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The Gender of Communication: Changing Expectations of Mothers and Daughters in Urban China*

Harriet Evans[†]

ABSTRACT In the flow of the material, cultural and moral influences shaping contemporary Chinese society, individual desires for emotional communication are reconstituting the meaning of the subject, self and responsibility. This article draws on fieldwork conducted in Beijing between 2000 and 2004 to discuss the gendered dimensions of this process through an analysis of the implications of the “communicative intimacy” sought by mothers and daughters in their mutual relationship. What could be termed a “feminization of intimacy” is the effect of two distinct but linked processes: on the one hand, a market-supported naturalization of women’s roles, and on the other, the changing subjective articulation of women’s needs, desires and expectations of family and personal relationships. I argue that across these two processes, the celebration of a communicative intimacy does not signify the emergence of more equal family or gender relationships, as recent theories about the individualization and cultural democratization of daily life in Western societies have argued. As families and kin groups, communities and neighbourhoods are physically, spatially and socially broken up, and as gender differences in employment and income increase, media and “expert” encouragement to mothers to become the all-round confidantes, educators and moral guides of their children affirms women’s responsibilities in the domestic sphere. Expectations of mother–daughter communication reshape the meaning – and experience – of the individual subject in the changing character of the urban family at the same time as they reinforce ideas about women’s gendered attributes and the responsibilities associated with them.

One afternoon in the spring of 2002 when I was conducting fieldwork in Beijing for my research on gender and mother–daughter relationships, I became involved in a lengthy conversation with a group of young students about their

* A draft of this article was presented at the International Conference on Gender Studies, Fudan University, 26–29 June 2009, and I am grateful to the participants of the conference for their comments. The article draws on individual narratives I first discussed in *The Subject of Gender*. I specially thank Gail Hershatter for her perceptive critical suggestions both about my book and this article.

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“communication” (*goutong* 沟通) with their mothers. The conversation was sparked off by the comments one of them made about the pleasure she remembered as a child in being able to “share lots of things” with her mother¹:

When I got home from school, I really enjoyed telling her about everything, about my friends and my teachers, but not many children got on with their mothers like that. They used to just go home and do their homework or watch TV. She used to play with me. We got on with each other very well. She didn't seem like an adult. The atmosphere was great.

The other three young women in the group listened intently as Ruihua went on to describe other memories of her mother, and the conversation opened up into a discussion about *goutong* as a communicative bond of trust and intimacy between mother and daughter. Each of the women had their own experiences of family life as well as different desires for and even fantasies about relationships they had not had, so they did not share the same view of the qualities *goutong* implied. Their spontaneous use of term, however, suggested a familiarity with a language of individual emotional expression to which women of their mothers' generation, all subjects of the collectivist ethics of the Mao years, did not have access. As our conversation developed, the term *goutong* seemed to encapsulate a range of desires, longings and ideals of relatedness with parents, particularly with mothers, that were significantly different from those voiced by women who grew up during the 1950s and 1960s and marked the younger women as subjects of the individualizing discourse of the contemporary period.

One of the most profound aspects of China's transformation in the past half century has been the shift away from a collectivist and family-oriented ethics of personal responsibilities to an individualistic ethics of rights and self-development.² This “great transformation,” as Yan Yunxiang calls it, is necessarily a patchy process with far from uniform effects across the multiple differences of Chinese society and culture, and its manifestations in individuals' demands for rights, self-fulfilment and personal satisfaction are unevenly intersected by “age-old moral teachings of collective well-being” and by new moral positions including compassion to strangers.³ The new subject constituted in the social and cultural spaces of this shift appears in many guises: as the consumer-oriented effect and driver of the market's incitement to competition and personal success, the selfish individual motivated by little more than material self-interest,⁴ and, as Yan Yunxiang argues, the product of a state-managed process of individualization in which the state “manages the process of

1 I describe this conversation in greater detail in *The Subject of Gender: Daughter and Mothers in Urban China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), pp. 70–71.

2 Yunxiang Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society* (London: Berg, 2009).

3 *Ibid.* pp. xvii–xviii. See also Yunxiang Yan, “The Good Samaritan's new trouble: a study of the changing moral landscape in contemporary China,” *Social Anthropology*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2009), pp. 9–24, for a fascinating analysis of extortionists and public responses to them as an illustration of the multiple and inconsistent implications of the recent changes in China's “moral landscape.”

4 This view has been most notably associated with Ci Jiwei's claims that China is in “moral crisis.” Ci Jiwei, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: from Utopianism to Hedonism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

individualization by drawing boundaries and regulating directions.”⁵ This includes, as I argue below, those concerning the articulation of individual emotional needs and desires. The individualizing thrust of China’s socio-economic transformation is therefore an affective, moral and indeed epistemological process as much as a socio-economic and cultural one. Alongside the unprecedented material and social independence that characterizes young people’s lives, satisfaction of individual emotional needs is widely seen as a condition of sustainability of intimate personal relationships. This is much more than an effect of changing socio-economic and cultural forces making people more assertive in articulating their emotional needs, for in the flow of the material, cultural and moral influences shaping contemporary society, individual desires for emotional communication are reconstituting the meaning of the subject, self and responsibility in China.

This article discusses women’s experiences and expectations of the daughter–mother relationship in urban China since the mid-1950s as a particular instance of the affective and ethical transformation of the subject in China. “Emotion gets its meaning and force from its location and performance in the public realm of discourse.”⁶ Emotions are, as Lutz and Abu-Lughod amongst others argue, culturally and socially constituted, with changing articulations, idioms and symbols of expression across time. Changing meanings and modalities of emotional expression are also constitutive of changing affective and ethical subjects and relationships that are reshaping expectations of interpersonal and family life. While this process is uneven and patchy, and does not follow any uniform pattern across China’s many locational, cultural and ethnic, socio-economic, and generational differences, its effects in mediating both rural and urban expectations of close relationships have been increasingly noted in recent scholarship.⁷ Urban daughters’ and mothers’ subjectivities are being shaped, inter alia, within material and consumer practices and popular discourses corresponding with the “directions” established by the state, and encouraging individual emotional satisfaction in personal and family relationships.⁸ Communication (*goutong*) and the verbal articulation of emotional needs and desires between parents and children, so family psychologists and child education experts writing in the

5 Yunxiang Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society* (London: Berg, 2009), p. xxvii. See also pp.273–94 for his analysis of the contrasts and intersections between what he sees as the individualization of Chinese society and the individualizing processes of Western societies.

6 Catherine A. Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod (eds.), *Language and the Politics of Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 9.

7 Yunxiang Yan put forward a similar argument with reference to family and intimate relationships in rural areas in *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 81–82.

