BRILL

Me and My Family: Perceptions of Individual and Collective among Young Rural Chinese
Author(s): Mette Halskov Hansen and Cuiming Pang
Source: *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2008), pp. 75-99
Published by: Brill
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23615393
Accessed: 20-10-2018 00:22 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Brill is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *European Journal of East Asian Studies*

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

BRILL

EJEAS 7.1 (2008) 75–99

European Journal
of
East Asian Studies
www.brill.nl/ejea

Me and My Family: Perceptions of Individual and Collective among Young Rural Chinese

Mette Halskov Hansen
University of Oslo
m.h.hansen@ikos.uio.no

Cuiming Pang
University of Oslo

Abstract

This article discusses how young people born and raised in rural areas of China perceive and account for individual choice and responsibility in relation to their family and the state. Based on personal narratives of more than 100 young people, the article shows how concepts of freedom, independence, free love and personal development are widespread among young villagers who are searching, not merely for economic prosperity, but for a self-fulfilling life. They express a remarkably strong sense of individual responsibility for success or failure, and even tend to idealise individual choice. The article argues that in spite of young people's growing demands for individual space and the rapid changes in the relations between the generations, the family remains the most important collective for these young people, emotionally and as their only source of social security and support.

Keywords
Individualisation; rural youth; individual; family

> *...individualization is a fate, not a choice; in the land of individual freedom of choice, the option to escape individualization and to refuse participation in the individualization game is emphatically* not *on the agenda.*[1]

In this article we present a study of how young people, born and raised in rural areas of China, perceive themselves as individual actors in relation to their families, and to various state collectives and organisations. The majority of the

[1] Zygmunt Bauman, in the foreword to Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences* (London: Sage, 2003), p. xvi.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2008
DOI: 10.1163/156805808X333929

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

100 young people we studied dropped out of school after nine years or earlier. By the age of 16, they were therefore forced to start making choices regarding work, place of living, partnership and support for their own families. In reality, the scope of choices regarding work and livelihood was limited because their families needed capital, there was rarely work to find in the villages, and hanging around at home with nothing to do was frowned upon. Since migrant work was generally the only gateway to an income, the choices were largely restricted to which factory or construction site to go to and how long to stay there. Our research shows that when reflecting upon their lives and futures, the young people very often used biographical, or individualised, explanations of problems and dilemmas which were to a large extent structurally determined. In reality, they were excluded from participation in the Party-state's youth activities and from further education, and they lacked basic social security which could eventually make them less dependent on their families. Although marriages were no longer arranged by parents, most of the young people were acutely aware that their choice of partner would be of the utmost importance to the entire family, not merely to themselves.

Regardless of structurally determined limitations on the exercise of individual autonomy, our young interviewees emphasised a remarkable degree of choice and personal responsibility in matters regarding failure or success in schooling, work and aspects of their personal lives related to partnership and family relations. Living in a society going through a rapid process of individualisation, the young people struggled to act and define themselves as autonomous individuals with a right to choose in all matters of importance, At the same time, however, they endowed their closest family with trust and commitment. It was clear that the family was often the only available and stable source of social, economic and emotional security.[2]

The Individualisation of Chinese Society

In one of the most inspiring recent ethnographies about family life and relations in rural China, Yunxiang Yan concluded that since the period of decollectivisation and the gradual introduction of a market economy, the high price paid for increased individual space and determination among younger peo-

2) By 'closest family', we refer here to parents, grandparents and siblings.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ple was a loss of civility and the growth of ego-centred consumerism.[3] Having gained insight into intriguing and complex relationships between parents and children, lovers and spouses over a long time span, Yan showed that the dismantling of state collectives and the collapse of socialist morals in the 1990s left young Chinese villagers in an ideological vacuum. With first Confucian and then communist structures of mutual obligations and responsibilities lying in ruins, the every-man-for-himself values of the market economy and globalised consumerism came to dominate family life and relationships among people.

The research presented in the following supports many of Yan's findings, but we emphasise two main results that serve to further nuance and add to the picture provided by Yan. One of them is the remarkable sense of personal responsibility expressed by the young people we studied. The other is a tendency towards a discursive emphasis of the importance of family alliances, while individual autonomy vis-à-vis the family was constantly under negotiation. This research contributes to our understanding of how a process of individualisation[4] evolves in the Chinese context and influences people's behaviour and perceptions of self. In his theories of risk society and individualisation, Ulrich Beck focuses for the most part on individualisation in late forms of modernity ('second modernity').[5] In Beck's view, democracy and a welfare system are prerequisites for the emergence of a type of individualisation during second modernity that may provide people with the means to break with existent dependencies, disembed from clear-cut social categories, and develop new kinds of voluntary collectivism and societal engagement.[6]

---

[3] Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[4] Discussed by proponents of the 'individualisation thesis' such as Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991); U. Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997); U. Beck and J. Willms, *Conversations with Ulrich Beck* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*; Cosmo Howard, 'Three models of individualized biography', in Cosmo Howard (ed.), *Contested Individualization: Debates about Contemporary Personhood* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

[5] Matthew Kohrman, in an interesting article about smoking in urban China, is one of the few scholars who has employed Ulrich Beck's theory of risk society directly to a Chinese case; Matthew Kohrman, 'Should I quit? Tobacco, fraught identity, and the risks of governmentality in urban China', *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, June (2004); online at http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-6603468_ITM (accessed 26 February 2008).

[6] See Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*; also Howard, *Three models*, p. 40.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

In China, changes in the legal, social and economic fields during the period of de-collectivisation have had a particularly strong influence on the rate at which the process of individualisation has occurred, as is also shown in other articles in this volume. Collective forms of production have been abolished, the individual has become responsible for finding work, laws have increasingly set the individual in focus, pensions and other forms of social security are directed towards the individual, the media promote individual consumption, etc. The rapid changes in family relations, the demands on the individual to establish a livelihood outside the village and support family members, and the high awareness of unequal lifestyles disseminated through the media have all contributed to people's subjective experiences of social risk, uncertainty and need to make choices.

Choices regarding such areas as social engagement and collective activism are obviously not made freely. They are shaped by the way the government exercises its control, the government's definition of the possible field of action and its governing techniques, and structures such as class and gender, all of which continue to play a significant role in the social production of people's lives.[7] In the case of China, the lack of a universal welfare system also strengthens the experience of social risk, and in reality many continue to be subjected to the will of families and employers. Another direct limitation on the exercise of choice, and on experiments with the type of collective engagements which Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue are characteristic for the 'second modernity', is the lack of legal, non-governmental forms of organisations which can provide villagers with possibilities to participate in public life. This, Yan has argued, strengthens the negative social results of individualisation in China:

> If there were autonomous societal organizations and if villagers were able to participate in public life, a more balanced individualism might have developed, in which the individual obligations to the public and to other people could be emphasized as well. But just the opposite has happened.[8]

This article adds to Yan's findings by continuing with a discussion of how younger people born and socialised in rural families in China account for their own roles as individuals who relate to the family as a collective, to other

---

[7] E.g. Paul Henman, 'Governing individuality', in Cosmo Howard (ed.), *Contested Individualization: Debates about Contemporary Personhood* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Howard, *Three models*; A. Furlong and F. