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Introduction

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS

The Chen Family (Urban Household from Tianjin)

In 1962, after the completion of her primary school education, Grandma Chen (grandparent generation labeled as G1, born in 1943, one elder brother and two younger sisters) was assigned to a state-owned manufacturing work unit. It was here where she met the love of her life—the late Grandpa Chen.[1] She recalled the evolution of their courtship:

> He was my workmate. We had been courting for a week when my family set up a matchmaking meeting for me with someone else. They described the man they had selected as a tall good looking military officer. But I declined this offer and stuck with my workmate. To be honest, I pursued my husband to some extent. When we were apprentices, I really liked him and I asked one of his friends if he already had a girlfriend. His friend passed on my message and he wrote me a poem in return. He was very talented. From then on, we started courting. . . . At that time, I was an activist studying Mao Zedong's thoughts and was keen to join the party; as my father was a party member, the work unit also wanted to enlist me in the party. But his father was classified as a small business owner,[2] and the party secretary of my work unit warned me that if I wanted to join the party I'd have to break up with him. I couldn't agree to this and as a result I was unable to join the party.

Explaining why she chose him, Grandma Chen sweetly recalled: "He was very good looking and honest. He also had a very nice temperament. When we were young, as soon as I saw him my heart always started to thud." When asked if she would choose him again in her next life, Grandma Chen replied firmly: "Yes, he'd still be the one. He treated me very well, and he was

very kind to our children and my family. Even now I still dream about him—especially the years when we were courting and when we just got married."

In 1988, Daughter Chen (middle generation labeled as G2, born in 1968, one younger brother) had started to work in a state-owned clothing factory after completing her senior middle school education. At the time it was the fashion among young urbanites to visit dance halls after work. It was there she met her future husband. Daughter Chen explained why she chose him as her spouse:

> At the time I was very young. I just felt that he knew how to have a good time, and was good at singing, dancing and playing music. I was impressed that he could do so many things well. But he also deceived me on a very important matter. He told me that his father was Head of the Railway Bureau and would be able to arrange for my brother to get a good job there after finishing at vocational school. In the end, it turned out that only his brother-in-law worked there. He'd been bluffing all along. I was so young that I was deceived into marrying him.

When asked if in a future life she would choose the same spouse again, she replied with a firm disavowal: "No. Certainly not. I would definitely not marry that sort of person. I would want to find someone who really cares about me." She admitted that when they quarreled, she had occasionally thought about divorce. But she said with a sigh, "After all, we've been through so much over so many years together. Like the left hand touching the right hand, we've got used to each other. We just make do [*cehuo*] and treat each other as companions."

In 2016 Grandson Chen (grandchild generation labeled as G3, only child, born in 1991), a white-collar employee in a state-owned company, was married to a friend he had known since they were teenagers. He described how they had come together: "We had already known each other since our teenage years. She was the former classmate of my middle school mate. We dated for a few months, but I broke up with her as she was quite ugly when she was a teenager."

Thanks to his handsome looks he was popular with girls and had at least ten different girlfriends. But in 2014 he and his original girlfriend started dating again. He explained why in the end he chose her as his wife:

> She had been persistently pursuing me for many years. I also knew that she was a good person and not one of those women with a scheming mind. Just imagine how tiring it would be if you had to live with someone who was always scheming. We dated for less than two years and she kept pressing me to get married. I personally didn't want to get married, but she was keen. And when all is said and done, we are from compatible families [*mengdanghudui*, "matching households"], and we've been comfortable with each other. So I was happy when we eventually got married.

But although insisting that he would choose the same wife if he had to relive his life, Grandson Chen remained skeptical about the role of "love" in marriage: "As time goes by, for sure it eventually disappears. I have no doubt at all that after 20 or 30 years of living together, most married couples stay together for the sake of their children. After all, China is unlike other countries. It's impossible for couples to still be deeply in love in their 50s and 60s. In my whole life I've never met such a couple."

The Li Family (Rural Household from Shandong)

After having served in the army for four years, in the 1960s Grandpa Li (G1, born in 1942, with four younger brothers) returned to his Shandong village and worked in the local production brigade. Through a village matchmaker, he was married in 1968. He explained how this came about: "My wife and I were from the same village. I often went to her side of the village to play when I was a child, so I'd known her from childhood." He recalled the marriage introduction as follows: "At the time parents tended to make the final decision, although they also discussed it with us children. I had seen her before, and in my eyes although she was a bit short, there was nothing dumb about her. With no many brothers and a poor family background, it wasn't easy for me to find a wife so I had no objection to this marriage proposal."

After living together for nearly fifty years, his assessment of his wife was simple and direct: "She is not a bad wife. Her nature is simple and straightforward. She treated my parents well and didn't fuss about things. She also gets on well with her sisters-in-law. I'd have chosen her again if I had the chance."

Son Li (G2, born in 1969, with a younger brother and a younger sister) was married in 1989 through an arranged marriage. The marriage was initiated by the bride's mother who lived in the same village and, having known Son Li as a very handsome and smart child, had engineered his engagement to her daughter when he was just twelve years old. Son Li recalled his early impressions of his wife: "When we became engaged I was too young to understand anything and only interested in playing. Only after we got married did I get to know her better and realize what a good temperament she had."

For the first few years of marriage, they worked together in the fields. But with the birth of their two children and the need to earn more cash income, Son Li followed the example of fellow villagers and worked on urban construction sites, leaving his wife to look after the children and tend the fields. Commenting on their marital journey, his wife confided, "I had a crush on him when I was young because he was good looking. In the initial years of our marriage, his temperament wasn't good. But life became much better as he grew older and became more accommodating."

In 2012 Granddaughter Li (G3, born in 1990 and with one younger brother), married a man from a neighboring village through an introduced marriage. After failing to complete her senior middle school education, she joined other village dropouts to work in clothing factories in China's coastal region. After working for six years in various cities, she was summoned back to her village to attend matchmaking meetings: "I'd dated someone when I was working away from my village, but my family didn't approve of me marrying someone from a different region. My mother said that if I were to marry someone living far away, it wouldn't be easy for me to visit home, whereas if I married someone from my own region, I would be able to visit home every two or three days. So in the face of my parents' disapproval I stopped dating until I was introduced to my husband back home."

When asked why she had chosen her husband, she shyly explained:

> I didn't think very much. At the time, several of my relatives all said that he was a good person and hard-working. They also emphasized that my parents-in-law were good people. So I gave in. We got to know each other through phone calls for nearly two years before we finally got married. During this period, I also felt that he seemed to have a good temperament. After we were married I joined him in the place to which he had migrated and looked for work. But after giving birth to my son, I stayed at home while he continued to go out to work.

These examples provide a snapshot of the mate selection processes of various members of two of the three-generational families studied in this book. Do they demonstrate, as the existing literature would argue, a clear trend toward increasing autonomy among the younger generation?[3] Has Chinese marital life experienced a shift from a language of duty to a language of love?[4] The picture emerging from both the Chens' and Lis' narratives and the other families interviewed resists such linear generalizations, instead suggesting complex and sometimes paradoxical changes and continuities across three generations.

