jiangsu, *yuesao*). "[The male employer] gave me the house keys. I told him I wouldn't take his keys. I explained to him that I would come to his house when he is at home. When he's not at home, I won't go. I don't like to keep someone's house keys. I am afraid of rumors." (An Ayi, ca. forty years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families and foreign families).

For an *ayi*, the fear of being marked as a thief outweighs the fear of being accused of seducing the male employer. This shows how *ayis*, as "working-singles," are obliged to navigate between the stereotype of seducer and other potential accusations from their employers. When there are thieves out there, an *ayi* is aware that her employers will suspect her, even if she is innocent, because of her negative reputation in the city dwellers' eyes.[47] Thus, the *ayi* quoted above, decided to schedule a time with her employer each time she had to clean his house to avoid problems, rather than keeping his house keys.

Honesty is a mode of face-work and emotional labor that is performed and negotiated by being overtly careful in financial matters, taking good care of household items, and through discussions over possession of the house keys. After selecting their employers and job types, *ayis* painstakingly perform the everyday handlings of their domestic work for their employers, thus building up trust over time. Being "working-singles," or, working singly, the *ayis* have to be extra careful to manage trust. After all,

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46 Kai-Ping Huang and Karen Yuan Wang, "How Guanxi Relates to Social Capital? A Psychological Perspective," *Journal of Social Sciences* 7, no. 2 (2011): 121.
47 Gaetano, *Out to Work*; Sun, *Maid in China*.

when bad things happen at the employer's home, there are no witnesses to testify to an *ayi's* employer that she is innocent.

Professionalism

A second tactic for negotiating trust involves performing professional face-work. The professionalism of an *ayi* can be as practical as obtaining the required certificate. According to Wu Ayi, an aspiring *yuesao* needs to receive training to obtain the maternity and infant care division certificate (*muying hulizheng* 母婴护理证) in order to officially work as a *yuesao*. By obtaining a certificate, a *yuesao* can gain the trust of her customers. However, obtaining a professional certificate is only one way to generate a sense of professionalism. First, childbirth experience is a prerequisite for the job, meaning that, to be a *yuesao*, a woman has to be a mother herself and have first-hand experience in giving birth:

> PENN: *Do you need to have childbirth experience to be a yuesao?*
> WU AYI: *Yes, for enhancing trust from our clients, you have to.*
> *After this criterion, there are tests on theories about the*
> *health of the infants ... For the infant, you need to know*
> *the body index.[48] You need to observe [the infant]. You*
> *need to take care of the women's wounds and breasts.*
> *You need to cook the special meals for the postpartum*
> *period... We need to teach the mothers the proper way*
> *of breastfeeding because it's the most important.*

As Wu Ayi explained, their clients do not trust a woman with no first-hand childbirth experience, because to take care of the infant and the mother, the *yuesao's* personal experience is treated as the prerequisite to prove that she is qualified for the job. Further, when asked how she proves herself as trustworthy to clients, Wu Ayi said that she would take out her certificate first, after which she would wash her hands because she was going to touch the infant. Then she would change into her company's uniform, which was soft and comfortable for the infant. The whole ritual, as guided by the training provided by her company, helped her to perform a sense of professionalism in front of her clients. In Goffman's terms, it gave her "face" in front of the new parents who might have less knowledge of infant care than her. She explained the process of this trust-building relationship:

> When you arrive at the employer's home, they will check your identity to see if you are the right person sent by the company. After that, I start my work. Every day when they have any queries, I answer

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48 She is referring to the basic body indexes, including the heart rate, temperature, and body weight of the infants.

them. Those questions are about childcare professionalism. The quickest time to gain their trust is a week. Then, they will be at ease with you. That is the quickest time for them to kill their doubts. (Wu Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangsu, *yuesao*).

Hired by the *yuesao* company instead of being a "freelancer," Wu Ayi's work is highly monitored by the clients, as they can leave comments in her work-report, known as a "diary," which is provided by the company. She explained that her tasks are listed on an hourly basis in the report. Employers can request to have another *yuesao* if they are not happy with the performance of the assigned *yuesao.*

Moreover, Wu Ayi expressed a sense of professionalism, which was backed up by her company. As explained by Madam Ma, the company owner and Wu Ayi's boss, she provides trainings for the newly recruited *ayis* in order to teach them the knowledge they need to be a professional *yuesao*. The *yuesaos* in her company obtain professional childcare knowledge. and learn the proper steps to take when they first enter the client's home. Most importantly, the company has established rules and regulations for its *yuesaos*:

> We use *Dizigui* (弟子规 "Standards for being a Good Pupil and Child"). You see this? These are the rules and regulations of our services. Do you understand, *Dizigui*?... We need to read this. I need to teach [the new *yuesaos* at her company]. You need to learn and to practice it at work... You need to be a good person first. Our occupation is very special. You must be patient. So, the rules are set as a guideline and to constrain us to do things well. Then, you can take better care of the infants. (Wu Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangsu, *yuesao*). Through these trainings, *ayis* develop "trust" in their self-image as professional *yuesaos,* which helps in their face-work and leads their employers to trust them.

For a *yuesao* who works for the agency or domestic service company, it is easier to build trust, as their agency or company endows them with a professional image, and their short-term service and replaceability do not require as much of a long-term process of trust-building and developing of a proper subjectivity. This is different for the other *ayis*. According to Yan, "to train a domestic worker is to foster a proper subjectivity, so that she can see work and respond readily to it. Her 'improved' subjectivity is supposed to mediate between the mind of the employer and her own body, thus producing knowing, willing, and affective labor that can anticipate and meet the needs of employers."[49]

Unlike Wu Ayi's situation, in which her company provides a uniform, most *ayis* have developed a dressing-down strategy to build trust with

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49 Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*, 96.

their employers. In the words of Ke Ayi, "I wore *qipao* (旗袍—the traditional Chinese-style dress for women) [before she worked as a domestic helper]. My disposition was different from now. I am an *ayi* now; therefore, I dare not dress up." (Ke Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, *shewai*).

And, as Fang Ayi explained:

> I met a female employer. She said she hired an *ayi* once who dressed beautifully and moved seductively in front of her husband. Some *ayis* are indecent. Some male employers are decent, while some are not... For indecent *ayis*, he [referring to male employers in general] would touch her for sure, right? If you are very decent and you talk nicely, he won't touch you, right? If you are indecent, he must touch you. You can't blame anyone, right? (Fang Ayi, forty-three years old, Jiangxi, part-time, *shewai*)

Fang Ayi's explanation reveals that a proper dress code for work, that is, no skirt or dress, no fancy outfit, and no make-up—in other words, dressing down—becomes a way to avoid sexual harassment from male employers, and to eliminate the doubts of female employers, as well as to avoid gossip among other domestic helpers. But when she adds "right?" to "he won't touch you," she reveals that even when dressing down, one is never safe. In this light, her narrative reflects the precarious situation of the "working-single" and the way in which *ayis* have to also trust their (male) employers to not sexually harass or abuse them. As He Ayi's comments indicate, gossip does circulate: "You know Xiaoliu? I suspect that she is having an affair with her male employer. The wife of her boss always travels. [Xiaoliu] often wears make-up, and lipstick, and paints her eyebrows." (He Ayi, fifty-three years old, Jiangsu, part-time, *shewai*).

Some *ayis* employ the "dressing-down strategy" to build trust with urban families. It is a kind of face-work that aims to avoid any suspicion of seduction; moreover, it is face-work through which the employers also gain face, as they will not be seduced. This is crucial, given that the "working-single" status is perceived as a threat to the stability of the family.[50] In other service sectors, such as the beauty parlor industry, female workers are required to dress up in order to meet the modern standards of service work in the global city of Shanghai,[51] and the demand for professionalism from their employers and urban customers.[52] But for the *ayis* in our study, dressing down is a tactic used to perform face-work—a response to the social discrimination against migrant women.

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50 Gaetano, *Out to Work*; Sun, *Maid in China*.
51 Ip, "Desiring Singlehood."
52 Cara Wallis, *Technomobility in China: Young Migrant Women and Mobile Phones* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

Care

Besides performing honesty and professionalism, *ayis* also manage their emotive expression of care to establish trust with their employers. In their study of domestic helpers in China, Su and Ni argue that care labor is a social construction under a patriarchal social order in which care workers need to perform certain feminine attributes, for instance, caring, obedience, and submissiveness.[53] Similarly, Hochschild criticizes how emotional labor always stresses femininity to provide care work.[54] In our study, we find that an *ayi* can build trust through taking extra care of the household, even when that is not requested by the employers:

> The other day I saw that [my female employer's] closet was really messy. I asked if she needed my help to tidy it up. She said, "okay." Then, I helped to tidy up her closet. I am quite efficient. And she trusts me. Her closet is like a mess. [The employers] like to take whatever they need from the closet. It is a mess. So, I wanted to help her. (Ke Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, *shewai*).

Ke Ayi's initiative is a special offering which is not a part of her paid job. In return for Ke Ayi's offering, her employer trusts her to tidy the closet, a very private space within the private space of the home.

While some *ayis* have chosen not to talk much with their employers to avoid misunderstandings and to create a sense of submissiveness and obedience, some *ayis* proactively talk about personal issues with their employers to build trust. In the interview with Xuexue Ayi, together with her former employer, Madam Sun, they shared:

> XUEXUE: *We talk about everything.*
> MADAM SUN: *We even talk about her daughter, if she has a boyfriend, or not.*
> XUEXUE: *We are like a family. I generally get along well with other people. I like Shanghai people, I think they do not act big (bubaijiazi 不摆架子).*
> MADAM SUN: *I chat with her while she is working.*
> XUEXUE: *We get along very well. We communicate mutually.*

Madam Sun claims that she knows Xuexue Ayi very well and that they talk about everything. As a result, Madam Sun trusts Xuexue, unlike the temporary *ayis* who help to do the chores, whom she believes would steal things. Treating an *ayi* as a pseudo-family member entails a negotiation of care: if the domestic worker is (like) a family member, they also need to be cared for, if they become sick, for example. Conversely, the domestic

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53 Su and Ni, "Gender Mechanism of Emotional Labor."
54 Hochschild, *Managed Heart*.

worker projects a sense of caring about the employer, even if she may only do this to gain her trust. Here, trust is built through the practice of talking about "everything," including the private life of the *ayi*, in order to help the employers feel secure about the person they hired. This form of trust, established with time, can help to blur—but not erase—the boundaries between the employers and employees. Madam Sun claims that Xuexue Ayi is her friend, but one might ask whether such claims do not obscure the hierarchical relationship between the employer and employee.[55]

Moreover, some *ayis* have chosen to articulate or perform their care for the family by learning to cook the dishes that the family members like. As Yao Ayi said, she bought the Chinese version of Jamie Oliver's cookbook for her Western employer. When her employer saw the cookbook, she was tremendously impressed and bought the English version. She told Yao Ayi which dishes her family liked, and then Yao Ayi would check her Chinese version and cook for them. Similarly, Wang Ayi also shared this impression:

> I know how to cook the dishes they like. I adjust to their taste gradually. Sometimes lighter, sometimes heavier. They like to eat lighter. After [she] finished cooking, I asked them if the taste was fine. They tell me if it's too salty or too light. Then, I have learned it. It's very arbitrary. I have learned [their tastes]. (Wang Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families, families from other Chinese regions, and foreign families).

By performing care by catering to the taste of the family, and thereby probably disregarding her own food preferences, Wang Ayi was able to secure a stronger and less precarious bond with the family. Like Wang Ayi, Yao Ayi also states,

> I feel really happy to work for foreigners. Tina's family does not give me much pressure. I work for them every day. I get along very well with their son, with Tina, and the grandparents [Tina's parents and parents-in-law]. We are like a family. I go back home at night. During the day, I work for them with dedication. They treat me like a family. (Yao Ayi, forty-five years old, Jilin, part-time, *shewai*).

According to Wang Ayi,

> Shanghai people like others to call them *xiaojie* or *taitai* (小姐/太太, literally lady/madam). [My female employer] asked me to call her Zhen Jie (真姐—Sister Zhen), and call her husband Brother Ye (叶大哥). She said, "I work at the company, and you work at my home.

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55 Although she did not hire a domestic helper after her retirement, she stays in touch with Xuexue Ayi, and they meet regularly in the district to catch up on each other's lives. She also refers Xuexue Ayi for jobs.

We are equal. Please don't feel any pressure. Please work like in your own home." (Wang Ayi, forty-three years old, Anhui, part-time, Shanghai families, families from other Chinese regions, and foreign families).

After working for Zhen Jie for some time, Wang Ayi was requested to call her employers by their names, with the designations of "sister" and "brother." Wang Ayi said that Zhen Jie trusts her deeply and treats her like family. Likewise, Yao Ayi feels that her employers treat her like a family member. As Sun describes,[56] domestic helpers are the "intimate stranger[s]" of urban families: "The maid is most certainly an intimate figure, in the sense that she needs to anticipate her employers' quirks and whims, cook to suit their fussy taste buds, and perform the most intimate bodily care, both for her elderly charges suffering from incontinence, and infants needing a regular change of diapers."[57]

When pseudo-family ties are being constructed, the care-work of enfolding the *ayi* into the narrative of the family not only obscures the hierarchical relationship but is also a way to neutralize the potential sexual danger of the *ayi* as a "working-single." As Yuting Liu and Xiao Suowei point out, it becomes common for domestic service companies to train the workers to mobilize the familial emotive expression when performing service works—a tactic of "deep acting" in the production of emotional labor.[58] The trust that the familial discourse helps to establish, may furthermore enable forms of exploitation:

The salary was very low at that time. I earned RMB 3,000 per month. [My female employer] treats me very well. Before the summer holiday [meaning July and August], she usually paid me RMB 6,000 in advance. She did the same before Spring Festival and Christmas. She paid for me in advance. She had never deducted the salary [if I made mistakes]. Therefore, I worked for her for the next six years, but I never asked her to increase my salary. I did not. So, when her friends' [*ayis*] bargained to increase their salaries, they were bad *ayis*. As a result, she liked to take me out and told people that I was not her *ayi*; I was her friend. (Zhou Ayi, thirty-nine years old, Zhandong, part-time, *shewai*).

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56 Sun, *Maid in China*, 13.
57 Sun, *Maid in China*, 13.
58 Yuting Liu刘育婷 and Xiao Suowei 肖索未, "'Servicing the Clients as Caring for One's Family, While in Daily Interaction It's Better to Keep Oneself as an Outsider': Emotional Labor and the Maintenance of Client Relations among Domestic Workers in Urban China '干活时把雇主当家人，相处时把自己当外人'——住家家政工的雇主关系及情感劳动研究," *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies* 妇女研究论丛 4, no. 160 (2020).

When the employers treat an *ayi* as a part of the family, or as a friend, it signals that the *ayi* has successfully built trust through providing (extra) care. But it can also serve as a veil to cover up injustices, such as the refusal to raise Zhou Ayi's salary.

The *yuesaos* in our study care for urban families and their newborns; in some cases, they might emotionally bond with the child. It is almost inevitable for them to feel a sense of care because the whole job is about care and the management of one's feelings through "deep acting." Likewise, the reciprocity of trust is established in which the employers have shown their care for the *ayis* in the name of family or friendship ties. Although such a trust relationship can be forged, the employer–employee relationship itself is obscured, putting the *ayi* in a more vulnerable position when they need to negotiate their wages. This trust also obscures social inequality: the *yuesaos* are forced to leave behind their own children, commonly known as "left-behind children," in rural China.[59] Yet, "given the prevailing free market ideology, migration is viewed as a 'personal choice.' Its consequences are seen as 'personal problems.'"[60] This framing of migration as a personal choice runs the danger of ignoring the political and socio-economic structural factors that are widening the gap between the rich and the poor in China. This observation reveals the ironic dimension of the care-economy in Shanghai: to be a "working-single" in the city, these women must prove to their employers that they have childbirth experience, meaning that they have children who are now cared for by their grandparents in rural China, known as "left-behind children" in the migration discourse. Hence, when city dwellers outsource care-labor to the rural-to-urban migrant women, the *ayis* must also outsource their own care-work.

Conclusion

Ayis lead a "working-single" life in the city; even when they are married, they usually leave behind their spouses and children. Working as a "single" in a stranger family's home draws them into a complicated daily negotiation of trust, which is amplified by their "working-single" status. Additionally, negative portrayals of domestic workers as thieves or sexual seducers in mass media have produced discourses of mistrust and the *ayis* are portrayed as low *suzhi* ("quality") by the urbanites. Following Peeren,[61] we have stressed the reciprocity of the employer–employee relationship: *ayis* are not easily replaceable, unlike factory girls or waitresses,

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59 China Labour Bulletin, "Migrant Workers and Their Children," *China Labour Bulletin*. Accessed October 15, 2017. http://www.clb.org.hk/content/migrant-workers-and-their-children.
60 Arlie R. Hochschild, "Love and Gold," in *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, ed. Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie R. Hochschild (New York: Metropolitan Press, 2002), 27.
61 Peeren, *Spectral Metaphor*.

because employers must put their trust in the employed domestic helpers, a face-building process that builds up the sense of integrity and trustworthiness over time. Therefore, we argue that trust requires face-work that is both verbal and performative.[62] *Ayis* choose their job because it gives them a stable income; it is, in their perspective, more attractive and less difficult than factory work, and it does not demand a high level of education. But, as we have also shown, it remains a precarious job, as *ayis* can become dispensable for their employers when trust is not properly built. This gestures towards a tension between precarity and autonomy.

To avoid being replaced, *ayis* must mobilize different tactics to increase their value in their employers' households by building a trusting employer–employee relationship. We observed three tactics through which *ayis* negotiate trust and perform emotional labor. First, they perform honesty over financial and material matters, including conscious deliberations over ownership of the house keys.

Second, they employ tactics related to outer appearance to perform a sense of professionalism, for instance, through the strategy of dressing down to avoid any suspicion of seduction. This is a form of face-work through which the male employers also gain face, helping them to establish a social image of a decent gentleman. This tactic is crucial, given that the "working-single" status is perceived as a threat to the stability of the family, not only by the female employers, but also in the media representation of *ayis*.

Third, the women interviewed care for the families they work for, articulating this care by providing special food or devoting extra attention to the children and the chores—therefore performing a "deep acting" to produce emotional labor. Through these tactics, *ayis* perform and negotiate a relationship of trust, but this relationship remains profoundly precarious: They must maintain a healthy body to perform their job duties, they are pushed to give up care for their own children, they dress down, the wages are low at best, and the working conditions are fragile and not legally protected.

In this study, we have steered away from purely negative portrayals of the domestic work and the life of migrant domestic workers in Shanghai. But it is hard to deny all the social inequalities with which they are faced. Granted, they have the power to select their job type, as well as their employers under the post-reform market economy. In a sense, this may help these workers to enjoy some space of freedom and construct a relationship based on trust. However, these "new servants,"[63] as Yan terms them, are situated in a precarious circumstance where the urbanites are positioned as the higher social strata and the rural-to-urban migrant women are the subordinated, backward others.[64] Domestic work remains

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62 Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*.
63 Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*.
64 Penn Tsz Ting Ip, "Migrant Women Walking Down the Cheap Road: Modernization and Being Fashionable in Shanghai," in *The Routledge Companion to Modernity, Space and Gender*, ed. Alexandra Staub (Oxford: Routledge, 2018).

a kind of "dirty job" that city women are unwilling to do, making the perfor-mance of such care-labor at times suppressive, and the identity of domes-tic helpers stigmatized and vulnerable. Social inequality thus prevails; rural-to-urban migrant women must invest not only their skill and time, but also their emotions to gain some trust in the family workplace. They are the precarious "working-singles" of twenty-first-century Shanghai.

ORCID®

Penn Tsz Ting Ip 🔵 https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3619-8293
Jeroen de Kloet 🔵 https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2314-5424

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Shilpa Phadke 🔘

"You are Next": Unmarried Urban Women in India and the "Marriage Talk"

Abstract   In this chapter, I focus on women's relationships with their families in relation to what I am calling the "marriage talk," that is, the conversation that revolves around when, whom, and even how a woman should marry. My concern in this chapter is not to contemplate the state of singleness, but rather to reflect on the ways in which women are inter- pellated by the institution of marriage so as to render any other choice, such as remaining unmarried, unthinkable. The paper also illuminates the gendered and casteist ideologies that underpin the institution of marriage and concomitantly, most "marriage talk" in India. This chapter centers its discussion on what it means to be a family, and engages with the changing role that daughters occupy as gendered human beings, and the shifts that occur when daughters are single. It asks how differently families might be constructed if we dislodge marriage from the central position it now occu- pies. In doing so, it asks what might change if women were to be recog- nized simply as individuals rather than as daughters, wives, and mothers.

Keywords   marriage; family; caste; gender; education

"You are next," booms your loud octogenarian uncle, rapping his cane on the floor.[1] His gap-toothed smile looks a bit like a grimace as you somehow resist the temptation to roll your eyes, for he is far from the first person at your cousin's wedding to make this announcement.

When an unmarried woman shows up at a wedding, it is a free-for-all for the extended family to announce that she should be "tying the knot," "looking for Mr. Right," "entering wedded bliss," or whatever other similar trite phrase they might care to use.

The above conversation is a composite caricature of my own memories and the narratives of the women I interviewed. For, misquoting Jane Austen, it appears to be a truth universally acknowledged that a single Indian woman of a certain age must be in want of a husband. This certain age might vary, depending on a woman's geographical location, family values, educational and employment status, and her bargaining power, but at some point, usually sooner rather than later, her family will decide that she needs a husband.

For many women, their relationships with their families are central to the ways in which they lead their lives. In this chapter, I focus on women's relationships with their families, more specifically with their immediate families (however they define these: an immediate family may encompass only their nuclear families, or they might include aunts and uncles who are siblings of parents, or even extended kin) in relation to what I am calling the "marriage talk," that is, the conversation that revolves around when, whom, and even how a woman should marry. My concern in this chapter is not to contemplate the state of singleness, but rather to reflect on the ways in which women are interpellated by the institution of marriage so as to render any other choice, such as remaining unmarried, unthinkable. I focus on the supposed universal desirability of the institution of marriage, though singleness or singlehood is often foregrounded in the narratives I deal with.

My endeavor is to explore how women are negotiating "marriage talk" by dodging it, challenging it, and in doing so, are reflecting on it in complex and nuanced ways. The intention is also to illuminate the gendered and casteist ideologies that underpin the institution of marriage and, concomitantly, most "marriage talk" in India. The chapter also engages with the shaming and infantilizing of unmarried women by their extended families. It focuses on the role that mothers are expected to play, and the sometimes-supportive relationship that is produced between mothers and daughters in the process. It examines how education and employment success may mediate these conversations in interesting ways. Finally, I argue that by being "difficult daughters," these women transform the terms of negotiation, therefore contributing towards challenging the hierarchical and gender-iniquitous nature of marriage and thereby questioning the institution itself.

This chapter centers its discussion around what it means to be a family, and engages with the shifting role that daughters occupy as gendered

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human beings, and the shifts that occur when daughters are single. It asks how differently families might be constructed if we dislodge marriage from the central position it now occupies. In doing so, it asks what might change if women were to be recognized simply as individuals rather than as daughters, wives, and mothers.

About the methodology

The chapter is based on twenty-one interviews with women who had never been married, though, upon hearing about my research, three divorced women told me separately that they had many stories to tell of their own parents' responses to their divorces and subsequent hopes for their remarriage. All of my interviewees had been brought up and were living in India. One interviewee had recently moved outside the country for work, while another one had moved abroad for higher education. Of these interviews, four were conducted in person, seven on the phone, and ten by email, based on the preferences of the women I interviewed. All identified as cisgender and heterosexual. All the names used for the women are pseudonyms, and where required, some details have been altered to protect their identities.

Since the focus of the research was on marriage, I was looking for unmarried rather than unpartnered women. Hence, of the twenty-one women interviewed for the present study, five were in romantic relationships with men, and two of these were living with their partners at the time I interviewed them. Of the rest, ten of the women lived on their own, seven lived with their families, one lived in a university women's hostel, and one rented a flat with friends. Some of the women were themselves actively looking for partners, depending on serendipity, digital connections, friends' friends, or familial suggestions. Some of the women had found great freedom in the single state, and pointed out that it would take something or someone very special for them to want to change that. Some would be happy to be partnered but were not willing to "settle" for anyone.

Of the twenty-one women I interviewed, ten were between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine, and eleven were between thirty and thirty-six years old. Eighteen of the women were Hindu, two Muslim, and one Christian, though many said explicitly that they were non-practicing. The two Muslim women identified as privileged-caste. The Christian woman said she did not have a caste. All but one of the Hindu women belonged to privileged-caste communities, and many acknowledged the advantages that came from their caste locations.

The one woman who identified as Dalit said,

> I belong to a Dalit family that is fairly well-connected. I can honestly say that I have never faced any consequence of my caste. Rather, I am realizing every day how fortunate I am for having had all the advantages that money or class could provide. And while it is true

> that I spent a long time hiding my caste identity from people for fear of rejection or ridicule, today I proudly own it.

This comment is relevant because it simultaneously asserts that she had not suffered any negative consequences due to her caste, yet also that she felt the need to hide her caste for fear of being shamed. This fear is a consequence of her caste location and must be read as such. None of the privileged-caste women I interviewed, expressed gratitude for the advantages provided by class in quite the same way.

Further, the group of women I interviewed had all had access to higher education. Every single one of them had a post-graduate degree or diploma, six of them were currently pursuing PhDs, two had plans to pursue PhDs in the future, and two already had PhDs. Further, sixteen of the twenty-one women had received an education that might be broadly regarded as situated within the humanities and the social sciences. All but three of the women identified explicitly as feminists, and the three who did not, said they believed in gender equality but did not know enough about feminism. The education and feminist politics of my interviewees inflect the ways in which they are able to view, articulate, and analyze the institution of marriage and their location as single women who are expected to enter it.

As is clear from the foregoing discussion, these women do not constitute a representative sample of women in this age group. They are not even representative of unmarried, urban, educated women who are engaging in conversations about marriage with their families. Despite this disclaimer, this cohort of women nonetheless raise deeply relevant concerns around "marriage talk" that might have a wider resonance than such a restricted group might otherwise suggest. What this chapter offers, then, is a closer look at the possibility of oppositional narratives that are part of any institution, which, in this case, is marriage.

"We have to look now, or all the good matches will be taken"

The assumption that a woman will marry often carries a sense of inevitability and universality in India[2]—a sentiment shared by China,[3] Japan,[4] among many other nations. In the context of the United States, Bella M.

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2   Sarah Lamb, "Being Single in India: Gendered Identities, Class Mobilities, and Personhoods in Flux," *Ethos* 46, no. 1 (2018).

3   Wanqi Gong, Caixie Tu, and L. Crystal Jiang, "Stigmatized Portrayals of Single Women: A Content Analysis of News Coverage on Single Women and Single Men in China," *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017); Haiping Wang and Douglas A. Abbott, "Waiting for Mr. Right: The Meaning of Being a Single Educated Chinese Female Over 30 in Beijing and Guangzhou*," Women's Studies International Forum*, no. 40 (2013).

4   Eriko Maeda and Michael L. Hecht, "Identity Search: Interpersonal Relationships and Relational Identities of Always-Single Japanese Women Over Time," *Western Journal of Communication* 76, no. 1 (2012).

DePaulo and Wendy L. Morris note that there is an "ideology of marriage and family" that assumes not only that everyone will want to marry, but also that they will actually marry.[5] This scholarship from varied contexts seems to suggest a broad pressure to enter into heterosexual marriages, even though different cultural locations display variants on this theme.

In my interviews, while the perceived-to-be-appropriate age of marriage varied from twenty-three to twenty-seven depending on the caste, community, specific education, and class location of individuals, marriage was seen as an essential component of adulthood. Minal (twenty-six, PhD student) pointed to the assumption that marriage is inevitable. She said, "It would be easy to be stubborn about not getting married if I had women around me doing the same thing, but I know that as years go by, there will be fewer and fewer unmarried women, at least in my family."

For many women, it was suggested that they should begin the search for grooms early in order to "catch" the best ones. The weddings of other people were a common place for such an undertaking, and here it did not seem to matter whether you were even of a legal age to marry. Tarini (thirty years old, working with an information technology consultancy) said, "Until very recently, there was never a question in my family about *if* I would get married, it was more of a when. The first time it came up was probably when my older sister got married. I was *sixteen* at the time."

Geetha (thirty-one years old, working in a non-Governmental Organization [NGO]) had the question come up at her cousin's wedding. "The first time my parents spoke of marriage was in 2010. This was when my cousin got *nicely arranged married* to a nice Brahmin boy and everyone was very happy. She was twenty-five and I was twenty-three, and it was made evident that I was next in line 'on the market.'" Saying that you are too young or have just found a job is often not a deterrent, as relatives simply respond, as Geetha's parents did, by saying, "It can take five to six years to find a good boy. And it's not like we *will* find someone, and you *have to* get married to him. These things take time."

Weddings are supposed to beget more weddings. Kamila's (twenty-five years old, working in an NGO) older brother married just as she had finished her master's degree. She recounted, "My marriage was the peak thing to be discussed." She was fuming to find that her parents were very concerned about how she looked, since

> it is at such ceremonies that people "see" you, so you have to look a certain way or dress a certain way. Even though it came under the guise of "you have to look nice." When I said I don't like gold—I don't want to wear it—they said I had to wear gold, because what will people say if the younger sister of the groom is not wearing anything

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5   Bella M. DePaulo and Wendy L. Morris, "Singles in Society and in Science," *Psychological Inquiry* 16, no. 2–3 (2005): 58.

gold. I knew that it was about being seen as a prospective bride...
I did not wear any gold, though it came with a huge fight.

Marriage also seemed inevitable to Madhavi (twenty-eight years old, work-
ing at a corporation): "My parents have been actively 'looking' for some
four years now. Women in my family marry fairly young. Most have been
married by twenty-five. So, at twenty-eight, I'm already old by their stan-
dards. Most cousins my age already have children." The question of mar-
riage came up for Kriti (twenty-five years old, working in an NGO) when she
had just begun her MA degree program and was considering an academic
career. When she mentioned her plans to her mother, her mother said,
"You can finish your master's degree." Kriti reflected:

> She *emphasized this.* I was taken aback by the timeline that had been
> created by my parents...In arranged marriage situations, the par-
> ents are the ones who hold the power. It is difficult to make out
> what they are doing—talking to people or presenting us in a certain
> way; there's a big gap in power. I had no idea if they were telling
> people to look out for me, or whether they were making a biodata[6],
> or going to a marriage broker... it gave me a lot of anxiety.

In many contexts, women are regarded as *paraya dhan,* literally trans-
lated as "wealth of others," suggesting that they belong to another family,
namely, their would-be marital family, and not to their natal one. Within
such a worldview, adult women are considered marriageable until mar-
ried. All occasions, especially weddings, become spaces in which this status
may be commented upon. This vision of women as implicitly marriageable
often places a great deal of pressure on them.