8 My focus is not on the state in its various external and internal effects on subject formation, but I should point out that my reference to the state does not presuppose a uniform, let alone monolithic entity. Sara Friedman discusses this in her analysis of the relationship between state power and subject formation in the intimate lives of women in Hui’an county, south-eastern China, using a Foucaultian notion of governmentality. Sara L. Friedman, “The intimacy of state power: marriage, liberation and the socialist subjects in southeastern China,” *American Ethnologist*, Vol.32, No. 2 (2005), pp. 312–27.

Chinese women's press suggest, contribute to stable and sustainable personal and family relationships.⁹ Daughters' and mothers' personal narratives similarly identify mutual communication, trust and understanding as key aspects of their desires for, if not necessarily experiences of, their mutual relationship.

The following discussion draws on fieldwork I conducted between 2000 and 2004 in Beijing, talking with educated and professional women of different ages about their experiences of the mother–daughter relationship since the early years of the PRC. I extend some of the arguments I made in the book that resulted from this research to discuss the implications of what I see as the gendered dimensions of the “communicative intimacy” sought by mothers and daughters in their mutual relationship for the new “individualist ethics” of self-development. The first part of the article discusses major arguments put forward in recent years by sociologists and anthropologists about the “intimate turn” or, as Yan Yunxiang has put it, the growing “emotional expressivity” that characterizes contemporary aspirations in family and interpersonal relationships. It then considers daughters' and mothers' changing experiences of “communication” in the context of the social and cultural transformation of urban family life. I suggest that discursive celebration of a communicative intimacy does not signify the emergence of more equal family or gender relationships, as recent theories about the individualization and cultural democratization of daily life in Western societies have argued.¹⁰ As families and kin groups, communities and neighbourhoods are physically, spatially and socially broken up, and as gender differences in employment and income increase, discursive encouragement to mothers to become the all-round confidantes, educators and moral guides of their children through “communicating” with them affirms women's responsibilities in the domestic sphere. Expectations of mother–daughter communication affirm a new ethics of the individual subject in the changing character of the urban family at the same time as they reinforce the gendered attributes and responsibilities associated with them.

Perspectives on Intimacy

Intimacy in Western societies has been a topic of historical and sociological debate for many decades, spanning the changing forms of romantic and sexual partnerships, cross-generational relationships, social friendship networks, and changing family structures and forms.¹¹ Different arguments have been put forward to explain the changing material and cultural environments generating this

9 Evans, *The Subject of Gender*, pp. 92–93.

10 Ulrich Beck and E. Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Antony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

11 Jacqui Gabb has written a useful comprehensive review of recent sociological literature on intimacy in Western culture, especially the UK and the US, in *Researching Intimacy in Families* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

interest. Lynn Jamieson, for example, sees it in part as the effect of feminist attention to the politics of the person in affective and personal life.¹² Beck and Beck-Gernsheim have argued that it is a consequence of the individualization of post-war Western societies and its contradictory effects. “A kind of universal *Zeitgeist* has seized hold of people, urging them to do their own thing,” disturbing previous patterns of gender and family relationships and promoting an ever more zealous search for intimacy and love as a “counter to, refuge from the chilly environment of our affluent, impersonal, uncertain society, stripped of its traditions and scarred by all kinds of risk.”¹³ For Baumann, as for Beck, the “present day uncertainty of working life is a powerful individualizing force ... It divides instead of uniting, and since there is no telling who might wake up in the division, the idea of ‘common interests’ grows ever more nebulous and in the end becomes incomprehensible. Fears, anxieties and grievances are made in such a way as to be suffered alone.”¹⁴

Against such tendencies, the “colonization of public space with the intimacies of private life” can be seen as a response to the vulnerability and isolation of the individual in contemporary society.¹⁵ Much of the recent debate about the forms and effects of this “intimate turn” has taken shape around Giddens’ argument that the transformation of intimacy signifies a “wholesale democratization of the interpersonal domain.”¹⁶ The separation between sexuality and reproduction, Giddens argued, has eroded familial ties of obligation and facilitated the emergence of “pure relationships” between men and women as equal partners. Whatever their different emphases, these arguments share the view that the reconfiguration of forms of intimacy in Western societies has to be understood against the backdrop of the separation of the self-determining and self-reflexive individual from the “traditional” constraints of family, community and social class at the same time as modern social institutions reinforce the status of the family as a social unit of affect.

On the basis of her analysis of the historical constitution of intimacy in structuring family relationships in the West across the 20th century, Jamieson critiques Giddens’ argument on the ground that it ignores the plurality of the relational dimensions of most people’s affective lives, and marginalizes the gendered, ethnic and class mediations of the “material and embodied contexts” in which intimate

12 Lynn Jamieson, *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

13 Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, pp. 2–3. Antony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*.

14 Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 24.

15 *Ibid.* p. 6. This brings to mind Richard Sennett’s earlier “tyranny of intimacy” as “the product of the dislocations caused by nineteenth century capitalism and secular belief.” He wrote: “The reigning belief today is that closeness between persons is a moral good. The reigning aspiration today is to develop individual personality through experiences of closeness and warmth with others. The reigning myth today is that the evils of society can all be understood as evils of impersonality, alienation, and coldness. The sum of these three is an ideology of intimacy: social relationships of all kinds are real, believable, and authentic the closer they approach the inner psychological concerns of each person.” See Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 259.

16 Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, pp. 3–6, 58.

relationships are experienced.¹⁷ She argues that while there has been a notable shift towards a culture of “affective and communicative disclosure,” there is little evidence that this leads to more equal and democratic relationships. Parenting, for example, “is rarely a gender-neutral activity and often exacerbates inequalities.”¹⁸ Intimacy between parents and adolescent children, she suggests, may often be served better by silence rather than disclosure, and rather than cementing bonds of affection and trust, “disclosure” may function more as an information-seeking device on the part of the anxious parent.

Emotions and interpersonal ethics have not, to date, been a dominant theme in sociological and anthropological research on contemporary China. What there is has tended to feature culturalist claims about either the insignificance or the instrumental purpose of the emotions in the social life of China’s rural communities.¹⁹ Yan Yunxiang’s *Private Life under Socialism* made a path-breaking contribution in analysing the emergence of “emotional expressivity” as a new component of the individual’s sense of value in personal relationships produced in the circulation of global cultural influences in local village society.²⁰ More recently, Yan has linked these greater demands for “emotional expressivity” to what he argues is a changing moral landscape of family and social relations under the individualizing shift in contemporary Chinese society.²¹ However, this process started long before the advent of the market reforms of the past three decades. The Maoist attempt to “untie” (*songbang* 松绑) individuals from the four ropes (political, clan, religious and gendered) that bound them to “traditional” society was the first step in a much longer process of constructing new social subjects tied to the collective and the state through the institutional mechanisms of the household registration system, state job allocation, and unified purchase and sale. Rural and enterprise reforms from the late 1970s on have continued and intensified this process in a new direction, resulting in the “untying” of the individual from the socialist institutions of the Mao era, and the unleashing of a state and market-driven process of individualization, replacing the collective subject of earlier times with the self-interested but paradoxically ethical compassionate individual subject of today.²²

Media, popular and academic opinion abounds with descriptions of China’s moral crisis and moral decline over the past few decades. Some scholars such

17 Jamieson, *Intimacy*, p.2.

18 *Ibid.* p. 488.