In the urban Chen family, Grandma Chen's narrative from the Mao era depicted a passionate and romantic love story in which she defied the matchmaking efforts of her family and the meddling of her workplace superiors in order to pursue the love of her life. In these regards her approach toward marriage was distinctly "modern" and contrasted with that of Grandson Chen, who grew up in the market reform era of the 1990s. Paradoxically, despite his greater experience of dating, his embrace of the Chinese idiom of "matching households" as a basis of spousal choice and his skepticism toward the role of "love" in marriage indicated a more "traditional" attitude toward marriage than that of his grandmother. Yet notwithstanding the very different degrees of intensity that characterized their courtship experiences, both retained the same

understanding of marriage as a partnership of shared responsibilities. As for the middle generation, Daughter Chen's experience offers a vivid example of how personal desire and family duty can go hand in hand in the selection of a partner. In her case, she fell for her husband for two main reasons: on the one hand, she was attracted by her future husband's personal charm; on the other hand, she was swayed by the belief that his supposedly powerful family could facilitate her brother's career advancement.

In the rural Li family, a distinctly nonlinear trajectory seems to have characterized the mate selection process across three generations. Both Grandfather Li, bound by the conventions of the Mao era, and Granddaughter Li, who was more representative of the period of widespread migration, found their partners through "introduced marriages"; by contrast, middle-generation Son Li, who reached marriageable age in the early post-1978 reform years, entered an *arranged* marriage—albeit one regarded by his wife-to-be as desirable. Adult children's ability to veto the proposal could be interpreted as conferring a greater degree of autonomy than in arranged marriages. However, this autonomy is positional and relational. Thanks to his family's impoverished circumstances at the time, for example, Grandpa Li did not enjoy the luxury of choice. In the case of Granddaughter Li, her mother set the parameters within which she could exercise her autonomy, defined in such a way as to prevent her from marrying someone who lived far from her natal home—a principle which Granddaughter Li, like many other women of the grandchild generation, had internalized as her own preference in the search for a spouse.

The experiences of siblings add a further dimension to the complexity of the three-generational picture. In the Chen family, for example, while Grandma Chen exercised "free will" in choosing her husband, she also played a critical role alongside her older siblings in persuading her youngest sister to marry someone who lived very close to the natal family in order to provide support for their parents in old age. In the Li family, while Son Li quietly agreed to an arranged marriage, his younger brother's termination of two village engagements to which he had already agreed caused anguish to his parents, even though they eventually had to bow to his recalcitrance and "let him be." However, in the case of their disabled daughter who lacked the ability to speak, Grandpa Li took direct control of the process and prudently selected as her marriage partner a young man from a smaller and less influential lineage group in order to protect her against discrimination within her marital family. As for the grandchildren, while Granddaughter Li's spouse selection was carefully orchestrated, Son Li and his wife were more accommodating toward their son, allowing him total freedom and discretion in choosing a wife in the belief that as a college graduate that he would choose a wife from a "superior" background to that of their own acquaintances. As it turned out, Granddaughter

Li's brother, a white-collar employee in a fourth-tier city, married a kindergarten teacher also from a rural family background.

Concealed in this mosaic pattern of spouse selection, some shared characteristics also emerge from the experiences of all three generations. As illustrated in the spouse appraisals of both the Chen and Li families, it is evident that marriage in China is still not only a matter of two individuals coming together, but is also viewed as the union of two extended families. As such, it embodies a mixture of emotions embracing the expression of the couple's personal feelings for each other as well as the fulfilment of mutual responsibilities and obligations toward their respective families. It is clear too that in the Chinese context love is not blind. Rather, there is a strong tendency to marry someone from a "compatible" family background, as evidenced, for example, in the persistent urban-rural segregation across three generations in both the Chen and Li families. Finally, far from indicating a linear shift from declining parental authority to increasing youth autonomy, my findings suggest that the outcome of intergenerational negotiations depends on a wide range of factors, including institutional context, demographic family profile, material conditions, gender, and life stage. Indeed, it is precisely the nonlinear nature of change, the continuity and diversity of Chinese family practices, and the hidden forces that shape the dynamics of intimate practices within such families that this book seeks to capture.

In contrast with the existing literature, which mainly uses cross-sectional data or focuses on a single urban or rural site, this book provides the first comprehensive and in-depth examination of family life across three successive generations in multiple urban and rural locations in China between 1949 and the 2010s. Grounded in life history narratives, it describes and analyses the whole gamut of family practices over the entire course of life, including childhood experiences, courtship and marriage decisions, marital life, sex and intimacy, and aging and old age support. Through intersecting analytical lenses of generation, location (urban-rural) and gender (son-daughter, husband-wife), it shows how family members have negotiated changing socioeconomic and cultural conditions in order to forge their own distinctive and varied family life trajectories.

Theorizing Family Life and Social Change

Notwithstanding the importance of its empirical content, this book is more than an empirical study. No less significant, its arguments are theoretically framed as a means of adding to and sometimes challenging the academic debate on family life and social change. As an early influential modernization theorist representative of Western sociology, William Goode argued that there existed

a "fit" between industrialization and the conjugal family.[5] The essence of his thesis was that the forces of industrialization and urbanization had facilitated a shift from vertical family and extended kinship obligations toward the "modern" nuclear family centered on the conjugal relationship between husband and wife. Goode's implicit prediction was that as industrialization spread, family patterns throughout the world would converge to the Western conjugal family model. His thesis attracted widespread criticism on the grounds that it was rooted in an ethnocentric developmental paradigm and failed to capture the empirical reality of family life in Western societies. Nevertheless, two of his subsidiary hypotheses have continued to gain purchase among academic scholars:[6] first, that parents' control over their children would diminish as industrialization proceeded; second, that the ideology of the Western conjugal family, with its emphasis on companionate and romantic love, would spread widely throughout the world.

In response to more recent developments affecting family life in the United States and Western Europe since the second half of the twentieth century—for example, later marriages, a sharp rise in divorce, declining fertility rates, and an increasing proportion of children born out of wedlock—the theorizing of family life and social change has entered a new phase that delineates the deinstitutionalization of marriage. In the United States, Cherlin argued that from the 1950s there was a shift from companionate marriage to individualistic marriage that emphasized personal fulfilment and self-development.[7] Similarly, across the Atlantic, the British sociologist, Anthony Giddens[8] depicted a transformation of intimacy from romantic love to a "pure relationship" encapsulating the late modern condition, whereby couples stayed together for only as long as their relationship remained mutually satisfying. Again, German sociologists Beck and Beck-Gernsheim[9] argued that individualization, closely associated with de-traditionalization and de-normalization of roles, had led to increasing emphasis on negotiation and contingency in intimate relationships and the weakening of gender and class factors. A variant of the deinstitutionalization narrative was evident in the framework of a second demographic transition, proposed by Belgium demographer Lesthaeghe and his colleagues. This contrasted the first demographic transition, comprising a shift from a pattern of high fertility and high mortality to one of low fertility and low mortality (completed in most Western countries before the 1950s), with the second, post-1950s transition characterized in those same countries by "sustained subreplacement fertility, a multitude of living arrangements other than marriage, the disconnection between marriage and procreation, and no stationary population."[10] The primary driver of this supposedly evolutionary process was a cultural shift toward postmodern values and norms (i.e., those stressing individuality and self-actualization).[11]

Such grand theorizing is grounded in five major assumptions. First, the self / individual under discussion reflects a particular liberal notion of an autonomous self and individual. Second, it follows the logic of an unilinear historical progression model, exemplified in the evolution from traditional through modern to postmodern family practices. Third, in the absence of kin and extended families, the nuclearized family has become the default condition in the new theorization. Fourth, the nation-state is the basic unit of analysis. Fifth, although the theorizing of much of the new literature derives from the context of Western Europe and North America, an implicit assumption is that as modernization proceeds, the rest of the world will eventually embrace the Western model.