Chitra's (thirty years old, working in social media) story underscores
that parents often push things in a particular direction. It is clear from her
detailed recollection that the incident was clearly etched in her memory:

> The first time my family brought up the topic of marriage was on
> twentieth August 2009. I was home on vacation for my mother's
> birthday. She asked me if I would be willing to meet a boy. I could
> see how excited my parents were and I agreed. After I met him, that
> night I got phone calls from more people in the family than I do on
> my birthday, all asking what I thought of him... and how I must say
> yes to marrying him. I said that he was nice enough. Somehow this
> lukewarm response translated to a "yes" in everyone's mind, and
> the emotional blackmail began. It took a few months of constant

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6   A biodata is another word for a resume. Here the kind of biodata invoked is one
     that is circulated by the parents of potential brides or grooms listing their educa-
     tional qualifications, employment credentials, and other skills and qualities that
     might mark them as desirable life partners.

negotiating to finally get my family to agree to let me finish my master's program before any "ceremonies." The guy's side were in a huge rush for the wedding and thankfully disagreed. He called me ten days after our last conversation to let me know he was getting engaged—like he was window-shopping for shoes. Definitely a lucky escape.

When Neera (thirty-six years old, a university professor) was about twenty-six years old and had just begun an MPhil program, her parents placed an advertisement in the newspaper. She had no idea about this until her brother told her. "Thankfully, they themselves did not like the responses they got," she says. "But by the time I took it up with them and asked them, 'How could you not ask me?', a lot of time had passed."

Kriti, Chitra, and Neera's narratives gesture to the reality that women are not really consulted in the discussion of their own marriages. Women with greater bargaining power or more liberal families will have a choice of whom to marry (within a limited pool), but often not of whether and when to marry. Linked directly to such a lack of choice is the implicit eliding of any questions of sex and sexuality. Good young women are supposed to be ignorant of, or at least uninterested, in sex. Within this worldview, it is assumed that a modest young woman would not (and should not) display enthusiasm for her own marriage, and it is up to the parents to assume the responsibility and make decisions for their daughters' well-being. Young women's protests about not wanting to marry are thus often not taken seriously by their families; in fact, such protests may sometimes be seen as a performance of appropriate femininity.

There is often a connection between the stage of education and the question of marriage, in the sense that the beginnings and endings of educational degrees are moments when the marriage question tends to arise. This is a time that is seen as the window of opportunity for women to marry, and families often insist that once this has passed, all the good matches will already have been made.

Young women often find themselves negotiating education and employment with families, and where families are loving and accede to their daughters' wishes to some extent, young women often feel that they then have to respond to their parents' openness and liberalism by somehow accommodating their desires. Kamini (thirty years old, university teacher) started a master's program at twenty-three after working for a while, and she recalled that

there was the sense that you were locking yourself in for two years. The pressure was highest in my mid-twenties—which was seen as the golden window to marry. That's the time my relationship with my parents was very fraught. I had decided what I wanted to study largely on my own—a rarity in my family, as my cousins had listened to their families. I felt that I had had my way for eight years and so I had to meet them mid-way.

Where parents are supportive of their daughters' desires to postpone or eschew marriage, extended families may remind them of their "duties." This is reflected in Padma's (thirty-two years old, medical doctor) narrative:

> I must have been about twenty-four, and one grand-aunt called my mother and said she knew this "good boy." This so-called boy was over thirty and lived outside the country. My mother told her, "Padma is not interested." My grand-aunt told my mother that she should not listen to me, that children don't know what's good for them, and that it is up to parents to decide.

In the Indian context, the institution of marriage is as much about parents as it is about the couple themselves. The onus of marrying off their children is placed on the parents. And because women occupy a much lower status in the marriage hierarchy, it is the parents of daughters who are counted upon to perform the task of finding suitable husbands.

Sanjana's (twenty-five, college teacher) family suggested that the biological clock was ticking, and that it was not good to wait. The idea was that

> more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight years is not good for reasons of pregnancy. My extended family keep on asking my cousin about her marriage plans. She is twenty-seven. Their reactions and expressions show that they do not like it when she says she does not want to marry now. There are awkward silences and uncomfortable questions.

Kamalini Ramdas points out that terms like "old maid," "biological clock," and "shelf life" are used to describe the singleness of women, suggesting deficiency.[7] She argues that "Single women are thus cast as...'women in waiting' as they have yet to complete what is seen as an important rite of passage."[8] Similarly, Asha L. Abeyasekera, in the context of Sri Lanka, has pointed out that "single women signify 'lack'—they are incomplete and, therefore, do not belong."[9]

Implicit in this idea of the "right age to marry" is the suggestion that if women pass a certain age, they will then have to settle for lesser matches in the eyes of the "world"—the circle of family and friends who matter. Chitra senses that, as she gets older, her parents feel that they will now not get the kind of groom they had hoped for, given their own status and connections.

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7   Kamalini Ramdas, "Women in Waiting? Singlehood, Marriage, and Family in Singapore," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 44, no. 4 (2012).
8   Ramdas, "Women in Waiting," 832.
9   Asha L. Abeyasekera, "Singleness and the world of 'not belonging,'" *Open Democracy*, December 5, 2016. Accessed July 2, 2020. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/gendered-dimension-of-space-singleness-and-world-of-not-belonging/.

This narrative that women will not find suitable matches is not new or even peculiar to India. Chinese women who are unmarried, have been labeled "leftover women" by a state initiative. Leta Hong Fincher argues that the state-sponsored media campaign denigrating these so-called "leftover women" (usually urban career women and single women over the age of twenty-seven) reflects a more general resurgence of gender inequality in contemporary China.[10]

As argued above, often women are not even seen as relevant to the conversations taking place among "elders" regarding their marriage, which may begin without their approval or knowledge. This serves to implicitly infantilize young people, and especially women.

"What do you know?"—Infantilizing single women

An unmarried woman is often still regarded as a child—as someone without agency, as someone who has not yet grown-up, or settled—regardless of how successful she might be professionally, or how independent she might be personally.

The elevation of the heterosexual, married dyad creates a space where, even when it is the unmarried daughter who shoulders the responsibility of caring for aging parents, it is her married siblings who are seen as the adults.[11] Ai-Ling Lai, Ming Lim, and Matthew Higgins, who studied the notion of abjectness in singleness in Britain, suggest that the experience of singleness is gendered, and pathologizes single women (in a way that does not affect single men), and seeks to discipline their sexuality.[12] Writing on the Indian experience of singleness, Rekha Pappu argues that single women are seen as "unfortunate, lonely, vulnerable, incomplete, frustrated, frigid, man-hater, woman-lover, self-indulgent, promiscuous, predatory, unpredictable, non-conforming, subversive, free, independent, or autonomous,"[13] once again problematizing their sexuality.

These assumptions are reflected in Nasreen's (thirty years old, PhD student with fellowship) observations:

> That I am unmarried often makes me feel like my value amongst my extended family is diluting. I have seen my cousin and sisters who were earlier taunted, be treated with respect once they were "respectably married." Unmarried women are not treated on par

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10 Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zed Books, 2014).
11 See, for instance, Lamb, "Being Single in India."
12 Ai-Ling Lai, Ming Lim, and Matthew Higgins, "The Abject Single: Exploring the Gendered Experience of Singleness in Britain," *Journal of Marketing Management* 31, no. 15–16 (2015).
13 Rekha Pappu, "Reconsidering Romance and Intimacy: The Case of the Single Unmarried Woman," in *Intimate Others: Marriage and Sexualities in India*, ed. Samita Sen, Ranjita Biswas, and Nandita Dhawan (Kolkata: Stree, 2011), 370.

with married couples. I worry that if I remain unmarried for long, I'll lose the respect of my family, and my relationships will be strained. This makes me feel even more pressured to succeed in my professional life so that I can win their respect. And even if I don't win their respect, at least I won't remain dependent on them in any way.

Similarly, Lisa (thirty-one years old, PhD student with fellowship) challenged the idea that only marriage settles a woman.

Family, mostly my mother, and older aunts and uncles, have been vocal about the need for me to be married and settled. The word "settled" annoys me. A woman is not considered to have done enough in her life if she doesn't have a man. I feel this is a way in which women are controlled and curtailed. It is a subtle hint that no matter how accomplished a woman is, she has not established herself if she is not married.

Geetha concurred with this, saying, "Many times, it's just the feeling of not feeling included in family affairs because *every* other woman your age is married and has a kid."
Madhavi added,

It's really infuriating. Despite the fact that I have two postgraduate degrees and am doing really well professionally by any standards, even by those of my male cousins, in fact much better than most of them—it's the men, both married and single, and the married women cousins, who are asked for their opinion in the family. As a single woman, it is assumed that I can't possibly have anything of import to say. From their perspective, it is only when I marry that I will gain any kind of status.

Women are infantilized, considered to be not quite adults until they are married. I read the denial of status and any semblance of voice to young, unmarried women as yet another instance of women being coerced into complying with the pressures to marry. As Nasreen pointed out, by making unmarried women feel undervalued, natal families subtly and openly push them towards what seems like a more desirable status, that of a married woman. However, as a significant body of literature on marriages suggests, young married women in India tend to have even less of a voice in their conjugal families, whatever their marriage might do for their status in their natal families. Women appear to recognize this and sometimes make choices that take them away from, rather than towards marriage, even as, it is their marital status that tends to occupy the minds and opinions of people around them.

"What will people say?"—negotiating well-meaning and not-so-well-meaning others

Log kyā kahenge or "What will people say?" is the threat that is often used to get daughters to conform to hegemonic ideas. The idea that individual actions or, in this case, inaction, reflect on the family honor, which will be besmirched if they do not obey, is used to compel many recalcitrant daughters to marry.

Chitra's unmarried state framed her entire relationship with her family. Chitra said she went to a wedding where the bride was quite overweight by current, normative standards, and her mother's immediate response was, "If she can get a guy, how come you can't?" Chitra told me that this comment was not an aberration, and that every so often her mother would bring up *that first proposal*. "Even now when we have a fight, my mom reminds me—'We found such a nice guy for you.' My mom is on his social media, and every time he posts a picture of his wife, my mother says, 'This could have been you.'"

The people who are most likely to suggest matches and to talk about marriage are relatives. Neera told me how she strategically got her aunt to stop suggesting possible grooms:

> My *masi*[maternal aunt] would suggest someone every other month. One day I told her I had some problems related to PCOS [polycystic ovarian syndrome] and partial seizures—I told her that it's nice that you are recommending people, but whoever you meet you should come clean with my medical history. There could be reproductive complications. After that, she never volunteered—she was off my back for good. She was extremely hesitant to suggest to a relative a female who might be reproductively challenged—that worked like magic.

Neera's strategy suggests an interesting contradiction. Even as gendered singleness is pathologized as being aberrant, women are claiming, even flaunting their equally pathologized bodies, in this case, in relation to PCOS, to avoid being disciplined into marriage.

Talking about her uncle's intervention, Radhika (thirty years old, recently completed her PhD) said,

> My uncle did engage with my mother on this. My mother's response was that since I was in the process of writing up my PhD, he should wait till I complete it and then bring the alliances to my notice. It would be very distracting for me otherwise, is what she conveyed. Ever since, he stopped talking to me; he has also stopped talking to her.

Similarly, Sneha (twenty-six years old, working for a media organization) pointed to the insidious ways in which social pressure works. "When

people talk, I don't take it to heart—these are not people I am emotionally invested in. I also equate marriage comments with comments about my weight. The suggestion is often made that I should lose weight for this or that wedding or event." Women who do not meet the prescribed standards of appearance, are also at the receiving end of comments about their weight, color, or whatever is seen to be the problem, with the implication that if only they could address it, they would be able to find a husband.

Padma suggested that relatives might be misguided but in a benevolent, patriarchal way. She recalled that

> once my grand-aunt actually went to meet a family about a *sthal*—a possible proposal. She reported back to my mother, who gleefully reported back to me, that my rather conservative, though very loving, grand-aunt had decided on her own that that family was too religious for me. She apparently told my mother that they do *pūjā* [ritual prayers][14] every day, and expect that their daughter-in-law will do *pūjā* too. She said that she simply could not imagine me in such a role. So, though my relatives are annoying, they are also well-meaning, and I think they truly care about me. The thing, though, is that what they want for me is not what I want for myself.

Rhea (thirty-six years old, PhD candidate) noted that her mother was disappointed that her grandmother did not display an interest in getting her, Rhea, married off suitably. Speaking about her grandmother, Rhea said:

> She was very happy that I went to one of the well-known colleges in Calcutta. Even though she didn't have the opportunity to study, she was very proud that my mother had always been a very good student, and that she was good at mathematics. When I was younger, she used to tell me that I must study more than a master's degree, since my mother has a master's degree in geography. She felt that I must do something more with my life.

Though weddings provide her with substantial work, Keya (thirty-one years old, photographer) was quite critical of the consumer dynamics in large weddings and said that she was definitely not ready to marry herself.

> I have been shooting weddings for the past five years and it's been great. I love the energy and the chaos and of course I love making images—memories for the bride and groom. But the more I see these high-end weddings, the more I feel that sometimes it's not needed. I am grateful to get such projects but would not like to be on the other side. I also don't have dreams of a three-day wedding and an obnoxiously expensive outfit.

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14 All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are by the author.

Keya added, "Sometimes my cousins call up my parents asking them when I am getting married but the fact is that I always wanted to travel the world, make photos, and experience it all, and now I am literally living my dream."

For Keya, the act of "living her dream" assumed center stage, and her comments suggest that everything else would then recede. Both Keya and Padma acknowledged that extended families often did not understand what motivated them and what they wanted from life. Women, then, are asserting that their needs and desires are different, and yet just as valid as the ambitions of marriage that their families have for them. They claim to know what they want and are convinced that they are right, which allows them to articulate what they want.

Women also encounter random comments and judgement not just from family, but from strangers too, as Keya discovered.

> I was shooting a wedding two years ago and I got to know that one lady thought I was a "characterless girl" just because I was single, a photographer, talking easily to people, and traveling the world. I laughed because I really didn't know that doing my job as a photographer, traveling the world, and talking to people could be seen as such a sin. This is something that has happened few times because my profession is male-dominated.

Even if Keya laughed this off, such comments are not unusual for single women above a certain age. The word "characterless," suggesting a person of questionable morals, appears frequently. In her book *Status Single*, Sreemoyee Piu Kundu narrates an interview she conducted with filmmaker Shikha Makan, in relation to questions of renting an apartment.[15] In this interview, Makan tells Kundu, "Essentially you are battling a deep-seated assumption that a woman who hasn't married past a certain age is 'characterless.'"[16] Makan is the director of a film that looks at single women's engagement with the city and housing, called *Bachelor Girls.* Research focusing on Delhi and Mumbai also suggests that single women find it harder to rent accommodation, even in so-called megacities.[17]

Rhea pointed out that even spaces that were supposed to be safe and gender-progressive might actually not be. Recounting how she won a coveted prize as part of her master's degree in women's studies, she told me how she had sought out a teacher who she felt, had helped her, in order to thank her. The teacher's response really upset Rhea: "She said that doing well in the two years and being nominated for the prize is okay, but since

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15 Sreemoyee Piu Kundu, *Status Single: The Truth about Being a Single Woman in India* (New Delhi: Amaryllis, 2018).

16 Kundu*, Status Single*, 16.

17 Lucie Bernroider, "Single Female Tenants in South Delhi: Gender, Class and Morality in a Globalizing City," *Gender, Place & Culture* 25, no. 5 (2018); Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2011).

I was older, if I wanted to have my own children, I should get married soon." In another similar incident, Rhea was told by her supervisor that "women who aspire for higher education and the status that it brings with it may 'miss the bus of marriage' in trying to be too picky." Rhea's experiences suggest that even in institutions of higher education, there is the assumption that women will, and in fact must, marry, irrespective of whatever else they may achieve.

The number and range of comments that unmarried women are subject to, seem to suggest that the extended family, and indeed extended society, are deeply invested in ensuring that women conform to the hegemonic ideal of heteronormative marriage, thus ensuring the status quo. Further, it is not just marriage itself that is regulated, but also the choice of groom.

Endogamous boundaries: whom not to marry

Marriage is a, or perhaps *the* hard boundary to the mixing of castes and religions. The sheer violence enacted on those who break the codes surrounding inter-caste marriages testifies to how zealously caste endogamy is practiced.[18] According to the census of 2011, only 5.8 % of Indian marriages are inter-caste, a figure that has remained unchanged for over forty years, according to Tridip Ray, Arka Roy Chaudhuri, and Komal Sahai.[19] Furthermore, they point out that whereas in other countries, education correlates more closely with a decrease in endogamous marriages (along social, ethnic, or racial lines), in India, education levels have little or no bearing on the likelihood of marrying outside the caste group.

It is unsurprising, then, that caste-related and religious endogamy forms the inevitable subtext to any "marriage talk." Padma pointed to this implicit understanding of caste endogamy as a given, where often, any other outcome was not even in the range of considered possibilities. For her,

> Nobody has mentioned caste. My mother says she'd be delighted if I found my own "boy." I am not sure what this obsession with calling adult men and women "boys" and "girls" in relation to marriage is. But going back to finding my own husband—she has not mentioned caste or even religion, but I don't think she imagines a caste vastly

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18 Uma Chakravarti, "From Fathers to Husbands: Of Love, Death and Marriage in North India," in *"Honour": Crimes, Paradigms, and Violence Against Women*, ed. Lynn Welchman and Sara Hossain (London: Zed Books, 2005); Prem Chowdhry, "Enforcing Cultural Codes: Gender and Violence in Northern India," *Economic and Political Weekly* 32, no. 19 (1997); Perveez Mody, *The Intimate State: Love-Marriage and the Law in Delhi* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2008).
19 Tridip Ray, Arka Roy Chaudhuri, and Komal Sahai, "Whose Education Matters? An Analysis of Inter Caste Marriages in India" (Discussion Paper, Delhi Economics and Planning Unit, Indian Statistical Institute, 2017).

different from ours. She could imagine that I'd marry a Christian or Muslim, and if they were of a similar upper-middle class and edu-cated it would be okay, though in the present climate she might worry about safety if I married a Muslim, and with good reason. But I don't think she's thought about caste. All her friends, even the Muslims and Christians, are upper castes or similar. I don't think she knows anyone who is lower-caste or tribal as a friend, as someone she could have a relationship with. So, though caste has not been mentioned, I am sure she thinks I will find someone of a similar caste. Certainly, if she were looking, she would look within caste.

Sneha echoed Padma almost exactly:

My mother in this regard is fairly liberal—she is not insistent on marrying from a certain community. But it is not apparent to her that there can be a huge caste difference. Caste is not in their imag-ination. She was born in a Brahmin household, and married into a Brahmin household, and all her friends are upper-caste—cul-turally, she does not consider that I might marry someone from a completely different caste background. Any difference, she might imagine, would be religious.

This is also the reason why even the possibility of an arranged marriage was anathema to Sneha.

I've thought about the idea of arranged marriage in passing—all my principles would crash down on me. Endogamous arranged mar-riage is against everything I stand for. So not something I can ever do. Most of my cousins have had endogamous marriages, not just the arranged, but also the love marriages. That's how closed one's friend circle is.

Minal added, "Within my extended family, I don't know of anyone who has married outside of our caste or religion. Most of my cousins are still unmarried, but somehow I have a feeling that they won't [marry someone with a different background]."

Interestingly, in some cases, the desire to stay within caste boundaries includes the desire not to marry above caste. Kamini, who came from a non-Brahmin, privileged caste, said that her family was horrified when a cousin married a Brahmin, foreseeing that she might be looked down upon for her lack of Brahminness.

The foregoing narratives draw our attention to the insidious ways in which caste works, even in twenty-first-century India. Even as caste is often not openly acknowledged, it permeates social circles and is especially enforced in relation to marriage. Endogamous marriages are also linked to other structures of power, including unequal control and ownership of

land, and the idea of pure bloodlines where marriage is the final bastion of the perpetuation of caste hierarchies. *Indian Matchmaking,* a television show that was released on Netflix in 2020, also underscored just how deeply rooted caste and casteism are within the institutions of marriage and family. Marriage and the control of women's sexuality are central to what Uma Chakravarti has called "Brahmanical patriarchy,"[20] which she defines as "a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other, and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes." Chakravarti and others argue that endogamy is stringently enforced by these patriarchal codes to ensure that the caste system can be reproduced. Any violation of endogamous rules produces a violent reaction, including murder at the extreme end.[21] Even as many privileged castes are vocal in their opposition to affirmative action in higher education and the universities are fraught spaces of discrimination against Dalit and tribal students, the public universities are among the few places where people from different castes can meet as relative equals, and perhaps find friendship and even romance together.

Religion and caste are deeply intertwined. Often endogamous boundaries encompass both, and these may sometimes be represented as differences in food habits, such as vegetarianism. Minal said:

> My mother told me that I can marry whoever I want except a Muslim person or an SC/ST [Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes] person. They are also deeply concerned about how my partner's family should be "pure vegetarian." On a side note, though, they were not aware for almost a year that I am not vegetarian anymore either. When I said that I have had chicken, both my parents were almost horrified. One of my ex-partners, who my mother knew as being Brahmin, was not vegetarian. My mother had liked him I think, for multiple reasons—that he was an MBA graduate, was from a family who was also well-educated, and that he was Brahmin. When I told her that he was not vegetarian, she was surprised, but she said it was fine, people eat what they eat. But I don't think she would be *this understanding* if the caste or religion were different.

Interreligious marriages are not easily accepted either. In Madhavi's case, when her brother married across religious lines, she felt it restricted her own choices.

> My brother married a Christian woman. After that, it was clear to me that I would have to be the child who conformed, else it would

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20 Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens* (Kolkata: Stree, 2003), 45.
21 Chakravarti, "From Fathers to Husbands"; Chowdhry, "Enforcing Cultural Codes"; Mody, *The Intimate State*.

have broken my parents' hearts. They put on a good face about my brother's marriage, but for my parents it was not what they had dreamed of. They are happy for my brother, but I think very sad for themselves. If I ever marry, and it seems likely that I eventually will, I will not really be able to marry too far from our caste location.

Kamila and her brother, on the other hand, used a similar situation of inter-religious marriage to assert a specific kind of progressive politics:

My brother married a Hindu woman, and with that I became the biggest conversation in my family—how will we find a match for the daughter? She will also learn these things... she will also marry who-ever she wants. They tried to make him feel guilty by saying, "Think about your younger sister—who will marry her as the brother has married outside?" My parents were initially slightly uncomfort-able—they too bought into this idea that it will be difficult to get me married. But my brother and I have a strong thing going on and we challenged it—we asked them, "Why would I marry into such a fam-ily who would care about this?" We convinced our parents, but the extended family is still talking about it.

Kamila and her brother's tactics were to suggest that the only worthwhile kind of person she might be interested in marrying would not care about religious differences.

Like Kamila, Minal was confident that she could convince her parents. She said, "Even their rules about *who* I can and cannot marry... I think I can break them, even if with some arguments. I would never be worried about them 'disowning' me under any circumstances whatsoever, and I think, at the end of the day, they just want me to be happy."

Sadly, though, if surveys are to be believed, then Minal, Kamila, and Kamila's brother might be in a minority. The Lokniti-CSDS–KAS (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies–Konrad Adenauer Stiftung) survey (2017) shows that thirty-six percent of Indian youth (aged fifteen to thirty-four) saw inter-caste marriages as completely wrong; twenty-three percent saw them as partially right, and only one third approved of them fully.[22] Sim-ilarly, with inter-religious marriages, forty-five percent were completely opposed to them, and only twenty-eight percent fully supported them. These figures reflect both urban and rural data, but they are nonetheless, not encouraging.

Nasreen's narrative suggests that there is more than a little ambiguity, even among professionals living in metropolitan areas.

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22 Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), "Key Highlights from the CSDS–KAS Report 'Attitudes, Anxieties and Aspirations of India's Youth: Changing Patterns,'" *CSDS–KAS*, April 3, 2017. https://www.lokniti.org/media/upload_files/KeyfindingsfromtheYouthStudy.pdf.

I have increasingly wondered about how Hindu men perceive a Muslim woman of marriageable age. Perhaps my curiosity stemmed from observing how many of my cousins dated Hindu women, but when it came to marriage, fell in love with Muslim women who would be accepted into the family and play the role of the ideal daughter-in-law. In my social circle, where premarital sex and casual relationships are the norm, I have wondered if it's possible that Hindu men think of me as someone who is okay to hook up or have a fling with but not marry. Even amongst journalists my age, where people have a rebellious edge towards societal norms, and mix freely regardless of religion and caste, though not always class, the thought has nagged me. The first time I met my [Hindu] partner's friends, we were at a house party talking about Tinder [a dating app]. One woman was going through another woman's Tinder profile and asked her. "Is it okay to swipe right [accept] for Muslim men?" It was an awkward moment and brought out clearly how even amongst secular, modern, urban, upper-middle-class Hindus who had Muslim friends, dating someone from the community was breaking away from the norm.

Anandi's (twenty-five years old, PhD candidate with fellowship) narrative illustrated that even when the family is progressive, the question of caste plays a role, albeit in a different way:

My family has always been different. My parents too, had a court marriage, which was controversial in its day. Then, my mum did not change her name, they did not give me a surname, I call them by their first names instead of *aaie* [Marathi for mother] and *aho baba* [Marathi for father in a respectful way], they agreed to homeschool me for a few years, so we've been quite notorious in that regard. I feel the extended family were more surprised that I managed to be quite so conformist [same caste, opposite sex] in my choice of partner!

Caste and religion, and the implicit requirement that people marry inside these boundaries, are features of not just arranged marriages but also choice (or "love") marriages. Interestingly, for some women at least, the restrictions regarding whom they might marry are considerably reduced as they grow older. As Kamini pointed out,

In my early twenties, [my family] would have been particular— maybe not necessarily looking in my caste, but along similar caste lines—based on the idea of cultural similarity, that it's easier to assimilate in a family like ours. But by the time I was twenty-seven or twenty-eight, they explicitly said they were not bothered about caste or religion.

Minal added to this, "I feel that my parents worry about me not marrying at all more than me marrying someone they don't approve of. So, I think they will be happy if I get married at all." This sentiment is echoed in Lisa's observation:

> When I was younger, I was very strictly told that I should not have a boyfriend and if I did, he should only be Christian. Now that I am thirty-one years old, my mother is okay with any guy... provided we are getting married. At twenty-five, my parents would not have been happy that I have a boyfriend who is older and divorced. But, I think after one turns thirty, many of these lines are blurred. The only focus is to be married.

Kamini laughed: "It's a running joke among my single friends that things begin to drop one after the other—caste, religion, then class, then finally just gender remains—is it a boy—yes, good idea—get married."

While Kamini's half-joking narrative about how the only prejudicial boundary left is the heteronormative one, makes one smile, these narratives do not indicate that caste, religious, or indeed class boundaries are gradually dissolving, but rather offer a wry observation in regard to how important heteronormative marriage is. Moreover, these exceptions do not make the pressures of conforming to endogamy any less real for most marriages.

The insistence on endogamous marriages seems to clearly suggest that the goal of marriage is not what women are often told it is, that is, companionship, but rather a way of maintaining the status quo. "Marriage talk," then, is not only about marriage itself, but also a conversation about caste, religion, sexuality, and race. The ideals of coupledom and the aspirational family are used to mask the fact that the institution of marriage is little more than a way of cementing hierarchical boundaries. However, when women refuse to comply with the universal dictate to marry suitably, the mask begins to slip, little by little.

Bad mothers with uncontrollable daughters

Mothers are perceived to be central to the socio-political economy of matchmaking. Therefore, mothers who are seemingly unable to discipline their daughters, and to a lesser extent, their sons, into submitting to this "highly desirable" institution, are often cast as unsuccessful, or worse, as uncaring and bad mothers. Mothers of unmarried daughters, especially those who are past the desirable age of marriage, face as much, and maybe even more pressure and social disapproval than their daughters. The patriarchal ideologies that cast marriage as the only important goal for women, implicate their mothers as well, who must demonstrate competence and virtue by marrying off their daughters to good, desirable grooms, preferably of the same caste and religion. This pressure on older

women to cajole, guilt, and even coerce younger women into marriage might be read among the ways in which patriarchy co-opts women into adhering to the status quo.

As Padma pointed out:

> I think the various calls from relatives made my mother feel that by not looking for a groom for me she was being a bad mother. Basically, she's a liberal person who agreed with me that I should decide when and if I want to marry, and also whom to marry, but she was not immune to the snide comments about me being too headstrong and that she could not control her daughter.

Similarly, Kamini said that her mother claimed that "she doesn't go out to family events because people will annoy her with questions about when I'm going to get married and she doesn't want to respond," but added that she had not "been someone who attended so many family functions anyway." Like Padma's mother, Kamini's mother was also told that "that's what the girls will say, but it's your duty to make them understand that there's an age for everything." Women are lectured to about maternal duty even when their daughters are adults.

Sometimes the pressure on mothers to have their daughters conform, leads them to shame their daughters in various ways. Chitra's mother is a politician and as part of her mother's campaign, Chitra was to give a talk at a college for women. Just before the talk, Chitra's grandmother told her that if the constituents asked, she should lie about her age. "My *nānī* [maternal grandmother] told me to say that I am twenty-three, not thirty and unmarried. She felt that people don't relate to leaders who let their daughters remain unmarried till thirty. There's a sense that, if you can't control your daughter, how will you be able to take charge of anything else?" Another time at a Diwali festival dinner, Chitra said, "One aunty asked, 'When are you calling me for a wedding?' My mother told her, 'She won't listen.' She told my mother, 'If it were my daughter, I would have locked her up.'"

Though this is much less common, occasionally fathers are also censured. Chitra said: "My dad and I have always been very thick, but now if I want to spend time with him, at half-hour intervals, this issue comes up. It also gets ugly sometimes: 'What kind of girl are you that you don't want to marry?' he asks. His friends tell him he has to marry me off and already it is very late."

In some contexts, mothers are required not just to marry off their daughters but also to embody in their own lives the kind of women that families want as daughters-in-law. In relation to the upper-class, Marwari business community to which she belonged, Kriti said that mothers were seen as representative of whom their daughters would become:

> My mother internalized the pressure to present herself in a certain way over a long time so as not to hamper our future. Even her own

approach to relationships with other people—her need to present herself as a perfect Marwari *bahū* [daughter-in-law]. She feels a sense of pride that people will only say good things about her if they look at her as a role model for what I will turn into. When parents look at potential daughters-in-law in our community, they focus on the reputation and character of the mother of the girl.

Kriti went on to reflect upon how she had changed:

> Growing up, I used to passively accept everything around young women, and how we should behave and plan our lives. In college, I started thinking and seeing creative options for myself. My mum has tried to understand me—she said, "I understand you will not be happy in a business family where you will have to play the role of a traditional *bahū*."

Kriti added that it was often older women in the family who had the power to define what it meant to be "a good Marwari woman." Mothers of adult daughters, who were still themselves answerable to elders in the family, might then have relatively less power in influencing the discourse around marriage:

> Older women in the family—the matriarchs—ideal wives, mothers who have social capital, connections, money—are seen as the success stories in my family. There's a clear power differential and power hierarchy in my family. My mum's mum is still alive and she has several sisters—and they have an important role in their children's lives and those of their children's children.

Kriti's narrative suggests that women acquire power as they grow older, especially when they are women who have conformed. They draw power from the status quo, and often use it in the service of patriarchy to reinforce gender relations, in ways that underscore the "old ways" and the notion that "this is how we have always done things." Younger women have to fall in line if they do not wish to be excluded and perhaps even ostracized. However, external changes intervene to allow women access to different kinds of communities.