19 See particularly Sulamith Heins Potters and Jack M. Potter, *China’s Peasants: the Anthropology of a Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Andrew Kipnis, *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North China Village* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

20 Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life*, p. 83.

21 Yan draws a distinction between the concepts of individualization and individuality, in order to distinguish the emphasis now given to the “individual” in Chinese society from that which is embedded in the philosophical heritage of Western societies. He defines the notion of the individual within the changing balance between individual person, groups and institutions, and as necessarily differing across time and place. See the concluding chapter to *The Individualization of Chinese Society*.

22 See Yan Yunxiang’s discussion about *songbang* (untying) as a process redefining the relationships between the individual person, family, collective and state since the early days of the Mao era. See *ibid.* pp. xviii–xxiii.

as Ci Jiwei argue that the erosion of the collective has undermined the foundations of social and moral responsibility.²³ Guo Yuhua's research on the neglect of the elderly in a rural community points to a similar analysis.²⁴ In contrast, Liu Xin's arguments about the constitution of a new "moral space" in contemporary China identify a new ethical sensibility at the heart of the individual's "conditions of existence."²⁵ Jankowiak's work on urban China similarly points to the emergence of a new ethics at the intersection of the market and the new social relationships, practices and interactions it has generated.²⁶ With specific reference to urban singletons of north-eastern China, Vanessa Fong has identified a heightened sense of filial responsibility in response to parental suffering and self-sacrifice.²⁷ In contrast with his earlier attention to the rise of the self-interested "uncivil individual," Yan Yunxiang's recent work broadens out these arguments to point to the "multi-layered and multi-directional" meanings China's new moral space holds for different groups of people.²⁸

My research similarly suggests that the shift towards an emphasis on individual emotional self-fulfilment in personal – in my case, daughter–mother – relationships is producing multi-dimensional effects. As the following discussion demonstrates, experiences of the mother–daughter relationships of urban women born between the 1950s and the 1980s suggest that desires for recognition of the independent emotional self through communicative practice are replacing "traditional" expectations of the younger generation's obedience to parental authority. While on the one hand this is commensurate with the increasing self-interest of the individual, it is also on the other hand generating a new ethics of mutual recognition and exchange between parents and children, particularly mothers and daughters. As I have argued elsewhere, this shift also has its part to play in explaining daughters' attempts to renegotiate their sense of filial responsibility to their natal parents alongside rather than in contradiction to, their own desires for self-fulfillment.²⁹

Daughters of the Mao Era

Family relationships in urban China in the 1950s and 1960s were profoundly affected by the party-state's structures and demands of employment and political

23 Ci Jiwei, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution*; Ci Jiwei, "The moral crisis in post-Mao China: prolegomenon to a philosophical analysis," *Diogenes*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (2009), pp. 19–25, <http://dio.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/56/1/19>.

24 Guo Yuhua, "Daiji guanxi zhong de gongping luoji jiqi bianqian: dui Hebei nongcun yanglao shijian de fenxi" ("The logic of fairness and its transformation in cross-generational relations: analysis of a case of elderly care in rural Hebei"), *Zhongguo xueshu (Chinese Scholarship)*, No. 4 (2001), pp. 221–54.

25 Liu Xin, *The Otherness of Self: a Genealogy of the Self in Contemporary China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p.183.

26 William Jankowiak, "Market reforms, nationalism and the expansion of urban China's moral horizon," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, No. 33 (2004), pp. 167–210.

27 Vanessa Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy*. Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2004).

28 Yan Yunxiang, "The Good Samaritan's new trouble," p. 22.

29 See 'Reproducing filiality,' chapter seven of *The Subject of Gender*.

participation. Parents worked long hours, leaving early in the morning and often returning in the late evening. As the years progressed, they had to participate in more and more political meetings, campaigns and other activities organized under the auspices of their work units. Some, including mothers of many of my interview subjects, spent long periods away from home in cadre school or working in distant communes and state farms. Many were enthusiastic participants in the new government's drive for social and economic development, and were ambitious for their daughters. However, life was difficult for these women, and, exhausted by the demands of work and domestic life, frequently including the care of parents and parents-in-law and without much help from their husbands, they had little time or energy for their children.

One such mother was a textile worker in the eastern suburbs of Beijing, whose daughter Yuling told me her story.³⁰ Originally from a landlord's family, she considered herself fortunate to have been allocated a factory job in Beijing and to have been given accommodation in the factory housing that formed part of work unit compound. She used to leave home at six or seven o'clock for the morning shift and did not return until the afternoon. If on the later shift, she would sleep in the factory dormitory at midday. At home, she was extremely attentive to her mother's and mother-in-law's needs; her two brothers had died and she took her filial responsibilities very seriously. But she always seemed to be tired and never had much time for her three daughters, whose maternal grandmother took over their day-to-day care. In her second year of primary school, Yuling started going as a weekly boarder to a school in another part of the city, so she only saw her mother at weekends. Her mother was ambitious for her daughters and tried to inculcate in them a commitment to study as the means to achieve the same opportunities in life as men. She was a proud and demanding woman who became increasingly dissatisfied with her lot. In comparison with many of her fellow workers, she was relatively well educated, since as the daughter of a landlord family she had received six years of education. She tended to look down on other families who, though similarly employed, came from less educated backgrounds. Yuling suffered from her demands, and grew up feeling emotionally alienated from her mother.

She didn't have any time to take care of us or do things with us ... and her demands on us were enormous. Sometimes we couldn't satisfy her demands. During the Cultural Revolution, when there were no books to read and we just spent our time playing around outside, she got really dissatisfied, and she took out her frustration on us, demanding that we study all the time. But we were children, and of course we wanted to play. And then when we were teenagers, she didn't really understand us, she wasn't willing to try to understand us. Maybe there wasn't such an idea around.