However, contrary empirical evidence and alternative conceptualization have emerged in a number of countries in which these supposedly universalizing theories originated. For example, among British sociologists there has been a robust debate since the late 1990s on the extent to which Giddens' transformation of intimacy and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's individualization theses have taken place.[12] Empirical evidence from Britain has indicated that while commitment may no longer be embodied in traditional forms such as marriage, notions of family, partnership, and kinship remain central to people's lives.[13] Nor has there been a significant weakening of pre-existing social structures: for example, class and gender remain important in shaping intimate practices.[14] Indeed, frustrated by the fixation of many commentators on the supposed decline of commitment and the weakening of family life, British sociologist Carol Smart proposed the "connectedness thesis" in antithesis to the Beck and Beck-Gernsheim individualization thesis in order to highlight the continuing importance of notions of connectedness, relationality and embeddedness in personal choice-making and family formation.[15]

In the United States, Bengston and colleagues[16] drew on a longitudinal quantitative study of four generations in Southern California to debunk what they regarded as the myth of the decline of the American extended family. Instead, they sought to show how parents across a wide range of family types had continued to play a central role in shaping the life orientations and achievements of younger family members and how intergenerational bonds had remained resilient against the background of massive social changes since the 1960s. In contrast to the de-traditionalization / deinstitutionalization narrative, they employed the concept of "linked lives"[17] to capture the process of intergenerational transmission and continuity. In more recent decades, empirical research has also pointed to a growing class divergence in family practices within the United States. Thus, while well-educated and securely employed Americans brought up their children within stable marriages, their less well-educated counterparts whose employment status was more

vulnerable eschewed marriage in favor of bringing up their children in short-term cohabitating relationships.[18]

Thanks to the asymmetrical nature of global academic exchange, however, such critiques and alternative theorizations are seldom translated and made known in societies beyond the English-speaking world.[19] Consequently, both Goode's modernization theory and the new modernity writers' work (e.g., Giddens and Beck / Beck-Gernsheim) have continued to exert a strong influence on academic studies focusing on developing countries (including China) and undertaken by scholars in these countries.

The China Context

Throughout much of premodern history the core principle of social governance adopted by the rulers of China was Confucianism—above all, its hierarchical precept that everyone should be aware of and behave in accordance with their position in society to achieve a harmonious social order. Out of this precept emerged a highly structured family organization whose members' conduct was governed by a set of ethical guidelines—aligning with age, gender, and generation—in which respect and obligation were central to building harmonious family relationships. Filial piety was the defining principle ordering relations between adult children and older parents. In the words of Confucius himself, "In serving his parents, a filial son reveres them in daily life; he makes them happy while he nourishes them; he takes anxious care of them in sickness; he shows great sorrow over their death; and he sacrifices to them with solemnity."[20] Filial piety emphasized submission of the will of adult children to that of the senior generations, and also stressed the continuity and maintenance of familial lineage.

Within this system, marriage and sexuality were mainly directed toward building future generations, with love and sexual pleasure taking a secondary role. Parents played a prominent role in making marriage decisions for their children. Confucian familism was also fundamentally gendered with the ultimate objective of perpetuating the patrilineal descent line.[21] Daughters were located at the bottom of the kinship hierarchy and property was transmitted through males.[22] The notion of *nanzun nübei* ("women are inferior to men") effectively defined women's conduct in society, exemplified by prescriptions such as the *sancong* ("Three Obediences"), which dictated that women were subject to the authority of their father when young, their husband when married, and their son when widowed.

In the early twentieth century, reformist intellectuals condemned Confucian protocols of hierarchical family relations, arguing that they had caused China's defeat in the Opium War and were a barrier to its modernization and

development. Their demands for greater freedom from family control for women and young people led to some modifications to family practices, although the impact was largely limited to urban educated circles.[23] However, the Communist Revolution of 1949 transformed China's political landscape. In the years that followed, the Communist Party launched a series of campaigns designed to radically reform the traditional Confucian family organization by advocating freedom of mate choice and redirecting citizens' loyalty from the family elders to the state. Individuals were assigned work either in state-run urban work units or in rural village production brigades, thereby reducing their material dependence on family and kinship networks.[24] Not least important, the party's advocacy of women's liberation for the first time mobilized able-bodied women into paid work outside the home, enabling female work participation to become a normative feature of women's lives in the Mao era. Yet notwithstanding these onslaughts on the power and authority of family elders, countervailing forces—material necessity, lack of labor mobility under the constraints of the household registration scheme (see below), and political chaos during the Cultural Revolution—simultaneously served to strengthen family ties.[25]

Following Mao's death in 1976 and Deng Xiaoping's accession to supreme power in 1978, implementation of China's watershed "open-door" policy symbolized a reorientation of China's economic development trajectory, paving the way for decentralization and other reformist economic initiatives.[26] In the countryside, collective farming was displaced by a return to family farming, while at the same time restrictions on rural-urban migration were relaxed. Rural family members became a source of cheap labor for China's burgeoning manufacturing sector, as a result of which millions of children and aging grandparents were left in villages as the middle generation migrated to cities in search of higher wages. In cities, the economic restructuring of state enterprises eliminated de facto permanent employment associated with the "iron rice bowl" and removed other welfare benefits such as subsidized public housing allocation, generating mass redundancy toward the end of the 1990s[27] and plunging citizens into a market economy in which employment precarity became the norm. Meanwhile, China's opening-up to the outside world and the forces of globalization exposed its citizens to Western ideologies and values, including consumerism and more liberal attitudes toward marriage and sexuality. In the face of so many potentially subversive forces, Chinese Communist Party officials sought to reinstate the family at the center of social life in order to strengthen stability and uphold moral rectitude[28]—a process that has continued into the twenty-first century, enabling the family to regain its central position in state governance.[29] The last decade has witnessed a resurgence of Confucian ideologies in state propaganda and mainstream media at the same time alongside the continuation of a neoliberal discourse centering on personal choice and responsibility.[30]

China has also undergone rapid demographic change. Before 1949 the Confucian emphasis on lineage encouraged families to have relatively large numbers of children. In the 1950s the party-state made a limited attempt to alter traditional marital fertility patterns.[31] After 1960, official policy began a shift toward the promotion of birth control in cities, which gradually evolved into the "later marriage, longer birth spacing, and fewer children" (*wan-xi-shao*) campaign—the main driver of rapid fertility decline in the 1970s.[32] In 1979 the government introduced the one-child policy: while modifications were permitted in rural areas, where couples were allowed to have a second child if the first was a girl, in cities the policy was strictly implemented through the use of workplace fines and other punitive measures. China's economic boom since the 1980s further accelerated a sharp decline in fertility, which has generated a new set of demographic challenges. Of these the most acute has been the aging of China's population. The first generation born under the one-child policy have now become parents themselves, burdening them with the responsibility of supporting two parents and four grandparents.[33] In an effort to address China's inverse population pyramid, in 2015 the state abandoned the one-child policy, introducing first a national two-child policy and, in 2021, a three-child policy. However, no more than 5–6 percent of couples have responded by opting to have a second child, citing inadequate childcare facilities and the high cost of child-rearing as the main reasons, especially in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai.[34] For the first time since 1961, in 2022 the rate of natural increase was negative (-0.6 percent), as a result of which the total population declined by 0.85 million. In 2023 China suffered an even greater contraction of almost 2.1 million, with the rate of natural increase falling by -1.48 percent.[35] In short, China has now entered a new long-term demographic trajectory of negative population. Despite the shrinking population, the state continues to fulfill its residual default role in welfare provision, while Chinese families remain the main providers of funding and services for their dependent members.[36]