Kriti said that sometime in the next few months she was going to the wedding of a cousin. She was now a twenty-five-year-old unmarried woman, an age she considered as being on the cusp of becoming unmarriageable in her community. She pointed out that things had been different for her:

> Girls in my generation have not been raised with the amount of inequality that our mothers' generation were. Our mothers were barely sent to college. My parents have tried to give children equal opportunities in terms of education, encouraging kids of both

genders to go out for studying. So, a lot of young women are not conditioned with being okay with what a traditional marriage looks like.

When women are educated, they may start asking uncomfortable questions. They are able to access worlds outside the ones they were brought up in. This allows space to challenge the power structures and hierarchies that might be taken for granted within their families. They may encounter older women outside their families, such as their teachers; they may encounter other young women, for example, their classmates and peers, with different ambitions; they may encounter feminism, especially in humanities and social science education—all of which may transform them. They may eventually choose to refuse to conform, because the ostensible threat of being excluded from familial approbation might actually be seen as a lesser evil than the reality of what conforming to the expectations of marriage might look like.

As daughters negotiate, avoid, and skirt the "marriage talk," parents also change with them. Just as parents often try to find truly suitable matches, they often understand when their daughters say they are not ready or do not want to marry. In some cases, parents were progressive to begin with, in others they change in negotiation with their daughters.

Some mothers are less bothered by their assigned roles. Keya said, "The funniest thing is when people call my mom telling her that she must explain things to me, like how important it is to get married, and she really needs to make me understand. My mom definitely is the last person who would actually have me sit down and chat about this. We'd rather have a talk about where we should travel next."

Rujutha and Deeksha both have liberal parents. Rujutha (twenty-eight years old, working in a media NGO) said she was able to "crib to [her] mother about being single and about being in a relationship. My mother is incredibly supportive about [her] being unmarried—she knows about my partner and that we live in together." Deeksha (twenty-nine years old, working for a corporate consultancy) added, "The question has come up now that I'm nearing thirty but in a very subtle way. I think I am lucky to have liberal parents who do not push marriage down my throat. I know of friends who have had very different experiences." Kalpana Sharma, in the introduction to her edited volume of essays by women who are single by choice, points out that in most narratives, one striking feature is the presence of supportive parents.[23] Sharda Ugra's essay in Sharma's edited volume recounts how the author was told by her mother that had she (the mother) "not been an obedient daughter… she would never have married."[24] This was something that stayed with Ugra as she made her own choices.

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23 Kalpana Sharma, "Introduction: Simply Single," in *Single by Choice: Happily Unmarried Women*, ed. Kalpana Sharma (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2019).
24 Sharda Ugra, "Stomping on the Cookie Cutter," in *Single by Choice: Happily Unmarried Women*, ed. Kalpana Sharma (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2019), 15.

Some narratives suggest that many mothers demonstrate a strong shift as they talk with their daughters, with the more status quo-ist discourse on marriage gradually becoming less important. Neera suggested that her mother felt that she, Neera, was living the life that her mother might have been able to live, if circumstances had been different. "I see in my mother's eyes—that I'm glad you are being able to do things I could not. My mother is the most excited when I travel. If I travel alone to difficult places, she takes tremendous pride in it. She really feels happy when I'm enjoying myself. That I am able to make the choices I make. It is much more than a resigned acceptance."

In most cases, parents evolve in their understanding as the conversation on marriage evolves. Kamini described the early years when her parents brought up the marriage question in the following words:

> Very quickly I realized it was not going to work. I was unhappy and they were unhappy. Talking to friends, I feel I had a very good equation with both my parents, even as a teenager. For the first time, I knew what it was like to not be on good terms with your parents, and how isolating it felt, and for them also it was the first time they struggled so much with me. Now I feel the conversation is much easier. Earlier it had an emotional tone, now it's about financial stability, are you saving—more practical and pragmatic. I find these conversations much more manageable. Those are things I want to do too.

In a similar vein, Geetha pointed out that other considerations had taken over. "My father is more worried about me getting insurance, investing, saving, buying a car, or filing my taxes. I think both my parents hope I will find someone I can get married to." Similarly, Neera said:

> My own relationship with my parents changed, as they were reassured that I am fine on my own. They are able to respond to people's questions by saying, "It's her life and our task is to facilitate this." They've also seen some failed marriages among my cousins and their colleagues' children. They've seen working women who were promised they would be treated better [by their conjugal family] but they were not. Families do try to domesticate these women. They [her parents] appreciate that I am able to do all of this because I am on my own.

While marriage continues to frame the discussion when daughters are of a certain age, in many cases parents are willing to reflect, to negotiate, and perhaps even to change. This discussion allows us to reframe the lens where those seen as bad mothers from a conformist perspective, might, from the perspective of their daughters, be the best kind of mother—mothers who understand that marriage might not be the most important thing for them.

How to define success? Education and careers as forms of negotiation

For many women, educational achievement or the perception of the pursuit of successful careers (not just jobs) mediate the "marriage talk." Both Neera and Kamini worked in highly-regarded universities and were seen by their families as successful women on a desirable career path. This success, then, is a source of comfort and pride for parents, and it silences the extended kin, who, in middle-class contexts, also recognize and acknowledge such professional success.

As Neera constructed it, "In some way, you are the black sheep—but because you have a PhD and are teaching in a university, you can't be *that* black of a sheep. I am the first academic from my family." She added:

> Had I not found a profession that others see as respectable—if I wasn't earning as I do, if I didn't have a doctor attached to my name, if I was not teaching in a university they think is good enough... it might not have been the same... This helps them feel confident—*thīk hain shādī nahī kī* ["it's okay, she has not married"], but she is doing something. They can rationalize these choices in front of others. Economic and social mobility compensates for a lot.

Kamini, who also worked in academia and came from an academic family, concurred with this analysis:

> The job was something very important to them. They wanted me to have financial independence. My father was very keen on my professional growth as it eased the pressures in terms of the larger extended family. Earlier, questions would be asked: "What is she doing—why is she still studying?" Though I have aunts who have PhDs, they did it later in life. The extended family did not see the PhD and personal life as being mutually exclusive. But getting a job in a place like this—not a local college, but in a place of national repute at my age. Education, in my caste location, was more important than even the amount of money you make. Also important are the places you studied—did you do engineering at an IIT [Indian Institute of Technology], are you in the top universities? The fact that I'm doing international conferences and publishing makes a difference. A lot of my family are in academia and they get what it means. They read this as success and therefore, they don't give me so much grief.

The suggestion that career success allows for some breathing space in relation to the "marriage talk" is echoed by those whose jobs are not seen as indicative of the same kind of success. Certain kinds of work are not recognized in the same way as others. In some contexts, they may even

be seen as frivolous and as a way of passing the time until women marry. For those who work in activism, families may disparage or undermine their work.

Kriti said she had a

lot of ups and downs when I started working in an NGO, they thought I was volunteering my time. They felt I was not settled as they had no concept of a career with an NGO. My line of work was not considered meaningful in my community and was devalued. And because they thought I'm not doing anything with my life they saw no reason why I could not marry.

Kamila, who was also working at an NGO, added: "There is nobody from my extended family on either side who do the kind of work I do—they have no clue about what an NGO job is." Kamila continued:

Even my parents call and ask me my life plans. They don't see what I do now as a life plan because of what I'm earning. They are uncomfortable that I am living in a class below what I was born to. They feel I need more money, should have a car. I say I don't need those things. They argue: when you are thirty you will want other things. I said I want to do a PhD—but I don't know at what point in life. Now they keep asking when I'm applying and whether I have identified colleges.

Kamila also learned from her brother that her parents were using her future PhD plans to vindicate themselves as good parents to relatives. "I hear that they are telling extended relatives that she wants to get a PhD first... The whole family seems to know I want to do a PhD. So, there's now another kind of pressure to get a PhD. So, I have started saying new things, I tell them I need more experience to get a scholarship."

Education enables women to renegotiate timeframes, to push boundaries a little. In these relatively privileged contexts, higher education is considered a good thing. As Kamila suggested, her reputation as an intelligent and studious girl had helped her navigate the expectations of her extended family. She said: "Who can stop someone from studying? That would make them very bad people. So, holding out the possibility of the PhD has worked for me." Kamila's narrative resonates with Neera's, which foregrounds the middle-class aspiration for education. To be educated is virtuous, and thus women who might otherwise be seen as difficult for refusing to marry, are nonetheless, able to present themselves as "good" middle-class girls if they pursue higher education.

Parents are also able to use their daughter's educational aspirations to present themselves as concerned but caring parents. Though Meera's (twenty-seven years old, journalist) parents are liberal, they too use the PhD excuse to respond to marriage requests:

My parents themselves married late and did so outside the community, when their extended families were not the most liberal. The understanding in my extended family, both from my Marwari side and Punjabi side, is that because my parents married when they wanted to, I will be doing the same. Currently, when asked by "concerned" family members, their answer is, "She is too young, let her work and do what she wants, she will get married when she wants to." For the brief period I was unemployed... the narrative, which went out to the extended family, was, "She's applying for a PhD." Deflecting the "when is she getting married" question otherwise would have been tougher, I think.

The PhD or even the promise of a future PhD emerges as an important marker that not just women but also their families use, to signal to the extended kin and community that while their daughters might not be conforming by marrying, they are still nonetheless, achieving other desirable goals. The appearance, in my interviews, of the PhD as a tool of negotiation however, very clearly indicates that this sample is not representative of women seen to be of "marriageable" age.

Aside from the achievement of this degree and the possibilities it harbors in terms of avoiding marriage, there is also significant anxiety attached to women becoming *too* accomplished. In India, well-educated and successful women of a marriageable age often struggle to match with equally successful grooms, as there are not always enough of them to go around. This issue is of course tied to a hierarchical understanding of marriage where the prospective grooms must be more educated and earn more than the potential brides.

Neera pointed out that, now that she was a university professor, there were few men who were equally qualified, whom her family might suggest in an arranged marriage scenario. In this vein, Sarah Lamb, in her study of single women in Kolkata, has argued that

single women's narratives also expose the problem of gendered mismatches of class. Marriage takes place not only between individuals but between families. If through education and employment a woman achieves a class status much higher than that of her family background, she becomes practically unmarriageable.[25]

Similarly, Sandy To argues that in the Chinese context, highly-educated women find it hard to marry, as Chinese men do not want to marry women who are more accomplished than them because of their fear of "being

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25 Lamb, "Being Single in India," 60.

ridiculed or despised in a highly patriarchal society."[26] She suggests that men still feel the need to maintain superiority and control over women.

Families often respond to the educational achievements of their daughters by looking for a specific kind of potential groom. Kamila talked about a time when her father went to see a boy for someone else: "My father had gone to see some boy for my cousin. He liked him and called me, giving me info about this boy. He said he's a PhD in sociology and a teacher, and his father is also a professor. My father has grasped some idea of what kind of boy I would like and was trying to push this boy."

Kamini also said that education changes the kind of men families seek for their daughters:

> Now, even if someone approaches my mother about a *riśtā* [proposal], it's someone with a PhD in Europe or something. They are cognizant that being an academic means something, and that I should be partnered with someone who is equally academically qualified. Earlier there were engineers suggested, but not anymore. Also, there is the age factor—only people [of similar age] doing PhDs are still single.

There is an innate contradiction here. Sandy To's research suggests that women do want to marry but that their success makes them unmarriageable. My own narratives, particular as they are, point to another possibility. While it is assumed that "over-educated" women become unmarriageable, some women themselves use education as a means to delay marriage, and perhaps even to take themselves off the marriage market. This is most visible in Kamila's narrative, where she actively used the PhD, which she had not yet begun, to stave off possible marriage connections. Neera and Kamini's narratives, too, suggest some level of relief, even glee, that their degrees allowed them the space to make choices.

What if we were to see women's choices to pursue higher degrees not as something they do despite the fear of not finding grooms, but precisely because they are engaged in a quest to avoid marriage, either temporarily or permanently? Education, then, might be seen not as something that prevents them from achieving one goal, that is, marriage, but rather a way of achieving another one, namely the possibility of choosing their own futures, which may, or may not include marriage.

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26 Sandy To, *China's Leftover Women: Late Marriage Among Professional Women and its Consequences* (London: Routledge, 2015), 38.

Difficult daughters

Single women are seen as difficult: difficult to please, difficult to talk to, difficult to reason with. They are seen as excessively choosy, picky, as never considering anyone to be good enough, and as somehow asking for too much.[27] Kinneret Lahad points out:

> In Israel, midlife selective women are called "*Bareraniot.*" This adjective derives from the noun *Breira*, which in Hebrew can mean either an option or a selection. *Ravakot Bareraniot* (selective single women) in Hebrew slang designates women who have options but are too picky about them. Some of the contemporary interpretations of the term refer to the new kind of single woman: attractive, educated, independent, liberated from traditional constraints, yet overly selective. Part of the reason these women stir so much interest and contempt is that they defy the heteronormative injunctions to confirm to one's expected gendered duty to marry and reproduce.[28]

Lahad's arguments ring a bell for many. Geetha said:

> The worst has been me walking in on people discussing me in my absence. Usually, it's my maternal grandparents expressing anguish and worry to my parents about my unmarried status. It often takes the form of: "There is no point in being choosy. You have to settle, otherwise she is just getting older and older, and we are scared she will also become like"—and they mention the name of a single woman in family who is unmarried, and whom everyone has given up on, but who might in fact be successful and happy.

In a similar vein, Chitra says that her awareness of what marriage entails already marks her out as not a good girl.

> It is difficult to make them understand that I know the *shādī* [wedding] is not just about the party. I had to spell it out for them that I was not sexually attracted to this one guy. It is difficult to explain that I know that marriage involves sex. Everyone is talking about everything else. If you are a girl and you are engaged, you are expected to be excited about it and not ask too many questions.

Chitra remarked on how her family had failed to acknowledge that some kinds of safety were non-negotiable. She said:

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27 Kundu, *Status Single*.
28 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): 26.

> There was this one guy who had traveled a lot. He got drunk one night and told me he'd slept with fifty women—so I told my dad that he should get a test for STDs. My dad said that nobody talks about these things—they will say the girl is *badtamīz* [rude]. But if I have this information and I don't protect myself then I'm stupid.

As if that were not enough, Chitra also found herself feeling guilty because she wouldn't make people happy the way they would want.

> My mother had dengue and was ill. I was looking after her. She said I had hoped to see you married before I died. When the first guy was suggested all my four grandparents were alive. Now only my *nānī* (maternal grandmother) is left. She [her *nānī*] says, "[The other grandparents] also wanted to see you married, but now, do it for me." I become this selfish person who won't do this for someone. I still get taunted for being stubborn, having a lofty opinion of myself.

Similarly, Lahad suggests,

> [A] single woman above marriageable age transgresses well-established systems of meaning. This is one of the reasons why selectiveness is also understood in terms of excess. Single women are merely exaggerating, they are represented as overbearing, overly demanding, and having too high an opinion of themselves, and in this sense, they are outside the confines of the normal. In other words, the label of selectiveness represents a disturbing vision of a subjectivity of excess.[29]

At the same time, narratives in my interviews suggested that women who were not afraid to stand up for themselves, wore the label of difficult women with pride. As Kamila put it,

> People are told to stay away from me. Because earlier there have been fights about other things—political things. Fights where I tell them, "I don't want to talk to you, don't call me." I am known as someone who is always angry. Cousins, aunts, nobody dares. Even in everyday conversations I call out sexist, or anti-Hindu, or casteist statements. They tell each other, *uske mūh mat lago* ["don't argue with her"]. So yes, nobody would dare introduce me to anyone.

Padma concurred: "Nobody will dare say anything directly to me [about marriage] as I'm known in my extended family as a firebrand feminist—this is not a compliment for them but I take it as such."

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29 Kinneret Lahad, "'Am I Asking for Too Much?'" 31.

While there is a growing economy that caters to single people, including single women, the inevitable stigma attached to them, persists. Even in the twenty-first century, single women are an anomaly. Being labeled "difficult" often means that women are seen as transgressive, and therefore unable or unwilling to conform. Here too, as in the case of education, being difficult is for many women a way of ensuring, as Kamila and Padma did, that nosy relatives are too intimidated to approach them, thus avoiding the "marriage talk" altogether. For the women I interviewed, their quality of being difficult had won them some amount of space for expression and articulation. Whether they wanted to marry or not, their refusal to be obedient daughters meant that they had gained a certain amount of bargaining power. Being difficult, then, may be as much of a choice, an explicit assertion of agency as anything else, for women who desire to make their own choices.

Conclusion

Women who refuse to see marriage as the central question in their lives, compel the negotiations around "marriage talk" to evolve, either out of their own sheer stubbornness, by being "difficult," or sometimes, even by engendering transformation within their families. This chapter asks: What if we no longer see marriage as demarcating women's relationships to natal and marital families, and women simply in the light of the roles of daughters, sisters, wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers? The act of removing marriage from the equation, or at least dislodging it from its central location in women's relationships to families, has the potential to be transformational. If women belong (if indeed we require them to belong somewhere) only to their natal families, then marriage is no longer the definitive institution through which women can belong or indeed, make claims. This may be the first step towards rethinking how we understand families and creating even small fractures in the patriarchal assumptions that govern them. My exploratory research suggests that where families are able to move beyond the centrality of marriage, they pose a challenge to the very idea of family itself. Being single, even temporarily, is then not just something that happens by chance, but must be seen as a political act.

While families remain invested in the idea of marriage, women nonetheless create spaces for themselves by choosing to be single or refusing to settle, as some of the narratives in Kalpana Sharma's edited volume *Single by Choice* and Bhaichand Patel's edited volume *Chasing the Good Life* suggest, as do the stories recorded in Kundu's work, *Status Single*.[30] Women

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30 Kalpana Sharma ed, *Single by Choice: Happily Unmarried Women* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2019); Bhaichand Patel, *Chasing the Good Life: On Being Single* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2006); Kundu, *Status Single*.

are also choosing to, and even reveling in, navigating cities on their own as single women.[31] This chapter is a small intervention in the very large and widely researched area of marriage and family studies, and might also be seen as a contribution to the new and growing field of singles studies.[32]

Once we challenge the central role that the institution of marriage has long enjoyed in any discussion of single women, new and exciting questions may be asked. In one conversation, my colleague Nithila Kanagasabai asked, "Can we even begin to talk about single women as a community and not discuss it merely within the framework of individual choice?"[33] Ketaki Chowkhani is researching the ways in which consumer capitalist modernity inflects the lives and worlds of singles living in metropolitan centers.[34] Chowkhani is also teaching a post-graduate course titled "Singles studies"—the first of its kind.[35] This book also suggests many ways in which these questions may be phrased and addressed.

These questions fly in the face of the insistent question, "When are you getting married?" Even as the narratives in this study challenge the centrality of heteronormative marriage, they reveal exciting possibilities for rethinking ways in which one might lead a fulfilling life, and in doing so, invite us to reflect upon singlehood as a choice.

ORCID®

Shilpa Phadke https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6580-610X

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Chenying Pi

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

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,

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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 fem-ininities 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 univer-sity 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 employ-ment. The discussions I had with the ten groups were semi-structured, lasted between two and four hours, and revolved around what the infor-mants 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 sin-gle 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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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 Re-negotiating 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

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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.*

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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 for men 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 compatility, 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

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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

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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.

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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 counter-measure 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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Yin Shan Lo and Yiu Fai Chow 🄳

Foregrounding and Backgrounding: An Interview with Guo Qingling

Abstract   The works of contemporary artist Guo Qingling were featured in the two exhibitions curated for the HERA project on single women, in Shanghai and in Leiden. Engaging with the problematic of precarity, the exhibitions probed into the experience of women in rapidly changing Asian cities like Shanghai and Delhi. Guo's paintings offered responses to the anxieties, insecurities, liveliness, and, above all, sheer complexities engendered in the intersections of gender, class, and urbanity. The women in Guo's works stand on their own—single in that sense—facing us, or with their back against us, intent on their labor. They are sometimes rendered in bold strokes, sometimes in opacity, oscillating between fragility and fortitude. Born in 1973, Guo graduated from the Shanghai Drama Institute and later became an artist. Known for their visualization of women, Guo's works have been presented in her native China, the United States, and Europe. She lives and works in Shanghai and New York. In this interview, we invite Guo to deliberate on her creative experience, personal life, and concerns with femininity, humanity, and the contemporary world. Our aim is to attempt a dialogue between an artistic project and the academic discussions carried on in this anthology.

Keywords   single women; China; Guo Qingling; contemporary Chinese art; paintings

The works of the contemporary artist Guo Qingling 郭庆玲 were featured in the two exhibitions curated for the HERA project on single women, one in Shanghai (Fei Contemporary Art Center, 2014) and the other in Leiden (Museum Volkenkunde, 2016). These exhibitions probed into the experience of women, particularly single women, in rapidly changing Asian cities like Shanghai and Delhi. Guo's paintings offered responses to the anxieties, insecurities, liveliness, and, above all, the sheer complexities engendered in the intersections of gender, class, and urbanity. The women in Guo's works stand on their own, single in that sense, facing us, or with their back against us, intent on their labor. They are sometimes rendered in bold strokes, sometimes in opacity, oscillating between fragility and fortitude.

Born in 1973, Guo graduated from the Shanghai Drama Institute and later became an artist. Known for her visualization of women, for instance in her *Background series* (Fig. 1), *Gray* (Fig. 2), and *The Second Sex* (Fig. 3), Guo's works have been presented in her native China, the United States, and Europe. She lives and works in Shanghai and New York. In this interview, we invite Guo to reflect on her creative experience, personal life, and concerns with femininity, humanity, and the contemporary world. Our aim is to facilitate a dialogue between an artistic project and the academic discussions carried on in this anthology.[1] Reading Guo's works as creative interventions in images of Chinese women, we learn from one artist's practice how imaginaries of autonomy, respectability, and precarity among Chinese women have changed, and still can be changed. If these three central concerns are formulated by the editors of this anthology as forms of governance, Guo tells us how she eradicates the background of the women in her works in her attempt to foreground the women themselves. This foregrounding amounts to an ambivalent, if not paradoxical, act of freeing them—at least in the paintings, at least momentarily—from governance, and at the same time stripping them of personality, identity, and humanity, leaving them faceless. Fundamentally, her technique proposes new ways of seeing these women, not only the women themselves, but their conditions, their lives, and their worlds, and also our own worlds. For a collection of academic research, this interview delivers a response, as artistic and personal, as it is political and humanitarian, to the painful remark that opens this book: "There is something tainted about the single female body." In Guo's formulation, we must learn to look as if it were the first time.[2]

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1   The interview was conducted in Chinese in 2018 and translated for the current purpose by the authors.
2   Further biographic details of the artist and their artworks can be accessed at guoqingling.org.

Figure 1: *Background Series* by Qingling Guo. 2015. Oil on Canvas, 100×125 cm.
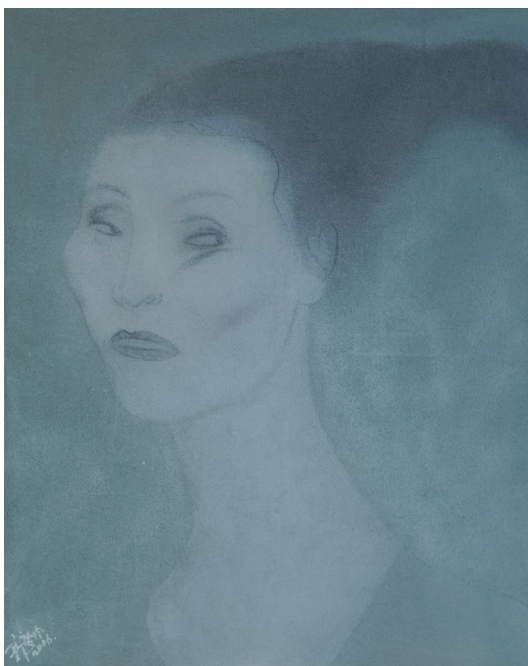
Figure 2: *Gray* by Qingling Guo. 2006. Acrylic on Canvas, 100×125 cm.

Figure 3: *The second sex* by Qingling Guo. 2012. Oil on Canvas, 100×125 cm.

INTERVIEWER(S): Let us begin with your series titled *The Second Sex*, an allusion to Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work[3]. When did you first hear of or read *The Second Sex*? What kind of impact did it have on you?

GUO QINGLING: From 1998 when I first started painting until now, working on all kinds of female subjects, the process was very natural. Each phase had different backgrounds and contacts, including women from different social strata, civilians, fashionistas, women with illnesses, intellectuals, and factory girls. I've tried to be among them, to work with them, to study their profiles and information, or just look at them; all this gave me complex feelings. I was not one of them, even when I was immersed in their presence; I never got too close, but I wanted to explore their lives and motives of living, because we are of the same sex. Many years ago, I read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex.* Afterwards, when working on the topic of the "intellectual," this term came up, but as my artist statement says, "Starting in 2012, *The Second Sex* is a long-lasting series of works on the female subject, a proposition which is harsh and realistic, yet extraordinary with feminine qualities in humanity. 'Second' is never first, 'second' always hides behind first, here it seems mediocre and lonely. 'Second Sex,' the second humanity and gender traits,

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3   Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1949).

generally refers to women." I used the title of de Beauvoir's book, but I maintained my own understanding of women and humanity.

INTERVIEWER(S): After so many years, how have you translated the feminist context into your works? How far have you come since your first encounter?

GUO: Since puberty, the rebellious side of me has stayed in hibernation for a long time, but it returned to my blood in the form of criticism. I'm always concerned about humanity and society, which determined my preferences for certain genres of film, novels, and art. The aspects of humanity that are most cruel or benign, numb or cold, all impact me. I could never experience de Beauvoir's strict philosophical course, but I followed my own shallow understanding. Painting is visual; it represents a part of you, and no one would understand it if you didn't explain it. *The Second Sex* is only a name, never a burden. I thought it was appropriate and adopted it without alteration.

INTERVIEWER(S): Compared with your paintings of women from different classes and identities, this "second humanity" sounds much broader and more abstract. How did you choose your characters? What are the "feminine qualities" in humanity? Why is this subject "harsh and realistic?"

GUO: *The Second Sex* series came from books I read during those years, and I became interested in some of the authors or in women with intellectual thought processes. I spent a lot of time researching details of their lives, and I imagined the relationship between their work and life. Even though they've made great contributions or were praised throughout generations, they would still have had certain weaknesses of human nature. I felt like wandering into the other world, listening to rumors circulating between the living room and bedroom. The character I choose to paint must be someone I'm interested in, but I also consider visual effects. My understanding of "feminine qualities" in humanity comes ultimately from my concern with the human being. Humanity is so complex—our behavior or actions can be determined by a random thought, but they are also related to personality, certain situations, and intricate relationships. Female qualities and mentalities always differ from those of men; this has already been analyzed in the works of feminist writers such as de Beauvoir. Existence itself is harsh enough, and you have to experience aging, illness, and death—whether you are human beings or are the surviving world around human beings, you can easily feel lost and flustered (but I think this analogy is more typical on our Chinese soil). When facing a harsh situation, the weaknesses in humanity are infinitely magnified and unconstrained. So when we exert pressure on others, we are also victims. If you look down from high above, we are like ants—dispensable nonentities.

INTERVIEWER(S): Can your other series *Chinese Medicine Institute of Gyneco-logical Disease* be read as the other interpretation of Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*?[4]

GUO: I started working on *Chinese Medicine Institute of Gynecological Disease*, also known as the *Gray* series, in 2006. I hadn't thoroughly read Susan Sontag at that time, but this series really came from deep in my heart. "Chinese Medicine Institute" is the name of a hospital where I went for treatment. The waiting time was always long and boring, so the only thing I could do was observe women who had all kinds of illnesses. I occasionally talked to them, but mostly I listened, to conversations between doctors and patients, and patients and families. Back home, I started to do research on gynecological diseases, and discovered that 85% of women lack awareness of their own health. The human body is like a delicate apparatus, with countless tissue movements when we breathe. In summer 2000, when my father passed away, I saw his face relax. All hardship faded, cells went static, and his body started to decay in the summer heat. This image stayed in my memory, and for the rest of the summer I could hear the cracks in my bones while walking. This series, running from 2006 to 2009, was my usual style, focusing on the essential, using acrylics to mix different shades of gray. The content was always there, but most likely people didn't know.

INTERVIEWER(S): What made you paint the *Urban Single Women* and the later *Background* series (originally named *Factory Girls*)? As an intellectual, and a mother, how would you project your gaze onto them?

GUO: Between 2002 and 2005, I quit my university teaching to work for a fashion magazine, *Seafood.* The series from this period actually grew out of the environment I'm most familiar with—the environment of those urban single women who don't have to worry about anything, and just relish their superficial life. Naming them *Seafood* was just like what I felt at that time: physically present, spiritually observing. The *Background* series, beginning in 2014, focused on the observation of female workers among messy factory settings, depicting them from behind as they silently worked. Their body movements seemed controlled by every necessary procedure, simple and repetitive. I could feel them being happy, but I didn't understand this community. I tried searching for traces of this collective online. I tried getting closer to them, but it was difficult. On the canvas, I could only find a position to suit the relationship between us, so I painted their backs, a "back view" of laboring.

INTERVIEWER(S): Did you try to communicate with them in the factory? You said, "I like to paint their working status, which is very touching,

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4   Susan Sontag and Heywood Hale Broun, *Illness as Metaphor,* Vol. 72 (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1978).

especially the 'back view.'" In our collective memory of Chinese liter-ature, the "back view" usually reminds us of the father figure. The famous essay penned by Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 is compulsory reading material for many students.[5] Do you think there is any difference between the "back views" according to gender?

GUO: In the factory, I tried to communicate with them, but we were out-siders to each other. There was a mutual timidity, a certain alertness due to an unfamiliar atmosphere. Afterwards I searched desperately on the Internet to find out about their living conditions. I painted vaguely, evaded details. In this series, regardless of whether they were men or women, the "back view" of laboring always touched me. I didn't dare to stare at them for long, fearing that I might offend them, so I stood at the back and observed their habits. I inspected their faces from the photos I took, imagining how they would turn around and appear in my paintings.

INTERVIEWER(S): How do you see the women in Mao Zedong's slogan "women hold up half the sky"?

GUO: I'm unfamiliar with "women hold up half the sky," because I don't have memories of that era, but I'm sure it must have been a blindly fanatic time.

INTERVIEWER(S): How do you differentiate between "her" and "them"? To paint "her" as an individual, then categorize "them" as different col-lectives in your exhibitions?

GUO: Everyone is unique, ordinary people have their own stories. When similar stories are grouped together, the appearance of a collective creates more value and strength.

INTERVIEWER(S): Why do you see yourself as an "outsider" in relation to other women? Has it got anything to do with your own identity sub-consciously, as a "non-local" in Shanghai for so many years?

GUO: In the 1970s, my parents worked at Sinohydro Engineering Bureau No. 8, setting up hydropower facilities around the country. As an on-the-move unit, we were moving house all the time. I can't speak any local dialect of our country and never had a sense of belonging, so I often feel like an outsider. Subconsciously, I segregate myself from any community. Having spent over twenty years in Shanghai, this is my home, but I have never actually integrated into the city. This underlying sense of being an outsider is a part of who I have been since birth.