Yuling's emotional detachment from her mother characterized the experiences of a number of urban women of her generation and background who shared their stories with me. She, as many others I interviewed, were mothered by capable and

30 *The Subject of Gender*, pp. 46–47. The names of the women to whom I refer in this article are the same as those I use in *The Subject of Gender*, and all are pseudonyms to protect my informants' anonymity.

educated women who routinely had to respond to multiple and conflicting interests – of work and political activity, their own desires to achieve recognition in the public world of “male-female equality” (*nannü pingdeng* 男女平等), caring for their elders, supporting their husbands, and doing the domestic work associated with their responsibilities as wives and mothers. The notion of the parent–child relationship as a communicative bond had little place in the cultural and political environment of their formative years in Mao’s China, and, heavily influenced by what their daughters described as the “traditional patriarchal” culture of their family upbringing, they demanded compliance and respect from their daughters. In their daughters’ accounts, their practice of mothering consisted of authoritative guidance and training and expectations of obedience to enable them to grow into successful socialist subjects and mothers of the socialist future.³¹

What I want to emphasize here is not that mutual affection was absent in these relationships: daughters’ attitudes towards their mothers changed and in some cases warmed as they came to understand the material and political constraints defining their childhood experiences. Rather, the constitution and character of the mother–child relationship was neither culturally nor discursively associated with the communicative bond that women of later generations have come to associate with good mothering. Traditional Confucian notions of intergenerational relationships, typically expressed through filial piety, did not include attention to children’s personal opinions and happiness, as Yan Yunxiang has pointed out.³² The focus was on respect of the elders’ needs and views. Narratives of the 1950s insisted on women’s natural aptitudes as wives, mothers and domestic carers. Indeed, it was women’s socialist responsibility to have and nurture children.³³ The state’s commitment to taking over the responsibility for the provision of domestic and childcare services temporarily alleviated women’s domestic burdens, with the establishment of work unit crèches, canteens and laundry services, but this did not disturb the assumption that mothers were or should be their children’s main carers.³⁴ The socialist wife and mother of the era was a model of an ethics of selflessness and collective obligation who was expected to educate her children in the values of hard work, frugality and self-sacrifice. That she try to “understand” her children in the manner of contemporary emphases on

31 See also *ibid.* p. 53.

32 In a paper on “Filial piety and personal happiness: redefining the moral person in intergenerational relationships” given at a workshop on Ethics of the Ordinary (Anthropology Department, London School of Economics, 25–26 March 2009), Yan Yunxiang noted how traditional Confucian notions of intergenerational relationships, typically expressed through filial piety, did not include attention to children’s personal happiness. Rather, it was the parents’ happiness that was crucial, even at the expense of their sons’ and daughters’ happiness. The collectivist ethical discourse of the Mao era continued to deny the place of personal happiness in the constitution of the socialist subject.

33 See e.g. Wei Junyi who noted women’s “natural duty” (*tianran yiwu*) to bear children, in “Yang haizi shi fou fang’ai jinbu?” (“Does bringing up children impede progress?”), *Zhongguo qingnian*, No. 21 (1953), pp. 13–14, quoted in Harriet Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China: Discourse of Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), p.122.

34 Delia Davin, *Woman-Work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 180–90.

communicative disclosure was not part of her cultural habitus, nor therefore of her self-identification as a person. Although throughout the Mao era, attempts were made to shift the focus of filial piety away from the parent–child relationship to the socialist-citizen/Party-state one, the ethical discourse of the Mao era sustained what Yan terms the same “logic of submission and obedience.” Thus, while socialist ideology and its institutional mechanisms made a significant intervention in redefining the ethics of family obligations, these did not shift parental expectations of child obedience, as Yuling’s comments reveal. Her mother and many other women of her generation exemplified a maternal practice that did not incorporate recognition of their daughters’ separate needs; nor did their daughters anticipate a relationship with their mothers that offered such a space of recognition.

Becoming a Mother in the 1980s

By the mid-1980s, many of the institutional and economic constraints shaping earlier urban parenting practices had begun to change. Although state allocation of employment was still in place, the legalization of the private market and entrepreneurial activity already signalled a move away from the tight controls of the Mao era, and graduates were increasingly encouraged to find their own work. Dependence on the work unit system for the provision of basic welfare and child-care services such as crèches and health care continued, but with rising incomes matched by an expanding consumer market, urban households became increasingly responsible for their own domestic and care arrangements. The purchase of washing machines and refrigerators rose astronomically, and by the mid-1990s, well-off families were employing migrant girls as nannies to care for their children and take on the domestic work.³⁵ At the same time, the new orientation towards the privatization of domestic services was accompanied by a marked relaxation of controls on artistic and narrative representation about private life. “Affairs of the heart” – love, marriage, divorce and sex – became common topics of the burgeoning popular media and print culture. A new discourse of private affect and desire exploded into everyday life, replacing the stern self-sacrificing ethos of the Maoist subject with a new vision of personal happiness cemented by emotional self-fulfilment in interpersonal and family relationships.

As they approached marriage and child-bearing age in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Yuling and her contemporaries thus had to confront worlds of knowledge and experience for which their upbringings in Mao’s China had not prepared them. Some of them took advantage of the early reform era opportunities to study abroad and to travel, and others developed a growing interest in

35 Elisabeth J. Croll, *China’s New Consumers: Social Development and Domestic Demand* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 38–39.

international feminist theories of gender. They found themselves simultaneously enriched and confused by the effects of the changing ideological and cultural climate on their lives as wives and mothers. Making the transition from their experience as daughters of the Mao era to wives and mothers under market reform was not easy, and in some instances produced distress and tensions with their husbands, parents and parents-in-law, and children. Whatever their singular circumstances and decisions, however, they all talked about their relationships with their children in very different terms from those they used to describe their childhood and adolescent years in the collective era. A self-reflexiveness about their experiences as daughters gave them a new consciousness of how they wanted to mother their own children. In some cases, an explicit antipathy to the model of gendered conduct their mothers represented produced a conscious desire to do things differently and to recognize their children's autonomous needs for individual self-fulfilment and emotional satisfaction. Yihua's story describes this process.

Born in the mid-1950s, Yihua was slightly older than Yuling.³⁶ Her mother had received a university education in the early 1950s and was a middle-school teacher during Yihua's childhood. Neither Yihua nor her three siblings saw much of their parents during their childhood. Sundays were the exception, and when Yihua was very little she remembers being taken on occasional outings. As the children grew older, their busy parents spent little time with them. Their father was always occupied with political campaigns and would sleep in late on Sundays. Left to their own devices, the children learnt the basics of independence early on in life. "In fact," Yihua said, "we looked after ourselves from an early age. Many people were like this. We ate at school and in the kindergarten. We didn't need any parents to look after us." Yihua's younger brother could already cook stir fry vegetables by the time he was in the second year of primary school. Yihua did the housework and also looked after her youngest brother who was five years younger than her. She remembered picking him up from kindergarten and giving him a piggyback to go to see films.

Yihua described her mother as "open minded" (*kaiming* 开明) in her support of her daughter's education, but extremely controlling (*guanjiao* 管教) of her daughter's behaviour. She would sternly criticize Yihua for spending time with boys, even though during the early stages of the Cultural Revolution this was for political activities. Yihua remembered that on two occasions, much to her embarrassment, her mother went to the school to find her when she had not turned up at home. This was at a time when Beijing's streets were the scene of chaotic and frenetic activity so Yihua understood her concerns, but nevertheless felt angry and hurt by what she saw as her mother's distrust of her. So when the call was issued for the Red Guards to go to the countryside as "sent down youth," Yihua eagerly signed up. Her sense of her mother's attempts to control

36 I discuss some aspects of Yihua's experience in *The Subject of Gender*, pp. 86–87.

her, however, did not abate, despite her physical separation from home, and as she approached her 20s she felt the full weight of her mother's impositions in pushing her to get married. In response, Yihua attempted what she called a kind of revenge: "Well I won't find a boyfriend, let's see what you do." But at the same time, she felt she had no choice: "I couldn't not get married. I felt if I didn't get married I couldn't have an independent life."