Understanding Chinese Families

Assessing the impact of rapid social change on family life since 1949 has been a central theme of scholars investigating the dynamics of families in China.[37] Early research drawing on fieldwork in the Mao era[38] focused on the nature and scale of changes in traditional patterns of family life in early post-1949 China. Research findings highlighted paradoxical changes as well as continuities in family life, shaped by multiple complex and often contradictory forces. For example, in her investigation of old age support, Davis-Friedmann found that alongside efforts to eliminate values that threatened to subvert the collective economy, Chinese Communist Party cadres "simultaneously legitimated

traditional obligations of mutual support and long-term reciprocal care," as a result of which the elderly "benefited from a basic continuity between the pre- and post-1949 definitions of filial behavior."[39] Similarly, drawing upon systematic studies of both urban and rural Chinese families,[40] Whyte and Parish found that while the most egregious practices, such as minor marriage and concubinage, had quickly disappeared, core elements of traditional Chinese familism, such as intergenerational solidarity and marriage stability, had survived. They also highlighted differences in the pace of change between urban and rural China, illustrated, for example, in the greater success of state efforts to eliminate bride price and parental control of mate choice in cities, compared with the countryside. After 1978, as de-collectivization and other reforms propelled China toward a more market-based economic system, a new literature emerged, grounded in data collected in the 1980s and early 1990s and focusing on the impact of such changes on Chinese family life.[41] The findings highlighted the return of some pre-1949 traditions, such as the revival of teenage marriages and child betrothals, but also revealed significant variations in family composition and dynamics associated with diverse regional cultural traditions and differences in the impact of reform initiatives on local economies.

Prior to the 1990s the theoretical thrust of scholarly research on Chinese families was mainly embedded in Goode's modernization proposition, albeit with various revisions dictated by the use of Chinese data. Accordingly, this "revisionist" literature painted a counternarrative to the linear transition model implicit in Goode's theory: the paradoxical changes and continuities captured in China's experience suggesting that any simple "traditional versus revolutionary, socialist versus post-socialist" dichotomies were a misleading representation of reality. It also underlined the crucial importance of the state in shaping Chinese family life—an agency overlooked in Goode's model—even allowing for the partial nature of changes inherent in adaptive family practices that emerged out of state-directed policies. Finally, in contrast to Goode's emphasis on industrialization and urbanization as the main drivers of family change, the "China narrative" showed that socialist institutions—sometimes eschewing traditional customs, and at other times reinforcing them—often affected family life in contradictory ways, resulting in the complex and nonlinear pattern of family change documented in the China-based studies.[42]

US-based anthropologist Yan Yunxiang's study on private life and family change in rural China[43] marked a departure from these early lines of inquiry. Drawing upon extensive field research conducted between 1989 and 1999 in Xiajia village in the northeastern province of Heilongjiang, Yan argued that a decline of patriarchal power had given way to the rise of youth autonomy in everything from the choosing of spouses to the control of resources. He noted that following its intrusion into village society and family life after 1949, the

state's subsequent withdrawal after de-collectivization had left "a moral and ideological vacuum," which alongside the impact of marketization and consumerism, had encouraged the emergence of "ultra-utilitarian individualism" and the rise of "the uncivil individual."[44]

Reusing the ethnographic data from Xiajia village as well as adding two new chapters focusing on urban China, in his 2009 book Yan examined how the Beck and Beck-Gernsheim individualization thesis might be applied to Chinese society. He argued that the rise of individual agency since the 1970s has led to an individualization of Chinese society. In more recent work,[45] Yan followed the Beck/Beck-Gernsheim's emphasis on individualization as a macro-sociological phenomenon and argued that the state's withdrawal of welfare support alongside increasing risk and distrust in post-Mao economic reforms has dis-embedded individuals from former institutions and re-embedded them in a framework of familism. However, in order to distinguish this from traditional familism grounded in generational and gender hierarchy, Yan conceptualizes it as "descending familism," characterized by a downward flow of resources and care within Chinese families from the older generation to the youngest generation of children. Building upon this, Yan subsequently formulated another term—"neo-familism"—to capture the "emergent centrality of the family and the associated new changes since the 1990s,"[46] including descending familism, emergent intergenerational intimacy, the impact of materialism, and tensions between individual and family interests. In his 2021 edited volume, Yan outlined an inverted generational hierarchy in the rise of neo-familism, which he termed "the inverted family," the essence of which he characterized as "the constant decline of parental authority and power and the parallel increase in youth autonomy and freedom in both urban and rural Chinese families."[47] He credits "the gradual yet constant development of self-awareness and individual desires" since the 1980s to "the much stronger yet still ongoing trend of individualization at the turn of the twenty-first century" as the most important factor contributing to the inversion of generational relations.[48]

Three key issues can be identified in Yan's framework of individualization[49] and Chinese family change. First—and here there is a parallel with the conceptual weakness in Becks' work—Yan's conflation of the notion of individualization as a state-initiated social process with individualization as personal motivation reflecting individual choice runs the risk of romanticizing agency.[50] Second, Yan's strong emphasis on *change*[51] set a narrative tone that has tended to spotlight change while obscuring continuities. Third, through its portrayal of a unidirectional intergenerational power shift, the "descending familism" / "inverted family" framework runs the risk—which it shares with any model of linear change—of overgeneralization and fails to acknowledge the impact on intergenerational negotiation in a variety of material circumstances. As Whyte

has noted, given the unevenness of development and scale of China, "any single predictive theory or set of hypotheses specifying comprehensive changes in a particular direction is not likely to do justice to the complexities of evolving family life in the PRC."[52]

There are other studies that also do not neatly accord with the individualization narrative. Drawing upon urban case studies in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, Davis and Friedman engage with the deinstitutionalization of marriage and the "second demographic transition" theory.[53] They find that in the new millennium all three Chinese societies have experienced a higher average age at first marriage, fewer barriers to divorce, declining marital fertility, and greater social acceptance of premarital, extramarital, and same-sex intimate relationships. However, they have not experienced another key indicator of the "second demographic transition"—namely, the delinking of procreation from marriage. Instead, the authors identify "strong continuities in the 'rules of the games' for family formation, especially in the insistence that marriage precede childbearing and in broad support for the norm of lifelong reciprocity between generations."[54] Other recent scholarship embracing a wider range of case studies also highlights the diversity and complexity of contemporary family life. Santos and Harrell, whose edited volume focuses on "patriarchal configurations" concludes that "with all the changes in the classic patriarchal nexus, China remains a heavily male-dominated or andrarchical society, even though women continue to have significant power both inside and outside the family."[55] In terms of generational hierarchies, several of the volume's contributors question and complicate Yan's individualization thesis, revealing the persistence of filial values and patrilineal thinking alongside significant familial adaptations. Finally, drawing upon Illouz's[56] theorization of relations between emotion and capitalism, Sun's[57] study of rural migrant workers' experiences of love, romance, and intimate relationships argues that the socioeconomic hardships that they face have made these migrants an emotional precariat.