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5   Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 (1898–1948) was a major poet and essayist in modern Chinese literature. The essay Guo refers to is a 1925 one, titled *Retreating Figure* (背影 *Beiying*); it captures Zhu's memory of his father seeing him off at a railway station.

INTERVIEWER(S): From early works that resemble the distorted and alluring style of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Egon Schiele[6] to gradually becoming gray in tone, this represents a shift in the artist's mentality. Does it also reflect changes going on in society?

GUO: I liked these two artists very much during university. Anything with life has a sensitive soul, whether animal or plant. It can differentiate between a good or bad condition, hide its feelings, and adapt for survival. My mind has always tended to be pessimistic and isolated, even in my youthful years. All my works from different periods reflect the dilemma of not being able to fit in and watching from a distance. As time went on, I gave up on the thought of "fitting in."

INTERVIEWER(S): Is there any female community you want to paint but have not gotten around to? Such as artists or "the third sex"?

GUO: I don't know and never have a plan. Even having painted women for over a decade, I feel like my work only reflects my presuppositions about those communities. And the most painful part of the creative process is struggling between self-negation and affirmation, enduring life's twists and turns. Still, I follow my own flashes of inspiration, distilling them through trial and error.

INTERVIEWER(S): More recently, you moved to the United States. Can you talk about your experience with going abroad, and your reasons for doing so?

GUO: Since I attended university in Shanghai, I had lived in the city for twenty years. But I still felt very distant from it and got used to being an outsider. Moving from Shanghai to America therefore seemed very natural. Perhaps what's important is that I didn't want to be molded by a society of that sort into what it wanted me to be. The flowing river of my heart has always wanted to be part of the great ocean. In 2015, my husband Li Xiaofei 李消非 passed the American EB1-A,[7] so in the first half of 2016, I took my six-year-old child to New York, a city that was very attractive to artists. We chose a home near New York and everything began all over again. It's always difficult, wherever you are. Let the difficulties grow in your body, let them blend with your flesh and blood, and then perhaps they will get dissolved, bit by bit.

INTERVIEWER(S): How has the American experience influenced you as an artist, as a woman, and a person?

GUO: Before I came to America, I knew nothing about New York. My experience in other countries did not apply here. In any place, a painter

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6 The artist refers to the post-impressionist painter and caricaturist Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) and the Expressionist painter Egon Schiele (1890–1918).
7 EB1-A is one of the visa categories in the United States.

only needs a room, but with a change in surroundings, the personality of the terrain can influence the artist's state of being. Human nature is the same in every corner of the world. It's quieter here, which allows one to look into one's heart more clearly. It took me a while to get into a creative state, because everything needed adaptation, such as adapting to the pigment, the canvas. When the workplace slowly became filled with my presence, then I truly began on a journey.

INTERVIEWER(S): Would you say a bit more about your latest works? Is there a change from before? Especially on the topic of femininity?

GUO: The new works are an extension of the *Background* series. The "back view" is still in the painting. We never get used to being looked at by "others," nor do we look at "them" for a long time. Usually, social phobia affects lonely people. Even when they retreat into a crowd, they don't feel safe. In fact, what's between people is further than any distance. The people in *Background* seem to look the same as before, but in the process of producing this series, I have been continuously learning about this world and have deepened my understanding of humanity.

INTERVIEWER(S): Do you plan to work on a series on men?

GUO: All life is equal. When we stand in front of a common issue, sexual difference is not the most important. Now I paint less men who I feel fit for the canvas. As I see them only as a "back view," I'm not even aware of the gender difference. If one day there's a need, perhaps I will classify their gender.

INTERVIEWER(S): Your family moved to a relatively "free" country. Why the United States and New York? If there were no language barriers, what would be a more "ideal" country or city?

GUO: Moving to the U.S. seemed like destiny's arrangement. I know there is no paradise. I like many cities, perhaps Berlin, perhaps Stockholm... But most artists do not have affluent, comfortable lives. Life is limited, certain choices and experiences are already happiness.

INTERVIEWER(S): Every country and city has its own unique, complex "social" situation. When you have adapted to the pigments and canvases of America and New York, does the "back view" reflected in your work, go beyond "gender and race"? Does this constitute a "dilemma" for Chinese artists?

GUO: The history of human development is like a mirror, consciously reflecting our flaws. When we discard faith and reject righteousness, we see the black hole of cowardice. I believe no time and place in this world will ever go beyond or put a stop to "gender and race." It is present in Chinese rural cities, Shanghai, Asia, Europe, and America,

so there is always resistance, and there are always provocative top-ics. Chinese artists grow up in a sick body; their lived experience is their teacher, particularly cruel, and yet faintly hopeful. Life is flawed, and to manage to find some sort of balance is already perfection.

INTERVIEWER(S): I saw that your WeChat avatar is a work in your series. What is it called? Though it is also a female "back view," it clearly differs from what I've seen (she doesn't wear recognizable working clothes, the strokes aren't as crude as before, and it's a full body, not only the back...), why? Can you tell us more about the origin of the series?

GUO: In the *Background* series I made in Shanghai, there were already full body "back views," only the dimensions were greater than the current works. In the series I began producing in 2014, the initial painting was different from what it is now. From 2014 to early 2016, the main characters in these works were female workers in the fac-tory who were easily recognizable. These works originated from my observations during an excursion to the factory, where I found their working "back views" had a sense of simplicity. I looked at them working and resting. It wasn't easy to communicate with them, because we were outsiders in each other's eyes. People have a natu-ral defense against an unfamiliar presence. Afterwards, I researched the female workers' living conditions and made many preparations, but it was still difficult to enter their lives. So I painted ambiguously, without details, to express the conditions under which we all got along. After I came to America in 2016, the new works were still called *Background*. This time without the same soil to extend the subject matter, I began to take an interest in the subjects in my new environment. But my feelings towards the "back views," that is the state of "people getting along," remained. In the process, I hesitated for a long time, experimented a lot on the canvas, and finally slowly began to express things in a relaxed manner that suited myself. So now, the "back views" in the paintings display multi-ethnicity, which is related to my current living condition. It is just like on the other side of the globe; I only switched the subjects to explore the topics I'm interested in.

INTERVIEWER(S): Another common feature in the paintings is that all the women are alone. Why is that?

GUO: In the initial paintings, I had a background behind the "back views," but I felt the "back views" were undermined as a result. So I aban-doned the background, and the sense of alienation came to the fore. When there is no background, it is like the first time I saw "them" [the women]. This feeling remains clear to me even now. So, the works in this series depict people standing alone in the paintings. This series is called *Background*—in Chinese, "back view." In fact, everyone is not

that important, because to anyone except the "self," everyone else is "back view," and easily forgotten.

INTERVIEWER(S): Although you said, the figures are "people" and their genders don't need to be differentiated, the artworks are clearly depictions of women. Why?

GUO: Looking back, most of the figures I painted ended up being female. For this reason, I also feel confused. My paintings have never contained landscapes, small objects, or scenarios. They have never narrated a story. It's as if I especially isolated the figures in order to paint them. But I never define myself as a "portrait painter," because I don't paint portraits, but rather people in life. Scheler[8] argues that no period in history is like the contemporary one, in which people are so puzzled by themselves. It is like being in a cramped space, in the face of these "back views." I pace back and forth, like I want to chat with them [the women]. I'm the same kind as them: a daughter, a wife, a mother. I share with them the same body and internal structure. I want to segment the details in the face of complexity. The homogeneous depiction of gender allows me to go deeper in understanding the behavior of "people." But we are so different, individually, like parts that never intersect with each other. Unfathomable.

INTERVIEWER(S): If someone says you are a female painter, or a feminist painter, what do you think? How do you define yourself?

GUO: Since the nineteenth century, "feminism" has gradually transformed itself into an organized social movement, which has had a huge impact on people's traditional beliefs. The awakening of the feminist consciousness of future generations is the direct benefit of this. Most women have forgotten that all this is hard-fought human progress, but the problems will never disappear. Often, I don't care about being introduced as a "female painter," because I think such a distinction is outdated and meaningless, and I've never been seen as a "feminist" artist; at least I'm not an easily injured hedgehog. The important point is that I pay more attention to the women themselves, from their physical condition to their way of thinking, and certainly, these cannot be separated from the environment surrounding women. Around 2003, I paid attention to women's physiological and psychological diseases. I researched the literature extensively, and then painted a series of works, as mentioned earlier, called *Gray*. During this period, I realized that the two genders will never reconcile; one side will never know the other, and this is due to our complex human nature. In the face of humanity, both genders are weak. In social structures, the strong are always above the weak. Almost no one can

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8   The artist refers to Max Scheler, German philosopher (1874–1928).

stand on the opposite side of the conflict or really look at the issue from another perspective. Even if we are all weak, the weak step on the weaker. Everywhere we see wounds and scars. In the face of the disputes that emphasize gender disparities, I'm even more supportive of all those who have been abused and unfairly treated, even though the world itself is unfair.

ORCID®

Yiu Fai Chow https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6743-8339

Figures

Fig. 1–3: Photo: Li Xiaofei.

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Paromita Chakravarti

Of Homes, Hostels, and Addresses: Intergenerational Perspectives on Habitations and Women's Singleness in Contemporary Kolkata

Abstract   The essay examines selected working women's hostels in Kolkata to demonstrate how urban women's singleness is constructed through the spatial organization, administrative norms, everyday regulations, and interpersonal relationships of the inmates, as well as the specific histories and objectives of these institutions. From the 1940's with increasing women's participation in the workforce, these hostels came up, providing a supportive environment to women to work and live independently in the city. However, these hostels also bear the legacy of earlier organizations for single women, like "ashrams" for widows and shelters for destitute women or sexworkers that were established with a view to regulating the sexualities of unattached women. Using intergenerational perspectives of the inmates, the essay shows how these spaces understand single women's lives, needs, and problems. While providing a means to live outside the regimes of the heteropatriarchal family and home, they create their own regimes of "acceptable" female singleness in the ways in which they normativize notions of women's work, leisure, sexuality, and safety.

Keywords   hostels; homes; Kolkata; working women; intergenerationality; single women

In the 1979 Hindi film *Suhāg*, a drunk Parveen Babi drapes herself across the front of the jeep of a befuddled Shashi Kapoor, who asks her in consternation, "Kahān le jāun? Koi atā patā ṭhikānā hai?" ("Where should I take you? Do you have an address?").[1] In response, Babi sings, "Nā koi ghar hai merā, nā koi ṭhikānā—main to beghar hūn, apne ghar le chalo." ("I have neither home nor address / I am homeless, take me to your home"). Despite its title, *Suhāg* (marriage), the film's use of this song evokes a certain image of single women's lives in the city. It links ideas of women's singleness and homelessness, suggesting a difference between *ghar* (home) and *ṭhikānā* (address), between belonging and displacement. Driving through nighttime Bombay while listing the destinations that he could take her to, Babi suggests going to a hotel or a movie theater, or just cavorting in the streets like lovers. A scandalized Kapoor admonishes her for her boldness, since a hotel has associations of a socially forbidden extramarital, or in this case pre-marital, sexual encounter. Having exhausted the "respectable" options of public places that a single girl with a male companion could go to at night, Babi exasperatedly says, "To mujh se kar lo shādī aur mandir le chalo." (Marry me then, let us go to a temple). But before such a drastic step is taken, Kapoor finds Babi's identity card and drives her to the address marked on it—a ladies' hostel. The song ends, suggesting that for the single woman craving a nocturnal urban adventure in speeding cars, the best that her nervous gallant can do is to drop her off at a women's hostel, which is a *ṭhikānā* and not a *ghar*.[2] A disappointed Babi laments, "Lagtā hai ki merā ṭhikānā ā gayā / Nā ghar *āyā*, nā daftar *āyā*, ye to hostel ā gayā." ("It seems I have reached my address / Not a home, nor an office, but a hostel instead").

This chapter will deploy the distinction posited in the song between the *ghar*, or home, with all its moral and gendered associations of domesticity, respectability, and familial identity, and the *ṭhikānā*, a term which characterizes the hostel as a mere address, a place to stay, which carries no markers of belonging. This distinction will serve as a frame to map single women's experiences in contemporary Kolkata, erstwhile Calcutta, the nineteenth-century capital of the British empire in India. The binary of *ghar* and *ṭhikānā* has both a historical and contemporary relevance to forging ideas of women's single lives in Indian cities.

Partha Chatterjee's argument about the nineteenth-century Hindu nationalist configuration of the private sphere of the *ghar* as a site of Indian tradition, uncontaminated by colonization and embodied in the sequestered Hindu woman, is well known.[3] While for education and livelihood men needed to negotiate the colonial public sphere shaped by Western

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1 All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are by the author.
2 Ironically, the hostel is named "Śiva", referring to the hypermasculine Hindu deity considered to be the model husband that single Hindu girls are supposed to pray to, and long for.
3 Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

culture, women were expected to uphold the sanctity of the Hindu home and its racial, religious, and caste purity. The East India Company's Permanent Settlement Act, passed in 1793, resulted in land subinfeudation, decreased earning, and landlessness, leading to large-scale male migration from the villages to Calcutta,[4] the imperial capital. Boarding houses or hostels, called *mess bāḍis*, emerged in the city to accommodate these fortune-seekers. These temporary, non-domestic, mixed spaces were demographically diverse. They thereby reflected the cosmopolitanism of Calcutta—a trade hub, and melting pot of the empire.[5]

From the early twentieth century, women's boarding houses began to appear. As women left their homes—sites of tradition and racial purity—to join colleges, offices, or political organizations in the city, they came to inhabit the transcultural urban spaces of hostels, which were *ṭhikānās* rather than *ghars*. This transition can be seen as marking the Indian woman's journey towards a civic identity beyond the familial and communal belonging associated with the home.Multiple generations of women who came to stay in the city's hostels and negotiate the urban space, helped to shape ideas of women's unaffiliated, autonomous, single lives. By exploring their experiences, this chapter revisits Ipshita Chanda's *Selfing the City*,[6] an examination of single women migrants in the twenty-first century who came to Kolkata as outsiders, and built new lives and identities, making the city their own. However, I focus not so much on the migrant identity of the women, but rather on their status as single women, outsiders to marriage, whose singleness is constructed in specific ways by the city hostels they stay in. I explore how urban women's singleness may be understood through the framing tropes of *ghar,* the family dwellings associated with ideas of safety, honor, and protectionism that women leave behind, and *ṭhikānā*, the institutional hostel spaces with diverse communities and specific norms that they come to inhabit.

The legacy of the nineteenth-century moral and patriarchal understanding of the home continues to play out in the social and self-perceptions of women living outside marriage, away from their families. As Rama Melkote and Susie Tharu write in their "Investigative Analysis of Working Women's Hostels in India,"

> A prospective landlord bases his decision to accept a single woman as tenant not just on her ability to pay the rent but also on his

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4   In 2001, the government of West Bengal changed its capital city's colonial name "Calcutta" to "Kolkata" to reflect its original Bengali language pronunciation. This chapter would thus use Kolkata rather than Calcutta for post-2001 contexts and in all cases where the references are in Bengali.

5   Barshana Basu, "The Mess Bari Project: Documenting Kolkata's Diverse Boarding Houses," *The Messbari Project (Blog)*, January 8, 2019. https://messbariproject. wordpress.com/2019/01/08/the-mess-bari-project-documenting-kolkatas-di verse-boarding-houses/.

6   Ipshita Chanda, *Selfing the City: Single Women Migrants and their Lives in Kolkata* (New Delhi: SAGE and Stree Publications, 2017).

judgement of her clothes, her looks, the likelihood that she will have visitors, the hours she may keep... It is amazing how thin the line is between social acceptability and unacceptability for a single woman attempting to live outside the protection of marriage. Often, especially if her income is limited, she has to resign herself to living in a hostel in order to protect her reputation.[7]

But even a hostel does not ensure respectability. Leela Fernandes points out that single working women in Mumbai often do not reveal to their employers that they are staying in hostels, since "the notion of an unmarried woman living on her own continues to provoke a stereotype of a socially or sexually immoral woman."[8]

> For a man in India, a house provides shelter and other basic amenities... A house is also a mark of his lineage... For a woman... to be housed is not to be on the streets. In a house she belongs to one man—father or husband—and is protected from all other males. Traditionally she does not own property, but she achieves position within a property structure, often as property, through the patriarch who takes her into his house. Her status and her value are entirely dependent on this housing.[9]

Without the moral status conferred by the home, the single woman living in the hostel is socially seen as having only a *ṭhikānā* and a somewhat dubious reputation.[10] It is through these dialectics of home and address, safety and freedom, respectability and sexual autonomy, that the present chapter examines certain women's experiences of singleness in selected Kolkata hostels.

This chapter is based on a study conducted between 2015 and 2018 on eighteen women's hostels across Kolkata. Selected to represent a range of institutions, both old and contemporary, set up by the government, communities, by nationalist organizations, or by leftist groups. The hostels included the following:

> — The Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association (SNDMA), set up in 1925 to commemorate Saroj Nalini Dutt (1887–1925), a reformer who pioneered women's organizations, worked with rural women, and promoted women's education and political rights. In 1944, SNDMA

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7 Rama Melkote and Susie J.Tharu, "An Investigative Analysis of Working Women's Hostels in India," *Signs* 9, no. 1 (Autumn 1983): 164.

8 Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 167.

9 Melkote and Tharu, "Working Women's Hostels in India," 169.

10 When asked what a single woman needs the most, a resident of a working women's hostel responded, "She can stay hungry for a night, but not without a roof over her head." (forty-nine years old, nurse by profession). She explained that for a single woman, a shelter is also linked to her social respectability.

started a working women's hostel in the Ballygunge area of Kolkata for "middle-class" women. The association continues to be involved in social activities like adult literacy campaigns, programs on the health of women and children, nursing and midwifery courses, and running printing and stitching training units for poor women. Some of the oldest residents of the hostel are employed in the association's activities.

— Pankaj Acharya Smriti Niketan (PASN), a working women's hostel established by the West Bengal *Nārī O Śiśu Kalyāṇ Sangsthyā*, a women's organization comprising members of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), the women's wing of the Communist Party of India. The hostel was started in Kankurgachi in 1994 by AIDWA activist Mrinalini Dasgupta. The hostel authorities also run women's vocational programs and a school for poor children. Many hostelites are involved in these activities.

— The government-supported working women's hostels in Gariahat, Sahapur, and Baghbajar areas of Kolkata offering accommodation to employed women at nominal rates.

— St. Bridget's Hostel, Kidderpore, located in a nineteenth-century complex established by the Religious Congregation of the Daughters of the Cross. It was designed to house single working women aged between twenty and thirty years old.

— The Muslim Girls' Hostel, Park Circus, set up by the Muslim Waqf Board in 1994 to enable meritorious Muslim girls from the districts to pursue their undergraduate and postgraduate education in Kolkata.

These selected hostels housed both students and working women from middle and lower middle-class families in an age range from eighteen to seventy years old. The responses of the 119 residents of these hostels (who granted us one-on-one in-depth interviews) on singleness, marriage, friendships, family, home, domesticity, work, and the city demonstrate how the different environments of these facilities, their histories, institutional objectives, their administrative norms, everyday regulations, and the interpersonal relationships of the residents construct the singleness of urban women in distinctive ways. The hostelites' quest for a *ghar* or a *ṭhikānā* shapes their relationships to the city as well as their aspirations for an autonomous life.

For many of the young female migrants making their first "ambiguous journey to the city,"[11] as well as for their anxious parents, the hope is to find a hostel that is a "home away from home," a safe haven in the "big bad city" that enforces strict discipline, tight curfews, and curbs on late nights and visitors. However, for others, especially older boarders, the purpose

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11 See Ashis Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey to the City. The Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

of independent urban living is to find a place that treats its residents as responsible adults and allows them to live freely, instead of replicating patterns of familial surveillance. These residents look for an empowering environment in the hostel, which, rather than extending the space of domestic control, provides safe access to the possibilities offered by the city. This chapter examines some of these inter– and multigenerational perspectives on the residents' relationships with the hostel and their singleness in the city.[12]

The idea of temporality also structures the binary of "home" and "address." For most single young women, the hostel is a temporary address while they wait to get married and make their own homes. Uma Chakravarti remarks, "Hostels have to stop acting as transits between fathers and husband[s]," seeing them as a kind of waiting room.[13] Kamalini Ramdas has described single women as women-in-waiting, who have yet to make the all-important transition into marriage.[14]

However, for many of the older boarders, the hostel is not a transitional *ṭhikānā* but may well become a home while singleness becomes a permanent state. In this sense, their life trajectories look very different from those of the younger women. For the women employed (for extended time periods) in the hostels as superintendents, matrons, cleaners, and cooks, who often choose to work there because they provide free lodging, the *ṭhikānā* becomes both workplace and home. Here it is important to note that the hostel and its community offer these women modes of domesticity which are not fettered by the familial entanglements that they have left behind. The relationships of these long-term residents with the hostel are thus constructed differently from those of the younger women.

The existing scholarship on women's hostels in India focuses mostly on young boarders. Melkote and Tharu's analysis of protests by hostelites does not take the residents' age or length of stay into consideration.[15] Kameshwari Pothukuchi shows how hostels avoid long-term commitments, preferring to house younger women who work in the city for a few years before marrying and moving on.[16] Fernandes describes Mumbai hostels that offer accommodation to young working women for a maximum of three years, not wanting to take responsibility for long-term,

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12 Chanda's *Selfing the City* also sought to capture intergenerational perspectives of single women migrants to the city.
13 Uma Chakravarti quoted in Jahnavi Sen, "The Pinjra Tod Movement: DCW Issues Notice to Universities on Gender Biased Hostel Rules," *The Wire*, May 9, 2016, https://thewire.in/gender/the-pinjra-tod-movement-dcw-issues-notice-to-uni versities-on-gender-biased-hostel-rules.
14 Kamalini Ramdas, "Women in Waiting? Singlehood, Marriage, and Family in Singapore," *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 44, no. 4 (2012): 832.
15 Melkote and Tharu, "Working Women's Hostels in India."
16 Kameshwari Pothukuchi, "Effectiveness and Empowerment in Women's Shelter: A Study of Working Women's Hostels in Bangalore, India," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25, no. 2 (June 2001).

ageing boarders.[17] Ritty Lukose's ethnographic study of a Kerala hostel focuses on young college students,[18] while Chanda analyzes the experiences of young women, aged mostly between sixteen and thirty years old, although a few older women are included.[19] Anveshi's recent study is also based on young female workers in Hyderabad.[20] The studies on Indian women's hostels are thus overdetermined by a focus on young residents and the impact of liberalization on their work and migration, while very little research exists on older boarders. This is perhaps because hostels are still regarded as stopgap residences primarily for the young. By focusing on older women who have consciously rejected home, marriage, and families to live in hostels, we can better understand hostels as spaces that enable women's desire for autonomy, rather than as "waiting rooms" for young women who will eventually transition to marriage and homes *(ghar)*.

The oral narratives of both the long-term hostelites and younger boarders in this study construct a gendered history of the city, focusing on the shifting trajectories of women's employment, migration, and housing, as well as on their relationship to urban spaces and to the ideologies of home, family, marriage, and singleness. Their memories act as an archive of city hostels, tracing the role of these institutions in informing urban as well as women's histories. This leads us to speculate whether Antoinette Burton's theorization of women's memories of homes as alternative archives could also be applied to women's hostel narratives:[21]

> Can private memories of home serve as evidence of political history? What do we make of the histories that domestic interiors… yield? And, given women's vexed relationship to the kinds of histories that archives typically house, what does it mean to say that home can and should be seen not simply as a dwelling-place for women's memory but as one of the foundations of history.[22]

Reading the history of colonial Calcutta and post-colonial Kolkata through the narratives of multiple generations of women hostelites, this chapter will analyze how the hostels mentioned earlier, with their diverse histories, and demographic compositions, as well as different visions of gender roles, frame women's singleness in different and dynamic ways.

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17 Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class*.
18 Ritty A. Lukose, *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
19 Chanda, *Selfing the City*.
20 Anveshi, "City and Sexuality: A Study of Youth Living and Working in Hyderabad" (unpublished project report, Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, 2017).
21 Antoinette M. Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).
22 Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*, 4.

"Where shall she live?"[23] Historicizing the question of women's non-domestic accommodation

The problem of accommodating single women living outside their natal or marital families has become steadily more prominent in the last two centuries. While in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the focus has tended to be on never-married young women looking for work in the metropolis, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed greater preoccupation with widows and abandoned women. Nineteenth-century social and legal reformers, particularly in Bengal, were most concerned about Hindu widows. After the banning of *satī* (widow burning), questions of how to socially assimilate a widow, keep her chaste, and house her safely, became critical in a context where families were unwilling to take on her responsibility. From the late nineteenth century, residential hostels were established for widows, along with schools and vocational training centers. Some of these hostels also housed abandoned wives and victims of domestic abuse.[24] In 1897, Christian missionaries started the Young Women's Christian Association "Home," a hostel for young, employed Christian women in Calcutta.[25] Boarding houses for female students were also opened in missionary-run educational institutions like Bethune College. In the 1920s, the Bethune College hostel provided an empowering environment for women revolutionaries like Preetilata Waddedar and Kalpana Dutta. As Malini Bhattacharya writes,

> Did not leaving home and coming to the hostel provide a freedom to their sensibilities? The role that they played in the Chattagram [Chittagong] uprising required them to dissociate themselves from traditional familial and domestic roles. They had to live with men, wear men's clothes. This revolution in thinking must have been facilitated by their experiences of leaving behind their homes to come to Kolkata and live in the unfamiliar communities of women's hostels.[26]

From the 1930s and 1940s, as women's participation in the workforce increased, more hostels sprung up in Calcutta to enable the new arrivals

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23 See Mary Higgs and Edward E. Hayward, *Where Shall She Live? The Homelessness of the Woman Worker* (London: Edward E. Hayward, 1910).
24 Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 47–60; Sarmistha Dutta Gupta*, Identities and Histories: Women's Writing and Politics in Bengal* (Kolkata: Stree, 2010), 29–30, 34–35, 61.
25 The establishment of the Young Women's Christian Association and later their "Home" in London in 1855 was a response to the growing need for safe lodging for women since employment-related travel and migration among women had increased significantly in post-industrial revolution England.
26 Malini Bhattacharya, "Svādhinotā āndolane Kolkātāra Nārī Samāja" [Kolkata Women in the Independence Movement], in *Bishay Kolkata* (Kolkata: National Library Workers' Organization, 1993), 541.

to work and live independently in the city. For women from the districts, these spaces opened up social and intellectual horizons, enabling them to pursue higher education and participate in the nationalist and leftist political movements. Leftist activist Manikuntala Sen writes in her memoirs about her decision to leave her village home in Barisal, travel to Calcutta, and join the Communist movement in the 1930s—a move which marked a rupture with her religiously-minded family.[27] "I couldn't sleep at night. I used to pace on the veranda. My mother noticed this. One day she came, sat next to me and said... "Go to Kolkata. Stay in a hostel there and pursue your Masters. You will not survive if you stay here."[28]

While there was a steady flow of young single women migrating to Calcutta for education through the decades leading up to independence, the Partition of Bengal in 1947 led to a dramatic and sudden spurt of "unattached" refugee women arriving in the city from East Pakistan.[29] Dislocated from familial homes and forced to earn a living, many of these women found shelter in working women's hostels. Some who were victims of sexual assault sought refuge in a rescue home run by the All Bengal Women's Union. In the 1950s and 1960s, the government set up several hostels in the city to accommodate a growing population of working women. Later, the economic liberalization of the 1980s and 1990s expanded employment opportunities for women, which resulted in their increased migration to the city. To meet the new demand, private and community initiatives were undertaken to set up hostels for them.

The study tried to incorporate the rich diversity of women's hostels in Kolkata by including old nationalist organizations like SNDMA with its ideals of women's empowerment, institutions inspired by Leftist ideology, like the PASN, government-run hostels enabling poor and migrant women to build independent lives, as well as private or community-led hostels for younger women, mostly students. The attempt has been to situate women's experiences of singleness within a spectrum of urban and institutional histories.

The hostel as ideology: singleness, community, and politics

Historically, while women's hostels have provided an empowering and liberating space, they have also carried the burden of protecting the "respectability" of the "unattached women" by regulating their sexualities and ensuring their self-reliance and social assimilation by teaching them vocational skills and involving them in social work. This is evident in the early

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27 Manikuntala Sen, *Sedinera Kathā* [*Stories of Yesterday*] (Kolkata: Nabapatra, 1982).
28 Sen, *Sedinera Kathā*, 33.
29 "Unattached women" was the official category used by the Indian state to describe refugee women who arrived without families. See Uditi Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 201–241.

widows' schools and shelters for destitute or "fallen" women established by nationalist reformers. Women's hostel spaces have thus been ideologically constructed to manage women's singleness through Brahmanical patriarchal values of *brahmacharya* (asceticism).

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 1924 novel *Padmarag (Ruby Red)* portrays the complex lives of the inhabitants of Tarini Bhavan, a residential philanthropic organization for women from diverse backgrounds. All the residents, including Dina-Tarini, the founder, are "*biye fail*," (wordplay on *biye*, the Bengali word for marriage, and B.A., that is, Bachelor of Arts), referring to single women who are either widows or who have histories of failed marriages and relationships. They find new lives in the social activities of the Tarini Bhavan community but continue to be socially reviled for living outside marriage and away from their homes. Rokeya is at pains to establish her protagonists as monastic celibates, dedicated to social causes, and almost Gandhian in their visions. "None bore any signs of extravagance. All they seemed to be garbed in was simplicity and generosity. It was as if the daughters of sages and ascetics had renounced their *ashrams* in the wilderness for the material world."[30] Thus, Tarini Bhavan was not just an accommodation but also an abode of chastity and spirituality, like an *ashram* (hermitage). The narratives of the older boarders of women's hostels like SNDMA appeared to bear the legacy of an idealized imagination of the hostel space.

Sixty-seven-year-old Arundhuti Sen had lived in the SNDMA hostel for thirty years, after leaving an unhappy marriage. She did not remember if there had been a formal divorce. The separation and the beginning of her new life was facilitated by the hostel *didis* (older sisters) working in SNDMA, whom she trusted. Employed in the SNDMA office in exchange for free boarding in the hostel, she reminisced,

> Everything changed when I came here. I found a new vocation. I suddenly found myself in a larger life. I got addicted to the activities that were assigned to me from the *Mahilā Samiti* that runs the hostel. We went to distant villages to sensitize rural women about health and hygiene, run awareness campaigns on HIV [human immunodeficiency virus] and AIDS [acquired immunodeficiency syndrome], and on dowry. We would go in groups with the *didis*, who inspired us by their example.

Although she first denied having any kind of a home or family, she later revealed the existence of a sister: "I go to my sister's house—I eat, sleep, talk, watch TV—but in two days I want to come back to my own place. My sister takes such good care of me—this is a kind of selfishness."

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30 Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag: Two Feminist Utopias*, trans. Barnita Bagchi (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2005), 32.

For Arundhuti, the hostel was not merely a *ṭhikānā*, but had become a home—her "own place" to which she wanted to return, albeit guiltily, despite her sister's care. Although she felt that she was being selfish in wanting to be back in the hostel, it was not just a question of personal comfort: The hostel was her vocation and a means of accessing a larger collective life beyond the self. Asked if she had ever contemplated remarriage or having children, she said, "I never want to go back to the life of families. As for children, the *Mahilā Samiti* here had started *Anganwadis* and *Balwadis* [pre-primary crèches and schools] much before the government had thought of them. I have worked in those centers—there are enough children there."