Yihua's singleton daughter was in her late teens when I first met her in 2002. Their relationship was relaxed and easy. As I talked more with Yihua, it became clear that they shared a trust and affection that was missing from Yihua's childhood relationship with her mother. Yihua told me that she had made a conscious decision to use her own experience as a daughter to mother her own daughter in a very different way.

You couldn't say my mother was no good to me, she felt from her perspective she was doing the best ... She just wanted me to be good, meaning stable, with no problems, and to follow the same path as others. But her idea of "good" was not mine. I felt uncomfortable, really unhappy. And in fact, the more she felt like this, the more rebellious I became. She absolutely did not understand me. So I was very clear, very conscious that I absolutely could not be the same with my daughter. I thought that to be good to her I had to think of things from her point of view. In fact, when I sometimes think back, I wonder how a mother could even imagine that she could guarantee what a daughter is thinking. She cannot guarantee her development ... Now when I think back, maybe it was difficult for my mother to understand. But I think that you can't just see things from your own point of view. The point is that you have to have a basic understanding and trust. And you know, she could not do this. You just had to believe and do what she said, that was the end of the issue.

She also wanted to "do the best" for her daughter, but wanted to be conscious of what this might mean for her daughter.

I try to do this not from the view of what I think, what I think that she ought to do, but I try to think about things from her point of view, so that she can be happy and comfortable. Of course, I think about her future, and make suggestions to her about how she sees things, and try to help her. I also make some demands (*yaoqiu* 要求) about what she has to do. But some things are just my influence. Sometimes deliberately, sometimes just through talking. For example, I think that a woman should be the same as everyone else. Not just men, but women as well should be independent, both emotionally and materially. We shouldn't depend on others. Maybe, if you are lucky, you can find happiness depending on someone else, but I think that the best, the safest way is to rely on yourself. I think the basis is to be able to live your own life. It is not that I think that my daughter has to become anyone exceptional, I don't think this, but I feel that you should do what you can do. I always try to be like this with my daughter. So I look at what my daughter likes and let her decide.

Yihua described a close relationship with her daughter, and the pleasure this relationship gave her was evident in her tone of voice and gesture as well as in the events she narrated. Neither Yihua nor other mothers of her cohort often used the term *goutong* (communication) in their narratives, yet the qualities of relatedness and recognition the term implies were evident all their accounts, whether as an aspiration or as a lived aspect of their experience as mothers of daughters. Nevertheless, a survey conducted by the Women's Federation and other organizations in 2004 suggested that a large majority of mothers feel that they do not enjoy an understanding relationship with their children and would welcome the opportunity to learn about communicating from parents'

counselling sessions.³⁷ Yihua and others with similar experiences were fortunate to feel that they enjoyed the communication with their daughters that the current culture of “modern mothering” in China encourages them to develop. Yihua was confident about the bond she shared with her daughter, yet, as shown below, it was not the same as the idealized communicative intimacy of younger women, for whom motherhood was still a matter for the future. Mothers’ relationships with their daughters were fraught with anxieties and misunderstandings, often the effect of their sense of distance from their daughters’ cultural and emotional worlds. Xiaoli, another mother of Yihua’s age, told me that she often felt her daughter’s cultural interests were too narrow. Spending huge amounts of time painting her fingernails, for example, did not, in Xiaoli’s terms, constitute a fruitful use of time. Yet despite this she felt that she had managed to give her daughter a space to develop in her own way and to develop an emotional maturity that she had not had at the same age.

Of course, without having interviewed their daughters, it is not possible to assess how much their views coincided. Moreover, there is necessarily and always a disconnection between what mothers and daughters imagine they are communicating even when they feel that they are “getting through” to each other.³⁸ And noted above, Jamieson suggests that disclosure may function just as much as a means of reassuring mothers through obtaining necessary information about their daughters’ activities as it contributes to mutual intimacy and trust. Indeed, a “good relationship between parents and their growing children [may] require increasing silence on the part of parents rather than intense dialogue of mutual disclosure.”³⁹ However, whatever their daughters might have thought, the emotion that inflected the ways these mothers talked about their daughters clearly distinguished them from their own mothers. Their desire to be different kinds of mothers found form in a grammar of emotional expressivity that they felt their mothers had lacked and that corresponded with the emerging culture of “disclosure intimacy.” This was even more apparent in the narratives of younger women who grew up during the 1980s and 1990s.

Communicative Ideals

Many of my younger interview subjects were singleton daughters.⁴⁰ They were born in the early years of the government’s implementation of the single-child policy in the early 1980s, and the cultural and social environment of their formative years was radically different from that of their parents’ generation. For them,

37 “Qian ming Zhongguo mama diaocha: Ni liaojie nide haizi ma?” (“Survey of a 1,000 Chinese mothers: do you understand your child?”), *Zhongguo funü (Women of China)*, No. 11 (2004), p. 24, cited in Evans, *The Subject of Gender*, p. 89.

38 Gill Jones noted that many young people felt that they could talk more easily with their parents once they left home, and once they no longer needed to negotiate their independence within their parents’ household; see Gill Jones, *Leaving Home* (Buckingham: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 74.

39 Jamieson, *Intimacy*, p. 489.

40 This paragraph derives from *The Subject of Gender*, p. 71. I discuss Shumei’s narrative on pp. 72–77.

the political demands and ideals of their parents' youth belonged to a distant and unimaginable past. They had all benefited from the attention and resources their parents had invested in them, and as university students in Beijing had high, if not very clearly defined, professional aspirations. They were also extremely studious and spent little time indulging in the popular consumer delights that the globalized culture of the capital offered them. They were members of the elite in the making and were conscious that they enjoyed a range of choices that their parents had not had. In their language, demeanour and dress they were evidently subjects of the contemporary discourse of individual exploration and fulfilment. Of course, they had very different experiences of their relationships with their parents, but they shared the view that the parent-child relationship should ideally embrace a sense of mutual recognition and trust. Their use of the popular term *goutong* to describe this sense gave their descriptions of their relationships with their parents, particularly with their mothers, an affective quality marking their distance from the ethics of obedience and collective obligation of their mothers' earlier years.