The quantitative analysis of Chinese Family Panel Studies, the Family Module of the Chinese General Social Surveys and census data undertaken by Xie Yu and his colleagues lend further support to a narrative of nonlinear family change, characterized by both continuities and diversity in the post-Mao era. For example, their finding that cohabitation before marriage has increased nationally from less than 2 percent in the 1980s to 32.6 percent after 2000 is qualified by their assessment that this usually represents a transitional phase for couples who go on to marry—and by their finding that in any case cohabitation is still stigmatized in many parts of Chinese society.[58] As for marriage,[59] their investigation of trends during the period between 1990 and 2010 shows a delay in first marriage age and a decline in marital fertility, but also reveals that childlessness remains rare among married couples while nonmarital

childbearing is still virtually nonexistent in China. Another group of demographers[60] has sought to build on Bengston, Biblarz, and Roberts' suggestion of "linked lives" and their intergenerational solidarity model. Based on an analysis of national and / or regional survey data, the consensus from these studies is that intergenerational bonds remain solid even in the face of the emergence of new trends. At the same time, however, there are variations within each generation, shaped by a variety of factors such as location (urban or rural), education, gender, and socioeconomic status. In light of the complex picture of familial relations, Ji has used terms such as "mosaic temporality" and "mosaic familism" to capture post-Mao social transformational processes in which "tradition and modernity, the resurgence of Confucianism, the socialist version of modernity, the capitalist version of modernity, and the socialist heritage" all have their part to play.[61] Nevertheless, none of these alternative approaches has as much attention among Chinese scholars as Yan's individualization thesis. With translation of Yan's work, as one of the recent review articles highlights, the individualization model has replaced Goode's work as the dominant theoretical framework in studying family life within China.[62]

There are several deficiencies in the existing studies of Chinese families. First, they make an implicit assumption that there is a break in continuity between the Mao and post-Mao eras. This reflects the absence of any single work examining urban and rural family behavior that embraces both eras. Earlier book-length studies charting changes in Chinese family relationships derive mainly from fieldwork data from the 1970s to 1990s and therefore focus on the Mao and early reform periods. The focus of more recent publications has been the post-1980s generation, whose experiences have often been viewed as marking a "breakthrough" from those of previous generations. This book is the first to examine the extent to which their family dynamics differ from those of their parents and grandparents.

Second, the existing literature places great emphasis on the ways in which—both directly and indirectly—the institutional framework created by the state has shaped family behavior. However, this may obscure other forces that are at work. The principle of "linked lives" is a reminder that an individual's life is embedded within the lives of other family members, including those of different generations.[63] A major contribution of this book is its attempt to incorporate the ways in which families transmit values and behavior[64] across generations into an analysis of family life and social change in China.

Third, there is the question of which criteria to use in appraising change. Early studies of Mao era used pre-1949 conditions as a comparative basis while investigations of the post-Mao era have tended to make "tradition" the implicit yardstick for comparison. There is, however, an epistemological risk in comparing contemporary practices with traditional Confucian discourse, which

serves as a rhetoric on what family relations ought to be. Empirically, such an approach threatens to exaggerate change and obscure continuities.

Consider, for example, the following three statements, each of which seeks to capture the nature of intergenerational relationships in a particular era. Based on empirical data from the 2010s, Zhang[65] concluded that "the new formulation of filial piety" emphasizes "both generational interdependence and independence" and "underscores a parent-child relationship that is reciprocal rather than hierarchical." Again, commenting on his findings from Xiajia village in the 1990s, Yan[66] argued that "unconditional filial piety, which was based on the sacredness of parenthood, no longer exists. For younger villagers, intergenerational reciprocity, like other types of reciprocity, has to be balanced and maintained through consistent exchange." Finally, analysis of data from the Mao era led Davis-Friedmann to conclude that ordinary people relied on "deliberate calculations of reciprocal exchanges between young and old" and that "interdependence is the dominant characteristic of the ties between elderly parents and adult children. But families vary in their degree of solidarity. . . . One reason for this variation is the difference in the quality of parents' earlier efforts to meet the needs of their children." When compared with the discourse of Confucian familism, Zhang's findings were labeled as a "new formulation of filial piety," while Yan's were viewed as signaling a "crisis of filial piety." However, when compared with Davis-Friedmann's findings of the Mao era, it becomes clear that intergenerational reciprocity, grounded in mutual support and exchange, remained central in shaping Chinese intergenerational relations and had hardly changed over the previous seventy years.[67] In an effort to minimize such potential confusion and inconsistency, I have deliberately employed a generation-sequence design in order to compare the life experiences and perspectives of successive generations.

Fourth, while the individualization thesis has been strongly criticized in British family studies, it has, perhaps ironically, become the dominant model used in such studies within China. As I have already noted, findings from the existing empirical literature are not consistent with the individualization narrative. Hence there is the urgency of formulating an alternative framework to analyze and explain family life and social change.

An Alternative Analytical Framework

INTIMACY

As part of responses to and critiques of new modernity theorists' work on modernity and intimacy, sociological work on family life in the West (especially in the United Kingdom) has generated a growing corpus of literature

focusing on the emotional quality of family relationships and ways in which different acts of intimacy sustain relational ties.[68] Chinese family research also reflects this theoretical shift, as seen in increasing research emphasis on the place of affection and emotions within Chinese families.[69] In order to facilitate analysis of the findings presented in this book, I highlight here two aspects that demand greater attention in the "intimate turn" of research on Chinese families.

The first relates to a tendency to privilege certain forms of intimacy. For example, notwithstanding Yan's presentation of a variety of ways in which Xiajia villagers demonstrated intimacy, he defines "intergenerational intimacy" as "a new kind of mutual knowing, understanding, and emotional sharing across generational lines,"[70] an approach that seemingly accords with Giddens' notion of intimacy (viz., "opening oneself to the other"[71] in "a process of mutual disclosure").[72] Jamieson refers to this as "disclosing intimacy"—"a process of two people mutually sustaining deep knowing and understanding, through talking and listening, sharing thoughts, showing feelings."[73] However, empirical research drawing on British and Chinese data[74] reveals that while disclosing intimacy may be more evident in modern relationships, it is not the key organizing principle of people's personal lives. For this reason, I have adopted Jamieson's concept of "practices of intimacy,"[75] which she defines as "practices which enable, generate and sustain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to each other" so to be open to other practices people adopt to build and sustain their intimacy. For example, in her analysis of empirical data from the United States, Zelizer[76] reveals the intertwining of intimacy and money: "Every relationship of coupling, caring, and household membership repeatedly mingles economic transactions and intimacy, usually without contamination." Throughout my own book, "intimacy" is not conceptually confined to the communicative or emotional, but also embraces the material, practical, and other formats. Boundaries between different ways of enabling intimacy are blurred rather than rigidly demarcated.

The second aspect is captured in Giddens' suggestion that personal life brings about social change by spreading democracy through the search for more intimate and equal relationships.[77] The problem here is that much empirical research indicates that intimacy does *not* automatically democratize personal relationships. On couple relationships, for example, Jamieson has documented extensive evidence that reveals the complexity of the relationship between practices of intimacy and the reproduction of male privilege. On parent-child relations, Western studies have shown that parental vocabulary viewed by parents as primarily as a means of conveying intimacy is considered by their children to be a surveillance device.[78] Practices of intimacy have also been blamed for contributing to class inequalities. For example, Lareau[79] has shown how middle-class parents in the United States use words of praise to

communicate a sense of privilege to their children, while disadvantaged parents communicate the virtues of helpfulness and accommodation in preference to those of independence and self-reliance, which might expose their children to being victimized or thought troublesome. In the Chinese context, such considerations have largely been ignored, Sun's investigation of migrant workers being one of the few studies that touch on the reproduction of inequalities in intimate domains. In any case, there remains an implicit assumption that intimacy is likely to lead to equality.[80] With such considerations in mind, this book views intimacy as a social domain in which existing social structures can be revivified.