Asked whether she faced any problems in the hostel, she said, "There are problems everywhere—you will see them as 'problems' only if you don't regard the institution as your own." Arundhuti furthermore declared that she had no insurance policy. "I have surrendered to the *didis* here. They will look after me till I die." The word "surrender" carried almost religious overtones, resonating with the concept of *ashrams* and their spiritual and nationalist ideals of selfless dedication. This idea of service and a mutually caring community framed Arundhuti's narrative of her life in the hostel. When asked if she was comfortable with her identity as a single woman, she said, "I am a member of the Saroj Nalini community. That is my identity." This immersion in a collective life was coupled with a strong sense of independence. "I am mentally independent. Nobody can touch that. I don't do anything which is beyond limits. Even if you give me unlimited food, I won't eat it; even if you take me to millions of places, I won't go. But if anybody shuts the gate and tells me that you can't go out, then I won't accept it."

In many of the older boarders, one noticed a continuous self-surveillance and a need to sublimate desires into a higher calling, even as there was a marked appreciation of the freedoms of a single life. They had internalized the administrative norms of the hostel and did not complain about its problems or rules. Having lived there for a long time, they held positions of relative power and were resentful of the younger boarders who were disobedient and "naughty," being unaware of the ideals of social commitment represented by Saroj Nalini Dutt and the *didis* of the *Mahilā Samiti.*

Although not an old nationalist institution like SNDMA, PASN was also established with a social and political vision by Leftist activists. The aim was to build a hostel for poor women workers who commuted every day to the city on crowded local trains. Insisting that the hostel should house only women in government employment, the state refused to pay the full grant amount initially promised for the building. One of the oldest hostel members, sixty-two-year-old Rekha Dutta, who had worked as the superintendent (and was also a boarder) for twenty-four years, recounts how the hostel was completed through the fundraising efforts of AIDWA women who deployed personal savings, scrounged for loans, and even brought back food for hostel workers from weddings they had been invited to.

Rekha attributed her dedication to the hostel to her early political apprenticeship in the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPIM. She grew up in a house where there were "no images of gods and goddesses on the walls but a small statue of Lenin in the drawing room," and joined the party when she was thirteen. She helped AIDWA members mobilize poor women, conduct literacy classes for them, bring them to political rallies, and organize them into self-help groups. Her narrative was suffused with Calcutta's turbulent history in the late sixties, when neighborhoods used to be marked off and targeted according to their political affiliations with the Congress Party, the CPIM, or the Maoist revolutionaries known as Naxals. Rekha recalled, "I have even run with live bombs in my hand because they were going to destroy a neighborhood… in these cases I went against my party and I was threatened with eviction." Rekha's story brought out a critique of the powerful communist party that ruled the state of West Bengal for thirty-four years, from 1977–2011. It also offered a glimpse into women's political work, and intimate and intergenerational comradeships. Remembering her friendship with Mrinalini Dasgupta, a senior party member and the hostel's founder who offered her the superintendent's job, Rekha described buying her mentor a car with her own savings. "She was so happy… she cried endlessly… and said, 'You must have been my daughter in my past life. No one, not even my own son, has thought so much for me.'… and because we had the car we did more work… we went to Sunderbans, Purulia. …[T]he car helped us to carry [out] flood relief."

For Rekha, the political party and the hostel were much more than a *ṭhikānā*—they were both family and community. Her relationship with the older Mrinalini and the younger women boarders provided her with the multigenerational environment of mutual care and nurture usually associated with a familial setting. She elaborated, "I live with women [in the hostel] and each one has her own story and own troubles. My time flies talking to them and solving their problems. I never feel that I need children, or my own family. The women and girls I live and work with are more than enough."

After her father's death, Rekha had to support her mother and siblings. After her sister was married, she was prepared to renounce the world, join a religious order, and teach in an orphanage. However, the party needed her services, and Mrinalini roped her into working for PASN. Ever since, she has tried to follow the original vision of the hostel to help poor women.

> I like to help young girls… [T]here is a girl here who received star marks [seventy-five per cent] in her *Mādhyamik* [school leaving] examination. She used to be a goatherd… a first-generation learner. I read about her in the newspaper, brought her here, and helped her to complete her education. Now she studies nursing at the Calcutta Medical College.

When asked why she did not marry, Rekha responded,

> Marriage is the worst thing... my mother never spoke to my father in front of us... the women in the slum got beaten up so badly by their husbands... married women had no will... I have seen the father run away with the mother's earnings, come back drunk, lock up the mother, and sit and eat sweets in front of his hungry children.

For women like Rekha who chose to remain single, the hostel provided a supportive environment. This was also true for those residents who were trying to escape forced or bad marriages, like the "*Biye fails*" of Tarini Bhavan. Rekha said, "Girls come and tell me when their families arrange their marriages against their wishes. I ask them what they want and advise them."

Although the initial plan of a crèche attached to the hostel could not be implemented, several single mothers had managed to rear their children there. When the hostel cook Henna Saha, joined PASN, her daughter was young. Rekha recounted, "We brought her up... all of us together." The hostel provided an alternative family made up of freely chosen intergenerational affiliations that were often perceived as being stronger than blood and marital ties. Rekha's nephew experienced the communal mothering of the hostelites. A hostel alumna who lay dying at childbirth from heavy bleeding wanted to entrust her newborn child to the care of the hostelites. Rekha recounted receiving a call from the husband of the woman and rushing to the hospital. "She was calling out for us... I took my blood donor's card and reached there immediately... she gave her child to us as she lay dying... we all prepared for the child to be brought up in the hostel... finally, her in-laws did not give us the child."

Having fostered a supportive community for and by women in the hostel—an alternative family providing succor—Rekha felt that the idealism that had once animated the hostelites was now on the wane. She remembered the early days, when the hostel attracted women from all over the country, and even one from Mauritius—a student of fine arts who helped decorate the informal education center for children. In those days, many of the boarders were engaged in the projects for poor women and children run by the hostel. But now, young hostelites no longer had time for these activities. Rekha elaborated, "Everyone is busy with their own lives, their mobile phones... no one has time for politics or even watching TV [television] with other hostel women... they would much rather be on Facebook."

This change could be linked to factors like the decline of the political ideology which had once inspired the hostel, a paucity of funds, the growing individualism of the hostelites, or the changing environment of the city. The neoliberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s, led to a weakening of Leftist politics, and the vision of social collectivism, as well as the institutions nurtured by the party. But this shift appeared to pervade other women's hostels too, including those without any particular political vision. In order to better understand this change, we spoke to some old boarders

of government-supported hostels for working women and young women from community-supported hostels. Their responses are analyzed in the following part of the chapter.

Government hostels for working women and displacement, migration, and desire

Government-aided working women's hostels in Gariahat, Sahapur, and Baghbajar have nominal rates: The monthly boarding rate ranges between INR 100–550 (ca. one point five to eight euros), whereas the average monthly rent for private hostels is INR 1500 (ca. twenty-two to twenty-three euros). The Gariahat hostel was previously run by a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in the 1950s for middle-class women professionals and was later acquired by the government. The older boarders reminisced about a fellow hostelite, Captain Durba Bannerjee, who was the first woman pilot of Air India, and for whom the hostel curfew was relaxed since her duty hours were irregular. They remembered her putting on her "smart" uniform and leaving in the middle of the night. They lamented that such women did not stay in the hostel anymore, as the hostel was now in a state of decline, populated by residents who were mostly from poor families and who had nowhere else to go.

Most of the Gariahat hostel respondents were employed in the government's Integrated Child Development Scheme and earned meager salaries. Many were orphans, or refugees from the Partition (1947), and some had been dumped in the hostel by their relatives. Having lived on their own for most of their lives, these women had no sense of a home or family. When asked where her home was, seventy-year-old Krishna Dey said, "Home is what I do not have." Krishna came to Calcutta shortly after 1947 as a refugee from East Pakistan—part of an exodus of over 350,000,000 people who came to India between 1947–1951, leaving their homes to start new lives in Calcutta. Young single women took a lead in this rebuilding process, often becoming the sole breadwinners for aging parents and young siblings. Nipa, the female protagonist in Ritwick Ghatak's 1960 Bengali film *Meghe Dhākā Tārā* (The Cloud-Capped Star), represents the single women whose lives were spent in putting their dispossessed families back on their feet. Our respondent Krishna, however, left her family because of crushing poverty and the pressures of marriage, and spent most of her life in the hostel. She remembered, "We came here as refugees, but we didn't have refugee cards. My father owned a large business in Rangpur town, but during the riot we had to leave everything behind and escape overnight... He could not imagine living on some refugee cards. So, we struggled a lot."

Although aware of their limited family resources, Krishna wanted to take music lessons and possess a harmonium. When her brothers failed to fulfill her wishes, she left her studies and resisted their attempts to get her married. In her narrative, she did not directly articulate her own worries about a single life and a lonely future, yet it came through in her anxious

and empathetic description of aging eunuchs: "Once I went to the place where eunuchs live... I was led to a tiny room where the old eunuchs live. It was a dreadful sight. I found them so wretched that once I came back, I wrote a piece asking [Lord] Govinda why the eunuchs do not have a marriage ceremony or any siblings."

Krishna's implicit identification with the queer community of eunuchs acquires a special valence when read alongside her description of Pratima, the woman whose memory suffused her life, who had brought her to the hostel and finally abandoned her.

> When all my siblings were getting married, I felt dejected... then I met Pratima at a function. She proposed that I should stay with her. She used to live with her husband and mother-in-law. Five years later, I escaped from my house and went to Pratima. She used to take me to parties, which I disliked. But she mistook my dislike for parties as a dislike for her. So, without informing me, suddenly, she arranged a residential job for me at this hostel. I pleaded her not to send me away—all in vain.

Krishna revealed a tragic story of social transgression—of two women drawn to each other across gender and class barriers, but who failed to build a life together. Although she did not frame her experience as such, probably because the vocabulary was not available to her, Krishna's narrative was an account of queer desire leading to alienation from the family. Resolved not to marry, misunderstood and chastised by her brothers, she acknowledged her "strangeness" in the following way: "My brothers were strict. Moreover, I was unkempt and oddly dressed. I used to put *ālatā* (red paint) on my feet and wear white saris like widows." But then she paused and said, in a seeming non sequitur,

> I adore Pratima. I love her. She is a Brahmin woman. I used to be fascinated by her lifestyle, her demeanor, gesture, her voice. I still am... when I confided to Pratima's sister-in-law about what she had done to me, Pratima charged me with ingratitude. Even now when she banters, she appears hypnotic, but when she attacks me so rudely, it is as unbearable as poison.

Krishna's story provides a glimpse into the intensity of a type of queer love which remained unarticulated within marginal, single lives because of class and gender norms. The hostelites' responses revealed how these yearnings texture the everyday lives of women living in close proximity to each other. However, queer yearnings are perceived as a threat to the "respectability" of the hostel, and when discovered, they are brutally suppressed.[31]

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31 This is also because pornography is rife with male fantasies of women involved in sexual liaisons with each other in a girls' hostel.

The hostel superintendents related stories of "girls caught in the act" and thrown out, although the boarders hardly mentioned such incidents. Most young residents considered heterosexual marriage as an inevitable step that would follow their lives in the hostel. By contrast, some of the older women spoke of their love for women and their desire to live as part of a female community. Krishna said, "I have always wanted to stay with someone either as mother and daughter, or as sisters, and pursue music peacefully." Forty-eight-year-old Shorma Biswas, an orphan who grew up in an *ashram*, said, "I wish there was a woman older or even younger than me who would look after me and treat me with respect… I would live with her." Disappointed with the frequent fights between hostelites, she valued relationships of mutual care: "During illness… we all look after each other because we have only each other." For her, living in a collective meant that "we have the option of knowing varied perspectives on one issue. If you stay at home… you miss out on the various kinds of advice." She also valued the freedom that the hostel afforded her. "After a hard day's work, I can come back and rest… sleep without having to answer any questions… this would not happen at home, right? They would bother [me]… I would have to take care of people."

Krishna's appreciation of the autonomy of singleness and the hostel life implied a criticism of women's status at home, hemmed in by patriarchal relationships, domestic roles, and gender norms. "You can come and go as you like, save for yourself, and spend as you like. In most households, women… get the smallest share. It is all very unfair… the men would get the best things… It's great that I am single."

Coming from poor and sometimes abusive families, the respondents' desire for single lives often originated from a fear of violence. Shorma declared, "I do not trust any man… all of them cause hurt to women… I have seen my mother being tortured by men and so I grew up with a deep fear of them." For her, marriage, family, and children were just *"chhāipāṅś"* (ashes and dust). She remembered how her uncle had tried to get her married to "a pickpocket, a leper, a beggar, a dacoit." For her, marriage was associated with coercion and rejection—with her family's attempts to get her off their hands. Fears of marital discord and violence leading to suicide caused sixty-year-old Lily Karmakar to speculate, "One can never be sure… after marriage will I be lying under a ceiling fan or hanging from it?" Despite grinding poverty, none of the hostelites were willing to consider a marriage of convenience as a means of survival. A resident pointed out that, as single women, they at least had the independence of thoughts, although they might lack the independence of means.

A different narrative of singleness emerged from the forty-eight-year-old Anju Bose, an insurance agent from a district town who had been a hostelite for the past ten years. She had chosen not to marry because of a thwarted romance: "He went away once I refused his proposal. Now he lives in Jamshedpur… earlier I used to be [in touch with him]. But after my illness, I never met or contacted him, nor gave him my address; it is of

no use." When relatives still suggest that she should marry someone else, she says, "How can I? I don't like anyone else." She explained that she had initially rejected him because of her father's ambitious plans for her. She remembered having several suitors: "But my father... used to drive them away. He used to dream about his daughter becoming a railway officer. That his dream could not come true pains me." The story of the suburban girl with a lost love and an ambitious father is a recurrent motif in the accounts of the older boarders. It offers a vignette of the 1980s when economic changes had opened up new opportunities for women's work, leading to their increased migration to the cities. New experiences of independent urban living facilitated shifts in their ideas of love and marriage, even as it changed their relationships to their homes and families.

This motif also emerges in the narratives of the older members of the Sahapur hostel, which, although subsidized by the government, has a more up-market resident profile compared to Gariahat. Middle-aged Dola spoke about her father sending her to the National Cadet Corps (NCC) camps to learn self-reliance.[32] Speaking of her experience there, she recalled, "I went to the NCC camps... I was quite strong. I was skinny, but I could pull big trunks... My father... gave me a lot of freedom and made me strong mentally." However, Dola's assertive personality came in the way of love: "I can't say that I didn't like someone, but that doesn't mean he did too... I want to live my life with my head held high... I don't know how to propose to people... the humiliation that women have to go through—being submissive—I can't do that, sorry!"

Although not interested in marriage, Dola wanted a child and described her visit to the doctor who had apparently delivered one of Calcutta's first test-tube babies. Most respondents, however, dismissed the idea of single motherhood, while some spoke of their fear of childbirth, and others of how they considered their nieces and nephews as their own children. Like Krishna, Dola also described a passionate female friendship across class lines. Thrown out of her natal house after an accident, Dola was taken in by a friend who had married into a wealthy family. "She was Miss India... very beautiful. She has two sons. She has grandchildren now, a full family. We fight a lot, but when she hears something has happened to me, she comes instantly." Dola recounted how her friend cared for her in illness and took her traveling.

Other Sahapur residents, mostly migrant working women, also spoke about how their fathers had inspired them to live alone in Calcutta. Forty-two-year-old schoolteacher Maksuda who came from a conservative Muslim family, was grateful to her liberal father: "The generation before my father's was conservative, and they created problems when I said that I will not marry... He [her father] handled all this criticism... and supported

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32 The NCC is the youth wing of the Indian Armed Forces, which conducts training programs for student volunteers from schools and colleges on basic military operations, handling small arms, and parades.

my decision." Forty-five-year-old Jahnabi Ray from Bolpur, who held two master's degrees in economics and computer science, and a good job in a private shipping company, also attributed her success, self-reliance, and singleness to her father:

> In the Naxal period, a man had been murdered. His wife was running helplessly... My father stood by her, called a rickshaw when everyone else had shut their doors and switched off their lights. He was not scared... he took the man to hospital and then the crematorium, did his last rites... [He had] this courage and willingness to help others... if I show that [courage] as a woman, my in-laws will not like that... they want someone who is feminine. But I have grown up differently... my father got me into the NCC when I was in class eleven—he would draw moustaches on my face. I played with boys and trained in NCC camps, hanging from tires, doing parades... I lost my femininity.

Jahnabi's memories of her father and of watching classic English films with him had shaped her ideas of masculinity, making it impossible for her to settle for a Bengali man. "My father was crazy about Gregory Peck... and then I watched *McKenna's Gold* and since then I have found no one more attractive. But if I was married to a Bengali man in an arranged marriage, I would never have that passion at all."

When she came to Calcutta, Jahnabi found the men in the city to be effeminate. Her narrative of a Bolpur childhood, spent listening to the English music of the 1950s and 1960s and fantasizing about Bruce Springsteen and Gregory Peck, reverses the binary of the insulated provinces and the cosmopolitan city. The Sahapur narratives demonstrate how the sources of the respondents' independence and their choice of singleness lay in their childhood spent in district towns, attending NCC camps and learning to be self-reliant, as well as in inspiration provided by their fathers. Their subsequent lives in the city hostels merely helped them to realize their youthful dreams.

Among some respondents, however, the quest for autonomy and resistance to the normative structures of home, marriage, and family did not preclude affiliations with religious institutions. In fact, they framed their singleness through ideas of religious celibacy and spiritual sublimation of sexual urges and worldly desires. Several reported being disciples of the Ramakrishna Mission. Dola had close family connections with the Mission, which she wanted to nominate as the beneficiary in her will. She spoke passionately of her guru: "He is my bosom friend—he is a god to his devotees, but to me, he is a father, my 'property'... I fight with him, he loves me too—I am lucky." This intimate relationship with gurus and "gods" helped many of the respondents to cope with loneliness. Sometimes the bond with the deity was almost facetious, humanized, and hovering between belief and skepticism. Forty-six-year-old Rekha Biswas, an orphan

who grew up in a shelter, and is currently a resident at Baghbajar hostel, pointed to the line of idols in her room and said: "All of them are here. But if I am depressed... I abuse them... I don't give them food or water... and this Gopāla [the infant form of the deity, Kṛṣṇa] sitting in a bowl? I have no home; my Gopāla has a bowl at least."

The women's half-believing act of reaching out to gurus and deities represents a search for a support system. This is also manifest in their hankering for a community. Many spoke fondly of participating in programs jointly organized by the hostelites. Maksuda remembered how the birthdays of Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, as well as the Indian Independence Day, were once celebrated at the hostel.[33] She also pointed out the need for the superintendent to be a part of the hostel community, noting that "she should have been single, [like other hostelites] who would stay with us, not run back to her family every evening at seven p.m." Mridula spoke about the importance of a collective life, which influenced her to choose a hostel over a rented accommodation. Some boarders found communities among colleagues or like-minded people, like Maksuda's trekking friends and fellow commuters on the local trains, or Jahnabi's group of animal lovers.

The city wove in and out of the single women's narratives, emerging in their recollections of their experiences of work, politics, public transport, walking the streets, attending events, friendships, love, unexpected communities, and also of sexual harassment. This manifested in a series of vignettes, from Jahnabi taking leave from work to join the street rally for Nirbhaya,[34] visiting the Kolkata Book Fair, or devouring *phuchkās* (a type of street food) on the pavement, to Dola eating alone in *Arsalan* (a restaurant), to Maksuda going to watch plays with her fellow local-train commuters. These memories bring to life a dynamic geography of the city, claimed and animated by single women who choose to live and work in it. A collage of urban political history also emerges through their narratives, including references to the Partition, the refugee influx, and the Communist and Naxal movements. A rich tapestry of a gendered social history unfolds, depicting women's growing presence in the public sphere, their increasing mobility, changing relationships with the home and family, and their shifting perspectives on marriage, love, and singleness.

An interesting insight which emerges from the interviews, concerns the changing terrains of women's work. While most of the Gariahat residents had low-paying government jobs, the Sahapur women had livelihoods ranging from teaching and nursing to working as typists, doctors' secretaries, architects, physiotherapists, and corporate executives. There

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33 Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976) are well-known Bengali poets and are celebrated as cultural icons in Bengal.

34 Nirbhaya, or "Braveheart," was the name used to refer to the young physiotherapist who was gang-raped in a moving bus on December 16, 2012, in Delhi. This case sparked unprecedented protests across India by an irate public demanding justice for her as well as more safety for women.

was even a woman working as an officer in the Indian Intelligence Bureau. Compared to the heterogeneous experiences of the older respondents, the younger hostelites presented a more uniform picture, also because several of them (in the private and community-led hostels) came from similar religious or geographical backgrounds. Their views on living singly in the city, on hostels and homes, livelihood and marriage, romance and risk, and security and independence, were significantly different from those of the older residents, as we shall see in the following section.

Young hostelites and the necessity of marriage

The younger respondents of PASN were unaware of its history and political vision. For them, the hostel was a temporary *ṭhikānā* providing them with facilities that they paid for. They complained about the poor quality of food and the inadequate number of toilets, while one of them resented the "interference by the seniors." Unlike the older boarders, the young women retained close links with their families. They had little sense of belonging to a larger hostel community and were unaware of the festivals celebrated in the hostel or the social projects conducted there. They spent their leisure time watching films, listening to music on YouTube, and chatting on social media. A twenty-one-year-old woman remarked, "The phone is everything. If you have a phone there is nothing to worry about."

Despite enjoying the freedom of independent living, the young boarders felt unsafe in the city, went out only in large groups, and appreciated the hostel discipline. One of them suggested that an earlier curfew should be imposed. Although none of them mentioned the 2012 Nirbhaya incident, its memories seemed to frame their anxieties about women's security. The case, while highlighting the need for women's safety, had also led to an increased surveillance of, and restrictions on young women's mobility and autonomy. Most respondents had internalized these restrictions as being "for [their] own good." This is particularly interesting in light of the *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Cage) movement, started by young female students in Delhi who were protesting against patriarchal hostel norms, including early curfews, CCTV camera surveillance, and the moral policing of residents.[35] Contrary to the Delhi women, our respondents were demanding greater restrictions. This is in line with the findings of Chanda's study of young female migrants who also felt safer in hostels with rigid rules and early curfews.[36]

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35 Pinjra Tod is an autonomous women's collective of students and alumnae of colleges from across Delhi, which seeks to make hostel regulations less restrictive for female students by challenging the protectionism which curbs women's freedom in the name of safety. The collective also demands affordable accommodation for women.

36 Chanda*, Selfing the City*, 88.

Although the younger boarders professed a hatred of politics, they were conscious of gender inequities and familiar with the language of women's rights. When asked about their views on single and unwed mothers, most expressed admiration for their courage. However, they did not consider singleness as a viable life choice for themselves and spoke of marriage as inevitable. Despite this, they did not associate marriage with romance, sexuality, or the desire for children. Rather, marriage was framed as a "responsibility" that required "adjustments" and the "ability to serve others"—an act that was, above all, a measure of "maturity." Unlike the older boarders who had spoken about lost loves, the younger women hardly mentioned relationships or affairs. Most interviewees considered single lives difficult, giving examples of relatives and neighbors who had suffered due to choosing to live alone. A twenty-year-old student remembered a neighbor who had been abandoned by her husband and had lost custody of her children: "People talked behind her back... She had a boyfriend who was attacked by her neighbors." Others spoke of single aunts who were humiliated by the family. A young student from Chhattisgarh said that single women in her community were accused of being witches. For these reasons, the choice of a single life was seen as unfeasible.

Most of the young respondents at St. Bridget's hostel run by Catholic nuns were Christian women from the districts. They were students or workers in advertising agencies, beauty parlors, and schools. One was a civil engineer. Arriving from small towns with strong community networks, the women were bewildered by the city and recounted instances of harassment on the streets. Mentioning the Nirbhaya incident, one respondent advised her fellow residents to "carry themselves properly... keeping in mind [they] are alone, and the city is getting dangerous." Two residents said they carried pepper spray for safety and went out only in groups. For a young teacher, the hostel represented a safe haven in a violent city: "We have security here. Once we enter this place, we feel relaxed... I forget that I am in Kolkata." Although a few respondents felt that their exposure to Kolkata had boosted their confidence, most of them appreciated the early curfew and strict rules. One resident said, "We youngsters, we like to party and come back late... but I do feel [the nuns] are trying to save our lives. You don't know the world... whatever they do, they do for our good."

As practicing Christians, most respondents disapproved of live-in relations, pre-marital sex, and unwed motherhood. They avoided talking about sexual desires outside a marital context. One described sexual passion as a modern need: "In today's time, if you do not have sex, people consider you abnormal." Another respondent spoke of her fear of sex: "The desires are natural; the fears are also common." Some hostelites were involved in prayer groups and programs advising the youth against the dangers of "going astray" and watching pornography. One respondent spoke of lesbianism as a "psychological defect" and suggested counseling for women indulging in it.

Most residents regarded marriage as necessary and inevitable: "It will take place at the right time," said a twenty-one-year-old, remembering her single schoolteacher who regretted not marrying at the right age. For some, marriage was considered necessary for companionship, particularly in old age: "You need some shoulder to rest on, emotionally." A young engineer described marriage as a "holy relationship," which "will happen if it is in my destiny." Three respondents wanted to have arranged marriages. A twenty-nine-year-old said, "So far, I have been happy with whatever choices my parents have made for me. Since marriage is a big thing and involves families, I don't want to disappoint them. I don't go by looks but put more emphasis on the profession."

This same respondent said she had been in love but had had to terminate the relationship "since [their] professions and timings were clashing." Most hostelites wanted to consolidate their careers before entering romantic or marital relationships. One said that while "girls cannot remain single for long since people develop bad intentions towards them," she worried that "marriage will create problems in the path of [her] ambitions." Most narratives struggled to balance the demands of career and marriage, and though the women feared that marriage could impede their professional growth, they failed to overcome their anxieties about a single life.

At the Muslim girls' hostel, we spoke to eleven young women in their early twenties. The hostel was much more than a *ṭhikānā* for them. Rather, it was the space that had helped them realize their dreams pertaining to higher education, careers, and freedom. One respondent said, "When I am at home I am not allowed to watch TV, but here on my phone I can watch it, sometimes till two in the morning." Yet the independence afforded by the hostel did not compromise security. The women described it as a safe haven in a dangerous neighborhood with few streetlights, gangs of bike riders, and molesters. Most residents considered the city outside the hostel perilous. Two respondents related their experiences of living in paying guest accommodations in Kolkata, where one was harassed by the elderly landlord while another found voyeurs outside her toilet. But the hostel provided a safe space from which the young boarders could navigate not just the city but also the world outside. One respondent said that after living in Kolkata, she could live anywhere. For the young residents, the hostel had become a launching pad for their future journeys. However, while the city and the hostel taught them life lessons, it also made it impossible for them to return home. One boarder said, "I am from a remote village where people have to marry after a certain age. It is impossible for me to adjust to a rural life now. I want to have a job. I can't marry a man in the village and become a housewife."

The respondents had clear priorities, desiring to find a job before thinking about marriage. However, marriage remained an imperative. Most saw it as a religious injunction, while others described it as a social necessity. One claimed, "I have a disabled brother and a sister, so we need a male guardian… People don't take women seriously." Another said, "There is an

age for everything. This is a physical need. I cannot live an unfulfilled life. So why would I not marry?" The respondents were largely skeptical about inter-community marriages and expressed their preference to marry within their religion, unwilling to hurt their families' sentiments or to adjust to new cultural norms. Sensible of the opportunities they had been granted to forge independent lives, the residents of the Muslim hostel were also conscious of their ties to the very community that had helped them to do this. Unlike the highly-educated urban women interviewed by Shilpa Phadke in her essay in this volume, who spoke of negotiating, dodging, and challenging the pressures from their families and communities to get married, the young Muslim Bengali girls from poor and rural backgrounds did not resent the social expectation of marriage. They seemed only interested in deferring it, while the temporary *ṭhikānā* of the hostel helped them to do so.

Conclusion

Poised between the seduction of careers, mobility, and choice on the one hand, and the securities of marriage, family, and community on the other, the hostel potentially provides a space for the young respondents in this study to try out life options. However, convinced of the temporariness of the *ṭhikānā* and the inevitability of the *ghar* and marriage into which they must eventually move, they seemed wary of experimenting with the modalities of independent or community living that we saw in the older boarders. Unlike the long-term residents of SNDMA or PASN, the hostel did not represent an ideological space for them, nor did living in it signify a political choice or a life decision that would mark a deliberate break from home and family. While the older boarders of Gariahat and Sahapur underlined how the hostel enabled freedom and singleness, younger hostelites emphasized the need for security and protection. For the latter, the city was less a site of possibilities and more a locus of violence. Having internalized the scaremongering backlash of the Nirbhaya case, they saw the hostel as a shelter like home, which should impose strict rules to ensure their safety, even if it compromised their autonomy.

While for the older boarders the hostel stood for an alternative mode of collective living, the younger residents were hardly involved with the hostel community and showed little interest in its programs. Choosing to spend their time on social media, the younger residents were also more securely attached to their homes, families, and communities. These associations influenced their decisions to marry, which they planned to do mostly according to the wishes of their parents and within the community.[37] Unlike the individualized, sometimes passionate, even jocular relationships that

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37 Anveshi's study on Hyderabad hostels reports a large number of respondents wanting an arranged marriage or a "love-come-arranged" marriage. See Anveshi, "City and Sexuality," 69–72.

the older women shared with gurus and "gods," the younger hostelites participated in institutional religion in more structured ways, which shaped their attitudes to marriage. Many of them rejected not just pre-marital sex and live-in relations but also romance. This was in contrast to the older respondents' narratives, often haunted by memories of lost loves or queer desires, and told by women who had chosen single lives over loveless marriages. But for most of the younger women, even those who were amorously involved, marriage was a "mature" responsibility that had little to do with the frivolous distractions of youthful romance.[38]

Lukose points out how, although globalization has opened up opportunities for young women, the "celebrations of liberalization's promises provoke anxious discourses and regulations of young women, their bodies, their sexuality, and their vulnerability."[39] It is because of this atmosphere of moral panic that young women themselves "navigate their entries into the world of education and work, all within the horizons of the normative understandings of marriage."[40] While in the period of colonial modernity and in the post-independence era, particularly the 1960s and 1970s, romance was associated with the exercise of women's choice and agency against the traditional arranged marriage, this appears to have been reversed in a post-globalization India, where rising levels of violence against women ensure their acquiescence to social norms. This shift is apparent in the ways in which the two generations of hostelites view marriage, singleness, autonomy, security, and the city in relation to the hostel space. Even as the contemporary feminist discourse of women's hostels in India, as articulated in the *Pinjra Tod* movement, envisions these spaces as restrictive of women's mobility and autonomy, the narratives discussed in the present study provide an alternative view. Whether they talk about the hostel as an enabler of collective life and freedom (as the older boarders do) or as a space providing protection from the violence of the city (as the younger women do), these voices imagine the hostel differently, with varying degrees of approximation to a *ghar* or a *ṭhikānā*.