Shumei was one of these four. Born in 1979, she was mainly brought up by her mother who had been a school maths teacher before being transferred to work in the education committee of the local government in the north-eastern city where Shumei grew up. As a factory worker, Shumei's father had acquired the status of "red and expert" for his technical expertise during the Cultural Revolution. In the 1980s, when Shumei was eight years old, he moved south where he had been recommended to work for a Hong Kong-based joint venture company expanding its business in Guangdong. He returned home once each year on annual leave at Spring Festival, and then permanently in 1997 just as Shumei was about to go to university in Beijing.

Shumei described her mother as a demanding and intolerant woman who had learned tough lessons in independence from an early age. During the Cultural Revolution, her grandparents were denounced for their class background and sent away for several years, leaving her mother, then in her mid-teens, to do everything for herself. She became used to making her own decisions; this marked her as a strong and independent woman but also caused considerable tensions in her married life. Shumei's father was a stern man heavily influenced by what Shumei described as the "typically male" values of "traditional Chinese society," so when he returned home on his yearly visits there were often conflicts with her mother. She could not accept his insistence on exercising "total control" (*kongzhi quan* 控制权) and always wanting to have the last say (*shuole suan* 说了算) over important family matters, leaving her to deal with the "trivia" (*suosui de dongxi* 琐碎的东西) of daily life. After ten years away, when Shumei was about to leave home to go to university in Beijing, he decided that with both children away – Shumei at university and her elder brother working in Beijing – her mother should not be left on her own, so he returned to live permanently with her. The disagreements between them continued, with each thinking that they should have the last word. On her visits home, Shumei found the atmosphere as tense as

ever. At university she was free to develop her own independent views and was happy not to have other people making decisions for her. Thinking back, however, she felt that she had followed the same path as her mother and had unconsciously made a number of choices in response to her mother's ambitions. She had always studied hard and had aimed for top marks, and in obtaining a place at a Beijing university felt that she was fulfilling her mother's thwarted dreams for herself.

My mother didn't have the opportunity to go to university. But she always wanted to go to university in Beijing. She always hoped that she would have the chance. In fact, mum influenced me in all these things. She's a person who wants to excel in everything. She never wants to come behind other people, and because she was always with me these things naturally rubbed off on me. I couldn't come second. I had to come first. My mother was like this, even though she didn't study, and after she started work she always did very well. So ... and I look very like my mother. Other people say I'm another one of her. But the pity is that I had very little communication with her (*goutong hen shao* 沟通很少). When I was small it was like this, and it's still the same now.

In Shumei's words, *goutong* conveyed both the lack of and longing for an experience of a mother she felt had never had.

Lots of people think that the relationship between mothers and their daughters should be the closest (*zui tiexin de* 最贴心的), so logically there should be no problem in communication, not like daughters' relationship with their fathers. But it didn't turn out like this [... and] as I grew up and became more independent in my thinking about things, I really envied people who had that kind of relationship with their mothers. Girls who could say whatever they wanted with their mothers, when they felt hurt, or when they fancied someone, stuff like that, when their mum would help them sort things out. My mum understood very little about my life at school and my understanding of things, and I never talked about these things with her. My feeling was that she wouldn't understand anything, so talking would be even worse than not talking. My brother was the same. He didn't share much with either my mum or my dad.

So Shumei grew up feeling that her mother's demands were much heavier than other girls' mothers' who seemed to pay much more attention to the "tiny detailed things" of their daughters' lives. "So, to me, she always seemed to be above me, but my feeling is that daughters and mothers shouldn't be like this. Many mothers and daughters seem to be like good friends, they can talk about things. [My mother] was a teacher more than a mother. This is how I felt about her in my heart (*xinmu zhong* 心目中)." Shumei's view that other girls' mothers were "better" and "less distant" than her own seemed to stem from a yearning for an intimacy and a sense of mutual recognition that she imagined others to have experienced. And when another young woman in the group having this conversation countered Shumei's views to say that *goutong* did not mean "intimacy and harmony and stuff" but as openly expressing opinions and thoughts, and carving out a space of tolerant exchange and even criticisms (*pip-ing* 批评) of each other, Shumei clung to the idea that it had to denote emotional intimacy with the mother.

Shumei's and her roommates' narratives suggest a familiarity with an emotional language that is striking in its contrast with older women's accounts of their relationships with their mothers. The emotional habitus revealed in this conversation clearly identified them as members of a generation whose sense of self in

family and personal relationships includes, amongst other things, expectations of affective closeness and communicability. *Goutong* itself is a very contemporary term, prominent in popular media culture in Beijing and a standard item of confessional chat shows and pop-counselling to women about how to relate to their teenage children. The expressive or disclosing qualities the term implies belong to a cultural environment in which the ethical notion of the individual person is constructed as much around values of emotional self-fulfilment as around competitive entrepreneurial success. As noted above, neither Shumei nor her roommates spent much time reading popular magazines or watching television, and they were all diligent students with aspirations to future doctorates and professional careers in Beijing's competitive environment. Yet to all of them, the popular language of *goutong* offered a terminology to describe – and in a sense create – both themselves and their mothers as subjects of their times.

Trust, communication, the expression of affection and consideration for the independent daughter's emotional life all make contemporary mother–daughter relationships better than those of the last generation, so survey results of the late 1990s published in the journal *Zhongguo funü* (中国妇女, *Women of China*) suggested.⁴¹ Whether as daughters or as mothers, my interview subjects all indicated their awareness of the shift in the affective meaning of motherhood. Mothers, moreover, had no doubt that, in having access to this new discourse of communication to become “a different kind of mother,” they were contributing to closer bonds with their daughters than they had enjoyed with their mothers in the 1950s. Emotions of love and affection may be expressed through many symbolic and idiomatic ways without dialogues of disclosure, as Yan, Jamieson and others have pointed out. Nevertheless, although I cannot claim that the views of my research subjects are in any way representative, the terms and tones that Shumei and her roommates used in describing their relationships with their mothers drew on a vocabulary of mutual exchange and recognition, experienced or desired, that was absent from descriptions of the mother–daughter relationship in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Gender of Communication

Scholarship about women and gender has repeatedly drawn attention to the widespread, if not universal, association between women and attributes of care, emotionality, communicativeness and gentleness deriving from their natural role as reproducers and nurturers.⁴² In China, official and popular discourse has sustained these associations throughout the years of the PRC – and long before – despite public encouragement to women during the Mao decades to take on “masculine” roles appropriate to the new standards of male-female

41 See e.g. *ibid.* p. 90.

42 Sherry B. Ortner, “Is female to male as nature is to culture?” in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds.), *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974).