INDIVIDUAL

The theoretical construct of new modernity writers (for example, Giddens and Beck and Beck-Geinsheim) is underlined by a notion of the individual as someone who is autonomous. In contrast, Smart argues that relationality remains central to late modern selves. Drawing upon Mead's[81] conceptualization of the self as social and reflexive Smart proposes a notion of relational self: "To live a personal life is to have agency and to make choices, but the personhood implicit in the concept requires the presence of others to respond to and to contextualize those actions and choices. Personal life is a reflexive state, but it is not private and it is lived out in relation to one's class position, ethnicity, gender and so on."[82] Jackson further argues that "reflexivity is found in self-other relationships, the ability to reflect on oneself from the perspective of another and, in turn, reflexivity enables co-operation with others."[83]

The notion of relational self is not alien to scholars of China, the individual in Chinese personal relationships having long been viewed as not sharing a Western liberal notion of an autonomous self. Commenting on personal relationships in Republican China, Fei Xiaotong[84] put forward the concept of a "differential mode of association" (*chaxugeju*). According to Fei, personal relations are circles of networks with the self at the center and relationships become increasingly distant as one moves further from this core; rather than being guided within a common structure, a person can be predicted to engage differently with those whom s/he encounters, depending on their positions within these circles. Fei's conceptualization has striking similarities with those of contemporary British sociologists, both of which highlight the relational as well as the adaptive nature of interactions between individual and others.

Grounded in these theorizations, I propose the concept of "elastic individuality" in order to capture the flexible and fluid processes in which a person's agency and relationality is embedded. The concept has two main features. First, the elastic individual is relational. As suggested by Fei's concept of the

"*differential* mode of association" (my emphasis), the individual can have different interactions with different people. Thus, s/he is more likely to display more individualistic attitudes or behavior toward those who are located more distantly from the self, while exhibiting a greater degree of loyalty toward those considered closer to the self. Such differentiation also varies according to temporal rhythms. Second, the elastic individual is also positional and social, the malleability of elasticity being shaped and constrained by one's position in various structures (for example, family, local community, workplace, village, and wider society). Conceptualizing "individual" in this manner, I hope to obviate a fundamental dichotomy that permeates the existing literature on Chinese family relations—parental authority and individual autonomy—and reveal the much more nuanced and dialectical nature of relations between individuals and their family members over the life course.

THE NARRATIVE OF CHANGE

Critics have frequently noted that a linear narrative of change, mobilized by both classic and new modernity writers, relies on a binary conceptual distinction between tradition and modernity, and is grounded in the oppositional thought convention of the enlightenment, with a present defined and differentiated from a fixed "othered" past.[85] During the last two decades this narrative has also helped shape Chinese family research, in which "tradition" tends to be used as the implicit comparative yardstick. For example, Yan's latest concepts—"neo-familism" and "the inverted family"—are coined in relation to "traditional familism" / "patriarchal family in traditional Chinese culture."[86] While Yan acknowledges the mixture of traditional, socialist, and neoliberal values in post-Mao China, interactions between tradition and modernity and their impact upon family relations have largely been omitted in the literature.

Opposition between tradition and modernity, as noted by Jackson and Ho,[87] is often "based on essentialist notions of indigenous culture and ignores the evolution, reshaping and (re)invention of tradition." Moreover, we are reminded by scholars that tradition is not always invented: values and ways of life are passed down from one generation to another and persist through time.[88] Thus, Jackson and Ho[89] argue in favor of striking a balance between acknowledgement of the ways in which tradition is constructed and reshaped and recognition of the persistence of histories and cultural ideals. Going one step further, Carter and Duncan[90] argue that "tradition" may feature strongly in people's improvisation of family practices in new or changing circumstances because of our tendency to make do with what we have at hand—a process they refer to as "bricolage." Duncan argues that "bricolage" provides a better analytical tool with which to capture the relationship between agency and

structure through action.[91] Although it shares with the individualization thesis an emphasis on do-it-yourself practices, bricolage is also different in the sense that individuals are not completely free agents, but make sense of *existing materials and knowledge* to create something new. Duncan summarizes, "People try to both conserve social energy and seek social legitimation in this adaption process, a process which can lead to a 're-serving' of tradition even as institutional leakage transfers meanings from past to present, and vice versa."

Using British data, embracing personal life in the 1950s, as well as young women's attitudes toward marriage, and the rise of cohabitation and living apart in the twentieth-first century, Carter and Duncan reveal how people build their lives through an assemblage of "tradition" and "modern." Rather than experiencing a radical break with a traditional past in late modern Britain, people constantly adapt and revivify traditions to accommodate new and changing situations. As a result, change may be "more gradual and partial than often claimed, or even act to reinforce continuity."[92]

EMBEDDED GENERATIONS

Building on these various theoretical constructs, in this book I introduce an "embedded generations" framework to depict a nonlinear process of generational change, continuity, and diversity in family life. The concept of "embedded generations" refers to the ongoing, multifaceted, relational, and institutional configuration of family life in which each generation is anchored and entails three interrelated processes. Firstly, "generation" is an important social structural factor, producing a particular set of formative and sociohistorical experiences.[93] Generational divides matter particularly in the Chinese context thanks to the country having witnessed a number of major state-engineered political, economic, and demographic mass movements in the second half of the twentieth century, each of which disproportionately impacted a specific generation. The family dynamics of each generation therefore reflect the institutional markers of the era with which its members are associated. Secondly, generation is also relational in the sense that a familial generation does not stand on its own, like the "elastic individual." Children's, parents', and grandparents' lives are intricately and dependently intertwined across each generation's life course. Each generation is connected to other generations and serves as a bridge for intergenerational transmission and negotiation at the everyday level. Finally, individuals are diverse in their resource endowments and knowledge in materializing their agency. This generates uneven processes of intergenerational configuration (how individuals relate to other family members during intergenerational negotiations) as well as of institutional configuration (how individuals respond to the broader institutional

context). In short, there are variations and contestations of family practices within a generation and between generations.

Noteworthy also are two structural factors that may contribute to these uneven processes. *Gender* is a key structural factor in family life: maintenance of family welfare and preservation of intergenerational relations are premised on an implicit gender contract.[94] In China traditionally patrilineal culture cultivated a strong son preference, since sons were looked to as sources of old age support in contrast to married daughters who were transferred into the filial landscape of their in-laws. Although women's liberation has been a core component of the Chinese Communist Party's rhetoric since 1949, gender inequalities have persisted in both public and private spheres, and care and domestic work has remained a woman's responsibility.[95] In post-Mao China, gender ideology became even more entrenched with the rise of a public discourse promoting a "natural" gender order with women's family duties emphasized (as a wife and mother).[96] In the new millennium, a "resurgence of Confucian patriarchal tradition" has gone hand in hand with the "neoliberal rhetoric of individual responsibility," emphasizing the traditional virtues of womanhood while simultaneously presenting "women's sacrifices as their own personal choice."[97]

Western sociologists have often viewed class as another structuring factor. Despite government efforts, starting in the Mao era, to address class inequalities, actions of the party-state have paradoxically generated an urban-rural divide that persists as the most fundamental form of stratification within China. The *urban-rural divide* is not merely a geographic division, but is systemic, differentiating people's access to opportunities, livelihood, and welfare benefits. Since 1958 a strict household registration system (*hukou*) has existed, serving to segregate China's entire population into these two residential categories. In Mao era, it effectively prevented rural-urban migration in order to control consumption and finance capital-intensive heavy industrialization in urban centers. Although subsequent economic reforms removed the ban on rural-urban migration, urban-rural segregation has remained intact. Here the crucial institutional feature is that the benefits to which someone and his or her family are entitled are tied to where their *hukou* is located. Previously, rural families were far less likely than urban families to have health insurance and access to pensions. Due to the systematic extension of various social benefit programs over the last two decades, most rural families are now covered by health insurance and may also have access to pensions. However, thanks to the very uneven administrative structures of welfare benefits in China, the level of benefits, and reimbursement rates available to rural citizens are much inferior to those of urban *hukou* holders. Thus, migrants with a rural *hukou* have to rely on health insurance and pension provisions back in their native villages, not those provided to urbanites who may be employed alongside them. As a result

of unequal access to the benefits of China's modernization, urban and rural families possess profoundly different financial and discursive capacities to practice family life and intimacy. The interaction of many other factors, including sibling structure and the enactment of life courses, generate further compound effects. By incorporating such factors into my analysis, I reveal how individuals, in a multitude of ways, have imagined, negotiated, and lived out their family lives.