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38 Sneha Krishnan, "Making Ladies of Girls: Middle-class Women and Pleasure in Urban India" (D. Phil diss., Oxford University, 2015), 28.
39 Lukose, *Liberalization's Children*, 12.
40 Lukose, *Liberalization's Children*, 19.

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Lucetta Y. L. Kam

Moving with Precarity: Transnational Mobility of Chinese Queer "Single" Women

Abstract   A central question of this chapter is—Do the aspiration and ability to move have something to do with the queer women's presumed "single" status in a heteronormative society like China? "Single" is put in scare quotes here because the women I discuss in this chapter are regarded as single only in the sense that they are not in a heterosexual marriage or attached to men. I focus on the intersection of gender, sexuality, and singleness to explore the role of mobility (mainly transnational) in urban queer single women's search for autonomy and respectability. I interviewed thirty-two "mobile queer women" in China and Australia, as well as, two women from Hong Kong who were residing in Europe at the time of the interview, between 2015 and 2018. The study of queer women highlights the neglected fact that singleness can be a form of public (mis)recognition or self-representation of queer women in a heteronormative society. The lives they lead can be very different from popular stereotypes of single women in a heterosexual context. Their experiences demonstrate the complexity of the meaning of "being single" and the internal diversity of the category of "single women" in Chinese cities.

Keywords   queer single women; queer mobility; queer migration; Chinese lesbians; single women in China

Jay is a thirty-seven-year-old queer woman who originally comes from northern China.[1] Now, she is a self-employed photographer based in Shanghai. Although she has lived there for half her life, she is still officially categorized as a temporary resident. She is active in Shanghai's *tongzhi / lala* 同志／拉拉 community.[2] In the past ten years or so, she has been traveling to a number of cities inside and outside of China for leisure, work, and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer / questioning, asexual, and other terms such as non-binary and pansexual) events. These domestic and international trips have gradually formed an integral part of her work and private life. She has made a conscious effort to keep her work and private life mobile and portable so that she can always pick up her MacBook and start a trip. Her current romantic relationship also requires her to be a frequent traveler, as her partner resides in Taipei. They travel to meet each other several times a year. The meeting places are usually Shanghai or Taipei, but occasionally they will travel to other countries for short holidays. The destinations are mostly determined by Jay's visa eligibility. As a passport holder of the People's Republic of China and a temporary resident of Shanghai (which means she is subject to more internal scrutiny when applying for visas to foreign countries, as compared to people with Shanghai *hukou* 户口, or, residency), her transnational mobility is restricted by administrative and structural barriers. Nonetheless, Jay leads a life that is much more mobile than that of her parents' generation and of most of her married counterparts in China.

During my field trips in China and my participation in China's urban *tongzhi* community over the past decade or so, I have met more and more *lala* women who share mobile lifestyles and transnational aspirations similar to those of Jay. Young and educated queer people from the single-child generation (born after 1979) desire to study and work abroad. Veteran *tongzhi* activists also aspire to go abroad to connect with the global and the regional LGBTQI+ communities in Western countries and in Asia more broadly. Geographical mobility has become a new homonormative value and aspiration of the *tongzhi* in China.[3] Although transnational mobility, or its local Mandarin term, *chuguo* 出國, literally meaning "to go abroad," is a general imperative in post-socialist China, where internationalization

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1   The names of informants used in this essay are all pseudonyms. Their personal profiles are also partially altered to protect the informants' identities. All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are by the author.

2   *Tongzhi* 同志, literally meaning "comrades," is the Mandarin Chinese term commonly used in China (and in other Sinophone societies) to refer to people who identify as LGBTQI+. The term *lala* 拉拉 is developed from the Western term "lesbian." It is a local term used in China to refer to women with same-sex desires or relationships. In this chapter, I use *lala* to refer specifically to such women in China. I use "queer" to refer to established terms such as "queer migration" and as an umbrella term for non-normative sexualities and genders. I use *tongzhi* to highlight local LGBTQI+ communities and activism in China.

3   Lucetta Y. L. Kam, "Coming Out and Going Abroad: The *Chuguo* Mobility of Queer Women in China," in "Migrant and Refugee Lesbians: Lives That Resist the Telling," ed. Eithne Luibhéid, special issue, *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 24, no. 2 (2020).

and the pursuit of a global self is promoted by the state and realized by economic development, being queer and being mobile seem to have a connection that calls for further investigation. My study shows that queer women with mobility capital tend to obtain sexual and gender autonomy and social respectability through transnational movement. Transnational mobility has become a new model of homonormativity in China as international education, tourism, and global work opportunities have opened up new routes for queer people to achieve autonomy and respectability in a neoliberalist society. At the same time, mobility also exposes them to new uncertainties and precarity.

Most of the queer women in my study were not married (neither in heterosexual nor same-sex marriages) at the time of the interviews. Most women I met in the *tongzhi / lala* community in China were also not married. To the public, these women belong to the expanding group of urban single women. The stigmatization of single women and the cultural importance of marriage in post-socialist China have been widely studied and discussed.[4] The term "leftover women" *(shengnü)* was promoted by the All-China Women's Federation in 2007 and has since then been the subject of much media attention both inside and outside of China, in addition to attracting considerable academic interest. The term usually refers to women in their late twenties who are unmarried. Widely discussed and represented in popular media are the "leftover women" in China who are well-educated, with a good income and career. Since the label of "leftover woman" always depends on one's marital status, there is an assumption that such women are undoubtedly heterosexual. Indeed, the literature on single women in China is also overwhelmingly skewed towards heterosexual women and overlooks the fact that queer women constitute a part of the single women population in China. The experiences of queer single women are only to be found in the literature of *tongzhi* or queer studies, which discuss the pressure on queer women to marry and their corresponding coping strategies.[5] Most studies on single or "leftover" women in China do not include queer women. This is perhaps due to the fact that the dominating discussion of marriage pressure excludes the experiences of non-heterosexual women.

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4   Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zed Books, 2014); Yingchun Ji, "Between Tradition and Modernity: 'Leftover' Women in Shanghai," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77, no. 5 (2015); Lucetta Y. L. Kam, *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013); Lynne Nakano, "Marriage and Reproduction in East Asian Cities: Views from Single Women in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Tokyo," in *Cultural Politics of Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Asia*, ed. Tiantian Zheng (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016); Sandy To, "Understanding *Sheng Nu* ('Leftover Women'): The Phenomenon of Late Marriage among Chinese Professional Women," *Symbolic Interaction* 36, no. 1 (2013).
5   Elisabeth L. Engebretsen, *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Lucetta Y. L. Kam, *Shanghai Lalas*; Stephanie Yingyi Wang, "When Tongzhi Marry: Experiments of Cooperative Marriage Between Lalas and Gay Men in Urban China," *Feminist Studies* 45, no. 1 (2019).

Both single women and "leftover women" are assumed to be heterosexual, both in general perceptions and in academic studies. Many single informants, both from my previous study of *lala* women in Shanghai and from the present study, were very often identified by other people as unmarried heterosexual women. This perception hinders the exploration of the role of sexuality in the formation of the single women population in China, and of the ways in which queer women experience and negotiate with marriage pressure and other heteronormative demands.

A central question of this chapter is: Do the aspiration and ability to move have something to do with the queer women's presumed "single" status in a heteronormative society like China? "Single" is put in scare quotes here because the women I discuss in this chapter are regarded as single only in the sense that they are not in a heterosexual marriage or attached to men. In this chapter, I will focus on the intersection of gender, sexuality, and singleness to explore the role of mobility (mainly transnational) in urban queer single women's search for autonomy and respectability. Specifically, the study revolves around the following questions: Does the status of being single or an unmarried woman accelerate or restrict one's mobility? In what ways does this happen? How do queer women relate their mobile life to their single status? How does their sexual and gender non-conformity relate to their geographical mobility? What leads them to live or aspire to a mobile life? How does mobility work as a regulating force in queer women's quest for autonomy and respectability?

I intend to present the lives of women whose singleness is sometimes a result of public (mis)recognition, and other times, a self-directed identity to survive in a society where marriage is still regarded as a compulsory norm. The study of queer women highlights the neglected fact that singleness can be a form of public (mis)recognition or self-representation of queer women in a heteronormative society. Queer women are a part of the single women population in urban China, but they are always invisible to the mainstream society. The lives they lead can be very different from popular stereotypes of single women in a heterosexual context. Their experiences demonstrate the complexity of the meaning of "being single" and the internal diversity of "single women" in Chinese cities.

Mobility and respectability

As part of a research project on the queer mobility of Chinese women, I interviewed thirty-two "mobile queer women" in China and Australia, as well as, two women from Hong Kong who were residing in Europe at the time of the interview, between 2015 and 2018. The majority of the informants were citizens of the People's Republic of China at the time of the interview. More than half of the informants were interviewed in Australia. Some were residing in Australia on student and work visas, while the others had permanent residency or citizenship. Among them, there were international

students, working holiday goers, recently arrived immigrants in Australia and Europe, transcontinental commuters between China / Hong Kong and Australia / North America, young urban women in China who planned to go abroad, and women like Jay, who frequently traveled domestically and internationally. The ages of the informants ranged from twenty-one to forty-seven years. Most of the informants from China were born after 1979 and belonged to the only-child generation. Most of them identified themselves as *lala* and lesbian. Some identified as bisexual and a few described their sexualities as "fluid," "pansexual," or "not yet decided." All of them were assigned female at birth and most identified as "female," though a few described their genders in terms of their roles in a lesbian relationship, such as "H" ("half," which is a local term for *lala* women who embody a more androgynous gender style and whose sexual preference is not defined or restricted by terms such as "butch" or "femme"), "P" ("*po* 婆," feminine *lala*), or "T" (masculine *lala*). The informants in this study belong to an emergent urban mobile population in China. Mobility formed a significant part of their everyday lives and long-term life course planning. In this chapter, I focus more on the experiences of those informants who were not in a heterosexual marriage at the time of the interviews.[6] In this section and the one that follows, I will briefly discuss the connection between mobility and privilege, singleness, and precarity. The last section discusses the transnational mobile experiences and aspirations of queer single women in my study. It is hoped that the experiences of urban queer (single) women can advance our understanding of non-heterosexual women's articulations and practices of autonomy, as well as, of how they use mobility to tackle sexual and gender marginalization within a culture that prioritizes marriage.

Chuguo, literally "the act of leaving one's country," has long been a synonym for success in socialist China. *Chuguo* refers to someone's ability to leave her or his destined life and assigned social or geographical position. The act of *chuguo*, whether it takes the form of short-term travel for leisure or long-term movement for education, work, or migration, constitutes both a personal and national project of embodying a new form of self in post-socialist China—a project which is usually imagined as global, cosmopolitan, and desirable. Rapid urbanization and uneven economic development since the reform era (after 1979) accelerated the movement of people within the country. Major cities have experienced a huge influx of migrant workers from rural or less developed parts of China. Frequent relocations between cities for jobs, families living apart, and living in precarity and on the margins characterize the everyday life of rural-to-urban migrant workers.

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6   My study also included women who were divorced or in a heterosexual marriage at the time of the interviews. In this group, a few were in a cooperative marriage, which is a mutually agreed-upon marriage between a lesbian woman and a gay man. There were also women in a registered same-sex marriage or same-sex de facto partnership.

In the cities, international tourism, study, work, or even migration have become facts of life for the emerging urban middle class and the new rich. For them, mobility has increasingly become a defining part of a preferred urban lifestyle. Transnational mobility, for these urbanites, is a new bench-mark for success. The pursuit of a "global self," one that embraces cos-mopolitanism and strives to transcend the local, as extensively discussed by Lisa Rofel in her study on young urban women in China in the 1990s,[7] has continued into the new millennium. Moreover, it has also become a project that is aspired to by women from all sorts of social classes and economic backgrounds. With the availability and proliferation of transna-tional mobility in recent decades in China, such as through international education, immigration, business ventures, tourism, and more recently, working holidays, geographical mobility and social mobility have been tied together even more tightly. After the market reform, the mobility of a per-son between cities and continents remains a privilege. Such movement is heavily defined and confined by one's gender, class, and ethnicity, as well as, by one's physical ability and cultural, economic, and network capi-tals. In particular, network capital, defined by Anthony Elliott and John Urry as "largely subjectless, communications-driven and information-based,"[8] determines one's geographical mobility.

Within the transnationally mobile Chinese population, the educational mobility of the single-child generation has attracted much attention from researchers in the past two decades.[9] The two typical characteristics of the younger generation of transnationally mobile Chinese people, namely that of being both an only child and an international student, are also reflected among the queer women informants of my study. Chinese international students are always understood as a privileged group who take advantage of China's booming economy and of being the only child to enjoy their family resources. The decision to support an only child in pursuit of inter-national education depends on pooling together the family resources, and it is hence understood as a family investment.

Among the studies on international students from China, female stu-dents tend to be in the spotlight. The larger number of female Chinese international students contributes to the growing body of studies on this

7   Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
8   Anthony Elliott and John Urry, *Mobile Lives* (London: Routledge, 2010), 11.
9   Vanessa L. Fong, *Paradise Redefined: Transnational Chinese Students and the Quest for Flexible Citizenship in the Developed World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Anni Kajanus, *Chinese Student Migration, Gender and Family* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Fran Martin, *Dreams of Flight: The Lives of Chinese Women Students in the West* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); Ming Tsui and Lynne Rich, "The Only Child and Educational Opportunity for Girls in Urban China," *Gender and Society* 16, no. 1 (2002); Mengwei Tu, *Education, Migration and Family Relations Between China and the UK: The Transnational One-Child Gen-eration* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018); Mengwei Tu and Kailing Xie, "Privi-leged Daughters? Gendered Mobility among Highly Educated Chinese Female Migrants in the UK," *Social Inclusion* 8, no. 2 (2020).

group of mobile Chinese. Additionally, the growing number of female international students also draws attention to changing gender dynamics in the private and public domains in China and to how overseas education and mobility impact young women's aspirations and understanding of traditional gendered expectations. In the past sixty years, there has been a global trend of more female migrants moving independently for work and education (in addition to marriage-related migration).[10] Most of these women are international students, low-paid migrant workers, entertainers, and those migrating for marriage. There are also more female than male international students from China in Western countries.[11] However, the growing number of women in the global mobile population does not mean that traditional gender constraints from their home countries would disappear. Even if transnationally mobile Chinese women from the single-child generation are termed as the "privileged daughters,"[12] their position in the Chinese kinship network decides the possibility and the extent of their movement. In addition, their familial position and marital status regulate not only the space factor of their movement (how far and where) but also the time factor of their mobility (how long and when). The time and space constraints on Chinese women's mobility are well discussed by Rofel, in her work on young urban women in the 1990s, and Fran Martin, who has researched female Chinese international students in Australia.[13] Rofel finds that the women she talked to were struggling with "a split gender subjectivity: the single, free woman versus the respectable, married woman."[14] The desire to be global exposes these young women to the dilemma of personal freedom versus social and familial responsibilities. Martin also finds in her interviewees the paradox of the "autonomous and mobile identity"[15] that is nurtured by transnational education, and the gendered expectations of heterosexual women in China. The growth in opportunities for overseas travel does not solve but rather exposes the younger generation of Chinese women to the full effect of this paradox compared to their mothers' generation. Martin highlights the struggle and the importance of mobility for the younger generation of Chinese women:

> For the younger generation that is the subject of my study, the cosmopolitan imaginary and "deterritorialised subjectivity" that were already available to [their mothers'] generation have [further] deepened and consolidated as a result of the immense growth in opportunities for overseas travel. This produces in the daughter

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10 Migration Data Portal, accessed on January 14, 2020, http://migrationdataportal. org/themes/gender.

11 Kajanus, *Chinese Student Migration*; Martin, "The Gender of Mobility"; Tu and Xie, "Privileged Daughters."

12 Tu and Xie, "Privileged Daughters."

13 Martin, "The Gender of Mobility."

14 Rofel, *Desiring China*, 126.

15 Martin, "The Gender of Mobility," para. 29.

generation a distinctive subjectivity based on awareness of one's potential for transnational mobility and a concomitant desire—sanctioned and encouraged by parents—to build mobility capital, especially in youth. For this generation, the self-animating subject is specifically one that animates across national borders.[16]

A mobile self, or a "portable personhood" as discussed by Elliott and Urry,[17] is a form of self that is desired by the younger generation of urban Chinese women and often actively supported by their parents. However, the pursuit of a portable personhood or a global self that is unrestrained by local forces or kinship structures, cannot survive the demand of the heteronormative female life course. As recounted by the international Chinese students interviewed by Martin in her study, the freedom or time to pursue a "free, independent and self-focused personhood" is limited.[18] Martin concludes from the stories of those female students that "one's twenties can be a time of mobility, but one's thirties are imagined to be a time of gendered stasis."[19] This echoes the "split gender subjectivity" observed by Rofel in the earlier generation of young urban women in China.[20] More recent studies of the privileged, only-child-generation women in urban China have revealed that educational mobility, professional advancement, and career accomplishments, in many cases, cannot challenge the traditional gender norms in the private sphere and women's traditional roles as wives and mothers.[21] The mobility of women is both informed, induced, and interrupted by the heteronormative life course. In other words, the time before marriage is the only legitimate period for a young woman to pursue a mobile life and a global self. Mobility in this sense seems to be a privilege granted to pre-marriage young women born in the post-socialist era. Mobility also seems to constitute a rite of passage for young women that enables them to grow into a kind of person or citizen that is encouraged by the neoliberal state. Transnational mobility elevates the cultural, social, and even economic status of the so-called "privileged daughters," but it seems that the privileges and the respectability enjoyed by young single women cannot be preserved in their later life stages. And, what about queer women? How can they negotiate their desire to be mobile and autonomous women when they are faced with heteronormative demands?

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16 Martin, "The Gender of Mobility," para. 14.
17 Elliott and Urry, *Mobile Lives*.
18 Martin, "The Gender of Mobility," para 25.
19 Martin, "The Gender of Mobility," para 33.
20 Rofel, *Desiring China*, 126.
21 Ji, "Between Tradition and Modernity"; Nakano, "Marriage and Reproduction"; Kailing Xie, "'Her China Dream': The Aspirations of China's Privileged Daughters," *Discover Society*, September 5, 2017. Accessed January 14, 2020. https://archive.discoversociety.org/2017/09/05/her-china-dream-the-aspirations-of-chinas-privileged-daughters/.

Singleness, precarity, and possibilities

Female singlehood generally carries negative connotations. Single women continue to be targets of mockery and condemnation in official discourses, at workplaces, in family gatherings, and in many media representations in contemporary China. Regardless of sexual orientation, staying single is not a preferred way of life. Moreover, in popular understandings, a single life for women is usually connected with economic insecurity, social stigma, health hazards, and personal failure. In other words, singleness is always associated with precarity when the subjects are female. This popular assumption serves as a regulatory force that puts single women in a discursively undesirable and vulnerable position and hinders the imagination of single lives that do not fit into this model of precarity. In this section, I will first look at this presumed connection of singleness and precarity in Chinese women's lives. Next, I will discuss how this presumption is reflected in queer single women's lives. Finally, I will address the ways in which mobility leads queer women to look for new possibilities and strategies to cope with precarity.

While a precarious life has increasingly become an everyday reality for people from all walks of life in post-socialist China, being single is widely believed to be undesirable and the most precarious form of life, especially for women, for whom marriage and motherhood are still considered to be essential components of their gender identity and family obligation. A study carried out by Xie Kailing on university-educated women in urban China shows that marriage and motherhood are still considered essential qualities of a "successful woman" in contemporary China.[22] Another study of "leftover women" in Shanghai shows that "institutional obstacles such as a weak social welfare system and the exclusive legitimacy of childbirth within marriage" contributed to the resurgence of patriarchal Confucian tradition and the difficulty of being a woman living outside of the institution of marriage in China.[23] On the other hand, marriage is understood to be or promoted as a type of anchorage. It helps to solidify one's life, and one's position in society and the kinship system. In some cases, marriage is a way to achieve social stability and personal security, such as the offer of an urban *hukou* (household registration) and a marital home through marriage, not to mention the assumed economic co-dependence and familial recognition of a married couple. The top-down stigmatization of single women in China is one of the many ways in which the state maintains social stability.[24]

The other side of marriage as anchorage is its incompatibility with a mobile life and a mobile self. With the increase in job opportunities in cities, generations of young people have moved from rural areas and small towns to look for jobs and a better life there. Emerging groups of migrant workers such as factory girls (*dagongmei* 打工妹), and mobile population

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22 Kailing, "Her China Dream."
23 Ji, "Between Tradition and Modernity," 1059.
24 Fincher, *Leftover Women*.

in Beijing (*beipiao* 北漂) or Hong Kong (*gangpiao* 港漂) have formed a new landscape of internal movement of people in China. Most of the mobile workers in China start their journey at a young age, usually before marriage. The intensified mobility of people has led to the formation of new types of mobile families and intimate relationships in China. For educated young people, the few years during early adulthood and before marriage are the prime time to pursue individual freedom and transnational mobility. After marriage, people are expected to settle down in a relatively static marital life. This is especially true for women, who are expected to either return home after overseas education to follow the traditional life course that is assigned for women (such as being a wife and a mother), or to plan their after-marriage life around their husbands' life paths.[25]

The challenges faced by single women in urban China are not limited to marriage and reproduction. Their experiences of work and mobility, for example, require more research. Recent scholarship has started to look at other non-marriage-related aspects of single women's lives in China, such as their work life, self-care, and even the pleasure of staying single.[26] In my study, I try to direct the attention to the connection of singleness and mobility by focusing on queer women's aspiration to and experiences of moving through borders. Transnational mobility or, to some less privileged queer women, moving away from their hometowns and parental homes are common pathways to surviving heteronormative demands on single women. Being single and mobile is literally a rite of passage for many young educated queer women I interviewed in China. The desire to move or embody a global self has little to do with one's sexuality. It seems that to go abroad, either for leisure travel or for a longer stay, is a general desire in today's China. But for queer people, being mobile has another level of meaning. For some queer women I interviewed in China, Hong Kong, and Australia, mobility can be understood as an act of moving away from a predictable route or life routine, be it a geographical location or a normative way of existence. Mobility can also be a way to live out one's queer self, or one's preferred queer self. As publicly (mis)recognized single women, engaging in internal or international mobility allows them to detach themselves from the family and kinship network, which in most cases, constitutes the primary group exercising social control over their sexualities and gender. These women's aspirations to being mobile are partly nurtured in the same socio-economic and political context as those of other young people in China, and partly result from their specific experiences of being a non-conforming person in terms of gender and sexuality. In the following part, I will discuss how being single and queer inform and shape women's aspirations to and routes of mobility.

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25 Fong, *Paradise Redefined*; Martin, "The Gender of Mobility"; Tu and Xie, "Privileged Daughters."

26 Chow Yiu Fai, *Caring in Times of Precarity: A Study of Single Women Doing Creative Work in Shanghai* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Queerness and precarity

Jay, the woman I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, has moved many times during her stay in Shanghai, largely due to the fact that she does not have a permanent resident status, something which, in turn, affects her chances of finding a stable job. Permanent residency, job security, economic stability, and home ownership are all closely connected in an increasingly marketized China. Yet despite of the precarious life she leads in Shanghai, Jay refuses to return to her hometown in the north, where she had experienced hostility against her gender appearance since young. For Jay, mobility comes with and results from instability. After talking to many *lala* women in Beijing and Shanghai, it is not hard to sense the pervasive feeling of precarity. The fear of an unknown future and the perception of an unstable present are amplified by the fact that queer women are not part of the heteronormative kinship structure. The sense of precariousness in the *lala* community in China is eloquently expressed by Ana Huang: "A sense of precariousness pervades throughout *lala* culture, as people face temporal caps on their relationships. Without a future or a past, *lalas* float in a precarious temporal limbo, longing for anchorage."[27]

For Jay, the feeling of precarity is even more prevalent in her life because of her marginal position in Shanghai. Since she is not attached to any recognized work organization and it is impossible for her to obtain permanent residency (*hukou*) through marriage, she remains a temporary resident, even after twenty years of living in the city. Her legitimacy to stay in the city depends on the constantly changing policy towards the "mobile population," which is always unfriendly to internal migrants who are less educated or work in the informal sectors. Moreover, the policy is often subject to the manipulation of local officials. Jay's relatively vulnerable status in Shanghai as an outsider has, over the years, led her to travel overseas, seeking relief from the adverse effects of the internal social exclusion she suffers from. Transnational mobility and travel are, for her, ways to escape the internal scrutiny and social exclusion she is forced to endure in China as a person who does not have a permanent resident status in the city she lives in. She keeps her job mobile so that she can live a mobile life. At the time of the interview, she had started to plan to leave Shanghai for a city in China with a more affordable standard of living. "I do not want to settle down at this point, whether if it's in a city, to a certain condition, or with a woman," she told me. To queer women like Jay, who do not have a job from the formal sector or a permanent resident status in the city they live in, transnational mobility is a way to escape from the structural immobility—which includes both geographical and social dimensions—that she

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27 Ana Huang, "Precariousness and the Queer Politics of Imagination in China," in "Queer Asia As Critique," ed. Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong, special issue, *Culture, Theory and Critique* 58, no. 2 (2017): 227.

suffers from as a member of the marginal mobile population in China's affluent cities.

Jay was one of the few informants I talked to who did not have a university degree. Among the other queer mobile women I interviewed in China, Hong Kong, and Australia, the most typical reason given for going abroad was the desire to study. This partly reflects the trend of a growing number of female Chinese students in universities in North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. It is also partly due to the age range of the informants in my project. Most of them were in their early twenties to late thirties. Overseas education is especially popular among younger people of middle-class background in China who wish to continue their undergraduate or postgraduate studies.

Pat's story represents this group of queer women from China. When I first interviewed Pat in Melbourne in 2015, she was a kindergarten teacher in her early thirties. At that time, she had been in Melbourne for about ten years. Her hometown was Sichuan in China, and she had come to Australia for her undergraduate study. She had already obtained permanent residency in Australia and seemed to have quite happily settled down in Melbourne. Like many other women from China in her age group, she was a single child. Her parents were highly educated, and studying abroad was a normative choice for her and her family. Her sexuality was, at first, not a factor in her going abroad. She had come out to her family before she left China. But heterosexual gender norms and the social expectation in her hometown that one should lead a heteronormative life were factors that she repeatedly mentioned in the interview. As she approached thirty, Pat gradually noticed how the pressure of marriage was being imposed on her and her female friends in her hometown whenever she visited.

> Turning thirty is a new beginning [to me]. In China it's like... getting to settle down is more important. Fewer people will try to get what they want. Perhaps there's more to lose if they do. They think they can't live a drifting and unstable life. Here, I can just work hard to get what I want. In China, if you want anything, you've got to first try very hard to change other people's values before you do anything. That's more tiring.

In addition, Pat is a T-identifying lesbian.[28] Her masculine appearance also made her a talking point in her hometown. Pat decided to stay in Australia after graduation. Other women from China I talked to, shared similar explanations for going to and then staying in Australia. First, the general aspiration in China to go abroad justified their decision to leave home to study. Sometimes, middle-class parents in China participated in a family decision to actively plan for their daughters' overseas education. For example, Hilary had just started her undergraduate study in Melbourne when

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28 "T" is the masculine gender identity widely used in the *lala* community in China.

I first met her in 2015. Originally from a small city in Hunan province, she was then in her early twenties. As recounted by Hilary, her parents, who were in their early fifties, were very open-minded and liberal. Her bisexuality was not an issue for them. They actively planned for her to study overseas, and Australia was one of the destinations they had suggested. Hilary was studying literature in Melbourne. She planned to finish her doctoral studies in a country other than Australia before going back to China. This plan was also supported by her family. For other women I talked to, it was rare for parents in China to support their daughter's pursuit of a doctoral degree. Parents usually worry that, by the time their daughters finish their doctorates, they will be too old and too educated to find a matching husband. Hilary was lucky to have the support of her parents, both emotionally and financially. She could therefore, enjoy the privilege of being "single" and mobile much longer than other women from her generation.

Many other young women I interviewed in Australia avoided direct confrontation with their worrying (and sometimes dominating) parents in China over the issue of marriage. Some women tried to find a job and make a living in Australia after graduation. Others tried to find a job outside their hometown after they finished overseas education so as to live away from their parents and immediate family. A few older queer women I met in Australia were actively planning for migration to live together with their same-sex partner. For example, Jenny and Mercy started their relationship in Beijing in 2004. Both of their families were strongly opposed to their relationship. After they had been together for a year, they started to plan for their escape. Both women belonged to the well-educated elite professional class in Beijing. Mercy had a close family member who had already migrated to Australia. In terms of network capital, they were privileged to have transnational mobility. In the fourth year of their relationship, Mercy first migrated to Australia through her family connection. One year later, Jenny arrived in Australia with a student visa. At the time of our interview, they had lived in Melbourne for ten years and had registered for same-sex partnership. They were now in their late thirties and had survived the intense pressure from both families, who had urged them to get married heterosexually when they were younger and still living in China. After they migrated to Australia, the distance shielded them from direct intervention from parents on both sides. The new challenge for them at present, or in the very near future, was how to take care of their aging parents, and how to accommodate them into their same-sex relationship and household after such a long separation.

Mobility and possibilities

For the queer women I talked to in different Chinese cities and in Australia, their mobility was not initially caused by their sexuality or gender non-conformity. On the other hand, nearly all of them agreed that mobility made

their lives easier as queer women. Even for the few women I talked to from Hong Kong, a city that, compared to China and Taiwan, exerts less pressure to marry on both women and men—they found that transnational mobility helped them live a queer life apart from their home city.

For example, Ashley was born in Hong Kong. When I interviewed her, she was approaching thirty. She had just arrived in London from Hong Kong with a British passport, allowing her to stay in Europe without limitation. She was determined to start a new life in London, and told me that the move was related to her sexuality, but that she had not been discriminated against as a lesbian woman in Hong Kong.

> My queerness allows me to live a different life. Compared to my straight fellows, I feel less obligated to get married and live an ordinary life. [Heterosexual] social norms are not applicable to me. While most of my secondary school friends are getting married in a year or two, or having their first kid, I quit my job and moved to another city. Obviously, I have less of a social burden. Also, it's because of my class as well. I have no dependents and my mum is rich enough to sustain her retirement. Plus, given my dual nationality, my mobility is doubled. I don't think it would be possible if I didn't possess a British passport. Otherwise, I might be only able to do a working holiday for just a year or two.

From Ashley's case, we can see that queerness and mobility can be mutually constitutive. Being queer allowed her to imagine a life that was not restricted (or protected) by heterosexual norms. Her network capital as a dual passport holder possessing the essential cultural and language skills to live in a metropolitan city, also allowed her to plan for a mobile and flexible life. She was also driven by London's cosmopolitanism, and its LGBTQ-friendly policies and legal protection. Consequently, she was open about her sexuality in job interviews in London and believed that this would not damage her chances. I asked her if she would move again. She told me that she was not sure but would not mind if she had to. "I go wherever is important to me at the moment. I am spontaneous and less likely to plan for the future." My interview with her was conducted during the first few months of her stay in London. She was struggling to find a job and settle down in the new city. Nonetheless, she embraced the instability, or even, the precarity that was brought about by her transnational mobility. She knew very well that she would not be able to find the same kind of white-collar job that she had had in Hong Kong. Her mobility allowed her to explore the different possibilities of life as a queer woman and to live away from the life course that many of her heterosexual friends were following.