equality. Journals of the 1950s referred to women's tendencies towards sympathy, patience and restraint to explain women's "natural duty" to bear and bring up children and manage the domestic "trivia" of day-to-day life.⁴³ Cautionary tales about girls who fell into the "abyss" of pursuing personal happiness rather than the collective interest were repeatedly advised to channel their "natural" interest in emotional and sexual matters to studies and work.⁴⁴ Muted during the Mao era, and excoriated by the collective ethic of the time, the association between the female and the world of "private" matters reasserted its prominence in the 1980s in an explosion of publications and images legitimizing attention to individual emotional experience. Women writers became notorious for exposing their experiences of failed love, sexual violence and emotional desolation.⁴⁵ "Soft and gentle" images of a supportive femininity topped the rankings for desirable wives. Treating love and sex as key constituents of happy and stable marriages rapidly became crucial criteria of China's new claims to being a "modern society." While these images were sometimes disturbed by others of the "strong woman" (*nü qiangren* 女强人) and the ambitious entrepreneur, the dominant popular message affirmed women's naturalized emotional attributes of gentleness, sympathy and care.⁴⁶

By the late 1990s, the celebratory "revival" of women's emotional attributes began to take shape in another form that encouraged women to "communicate" with their children as a condition of the latter's healthy development. Sections on "parents' schools" (*jiazhang xuexiao* 家长学校) and "single parents' clubs" (*danqin julebu* 单亲俱乐部) in women's magazines commonly ran articles on mothers' love, on managing children (*guanjiao haizi* 管教孩子), and on educating women in the skills and approaches necessary to enable their children to grow up as responsible citizens of the future.⁴⁷ Mothers feature in this literature as figures responsible for the entire spectrum of their children's educational, physical, social, moral, emotional and dietary welfare. Cautioned not to spoil her single child nor to give in to the desire to overwhelm her child in "oppressive love,"

43 Interestingly Deng Yingchao was one of the very few who in the public discourse of the time gave a positive gloss on the emotional qualities of individual relationships. She advised her listeners not to forget the importance of "temperamental harmony" (*xingqing rongqia*) in deciding on a marriage partner. Deng Yingchao, "Tan nannü qingnian de lian'ai, hunyin wenti" ("On the question of love and marriage for young men and women") (first pub. 1942), in Zhao Chang'an *et al.* (eds.), *Lao gemingjia de lian'ai, hunyin he jiating shenghuo* (*Love, Marriage and Family Life of Old Revolutionaries*) (Beijing: Gongren chubanshe, 1985), pp. 1–14. The term *peiyang ganqing* (literally "nurture feeling") was frequently used in texts of the 1950s to indicate the importance of political, social and emotional compatibility in selecting a marriage partner. See e.g. Ren Kunru, "Yansu duidai jiehun he lihun" ("Marriage and divorce are serious matters"), *Zhongguo qingnian* (*Chinese Youth*), No. 76 (1951), p. 30.

44 See e.g. the associations between women's emotionality and the dangers of passion in Luo Jia, "Feizao pao si de aiqing" ("Soap bubble love"), *Zhongguo funü* (*Women of China*), No. 4 (1955), pp. 8–9.

45 Zhang Jie and Yu Luojin were two of the best known of this period. Zhang Jie's autobiographical story "Love must not be forgotten" was one of the first to explore individual emotion and passion in intimate relationships. For an analysis of the debate provoked by Yu Luojin's revelations about her marital experience in "A winter's fairy tale," see Emily Honig, "The life and times of Yu Luojin," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (1984), pp. 252–65.

46 For further discussion, see Evans, *Women and Sexuality*, pp. 96–97.

47 Evans, *The Subject of Gender*, pp. 92–93.

the mother appears as skilful domestic manager, empathetic friend and moral advisor responsible for the happy and successful development of her child.

While fathers occasionally appear in such literature in the form of moral role models of hard work, honesty and self-discipline for their sons, by and large they are neither specifically targeted nor identified in discussions about parent-child communication. My younger interviewees' accounts about their fathers were revealing on this issue. They acknowledged having benefited from their fathers' advice about educational and professional matters and in some cases talked about their fathers with noticeable affection. Only one, however, described feeling comfortable talking about her internal emotional life with her father. Many of these fathers were often absent from home on work, and their daughters frequently described them as "authoritarian," "dictatorial" and "patriarchal" figures who tolerated little challenge to their authority from either their wives or their daughters. One younger woman summarized the difference between her parents' influence on her by saying that her mother's was in the realm of social and emotional matters, of "how to be a good person," in contrast with her father's in "big things, like studying, how I think about things, and social opinions." She, as a number of others of her age, had grown up with the view that her mother did not understand much about "world affairs." Mothers' attention to their daughters' welfare within the domestic space of the home seemed to underwrite their greater capacity for understanding and emotional care.

Both these women and popular discourse thus share the assumption that the emotional qualities associated with cross-generational *goutong* are a female domain. "Mothers hope to become their daughters' friend," and daughters invariably turn to their mothers and not their fathers when needing to talk about their problems, concluded a 1999 magazine survey of mothers and adolescent daughters.⁴⁸ While the mother-daughter relationship brings tensions and conflict as well as deep love, "mothers' and daughters' hearts are joined" (*munü lianxin* 母女连心), and "no one understands a daughter as her mother does" (*zhi nü mo ru mu* 知女没如母).⁴⁹ Photographs of daughters hugging their mothers appear with the caption "The daughter is her mother's little heart warmer" (*nüer shi muqin de tiexin xiao mian'ao* 女儿是母亲的贴心小棉袄). "My daughter is often like my friend, like an equal companion" has become the ideal to which mothers of daughters are encouraged to aspire. The quality of connectedness to a mother that Shumei idealized assumes a space of intimacy and recognition in these images that derives from a notion of shared gender. Even though *goutong* was not part of Shumei's experience of her relationship with her mother, she did not imagine it as a feature of girls' relationships with their fathers, as her comments in the previous section indicate. The metaphors used to describe

48 In response to a question about which parent daughters turned to first to talk about their "problems," 82.65% of the 1,020 mothers who responded to the survey answered "me." Cited in *ibid.* p. 93.

49 Si Wuliu, "Mama yongyuan shi nüer de baohu shen" ("Mother is always her daughter's guardian spirit"), *Zhongguo funü*, No. 5 (1999), p. 10, quoted in *ibid.* p. 93.

cross-generational *goutong* are also feminine; the “little heart warmer” (literally “intimate little padded jacket” *tiexin xiao mian’ao* 贴心小棉袄) or the “intimate friend” and “soulmate” (*zhixin pengyou* 知心朋友) are not terms commonly used to describe boys’ bonds with either their mothers or their fathers.