Central to my argument is the belief that these multifaceted, interacting, and uneven processes—institutional and intergenerational—have contributed to a nonlinear transition from the past to the present and brought about complex shifts and continuities in family practices across several generations in China. The "embedded generations" model makes no preconceived assumptions about the direction of generational change and offers a dynamism that is absent from the linear historical progressions implied in the modernization theorizing or the neo-familism / "inverted family" model.

Fieldwork

This book draws on life history interviews collected during two phases of fieldwork, which I conducted in China as part of two research projects. In 2011 I spent four months in two villages (in Shandong and Hunan), collecting sixty life history interviews with seventeen multigenerational families in order to investigate the impact of rural-urban migration on familial support in rural China. Since I lived with local families in each village, I was involved on a daily basis in various family life routines, such as cooking, washing, cleaning, shopping, eating meals, and playing with children, as well as joining in frequent informal discussions with villagers from all walks of life. These experiences provided me with rich ethnographic data that further contextualized the life history narratives. Although my focus at the time was on intergenerational relations and old age support, I also collected detailed information about other aspects of family life, including child-rearing, mate selection and marital relations across different generations. This first phase of fieldwork sparked my interest in undertaking a much larger-scale study that would show how Chinese family life has shifted across multiple generations. Thanks to funding made available by the European Research Council, in 2016 I was able to assemble a research team, which, under my leadership, embarked on a three-year intensive program of fieldwork in China. In this second phase, I applied the same research methods—life history interviews and ethnographic observations—but broadened the geographical scope of fieldwork sites by adding a village in Fujian and three major Chinese cities.

THE SITES

All three rural fieldwork sites were villages located far away from urban centers (*yuanjiaocun*)[98] with a relatively high proportion (at least 70 percent) of households that had experienced migration. However, each was characterized by its own distinctive migration history and trajectory. The village in Shandong was located in the interior of the northern Chinese province. From the 1990s male villagers—initially in small numbers—began to migrate in search of work in Beijing and other provincial cities in North China. As they became aware of the significantly higher wages earned by these pioneers, others followed and from the year 2000 migration increased markedly. The gender composition of migrants aged between sixteen and twenty-five was quite even, and most of them—some having completed, others having curtailed their middle school education—sought work in urban factories. After returning to the village to marry, most husbands maintained their migrant status, usually leaving their wives in the village, although in a small number of cases returning to the urban sector with their new wives. As a result, except during the Chinese New Year holiday, when most migrants returned to their villages, the majority of permanent village residents comprised older people, married women, and children. However, when I revisited the region in the second phase of my fieldwork, a new trend was observable whereby following the marriage of their adult children many middle-generation male migrants returned to their village and become wage-earning local workers.

The village in Hunan (South-Central China) was located in the interior of the province. Its relatively hilly terrain made arable farming more difficult than in the Shandong Village (which was located on a plain), but its closeness to Guangdong—the site of one of China's first Special Economic Zones—meant that it had a longer history of outward migration. Starting in the 1980s, young men who had dropped out of school began to leave the village to work on urban construction sites, mainly in Guangdong. Most of them subsequently returned to the village to get married, after which their wives stayed behind to look after the young children. When these children reached school age, however, most married women followed their husband in search of urban work, supporting their husbands as street vendors or working as cleaners in factories. As a result, from the year 2000—earlier than in Shandong—the permanent population of the Hunan village mostly comprised older people and their grandchildren.

The Fujian village was in Southern Fujian province (southeast China). Being close to Nan'an, a city with a manufacturing base for plumbing appliances, it had experienced outward migration since the 1980s. However, unlike

the other two villages, a local tradition of entrepreneurship[99] meant that most village migrants found their first jobs as self-employed traders, buying appliances and parts from Nan'an factories and selling them to customers in major cities in western China. As in rural Shandong and Hunan, male migrants returned to their village to marry, subsequently returning to cities with their wives who supported their business activities as well as seeing to household tasks. When they became pregnant, the wives went back to the village to give birth, but several months later they returned to the city with their babies. As part of this migration trajectory, many grandchildren born in the village grew up in a city, while those who remained in the village were mainly older grandparents and members of the middle generation who worked as casual wage laborers in nearby township enterprises.

My urban fieldwork sites were the three cities of Tianjin, Guangzhou, and Xi'an. In the nineteenth century Tianjin, in northern coastal China, was an important port (including for Beijing) and housed the site of foreign-controlled concessions. After 1949 it grew into one of the most important industrial and commercial centers in China, with a population of 13.8 million and per capita GDP of $14,726 (2023). Guangzhou (south China), once known to the Western world as Canton, was for centuries a commercial melting pot, where China met the rest of the world. Today it is the capital of Guangdong province, and remains one of the largest (with a population of 18.6 million) and most economically advanced Chinese cities (with a per capita GDP of $19,422 in 2020). Xi'an (in central inland China) was one of China's ancient capital cities. It is now the provincial capital of Shaanxi province, with a population of 12.9 million and per capita GDP of $11,216 (2020). All three cities now comprise rapidly aging urban societies. According to the latest National Census, in 2020 the share of total population aged sixty-five and over was 7.82 percent in Guangzhou, 10.9 percent in Xi'an, and 14.75 percent in Tianjin.

The choice of these sites was strongly influenced by previous anthropological investigations of spatial variations in China. The renowned anthropologist William Skinner[100] identified nine regions of China—each possessing its own distinctive economic and natural resource endowments, environmental conditions, and cultural traditions—based on the drainage basins of major rivers and other geomorphological features affecting communications.[101] Others also have emphasized north-south divides, highlighting, for example, the strong lineage tradition of southern provinces, such as Guangdong and Fujian, in contrast to the absence of such a tradition in the northern half of the country.[102] With the benefit of hindsight, it has become clear that differences between my fieldwork sites in cities and their impact on family dynamics and behavior proved to be of minor importance, thanks to the nature of China's state-led urban-oriented economic development and engineering. By contrast,

differences between conditions in the three villages, especially divergent migration and livelihood trajectories, generated varied and distinctive patterns of family formation and dynamics (see chapter 1 and chapter 5). In the end, however, the most significant divide of all was and remains the contrasting circumstances between the urban and rural fieldwork sites and the divergent family life trajectories to which they have given rise.