Mobility enhances one's possibility to lead a non-normative life. As we saw above, Jenny and Mercy had planned for their "escape" to Australia. Others use education as a means to obtain the freedom and global self they

hope to embody. Luce, as a China-born, single queer woman in her early thirties, demonstrates how transnational mobility shapes her queer self. Luce finished her undergraduate study in China before she departed to the United States for her graduate study. She was brought up in a middle-class family in a coastal city in China. Like many other women I talked to, and women or men of her generation and family background more broadly, overseas education was considered a desirable choice. Luce stayed in the United States until she obtained a doctoral degree. After graduation, she chose to find a job in an Asian city that was not far from China. The prox- imity to her family was an important factor in her choice of this Asian city for work. It is close enough for her to take care of her aging parents, but not so close as to threaten her individual space. When I asked her about whether her mobility was related to her queerness, she wrote me a very self-reflective response:

> I don't think I have mobility because I am queer. Perhaps I can say that mobility does make my life easier as a queer, and I did realize, at an early age, that in order to become who I want to be, mobility is important. I guess for a lot of people, mobility entails personal suc- cess and achievement in a very heteronormative sense. Yet for me, and a lot of other queers, mobility is about the capacity to (choose to) be who we are.... Perhaps you can say that being queer did give me more incentives to earn mobility. So many sexual minorities are not "fitting in" in their society, and mobility is one way out. Some- times I also wonder if I do not have the mobility that I have right now, what kind of queer will I be? In order to earn mobility, do I already submit myself to the mainstream notion of accomplish- ment? Sometimes I think mobility actually obscures queerness, as many gays and lesbian who have the resources to enjoy mobility are conservative in many other ways.

Several themes or keywords appeared in Luce's response that were echoed in many other informants' narratives of their mobile lives. Some of these keywords are: mobility and a (new) queer self and life, detachment or escape from established structures of power (family and the political regime), and mobility as a privilege. To Luce, mobility does not point to a sure future for queer life or any forms of life that are radically different from "traditional" ones. It is possible that she will have to submit to rules of respectability to achieve a mobile self and life. Paradoxically, while mobility helps privileged queer single women to craft new life possibilities, it can also act as a governing force subordinating queer single women to norms of respectability that are required to live in a neoliberal and heteronorma- tive society.

As we saw above, one of the legitimate routes young Chinese women can take to achieve a temporary break from parental surveillance and gen- dered obligations before marriage, is to pursue an international education.

This course of action can also extend the freedom of a woman by prolonging the privileges she can enjoy as a single woman. The "split gender subjectivity" of women, as discussed by Rofel,[29] is also faced by queer women. In China, queer women with less power or with fewer resources to be mobile, are exposed to the same kind of social stigmatization or economic deprivation as heterosexual single women. As Jay's case demonstrates, without the necessary resources and network capital to go abroad for study, work, or a permanent stay, being "single" and queer in China often requires that women cope with immobility by detaching themselves from direct family networks and formal work structures. This usually leads to an even more precarious life. Being single and queer can be a double marginalization for women with less mobility or network capital, while at the same time, such a status also allows them the freedom to avoid the prescribed gendered roles of women in heterosexual relationships.

Queer, "single," and mobile

As demonstrated by the experiences of the informants in this study, mobility and queerness are interconnected and mutually constitutive. This does not mean that a queer life or self can only be accomplished through mobility, or that mobility is a prerequisite for a "single" woman in Chinese cities to pursue a queer life or self. Mobility, especially transnational mobility, is a privilege in contemporary China, inflected by class background and residential status. While mobility and queerness are interrelated, the former is a privilege that can elevate one's social status and respectability, and the latter is a denigrated quality in a heteronormative society. Some queer people, like most of the queer women in this project, possess the necessary cultural, economic, and network capitals to fulfill their desired life through mobility. Other queer people are relatively immobile or can only afford to have limited mobility. For some of them, living a mobile life and living away from a heteronormative way of life means a life detached from the established or recognized power structures or resources, such as the heterosexual kinship system, a job from the formal sector, and the interpersonal network (*guanxi* 關係) in their hometowns. Their mobility comes with losses, including the loss of family support which can be crucial in China, a society that places prime importance on personal relationships and networks. Loss of family support can adversely affect one's economic and emotional wellbeing and social respectability. While mobility brings autonomy and respectability to some queer single women, it also exposes them to a life that is unpredictable. Moreover, in order to build up mobility capital, queer people might need to submit to homonormative demands that serve the interests of a neoliberal society.

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29 Rofel, *Desiring China*, 126.

The numerous stories of escape told by queer women in this project demonstrate the connection between queerness, singleness, and mobility. Being single and queer can both point to a precarious life. Interestingly however, although mobility can increase the instability in one's life, it also offers an exit route, allowing queer women to live away from the stigmatization and deprivation that are imposed upon them for being both single and queer in China. The stories of queer single women in this chapter show the complexity and diversity of the lives of single women in Chinese cities. In particular, their experiences highlight the roles of sexuality and mobility in shaping the life trajectories of single women, as well as the many possible ways to live with precarity.

ORCID®

Lucetta Y. L. Kam ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6548-5665

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Sanjay Srivastava ⓘ

Technotopias, Consumer Cultures, and the Gendered City[1]

Abstract   Discourses of post-colonial urbanism are characterized by a pervasive emphasis on technology as panacea to problems of governance, policy, and social interaction. The idea that technology will overcome deep-rooted structural malaise and lead to administrative "efficiency," "clean" governance, and "reformed" urban spaces where everyone has equal access, has wide currency. This chapter explores how this "technological turn" in Indian urbanism plays out in relation to the politics of gender and, particularly, anxieties relating to single women in the city. The discussion deploys two key theoretical frameworks—"postnationalism" and "moral consumption"—to characterize processes peculiar to contemporary Indian modernity and, subsequently, to think through them about relationships between techno-positive discourses of the city and gender. It proceeds through exploring three interlocking processes—at national, city, and neighborhood levels—through which meanings of urban spaces, autonomy, and gender are produced. These are the discourses of "smart cities," an app intended to be used by women to mark out "safe" and "unsafe" spaces, and a "guideline" produced by the University Grants Commission of India (UGC) on the "appropriate" ways in which young (single) female students should conduct themselves within university campuses. The chapter draws attention to the entanglements of the different kinds of discourses operating at multiple levels of Indian life, that are, in turn, grounds for producing the idea that technology is a "solution" to social problems. This techno-politics, the chapter argues, effaces the functioning of power as far as relations of gender are concerned.

Keywords   urban techno-politics; gender and technology; city and women; masculinity and the city

Introduction

This chapter explores contemporary narratives of gender by focusing on two analytical concepts, namely "postnationalism" and "moral consumption," and their relationships with certain new formations of and discourses on urban spaces. The latter have to do with an imagination of the city as a "technotopia": a place that has been made "better" and whose problems have been resolved through the intensive application of multiple technologies, including those of communication and surveillance. In a contiguous discussion on "smart cities," Ayona Datta refers to this tendency as "technocratic nationalism," where "to be patriotic is to believe in the power of technology."[2] Within this context, my broader discussion centers on the ways in which ideas regarding gender journey across specific ways of imagining the urban, including the "technological turn." In particular, the chapter investigates how a combination of processes—of regional, national, and global significance—serve as grounds for imagining the place of gender in the city. The discussion seeks to locate relationships between city and gender within new notions of citizenship and how they are imagined to relate to the state and the market, particularly consumer cultures. The two concepts that I use to ground the discussion will, I suggest, be particularly helpful in excavating these contexts.

In the second and third sections of the chapter, I introduce the ideas of postnationalism and moral consumption.[3] The discussion is interspersed with specific examples of urban social processes that, I suggest, are both connected to these two concepts and also help to illuminate their meaning. Sections four, five, and six provide three separate examples of urban life-worlds imagined as technotopias and discuss how they relate to the ideas of postnationalism and moral consumption.

Postnationalism

The sense in which I invoke the term "postnationalism" is different from other recent studies that use the concept. Within the present discussion, the use of the term "postnational" is *not* meant to imply that the nation-state is insignificant as a context of analysis. I also do not suggest that we now live in a "postpatriotic" age where the most significant units of analysis are certain "postnational social form[ation]s,"[4] such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that supposedly problematize nationalist and statist

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2 Ayona Datta, "A 100 Smart Cities, A 100 Utopias," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 5, no. 1 (2015): 50.
3 I have adapted these concepts from Sanjay Srivastava, *Entangled Urbanism: Slum, Gated Community, and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).
   All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are by the author.
4 Arjun Appadurai, "Patriotism and its Futures," *Public Culture* 5, no. 3 (1993): 411.

perspectives. Further, my use of the concept also differs from another recent usage. In the latter, it is posited as "a distinct ethico-political horizon and a position of critique" and a concept that "can be instantiated... by suspending the idea of the nation as a prior theoretical-political horizon, and thinking through its impossibility, even while located uncomfortably within its bounds."[5] Postnationalism, in the context of my discussion, refers to relationships between nationalist emotions and the robust desires engendered through new practices of consumerism.[6] In my discussion, the state continues to be an important unit of analysis.

A brief comment is also required to differentiate my use of the term "postnationalism" from that of "neoliberalism,"[7] which might be said to describe the same set of social and economic circumstances. While I cannot dwell on this aspect in detail, the key point I wish to make is that neoliberalism "is unable to account for the specific *national* histories that transform into postnational ones"[8] and that there is no "universal neoliberal moment"[9] that allows for a "global" view. As Terry Flew points out,

> [the] debate about neoliberalism as *one of a number of competing ideas about the organization of capitalist economies and societies* has been largely overwhelmed by those arguments that present neoliberalism as the ascendant ideology of global capitalism, so that the world is seen as being, or becoming, more and more neoliberal in its institutional structures and policy choices.[10]

My deployment of "postnationalism" seeks to avoid the "too-easy application of models of capitalism and neoliberalism that obscure the variety of local experience."[11] In particular, the term seeks to capture the nuances of local histories—of capital and its cultural and economic fields—that produce locally inflected relationships between capital, the state, and citizens. I will have more to say on this later. However, a fruitful way of approaching the topic, and providing concrete illustrative examples, is through a brief exploration of the contemporary politics of urban spaces in Delhi.

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5 Malathi de Alwis, Satish Deshpande, Pradeep Jeganathan, Mary John, Nivedita Menon, M.S.S. Pandian, Aditya Nigam, and S. Akbar Zaidi, "The Postnational Condition," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 10 (2009): 35.
6 See also Nandini Gooptu, ed., *Enterprise Culture in Neoliberal India: Studies in Youth, Class, Work and Media* (London: Routledge, 2013).
7 Terry Flew, "Six Theories of Neoliberalism," *Thesis Eleven* 122, no. 1 (2014); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
8 Sanjay Srivastava, "Divine Markets: Ethnographic Notes on Postnationalism and Moral Consumption in India," in *Religion and the Morality of the Market*, ed. Filippo Osella and Daromir Rudnyckyj (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 99; emphasis original.
9 Srivastava, "Divine Markets," 99.
10 Flew, "Six Theories of Neoliberalism," 55; emphasis mine.
11 Daniel Mains, "Neoliberal Times: Progress, Boredom, and Shame Among Young Men in Urban Ethiopia," *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 4 (2007): 660.

In 1999, soon after being elected to office, Delhi's erstwhile Chief Minister, Sheila Dikshit, "called for an active participation of Residents Welfare Associations (RWAs) in governance."[12] The rationale for this was the apparent "failure" of "civic agencies" to carry out their normal tasks. The Chief Minister's Secretary noted that the call to actively involve RWAs in urban governance heralded a new era, marking "the first step towards a responsive management of the city."[13] Positing a distinction between the state and the "community," the Secretary further noted that such a "failure" of "civic agencies" meant that "it's really time for the community to be given direct control of managing the affairs of the city."[14] The government subsequently decided to "empower" RWAs to "take certain decisions on their own."[15] It was proposed that RWAs be given control over the management of resources such as parks, community halls, parking places, sanitation facilities, and local roads. A more direct relationship between the state and RWAs was also mooted through the idea of joint surveys of encroached land—that is, land that had been "illegally" occupied, usually by slum-dwellers—with the possibility that all illegal structures would "then be demolished in a non-discriminatory manner."[16] Finally, it was proposed that RWAs be allowed to impose fines on government agencies, which failed to carry out their assigned tasks.

In 2005, the Delhi state government announced that it would raise electricity tariffs by ten percent. The Delhi Residents Welfare Association Joint Front (RWAJF) was formed in the same year in order to protest against the measure. The Front consisted of 195 separate RWAs from around the city. The increase in power rates for domestic consumers was the second one since the state-owned electricity body was unbundled in June 2002 as a part of power sector reforms. As a result, three privately owned companies secured contracts for electricity distribution.[17] There was vigorous protest over the price raise and, in addition to the RWAJF, NGOs such as People's Action and another group known as Campaign Against Power Tariff Hike (CAPTH) joined the collective effort. Individual RWAs asked their members to refuse payment of the extra amount, while RWAJF lobbied the government and organized citywide protests. The protests gained broad coverage in both print and electronic media and, echoing Gandhian anti-colonial strategies, the organizers were reported to have deployed "the ideas of 'civil disobedience' and 'people's power.'"[18]

12 Abhilasha Ojha, "RWAs Will Soon Have Direct Control Over Sanitation and Community Halls," *Indian Express*, January 12, 1999, 1.
13 Ojha, "RWAs Will Have Direct Control."
14 Ojha, "RWAs Will Have Direct Control."
15 Ojha, "RWAs Will Have Direct Control."
16 Ojha, "RWAs Will Have Direct Control."
17 Aman Sethi, "The Price of Reforms," *Frontline* 22, no. 19 (2005). For a more benign view of privatization, see Ravi Kanbur, "Development Disagreements and Water Privatization: Bridging the Divide" (working paper no. 127010, Department of Applied Economics and Management, Cornell University, New York, 2007).
18 Sethi, "Price of Reforms," 5.

Indeed, the parallels drawn between the Gandhian anti-colonial moment and the present times were even more explicit, with the Convener of the RWAJF referring to the protests as "non-violent Satyagraha."[19] The term *satyagraha*, made up of the words *satya* (truth) and *agraha* (insistence), was used by Mohandas K. Gandhi to refer to non-violent resistance in his struggle against the colonial rule. Eventually, the Delhi government backed down, and the price raise was shelved. According to Sanjay Kaul, the President of the People's Action NGO, the success of the protest heralded the making of a "middle-class revolution."[20] Kaul is one of many who has re-discovered and deployed anti-colonial vocabulary on behalf of the people at a time when representations of the colonial era are part of the sphere of mass consumption. Hence, in the wake of the 2011 anti-corruption movement led by the social worker Anna Hazare, yoga guru Baba Ramdev invoked "Gandhi in calling for a '*satyagraha* against corruption.'"[21]

The circulation of ideas of civil disobedience, *satyagraha*, and revolution, as well as the consolidation of the notion of a "people" contesting the state, occur in a context that might be called postnational. By this, I mean a situation where the moral frisson of terms such as *satyagraha* and revolution, provided by anti-colonial sentiment and action, no longer holds. In an era of post-Nehruvian economic liberalization characterized by consumerist modernity,[22] the ethico-moral universe of the anti-colonial struggle is no longer part of popular public discourse. In fact, the so-called colonial ambience is the stuff of popular marketing strategies. Hence, the Spencer's department store in the privately developed DLF City in Gurgaon outlines its history through a series of billboard-size sepia photographs placed at the entrance.[23] The photographs, depicting fashionable European women shopping for fine goods at Spencer's stores, date from the colonial period and represent an efflorescence of colonial chic in the Indian public sphere. Other contiguous sites include the five-star Imperial Hotel in central Delhi, liberally decorated with a series of photographs of the "Delhi Durbar" (consisting of images from a 1911 ceremony held in Delhi to commemorate the coronation of King George V), and themed restaurants such as Days of

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19 Tanvi Sirari, "Civil Uprisings in Contemporary India" (working paper no. 161, Centre for Civil Society, New Delhi, 2006), 5.
20 Sanjay Kaul quoted in Sethi, "Price of Reforms," 4.
21 Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame, "Guru Logics," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 1 (2012): 318.
22 Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); William Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, "Muslim Entrepreneurs in Public Life between India and the Gulf: Making Good and Doing Good," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 1 (2009).
23 Sanjay Srivastava, "National Identity, Bedrooms, and Kitchens: Gated Communities and New Narratives of Space in India," in *The Global Middle Classes: Theorizing through Ethnography*, ed. Mark Liechty, Carla Freeman, and Rachel Heiman (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2012).

the Raj and Sola Topee, also in Delhi. Within this new context, the earlier emphasis on the ethics of saving money and delayed gratification for the national good—indispensable ideological accompaniments to civil disobedience and *Satyagraha*—do not find any resonance in contemporary popular discourses on the role of the state.[24] As I have noted earlier, the term postnational does *not*, in my usage, mean to imply that the nation state is insignificant as a context of analysis. Rather, it refers to the new ways in which the nation state relates to the citizens, the contexts within which it relates to *different* groups of citizens, and the manner in which it relates to capital.

In light of the earlier discussion and to pre-empt an aspect I discuss here, this chapter suggests that there is a significant middle-class discourse that seeks to rethink the idea of the state as such that it is increasingly thought of as a "friend" of the middle classes. The postcolonial state in India has most significantly been imagined as a benefactor of the poor, with "development" as its most important policy focus. Indeed, the so-called development focus of the state has been a defining feature of perceptions of postcoloniality itself.[25] As Akhil Gupta has pointed out, "development became the chief 'reason of state' in independent India."[26] Investment in heavy industry was, further, seen to be an important aspect of postcolonial development[27] and this, in turn, led to a perception of the state as being pro-industrialization and anti-consumerist. RWA activities such as those discussed above have become significant sites for the reformulation of these well-entrenched notions of the state and its relationship with different class factions. These neighborhood and city-level activities unfold in tandem with the broad national thrust towards "de-regulating" the economy,[28] including a shrinking public sector and easy loans for consumer purchases, and produce a palpable sense of amity between "the people" and the state. I refer to these aspects as characteristics of postnationalism.

Finally, in this context, one of the most significant ways in which the postnational moment resonates within the politics of urban space, concerns the repositioning of the language of anti-colonial nationalism from the national sphere to the suburban one. This, in turn, also indexes the move from the idea of the "national" family to the nuclear (gated) one, and

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24 See, for example, Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke*.
25 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Akhil Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).
26 Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments*, 107.
27 Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
28 Atulan Guha, "Labour Market Flexibility: An Empirical Inquiry into Neoliberal Propositions," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 19 (2009); Steve Derné, *Globalization on the Ground: New Media and the Transformation of Culture, Class, and Gender in India* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2008).

the translation of the notion of nationalist solidarity into (middle) class solidarity. Indeed, the most significant manner in which apartments in gated communities are advertised is through the trope of the nuclear family, heralding a new kind of national identity.[29] It is important to add here that this also has specific consequences for how the *single* woman is imagined in an urban context, for the shift in gaze is from the national *family* to the new nuclear *family*. There is, in other words, no symbolic space for imagining a woman out of the context of the family, or including ideas of her non-reproductive sexuality. The single woman's being "does not meet normative standards of feminine beauty, reproductivity, and heterosexuality [and hence] becomes excluded not only from marriage but also from social recognition."[30]

Discussions about changes in the nature of the family in India are also significant contexts for debates regarding gendered subjectivities. In particular, within popular discourse, putative changes in the family form—from joint to nuclear, say—are frequently invoked both as signifiers of a change from older ways and traditions, and of the changing role of women in society.[31] In some instances, these discussions serve to introduce ideas regarding putative changes in attitudes regarding single women:

> Singles form part of a new demographic that is changing the way women are perceived in India. They are either never-married or divorced, unabashedly celebrating their singledom, not giving into either the arranged marriage conundrum or the ticking biological clock.[32]

However, celebratory (or, perhaps, just hopeful) narratives do not usually match the far-more complicated situation that characterizes the quotidian experiences of singleness that have been observed by other researchers. The Indian city, while offering certain freedoms unavailable in a non-urban environment, is a long way off from being a utopia of the solitary life, particularly as far as women are concerned. It is important to remember, for example, that far-reaching changes in urban life that concern the nature of work, leisure, residence, mobility, and commerce have also been accompanied by a national-level movement towards religious conservatism. Hence,

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29 On this, see also Christiane Brosius, *India's Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2012), chapters one and two.

30 Sarah Lamb, "Being Single in India: Gendered Identities, Class Mobilities, and Personhoods in Flux," *Ethos* 46, no. 1 (2018): 65.

31 Ravinder Kaur and Rajni Palriwala, ed., *Marrying in South Asia: Shifting Concepts, Changing Practices in a Globalising World* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2018); Jonathan Parry, "Ankalu's Errant Wife: Sex, Marriage and Industry in Contemporary Chhattisgarh," *Modern Asian Studies* 35, no. 4 (2001).

32 Rekha Balakrishnan, "Why Single Women above 35 in India are saying 'Yehi Hai Right Choice, Baby!'" *HerStory*, November 25, 2019. Accessed November 30, 2022. https://yourstory.com/herstory/2019/11/single-women-india-dating-sex-life.

while on the one hand, gated communities and their "modern" lifestyles proliferate across the country, they are also sites of an efflorescence of Hindu religious activities that take their cue from a national mood marked by Hindutva politics. The recent proliferation of the *Karva Chauth* ritual, where women pray for the wellbeing of their husbands, is a case in point.[33] The rise of religious conservatism as a political strategy has also led to the re-fashioning and consolidation of new forms of social conservatism where gender continues to play an important role in the making of "Indian traditions."

Urban spatial changes which at first glance might project an air of a new world of possibilities, are in fact, circumscribed by wider social norms that continue to affect how women in general, and single women in particular, are regarded. Specifically, gender continues to be a site of expression of "Indian traditions," "morality,"[34] and "urbanness" itself is just *one* context affecting women's lives. As Patricia Uberoi points out, while bridal magazines in India narrate stories of "modern relationships," they circulate in contexts where "descent, succession and inheritance are in the male line; post-marital residence is 'patrivirilocal'… and authority resides with [the] senior males of the family or lineage."[35]

Notwithstanding media boosterism that speaks of new worlds of opportunities for women, postnationalism is also a context where ideas of national traditions and morality continue to hold fast and where "choice" is usually about the goods to consume rather than, say, spousal choice.[36] The moral life of the nation now finds expression *through* consumer culture, rather than against it. Moreover, debates on "'westernisation' and associated perceptions of transgressions of normative gendered comportment and spaces such as the domestic and the public"[37] continue to be part of a new context that I refer to as moral consumption.

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33 See Srivastava, *Entangled Urbanism* (especially chapters five and seven); Smitha Radhakrishnan, "Professional Women, Good Families: Respectable Femininity and the Cultural Politics of a 'New' India," *Qualitative Sociology* 32, no. 2 (2009).

34 On single women living as tenants in Delhi see, for example, Lucie Bernroider, "Single Female Tenants in South Delhi—Gender, Class and Morality in a Globalizing City," *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 25, no. 5 (2018).

35 Patricia Uberoi, "Aspirational Weddings: The Bridal Magazine and the Canons of 'Decent Marriage,'" in *Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in India and China*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot and Peter van der Veer (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2008), 245.

36 Uberoi, "Aspirational Weddings."

37 Christiane Brosius, "Regulating Access and Mobility of Single Women in a 'World Class'-City: Gender and Inequality in Delhi, India," in *Inequalities in Creative Cities: Issues, Approaches, Comparisons*, ed. Ulrike Gerhard, Michael Hoelscher, and David Wilson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 245.

Moral consumption

This section outlines the second of the two concepts I use as a background to this discussion, viz., "moral consumption." Moral consumption is a context "where...active participation in consumerism is accompanied by an anxiety about it and its relationship to 'Indianness.'"[38] The term refers to the context where consumerist activity is accompanied by explicit and implicit discourses on the possibility of exercising control over consumption activity. This is different from viewing consumerism as a threat to established life-ways, which, as some scholars suggest, is a significant reaction to consumerism in India.[39] Hence, I would suggest that recent contexts of consumerism indicate that the long-standing cultural discourses of the sacrificing and nurturing mother that actively proscribe "indulgent" consumption[40] can be encompassed *within* acts of consumerism by women. Let me provide two examples here. Firstly, women visitors to the Disneyfied (and hyper-consumerist) Akshardham temple complex in Delhi can move seamlessly between being consumers and devoutly religious persons precisely because the same space provides opportunities for both consumerism and religiosity.[41] That is to say, the (masculine) anxiety over female consumption is assuaged through a process of moral consumption whereby women take part in hyper-consumerism, and are also able to withdraw to the realms of religiosity. Though each realm is interpenetrative, each is imagined as separate. Hence,

> [t]he making of a moral middle class, one that has control over the processes of consumption, and hence modernity, is, in fact, located in the processes of (surplus) consumption itself. For it is only through consumption that one can demonstrate *mastery* over it. So, one consumes a wide variety of products of contemporary capitalism—IMAX cinema, the Disneyfied boat ride, Akshardham baseball caps—in combination with "spiritual" goods such as religion and nationalism. What differentiates the moral middle class from others is its *capacity* to take part in these *diverse* forms of consumption, whereas a more "de-racinated" (or "Westernized") middle class might only be able to consume the products of capitalism.[42]

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38 Sanjay Srivastava, "Urban Spaces, Disney-Divinity and the Moral Middle Classes in Delhi," in *Elite and Everyman: The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*, ed. Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 381.
39 Margit van Wessel, "Talking about Consumption: How an Indian Middle Class Dissociates from Middle-Class Life," *Cultural Dynamics* 16, no. 1 (2004).
40 See, for example, Henrike Donner, "Gendered Bodies, Domestic Work and Perfect Families: New Regimes of Gender and Food in Bengali Middle-Class Lifestyles," in *Being Middle-Class in India: A Way of Life*, ed. Henrike Donner (London: Routledge, 2011).
41 Brosius, *India's Middle Class*; Srivastava, "Urban Spaces."
42 Srivastava, "Urban Spaces," 381. All italics in the original.

The relationship between the new and the old middle classes, as represented earlier, is of course, relevant to the politics of gender in contemporary India, but it is also of more general significance. It is, for example, at the heart of contemporary discourses of anti-elitism that speak in the name of an "ordinary" middle-class citizen who has been denied his *(sic)* rights due to "appeasement" of, say, religious minorities and the poor.

My second example of moral consumption comes from gated communities in India. There is a long-standing discourse of "publicness" in India within which the place of women is a fraught one. The woman in public is seen to have abandoned her natural task of being the guardian of tradition, a task connected to the domestic sphere. Gated communities, however, are where the "street" is not the street; (and for precisely that reason) they are sites of intense middle-class activity, and represent a "public" where women can be both the guardians of tradition *and* take part in sexualized representations of the self. So, while on the occasion of the festival of *Karva Chauth*, women dressed in traditional (and elaborate) Indian clothing pray for their husband's welfare, they can also be found pacing the condominium grounds on their exercise rounds dressed in skin-hugging clothing. And, unlike the constraints placed on women at public celebrations of *Holi* (the festival of splashing colored water), at the Bacardi-sponsored *Holi* festival at one of the gated communities, men and women dance together to Bollywood songs on an open-air stage. Consumerism, here, is the grounds for the making of a moral middle class within which women are not determined by modernity, but are able to take part in it and "return home" when required. Postnational consumerism provides the *grounds* for the making of moral consumption, for one must take vigorous part in consumerism in order to display one's ability to withdraw from it. The relationship between postnationalism, moral consumption, and the new urban spaces of gated communities also speaks to the long history of anxiety about the "public woman" through the question: How can the "public woman" belong both to the world as well as to the home?

My discussion so far has outlined certain contexts that point to the relationships between the cultural and political economies of contemporary capitalism and urbanism that, in the Indian case, have specific spatial dimensions. I will now use these contexts as the background to the next part of my discussion, which focuses on current discourses on urbanism and women in public spaces.

Technotopia 1: smart cities

A key aspect of the *discursive* spaces created by the contexts I am referring to as postnationalism and moral consumption, is a specific manner of viewing relationships between private and public spaces. Furthermore, this translates into certain ways in which a social relation such as gender

is imagined as playing out across such spaces. I will illustrate this through three specific examples.

My first example relates to concerns about urban spaces and processes at a very broad level. I refer here to the so-called smart cities project launched by the government of India. The document called *Smart Cities: The MoUD's* [Ministry of Urban Development] *Note for the Parliamentary Panel on Urban Development* outlines the following definition for smart cities:

> Smart Cities are those that are able to attract investments and experts and professionals. Good Quality infrastructure, simple and transparent online business and public services processes that make it easy to practice one's profession or to establish an enterprise and run it efficiently without any bureaucratic hassles are essential features of a citizen-centric and investor-friendly smart city.[43]

It is important to point out that the discussions that surround the smart city program in India proceed from the perspective that technology as a tool of urban planning is "gender-neutral," and that in fact, it can have a positive outcome on gender inequality by promoting women's safety in public places. However, I will later suggest that the smart city discourse has quite an opposite effect.

One hundred cities across India have been selected to be converted into smart cities. The smart cities idea is built around a host of technological processes that, it is suggested, will address issues of infrastructure, housing, "IT connectivity," "e-Governance and citizen participation," and safety and security, particularly that relating to "women, children, and the elderly."[44] The "safety and security" aspects relate mainly to the provision of a greater number of surveillance devices, such as CCTV camera in public places, as well as, street lighting. Each selected smart city will receive around INR 100 *crores* (a *crore* denotes ten million; approximately 11,067,021 euros) per year for five years. Further funds are to be raised via municipal bonds, "leverage borrowings from financial institutions," both Indian and global, and Public Private Partnership schemes. Most significantly, smart cities are to be developed through "constituted boards" known as Special Purpose Vehicles (SPVs), each of which will have a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), as well as nominees from the central government, the state government, and urban local bodies. The smart cities project, Datta (2015) suggests, is characteristic of an era of "technocratic nationalism... in which to be patriotic is to believe in the power of technology."[45] The smart cities plan was developed through the assistance of Bloomberg

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43 Lok Sabha Secretariat, *The MoUD's* [Ministry of Urban Development] *Note for the Parliamentary Panel on Urban Development* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2014), 4.
44 Ministry of Urban Development (MoUD), *Smart Cities: Mission Statement and Guidelines* (New Delhi: Ministry of Urban Development, June, 2015), 4–5.
45 Datta, "A 100 Smart Cities," 50.

Philanthropies, which also assisted the Ministry of Urban Development (MoUD) in selecting cities for funding. Among other global corporations, IBM and Cisco SmartCity Dubai have either expressed strong interest or signed agreements to convert selected cities into "smart" ones.

There are specific aspects of postnationalism as it relates to the conceptualization and planning of smart cities. First, there is the changing relationship between the state, private capital, and imagined urban citizens. This relationship is being recast, as I have noted earlier, by imagining the state as a friend of the middle classes. This is a significant development in the history of the postcolonial nation state. To begin with, there is the potentially problematic relationship between the SPV, elected bodies, and non-professional and non-middle-class citizens. If the city (the smart city) is imagined as a corporation, then how might urban spaces, those thought of as secure and insecure, be imagined? The social complexity of Indian cities lies in the kinds of asymmetries of power, identity politics, and the politics of gender that, in effect, are sought to be effaced through recasting this complexity as a mechanical relationship between technology and global capital. I will suggest below that the smart cities idea is an entirely novel form of governmentality that paves the way for future thinking about relationships between spaces and subjectivities, and as in the case of this chapter, gendered subjectivities.