Everyday family life in contemporary urban China is fraught with demands and tensions. Social and parental pressures on the single child to achieve in the competitive educational system commonly result in enormous parental investment of resources and time in their child’s development. With huge amounts of school work and extra-curricula activities, children have little time to experience social relationships outside school. As various scholars have argued, single children now grow up in an environment in which they are accustomed to focusing on their own self-interest. Family fragmentation through divorce is rising, and vast numbers of families are being spatially and physically separated through labour migration and study abroad. Popular advice to women to provide their children with the loving, empathetic, stable and supportive environment they need thus gives instrumental meanings to the gendered inflections of the emphasis on mother–child communication. The trust and mutual recognition associated with the vocabulary of communication also gives dimensions to the individualistic ethics of the self that are unmistakably gendered. Furthermore, while expectations and experiences of mother–daughter communication undoubtedly improve the quality of close relationships for many families, they are not synonymous with the processes of “cultural democratization” and “equalization” of Giddens’ argument. On the contrary, as Jamieson contested, they may contribute to the gendered differentiations sustaining social hierarchies.⁵⁰

In what was an extraordinarily farsighted article when it was written in the early 1980s, Jean Robinson argued that the return to the household as the basic unit of consumption and distribution, as well as the privatization of welfare services, presaged the institutionalized re-consolidation of an increasingly unequal gender division of labour.⁵¹ The picture in contemporary China is, of course, much more complex and diverse, but there is now weighty evidence that the private market economy functions to exacerbate rather than equalize gender differentials. Recent studies have reached similar conclusions, including a survey published in 2006 showing that women are consistently likely to be employed in lower-paid and part-time jobs, and that the gender gap has become increasingly evident in the private sector of more developed cities.⁵² Gender

50 In the UK, the logic of neo-liberal market economies has sustained wide gender differentials in income, employment and the division of domestic labour. A recent 700-page report on “How Fair is Britain” published on 11 October 2010 by the UK’s Equality and Human Rights Commission on discrimination and disadvantage in Britain delivered a devastating critique of the continuing widespread gender divisions in British society. The culture of “disclosing intimacy” shaping expectations of family and interpersonal relationships does not, so it appears, lead to any automatic diminution of gender equalities.

51 Jean Robinson, “Of women and washing machines: employment, housework and the reproduction of motherhood in socialist China,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 101 (1985), pp. 32–57.

52 The survey data were collected from 48,401 urban households across China’s 35 largest cities in 1999 and are analysed in P. N. Cohen and Wang Feng, “The market and gender pay equity: have Chinese

inequality appears to be a structural feature of the market economy, and in conditions in which gender issues do not rank high on the state's agenda, the allocation of resources exacerbating such differentials continues to disadvantage women. Thus, while opportunities for mobility and occupation abound for the elite sector of well-educated and largely urban-situated women, including the younger women whose stories I draw on here, the logic of the unregulated market consolidates the entrenchment of gender discriminatory practices in the wider economy, society and culture.

The government has publicized a number of measures to enhance the wellbeing of girls and women including the protection of girls' rights, punishment of sex-selective abortions, and policies to close the pay gap and ensure equality in education. However, such efforts confront widespread disinterest in gender equality and a series of embedded assumptions about the characterization and value of the "female" that range from the extremes of sex-selective abortions to the naturalization of women's role in the unremunerated domestic sphere. The customary feminization of such qualities as gentleness, emotional expressivity and – now – communicative intimacy are components of such naturalization of women's gendered attributes. Seen in this light, the focus on women as the key agents facilitating emotional expression in the single-child family confirms their association with the domestic sphere, sustaining the cultural and social habitus shoring up the gender hierarchies of social and political institutions.

Many questions remain to be asked. How are the new modalities of emotional expression and intimacy shaped by place and region, ethnicity, sexuality, religion? How are the experiences and discourses of communication examined here differently imagined and enacted by men of different ages, cultural and socio-economic circumstance, and so on? How might the tendencies I have described be understood as an effect of the relationship between the state-supported market and women's negotiations of their roles, aspirations and rights? With reference to very different interests in the sexual biases underlying contemporary ideologies of intimacy, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have argued that intimacy "is the endlessly cited elsewhere of political public discourse," and "ideologies and institutions of intimacy are increasingly offered as a vision of the good life," protected in the haven of the world of private relationships.⁵³ But, as Berlant and Warner also pointed out, "affective life slops over into work and political life."⁵⁴ In China, how women's experiences of and desires for intimacy in

footnote continued

reforms narrowed the gap?" in Deborah S. Davis and Wang Feng (eds.), *Creating Wealth and Poverty in Post-Socialist China* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 37–53. Significantly, the authors of this article point out that as in developed capitalist economies, "gender bias [in pay] also could be expressed through an increasing tendency to relegate women to more nurturing roles, whether by families or by employers" (p. 52).

53 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in public," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1998), p. 553.

54 *Ibid.* p. 560.

their family relationships are imagined as belonging solely to a private domain, how they play out in new forms of sociality beyond the private and how they are mediated by their relationships beyond the domestic sphere, also raise questions about the boundaries between the domestic “inner” and the public “outer” worlds which have to be left for further consideration.

In ending, the feminization of intimacy I have discussed in this article appears as the effect of two linked but distinct processes: on the one hand, a reworked gender discourse, a “feminization of intimacy as a market-supported naturalization of women’s roles,”⁵⁵ managed by the state through a plethora of educational, psychological and media materials, and corresponding with the new forms of gender hierarchy in employment and incomes that the market economy has engendered; and on the other, the changing subjective articulation of women’s needs, desires and expectations of family and personal relationships. It is clear from my interviewees’ narratives that, whatever their effects, the gender-charged ideals of the communicative mother–daughter bond that Lynn Jamieson associates with the disclosing culture of intimacy of Western societies in the late 20th century are finding their way into the subjective worlds of young urban women in China, positioned between local and global cultural and market influences. The desire for the empathetic and communicative mother that I have explored in this article suggests expectations and ideals of a new ethics of individual emotional recognition that are transforming the meanings of mother, daughter and the mother–daughter relationship. Mothers’ and daughters’ changing expectations also offer an instance of how the multi-dimensional process of individualization of contemporary urban culture is a gendered process. The stories I have briefly described here show how this enriches women’s emotional lives, empowers the resolve of many and yet, in the terms set out in the relevant “advice” literature noted above, adds to the burdens and potentially discriminatory pressures that they have to contend with in their everyday lives as wives, mothers and workers.

Gao Xiaoxian’s article in this issue sheds insights into the qualities of sympathy and understanding that women bring to their work in political and administrative management. Other recent work on white-collar employees suggests how the language of emotional sensitivity is becoming an element of masculine subjectivities.⁵⁶ The intersections between the feminization of intimacy as a market and state effect, the feminization of intimacy in the subject formation of women, and the spill-over of these into other realms of the interpersonal, social and political life of men as well as women remain exciting topics for future enquiry.

55 My thanks go to Gail Hershatter for this formulation.

56 Derek Hird, “Models of masculinity? White-collar images at work in contemporary China,” in S. Hemelryk Donald, T. Schilbach and I. Cucco (eds.), *Other Stories/Missing Histories: Reflections from the Jiu Year in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, forthcoming 2010); Derek Hird, “White-collar men and masculinities in contemporary urban China,” unpublished PhD thesis, University of Westminster, 2009.