SAMPLING AND INTERVIEWEES CHARACTERISTICS

Purposive nonrandom sampling techniques were utilized in the recruitment of interviewees.[103] Four key criteria were employed to target specific groups within the population: namely, location (urban, rural and semi-rural / semi-urban—the last comprising suburban counties and villages), socioeconomic background, age, and gender. In total, this book draws upon 130 urban interviews with 43 urban families, and 130 rural interviews with 37 rural families.[104] Private interviews were conducted with members of two or three generations in each family unit.[105] Each interviewee was first asked to recall his or her childhood and then encouraged to take the lead in narrating their life stories. Further questions relating to relationships with family members were raised if these had not been covered during previous conversations. Particular care was taken to assure each interviewee that their responses would be treated in total confidence and not revealed to other members of their family.[106]

The life history approach proved fruitful for several reasons. First, people's life histories provided a captivating way of linking the past and present, bringing individual lives and wider social processes together and offering rare insights into changes and continuities. In doing so, they also exemplified Mills' idea of the sociological imagination and its ability to link history, biography, and society. Second, in a family setting, the life history approach helped to map out the relationships and dynamics between family members. Third, it provided overlaps between the chronologies of different family members, making it possible to cross-reference narratives, testing their credibility and identifying discrepancies between them. In addition to the life history interviews, through repeated physical visits and frequent communications via social media I was able to follow closely[107] the lives of a significant number—about one-third—of the interviewees during the second phase of fieldwork (2016–19). In 2023, after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, I also revisited some of the interviewees.

Members of the grandparent generation (G1) were born between the early 1930s and early 1950s. Those of the middle generation (G2) were born in the 1950s and the early 1970s. The generation of grandchildren (G3) were born between the 1980s and 2000s. I use the generation of grandparents to define a

multigenerational family as either urban or rural, which means that among rural G2 and rural G3 members, some may be resident in cities as a result of rural-urban migration. The interviewees' characteristics are listed in Appendix A. They represent a mixed gender distribution within each generation and include interviewees from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Among urban families, the proportion of interviewees engaged in working-class occupations (factory workers, self-employed vendors, and low-paid service workers) fell sharply across the three generations: from 76 percent (G1), to 53 percent (G2), to just 8 percent (G3). Among rural families, the proportion of interviewees who were farmers in each generation declined from 76 percent (G1), to 20 percent (G2), to 0 percent (G3). These occupational shifts across the three generations reflect the broader process of socioeconomic transformation that has taken place in China since the 1980s, including the expansion of higher education, growth of the service sector, and accelerated rural-to-urban migration.

The household sample includes a small number of elite families in the G1 generation, but the overwhelming majority are "ordinary" families. Prompted by Carter and Duncan's warning[108] against the disproportionate "marking" and exaggeration of the unusual and extraordinary at the cost of neglecting the ordinary and mundane that constitutes the bulk of social life, I have excluded new family formations that have emerged in post-Mao China, such as homosexual couples and transnational families, and focused on heteronormative, domestic families such as those of Chen and Li (see above). In other words, my book does not claim to be exhaustive in the sense of embracing all family formations in every generation. Rather, through the multi-sited and generational-sequence design it seeks to identify and capture the common features of generational change and continuity as well as diversity within families across different sites. In doing so, it fills a major gap in the scholarly literature on the dynamics and behavior of Chinese families.

Structure of the Book

Grounded in a careful analysis of life history interviews, the chapters that follow trace how family practices—childhood experiences, courtship, marriage decisions, marital life, sex and intimacy, and aging and old age support—shift throughout the life course. Except for the discussion of sexual relationships (where it was impossible get all members of one family unit to talk openly about sex),[109] each chapter comprises a small number of multigenerational urban and rural family case studies that are indicative of patterns of family behavior in chosen settings. In order to avoid repeating similar quotes, I provide a detailed description of these cases by way of contextualizing lived

experiences and family history. Discussion of these cases is supplemented by other family data in order to capture variance and diversity within each generation.

Chapter 1 examines the changes and continuities in childhood experiences across three generations. While the economic value of children as family helpers has dramatically declined, their potential value as a source of security in old age has remained an important adjunct to the emotional value that they command. In cities, overseen by their parents and driven by both neoliberal market and post-socialist state forces, the one-child generation has experienced an increasingly regimentalized childhood. By contrast, while facing the same pressure to study hard as their urban counterparts, the childhood of the younger rural generation has been profoundly shaped by multilayered institutionalized inequalities, including urban-rural segregation and patrilineal gender ideology.

Chapter 2 examines marital experiences across three generations. Rather than a universalizing triumph of conjugal intimacy, the picture that emerges reveals an embeddedness of conjugal intimacy within extended family ties. Chinese parents continue to matter greatly in children's lives, whether in terms of choosing a spouse, getting married, or managing conjugal life. As the life course evolves, the configuration of conjugal intimacy and intergenerational intimacy fluctuates. Whether or not vertical ties are managed well can have a major impact on the quality of conjugal intimacy. It also emerges from the analysis that intimacy is not automatically emancipatory and that inequalities, such as gender and urban-rural divides, are reproduced in the intimate domain.

Chapter 3 examines premarital sex, conjugal sex, and extramarital affairs. In contrast to Western sociology's progressive narrative of the impact of rapid social change on sexual lives during the last half century, the Chinese narrative reveals paradoxical changes and continuities across three generations of men and women. Despite a widening repertoire of sexual practices and increasing emphasis on "pleasure" among members of the youngest generation, gender transcends both the urban-rural and generational divides. In premarital and conjugal sex, male privilege in sexual agency and discourse permeates activities behind closed doors, where consent can be manufactured and women are more likely to be pressured into having sex. Only extramarital affairs offer a momentary glimpse of the "pure relationship" and "plastic sexuality" described by new modernity writers.

Chapter 4 focuses on grandparenting and shows how it has morphed into a familial responsibility. The three-generation comparison suggests that while grandparenthood has traditionally been honored in Chinese families, grandparenting is not embedded in Chinese culture. Rather, it is a reinvented "tradition" in response to the challenges presented by China's socioeconomic and

demographic transformations. The chapter also emphasizes gender and urban-rural differences. As a general rule, grandmothers throughout China bear the main responsibility for everyday tasks in raising grandchildren. However, thanks to their more advantageous economic status, *urban* grandparents are much more favorably placed than their rural counterparts in negotiating intergenerational dynamics.

Chapter 5 examines shifts and continuities in old age support practices across the three generations. While generational comparisons reveal a decline in everyday financial and instrumental support by adult children for their parents, crisis-induced intergenerational solidarity (arrangements for hospitalization and terminal care) remain intact. Concurrently, as the market economy has developed, differences in aging experience have widened between urban and rural families as well as between working-class and affluent families. The chapter further examines how filial morality, material considerations, and affection toward parents figure together in driving children's old age support. Against a backdrop of commercialized housing and the rapid development of the real estate market, the increasing financial importance of urban parental property has become a powerful weapon to prevent children straying from the filial path. However, for rural parents who lack significant material leverage, reliance on the weight of affective and moral imperatives in turning adult sons' filial obligations into solid care practices can carry risks.

The concluding chapter summarizes the main findings and returns to the framework of the "embedded generations." The diversity within Chinese families, along with the coexistence of continuity and change, shaped by the multifaceted and uneven processes underlying institutional and intergenerational configurations, do not support arguments based on a linear, unidirectional theory of family change. Rather than a transition from tradition to modern / postmodern, ideas and practices deemed "traditional" have constantly been reapplied and adapted to family life in different eras. As family life is embedded in local sociocultural and material conditions, while the youngest generation exhibits superficially similar trends (e.g., nuclear family lifestyles, falling fertility) to Western societies, the meaning or consequences of these practices are profoundly different. Chinese families continue to honor "traditional" intergenerational life-long reciprocity, and conjugal intimacy continues to be firmly anchored within the interdependent web of family and kin relations.

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