The next rung of my argument, and my second example, comes from a variety of surveillance mechanisms suggested for Delhi and the proliferation of mobile apps (applications) that seek to contribute towards women's safety in urban spaces.

Technotopia 2: CitySafe

In early 2015, the Delhi government floated a tender to install 18,300 "smart poles" in the New Delhi area. These smart poles "would have CCTV cameras, WiFi and LED bulbs."[46] The idea of public safety for women has been particularly urgent in Delhi after the brutal—and globally reported—rape of a young woman in Delhi on December 16, 2012. City-wide surveillance through CCTV cameras has found great favor with the Delhi government, which is frequently confronted with media reports that play up the idea of Delhi as the "rape capital of India," one that is understood to be an affront to "national dignity." While there is no reliable data on the numbers of CCTV cameras installed around Delhi as part of the *official* efforts to ensure public safety (and other aspects, such as traffic management), a recent interview with a senior employee at a Delhi government body charged with the task of establishing a variety of urban digital infrastructure indicates that this

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46 Aneesha Mathur, "Smart Poles in Central Delhi: NDMC to Issue Fresh Tender," *Indian Express*, August 22, 2015.

is a major preoccupation.[47] The official recounted that there were "thousands of cameras around Delhi, installed on a variety of buildings." He also added, however, that a very large number of these are not operational due to lack of payment of dues by the government to the private companies contracted to install and maintain the equipment. However, apart from state-sponsored measures—such as "smart poles" and CCTVs on government-owned buildings—there has also been a proliferation of non-state activity that seeks to address concerns of public safety for women through electronic surveillance and tracking mechanisms. A mobile application that was launched in Delhi in 2013 is one example. This app, which I will refer to as CitySafe, is a "map based… app… the core of which… [is] the Safety Audit…. which consists of a set of nine parameters that together contribute to the perception of safety. Each audit results in a pin on the specific location where the audit was performed and also records the time and date." (*CitySafe Information Booklet*, n.d.)[48] Further, "citizens can view (and contribute) information and comments on Audits, Harassment, Hazards and Places." Some of the nine parameters are lighting, "openness in the area," "visibility," "people density," "gender diversity," and "feeling."

The advisory group for the CitySafe app consists of "software developers, an urban planner, a self-described "technocrat and entrepreneur," global consultants on "women's issues," and a former employee of a prominent Indian NGO that works on issues related to women. Localities that are audited receive a score, and red and green pins indicate levels of danger and safety. Heat maps indicate "your city's safe and unsafe clusters … [a]nd the safest locations and routes in your city. Green color in the heat map is for safe, amber for less safe, and red for unsafe."[49] Users are invited to compare the safety score of their locality with that of other localities. The application's promoters have been requested by the police and various RWAs, among other groups, to demonstrate how it works. The development of the app and various activities to support its popularization have been funded by international corporate philanthropies as well as government-funded aid-giving bodies.

CitySafe "provides information about infrastructure to promote safety for women and other groups, to citizens at large and important stakeholders including the government, NGOs, corporations, and RWAs."[50] Continuing my argument about technotopias and consumer cultures, I would like to suggest that, following on from the broader smart cities discourse, there are additional processes beyond the realm of state action, which, nonetheless, draw on it. These processes interpret the idea of urban safety

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47 In order to preserve confidentiality, I am unable to reveal either the name of the official or the organization within which he is employed.
48 This description and that which follows is taken from the *CitySafe Information Booklet*. As I have anonymized the name of the app itself, I will only refer to it by this title. *CitySafe Information Booklet* (New Delhi, 2016), 2.
49 *CitySafe Information Booklet*, 2.
50 *CitySafe Information Booklet*, 2.

in the language of the consumer-citizen,[51] who has access to the goods of high-tech modernity that mark out dystopic (red pin) urban spaces. This version, or vision, of urban safety emerges from both a technologization of feminist concerns and an overwriting of the asymmetries of Indian urban life through producing "heat maps" that visualize certain localities as dangerous. In most cases, it is not difficult to work out what kinds of localities become identified as "dangerous." This manner of mapping the city as a series of more or less dystopic spaces is also based on a set of relationships between the state and its organs (such as the police), constituents of civil society (such as RWAs and NGOs), and private capital on local and global scales. While the professed aim of CitySafe is to contribute towards improving urban infrastructure which would lead to greater safety for women in public spaces, I suggest that the app, as well as the gloss that accompanies it, institutionalizes and normalizes long-standing power relations.

The broader theoretical point I wish to make, is that, in this instance, the combined politics of gender and urban spaces is produced through an alignment of specific social and class formations that contain the seeds of an exclusionary vision of the city. The key aspect that undergirds this aspect of safety for women is a version of "urban fear"[52] that is based on the logic of identifying populations under threat and spaces from where such threat might emanate. Even if unwittingly, gender becomes the site of an unspoken fragmentation of the city into its "dangerous" and "safe" spaces, rather than a social critique of, say, urban masculine cultures and the uneven development of city spaces. This alignment of factors that produce visions of the dangerous city and its dangerous populations, does not, to reiterate an earlier point, derive from a logic of "neoliberal urban development." Rather, I seek to capture a process where ideas of "technological nationalism,"[53] the role of global capital and technologies, the safety of "good citizens," and the efforts of a concerned state combine to produce a deeply problematic view of urban life. It is this complex landscape of action and behavior that I refer to as an aspect of "postnationalism."

Technotopias and moral consumption: The "UGC Guidelines for Safety on Campus"

This section of the chapter outlines the third and final context—a set of guidelines for women's safety issued by India's higher education regulator, The University Grants Commission—which will serve to round off the discussion about postnationalism, moral consumption, gender, urban space, and discourses of safety.

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51 Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class*.
52 Setha M. Low, "Urban Fear: Building the Fortress City," *City & Society* 9, no. 1 (1997).
53 Datta, "A 100 Smart Cities."

The invariable backdrop to recent discussions about gender and safety in public places, and particularly to discussions that refer to single young women, is the rape and brutal violence inflicted upon the young woman known as Jyoti Singh in Delhi on December 16, 2012. The twenty-three-year-old Singh was returning from a multiplex in a shopping mall and was accompanied by a male friend. As is the case with many young single women who have arrived in the metropolis to pursue a better future than that offered by their smaller hometowns, Singh worked in a low-paying job (in a call center) in order to train for a profession she hoped to enter, in her case, physiotherapy. The potential risk she was exposed to as a single woman in the city was magnified by the fact that someone of her background might not have been able to afford private transport for a late-night journey and opted for a public bus instead. She was raped and violently beaten by the bus driver and five of his companions. Two weeks after the assault, Singh died of her injuries.

In early 2013, in the wake of the massive outcry over the rape, the University Grants Commission (UGC), the government body charged with overseeing the higher education system, established a committee to consult the universities about ways of improving security at university campuses. The committee, consisting of feminist academics from a variety of disciplines, consulted widely among students and faculty at university campuses across the country and provided its report towards the end of 2013. Among other things, the committee's report included discussions on "the nature of power, the problem of violence, countering sexual harassment and issues of equality and freedom,"[54] "the entrenched patriarchal practices/structures and mindsets and the corresponding cultures of impunity and silence that sustain them, and conspire/militate against gender justice and perpetuate pervasive violence in society,"[55] and the "multiple fault lines of caste, class, religion, and disability."[56] Together, these statements amounted to a criticism of the discourses of "protection" and policing of young women, as well as of cultures of masculinity. By considering urban spaces and young women in particular, the report sought to rethink the relationship between being single and personal autonomy by imagining different kinds of freedom as rights rather than concessions made by different authority figures such as parents and college principals.

I have already noted that at the current time, in addition to postnational discourses, the Indian context provides us with a significant discourse regarding gender, consumerism, and autonomy. This is the discourse of moral consumption, and it is this, which is reflected in a document released by the UGC in 2015 with the title *UGC Guidelines on Safety of Students on and off Campuses of Higher Educational Institutions*. The provenance of the

54 "Saksham: Measures for Ensuring the Safety of Women and Programmes for Gender Sensitization on Campuses," (working papers id: 5756, New Delhi: University Grants Commission, 2013), 4.
55 "Saksham," 19–20.
56 "Saksham," 82.

document is shrouded in mystery, given that the UGC had already released the *Saksham* report in 2013 that dealt with exactly the same topic. In any case, the contents of this document are significantly different from the recommendations contained in the *Saksham* report. Some familiarity with some aspects of the *UGC Guidelines* might provide some clues as to why the UGC thought it prudent to release a report of this nature, rather than be seen as solely endorsing *Saksham* as a means towards gender rights.

The UGC's *Guidelines* document can be analyzed in terms of moral consumption as I have defined the term above. In order to do that, I begin by quoting some of its the key parts:

— Any physical infrastructure housing students, whether HEI [Higher Education Institutions] or hostels, should be secured by a boundary wall of such height that it cannot be scaled over easily. In order to further fortify it, a fence of spiraling barbed wires can be surmounted [sic] on the wall so that unauthorized access to the infrastructure is prevented effectively. The entry points to such housing units should be restricted to three or less and they should be manned by at least three security guards, sufficiently armed, CCTV cameras, identity verification mechanism and register of unknown entrants / visitors with their identity proofs and contact details. At least one woman security personnel should be deployed at such entry points so that physical security check of girl students or visitor can be undertaken. The bags and other belongings of students / visitors can also be examined, manually and / or by metal detectors, in order to secure a weapon-free and violence-free campus.

— Biometric way of marking student attendance, both in HEI as well as hostels, can be an effective way to overcome proxy. Such digital mechanism can enable HEIs to keep an eye on a student's movement and whereabouts in [a] failsafe manner.

— Setting up a university police station *within* the premises of the HEIs, wherever feasible, can go a long way in instilling a sense of security amongst students and scare amongst nuisance-makers and petty criminals. (emphasis added)

— HEIs should organize quarterly parents-teachers meet (PTM) so that grievances and gaps in the system can be addressed and resolved. Online complaint registration system *(sic)* can also be launched so that issues can be addressed before they slip out of hands of authorities....

— It is mandatory for institutions to elicit consent letters from the parents / guardians of the students who are embarking on tour.[57]

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57 *UGC Guidelines on Safety of Students on and Off Campuses of Higher Educational Institutions* (Delhi: University Grants Commission, 2015), 2–5.

There is, most obviously, an aspect of patriarchal tragicomedy in the way the UGC's *Guidelines* imagine university spaces and gendered subjectivities, and it hardly seems worthwhile to dignify the recommendations with serious discussion. However, beyond the patent absurdity of the guidelines, where the discourse of care masks certain fears regarding young and single women's autonomy, it is worth locating the document within the broader process that I have referred to as moral consumption. This, I suggest, allows us to think about the imbrication of gender with the multiple processes of contemporary modernity and postnationalism.

Moral consumption is a process of dealing with consumerist modernity. In the Indian context, it refers particularly to the imagined, potentially destabilizing effects of consumer culture. Consumer culture presents a double bind in the context of gender. Consumerism is both a structure of desire that marks the making of new identities and a site of anxiety insofar as it carries the promise of individuation for both men and women. The *UGC Guidelines* addresses this anxiety through a discourse of moral consumption, no doubt additionally stoked by the earlier *Saksham* report by a committee established by the UGC itself. That is to say, the guidelines create specific notions of an "outside" and an "inside" where the subjectivities of single young women are allowed to travel between consuming cultures of the world while, ultimately, being commanded to return to the spatialized gaze of traditional structures of power at / of home. Thus, consumption is good, but it must move along specified moral contours. The *UGC Guidelines* addresses that fraught territory that lies between the dis-embedding effects of contemporary modernity, for example, new forms of technology or changing norms of young women's sexuality, and embedding processes of power and authority. The *Guidelines* occupies a very specific discursive space. It presents the following question as one of fundamental importance: What are the ways of allowing young women who may choose to occupy the streets and other public spaces as part of a general public culture of consumerism, but also countering the potentially threatening culture of their publicness through a process of delimitation? The answer is, through moral consumption.

The *Guidelines* provides a solution to the problem of finding a balance between the home and the world.[58] Young women should be of the world, a world that is (approvingly) marked by changing relations between the state and the middle classes, "technocratic nationalism," exclusionary urban processes exemplified by gated communities, and the rise of consumerist nationalism. However, the unpredictable manner in which these factors, either singly or in combination, might produce uncontrollable female subjects, can be managed through a discourse of moral consumption. This discourse stipulates that there should be an *Indian* way of being

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58 Ujithra Ponniah, "Managing Marriages through 'Self-Improvement': Women and 'New Age' Spiritualities in Delhi," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41, no. 1 (2018).

in the world, which primarily entails defining the contours of being in the world. Urban young women must strike a balance between being and behaving, going out and staying at home.

Conclusion

I will conclude with an account of the past in order to contextualize the present.

As historians have noted, the colonial era in India was marked by attempts to produce the kinds of public spaces that the colonisers knew, where, unlike in India, there was no confusion between the "private" and the "public."[59] The apparent public in the Indian context did not appear to have its own rules and regulations of social order, hence presenting a problem for a clear differentiation of the private and the public that lay at the heart of the "domestic values of bourgeois privacy."[60] The British set about then, to create clearly demarcated public spaces that would erase the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private. The Western notion of "public" in the Indian context has translated into a history of public spaces that, since the colonial period, has been about lessons in civility and an education in modernity. The making of a public is also the attempt to distinguish the public, which is imagined to be rational, from the "crowd," imagined as irrational. Contemporary discourses on space move us to an interesting context of the making of new publics and the educative discourses of space in the late postcolonial period. Whereas the colonial and early postcolonial discourses emerged out of a dialogue between the state and the elite citizens, the provenance of the current discourse is wider, and more complex, and involves a greater number of interlocutors.

The three contexts outlined above, namely the Smart City program, the CitySafe App, and the *UGC Safety Guidelines* overlap. What they seek to produce is a new kind of urban spatial discipline, one that is anchored to the imperatives of postnational modernity and moral consumption. The smart city program seeks to create a public out of the changing relationship between the state and national and global capital through the intensive deployment of technology. This public is to be distinguished from the crowd that might disrupt this relationship. It lays the groundwork, in turn, for a *techno-politics* of population management. This techno-politics provides the context for addressing a specific section of that population, that is, women. This is where we might locate the CitySafe app, which refracts techno-politics at an oblique angle so as to institute women's safety as a relationship between "civic" citizens and bodies. It refracts asymmetrical urban spaces and processes as problems of technical and

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59 Sudipta Kaviraj, "Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Space in Calcutta," *Public Culture* 10, no. 1 (1997).
60 Kaviraj, "Filth and Public Sphere," 98.

infrastructural shortcomings. In the process, it institutionalizes a colonial map of the city where crowds congregate and "publics" are absent. Finally, the recently-released *UGC Guidelines* on the public safety of single young women seeks to insert the social back into techno-politics. However, this is on the terms of techno-politics itself. The *Guidelines* seeks to address and engage with the unintended consequences of a technological cornucopia: the effect of new public cultures that accompany consumerism and discourses around personal autonomy. It addresses the issue through the vocabulary of techno-politics insofar as it seeks to promote "appropriate" use of techno-modernity through the model of moral consumption. The *Guidelines* document approves of participation in techno-modernity, but the approval is circumscribed by the rules of propriety. In the context of women, the guidelines provide an answer to the question of how to be of the world but also return home when required. Consumerist modernity is, here, set on a course of becoming "appropriate" *Indian* consumerist modernity.

My discussion has attempted to point to three interlocking processes through which meanings of urban spaces, autonomy, and gender are produced in India. Firstly, there is a national-level discourse, that of smart cities, that imagines spaces as collaborative ventures between different forms of capital, governmentality, technologies, and "knowledge-workers." At this level, the discourse of gender is absent as the contemporary processes of producing cities are seen as necessarily "untainted" by the messiness of the social. The smart cities idea, though ostensibly about a reorganization of the relationship between populations and technologies, is, I suggest, about instituting a certain kind of de-socialized—that is to say, de-politicized—subject at the heart of urban life. The second level is that of the CitySafe app. This is the level where the politics of the city—already redefined by the smart city discourse—is instituted as another level of techno-politics that speaks of "danger" and "safety" in terms of relationships between Indian NGOs, international NGOs, technocrats, the corporate sector, Residents Welfare Associations, government bureaucracies, and the police. Finally, the *UGC Guidelines*, the final rung in my argument about the making of technotopias, provides a guide to local and individual action and behavior in a time of technotopias. In particular, the booklet seeks to outline the manner in which contemporary female bodies might occupy the spaces and processes created by modernity. It seeks to address the following question: If contemporary modernity creates or accommodates heterotopias, what are the ways in which meanings of space are reduced to manageable proportions within existing structures of power? The management of space through an invocation of time is a specific task of power in the contemporary period. It is in this sense that I speak of moral consumption as a specifically Indian way of dealing with the dis-embedding processes of the present.

Moral consumption, then, is a chronotope of modern life in India. A chronotope, as literary and cultural critic Mikhail Bakhtin pointed out, "is

a way of understanding experience; it is a specific form-shaping ideology for understanding the nature of events and actions."[61] The term "chronotope," Bakhtin says, is given "to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature."[62] Bakhtin speaks of several types of chronotopes that might populate a novel and signify different types of experiences. So, in novels where the road serves as a chronotope, "the image of the road [comes to signify] ... 'the course of a life,'...'the course of history' and so on."[63] I take the liberty here of resorting to a term from literary theory in the analysis of non-literary contexts in light of its inherent power as a tool of social analysis. Moral consumption comes to signify the fusing of putative Indian and Western spaces and Indian and Western times to produce an idea of propriety in a time of change. It produces this notion through a relationship with the concurrently circulating discourses of smart cities and CitySafe.

My discussion does not wish to suggest an "iron cage" of deterministic action where behaviors across spaces can be characterized as resulting from meta-discourses about spaces. Movements across space and actions upon space take place in both socially determined but also erratic, "extra-social" ways. What I have tried to think about is the manner in which spaces, and specifically, urban spaces, are both objects and processes,[64] and the ways in which the history and politics of a specific postcolonial present plays out in the Indian case. In the context of the present discussion, this allows us think about the relationship between processes connected to economic and cultural globalization, changes in the form of the state, and changes in its relationship with private capital, new policy formulations, and older structures of power such as the family. In order to think about the "Entanglements of Urban Space, Cultural Encounters, and Gendered Identities,"[65] I have outlined certain relationships between society and economy rather than relying upon characterizing the present as a "neoliberal" one which, perhaps, has simply come to mean a "conceptual trash heap capable of accommodating multiple distasteful phenomena without much argument as to whether one or the other component really belongs."[66] Rather than resorting to "neoliberalism" as a catch-all explanatory device, this chapter draws attention to the entanglements of the

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61 Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 36.
62 Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Towards a Historical Poetics," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 84.
63 Bakhtin, "Forms of Time," 243–244.
64 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, [1972] 1994).
65 My reference is to the title of the conference organized by the University of Heidelberg where an earlier version of this paper was presented.
66 Taylor C. Boas and Jordan Gans-Morse, "Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 44, no. 1 (2009): 156, quoted in Flew, "Six Theories of Neoliberalism," 53.

different kinds of discourses operating at different levels of social reality, that are, in turn, grounds for producing ideas about new and old spaces, new forms of politics and relationships between freedom and constraint.

ORCID®

Sanjay Srivastava ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0461-3122

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About the Authors

Laila Abu-Er-Rub holds a PhD in anthropology from Heidelberg University. She is currently the academic coordinator of the interdisciplinary Indo-German Centre of Advanced Studies (ICAS: MP) in New Delhi, funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). The project investigates the "Metamorphoses of the Political in the Long Twentieth Century." Before her posting in India's capital, she coordinated the Research Area "Public Spheres" at Heidelberg University's Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context" (2012–2017) and the HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area) SINGLE project "Creating the 'New' Asian Woman: Entanglements of Urban Space, Cultural Encounters, and Gendered Identities in Shanghai and Delhi" (2013–2016). Her research interests include visual and material culture, fashion studies, advertising, colorism, and gender.

Lucie Bernroider is a research associate at the Collaborative Research Center "Re-Figuration of Spaces" (Technical University of Berlin). Her main research interests concern middle-class spatialization, urban change, gender, and the study of political violence and social memory. She has worked on various projects, including the HERA project "Creating the 'New' Asian Woman: Entanglements of Urban Space, Cultural Encounters, and Gendered Identities in Shanghai and Delhi" (2013–2016) at the University of Heidelberg and the digital archiving project "Trans-Border Religion in the Nepal-Sikkim borderlands" (2020–2021) at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research and Documentation of Inner and South Asian Cultural History (CIRDIS), University of Vienna.

Prof. Dr. Christiane Brosius ⓘ https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1942-5381
is professor of visual and media anthropology at the Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies. She currently heads the Nepal Heritage Documentation Project with Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels (Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities), and is the Principal Investigator of the research project "Heritage as Placemaking. The Politics of Solidarity and Erasure." With Dr. Arunava Dasgupta, urban designer at the School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi, and Sujan Chitrakar (Centre for Art and Design at the Kathmandu University), she lead the themed network Urban Transformation and Placemaking: Fostering Learning from South Asia and Germany (2020–2023) funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). From 2013–2016, Christiane was the Principal Investigator of the EU-funded international research project "Creating the 'New' Asian Woman: Entanglements of Urban Space, Cultural Encounters, and Gendered Identities in Shanghai and Delhi." Since 2000, Christiane has studied changes in

globalizing cities, focusing on emotions and ritual practice, on contemporary art production, cultural heritage, and intergenerational relations. Her main regional foci are Delhi and the Kathmandu Valley.

Melissa Butcher ⊙ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5010-9133
is a former professor of social and cultural geography at Birkbeck, University of London, and currently the Programme Director at Cumberland Lodge, UK. She uses ethnographic, visual, and participatory methodologies to examine questions of identity and belonging within contexts of cultural change and contested urban space. She has been the Principal and Co-Investigator on several UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), European, and Academic Research Council-funded projects in USA, London, Delhi, Singapore, and Sydney, including: "The Trouble with Freedom" (2022, https://thetroublewithfreedom.wordpress.com/); "Learning from Small Cities: Governing Imagined Futures and the Dynamics of Change in India's Smart Urban Age" (2018–2021, www.smartsmallcity.com); "Creating the 'New' Asian Woman: Entanglements of Urban Space, Cultural Encounters, and Gendered Identities in Delhi and Shanghai" (2013–2016, www.hera-single.de); and "Creating Hackney as Home" (2013–2015, www.hackneyashome.co.uk). Melissa presents and writes regularly on issues relating to cultural diversity, mobility, gentrification, urban and youth cultures, social cohesion, globalization, and global human resources management.

Paromita Chakravarti is professor at the Department of English, and has been the director of the School of Women's Studies at Jadavpur University in Kolkata. She completed her doctoral studies at the University of Oxford. She teaches Renaissance drama, women's writing, sexuality, and film studies. Her work in the School of Women's Studies has focused on education and sexuality. She has led national and international projects on gender representation in school textbooks, sexuality education, women's higher education, homeless women, women in the Panchayati Raj and in self-help groups, as well as on HIV-positive women and children. She has worked with the state and central governments, the Women's Commission (on the state and national levels) and government ministries of education, Panchayat, rural development, HIV control and prevention boards, as well as with international universities on policy related to women's education, empowerment, and heath. Her book *Women Contesting Culture: Changing Frames of Gender Politics in India,* co-edited with Kavita Panjabi, was published by Bhatkal & Sen in 2012. Her book on *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: "Local Habitations"* was published by Routledge in 2018. She co-edited *Asian Interventions in Global Shakespeare* (Routledge 2020) with Poonam Trivedi and Ted Motohashi. Her anthology of essays, *Bengal-Italy: Transcultural Encounters From the Mid 19th to the Early 21st Century* (Routledge, 2023), co-edited with Professor Mario Prayer has just been published.

Yiu Fai Chow https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6743-8339
is professor at the Department of Humanities and Creative Writing at Hong Kong Baptist University. His publications cover gender politics and creative practices, including *It's my Party: Tat Ming Pair and the Postcolonial Politics of Popular Music in Hong Kong* (Pelgrave, 2024, co-authored), *Caring in Times of Precarity: A Study of Single Women Doing Creative Work in Shanghai* (Palgrave, 2019) and *Sonic Multiplicities: Hong Kong Pop and the Global Circulation of Sound and Image* (Intellect, 2013, co-authored). Chow is also an award-winning writer in lyrics and prose. He has penned more than 1,000 lyrics for a variety of artists in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. Lately, he is increasingly involved in multi-media projects.

Qingling Guo is a visual artist who lives and works in New Jersey. She graduated from the Stage Art Department of Shanghai Theatre Academy and was design director of the Creek Art Center (2004–2007) and Fei Contemporary Art Center (FCAC), Shanghai (2007–2015). She received, among others, the FIPRESCI (Fédération Internationale de la Presse Cinématographique) Award and an honorable mention by the International Jury at the 66th Oberhausen International Short Film Festival, Germany (2020, Producer); the VIDEOFORMES Award of the Conseil Départemental du Puy de Dôme, France (2021, Producer); and she is the recipient of the 2022 Lillian Orlowsky and William Freed Grant. See also https://guoqingling.org.

Jeroen de Kloet https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2314-5424
is Professor of Globalisation Studies at the Department of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam. He is affiliated with the Beijing Language and Culture University. He is also a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Art and Sciences (KNAW). He is the PI of RESCUE, funded by an ERC advanced grant. Publications include a book with Anthony Fung *Youth Cultures in China* (Polity 2017), and the edited volumes *Boredom, Shanzhai, and Digitization in the Time of Creative China* (with Yiu Fai Chow and Lena Scheen, Amsterdam UP 2019) and *Trans-Asia as Method: Theory and Practices* (with Yiu Fai Chow and Gladys Pak Lei Chong, Rowman and Littlefield, 2019). His most recent book, co-authored with Yiu Fai Chow and Leonie Schmidt, is titled *It's My Party – Tatming Pair and the Postcolonial Politics of Popular Music in Hong Kong* (Palgrave 2024). See also http://jeroendekloet.nl.

Penn Tsz Ting Ip https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3619-8293
is an associate professor at the School of Arts and Social Sciences (A&SS) at Hong Kong Metropolitan University. She was assistant professor at the Department of Cultural Industry Management, the School of Media and Communication, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (2019–2023). Ip is the Shanghai research team leader of the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded partnership project "Urbanization, Gender and the Global South: A Transformative Knowledge Network (GenUrb)" based at the City Institute, York University, Toronto (Principal

Investigator: Prof. Linda Peake). Her research interests include gender and women's studies, urban studies, migration studies, postcolonialism, and affect theory. Ip's research has been published in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, and *Global Media and China*. Ip is the first author of *The Ordinary Women: Qualitative Research on Workers' New Villages in Shanghai* (2021, in Chinese, with Zhang Yu and Liu Xi).

Lucetta Y. L. Kam ⬤ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6548-5665
is an associate professor at the Academy of Language and Culture at Hong Kong Baptist University. She is the author of *Shanghai Lalas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (Hong Kong University Press, 2013; Chinese edition 2015). Her publications on gender and sexuality in China, queer studies of Hong Kong, queer migration of Chinese women, and Sinophone queer female fandom in East Asia are included in various journals and edited books. Her current projects are the transnational mobility of queer women in China and Hong Kong and queer Asian popular culture.

Kinneret Lahad ⬤ https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1266-8457
is an associate Professor at the NCJW Women and Gender Studies Program at Tel Aviv University, Israel. Her research interests are interdisciplinary, spanning the fields of gender studies, sociology, and cultural studies. She has been involved in various prestigious research projects which have garnered international attention and praise, and materialized in publications in leading journals. Her book *A Table for One: A Critical Reading of Singlehood, Gender, and Time* was published by Manchester University Press in 2017. Her publications have also appeared in journals such as *Cultural Studies, European Journal of Women's Studies, Israeli Sociology, Nora: Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research, Sociology, Sociological Forum, Sociological Review, Time and Society, Sociological Research Online, Theory, Criticism and Society,* and *Women's Studies International Forum*. Her current projects include independent and collaborative studies on aunthood, friendships, time and temporality, emotions and affects. She has been a visiting scholar at Columbia University, a visiting scholar and lecturer at Venice International University, a visiting lecturer at the Master MIM Erasmus Mundus Graduate program at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, an honorary research fellow at Manchester University, and an Erasmus visiting scholar at Aarhus University, Ludwig Maximilian University (Munich), and the University of Glasgow.

Yin Shan Lo is a Hongkonger, cultural worker, and freelance journalist who was based in Beijing from 2008 to 2017.

Shilpa Phadke ⬤ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6580-610X
is professor at the School of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. She is the co-author of the book *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (2011). She is the co-editor of *Intimacy*

and Injury: In the Wake of #MeToo In India and South Africa (2022) and *Yaari: An Anthology on Friendship by Women and Queer Folx* (2023). She is the co-director of the documentary film *Under the Open Sky* (2016). Phadke is currently researching friendship and its possibilities and translating a diary written by her great-grandmother in 1921. She has published in academic books and journals in the areas of gender and urban public space, ethnographies of feminism, feminist pedagogy, risk and the city, middle-class sexualities, the middle classes and the new spaces of consumption in the city, feminist pedagogies, feminist parenting, and friendship. She also writes regularly in the popular media, both in print and online, on concerns related to gender and the city.

Chenying Pi is a Ph.D. candidate at the Heidelberg Centre for Transcultural Studies, where she is completing her dissertation on how single professional women in Shanghai negotiate femininities and contest gender norms in the midst of drastic social change. Her research interests focus on gender and popular culture in East Asia.

Sanjay Srivastava https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0461-3122
is British Academy Global Professor at the Department of Anthropology, SOAS University of London, and professor of sociology at the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi. An anthropologist by training, his research focuses on cultures of modernity in India. His publications include *Constructing Post-Colonial India: National Character and the Doon School* (Routledge, 1998); *Passionate Modernity: Sexuality, Class, and Consumption in India* (Routledge, 2007); *Sexuality Studies* (contributing editor; Oxford University Press, 2013); *Entangled Urbanism: Slum, Gated Community, and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon* (Oxford University Press, 2015); *Critical Themes in Indian Sociology* (co-editor; SAGE, 2019); and (*Hi*)*Stories of Desire: Sexualities and Culture in Modern India* (co-editor; Cambridge University Press, 2020). His current research focuses on new urbanism, urban cultures, and changing relationships between the state, private capital, and the category of "the people."

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HEIDELBERG STUDIES
ON TRANSCULTURALITY

What does it mean to be a single woman in India or China? Being single is an advancing trend, also in Asia. There is an ambivalent fascination with the single woman as a new type of empowered, pleasure-seeking, competent lifestyle-surfer, and dedicated career-maker. And yet, the single woman is also stigmatized and isolated, discriminated against or stereotyped as someone who challenges social norms. Place matters for singlehood. This book focuses on the urban fabric of India, mainland China, and Hong Kong. For it is here that social, economic, cultural, and political transformations become manifest and new possibilities of living are tested and vividly contested.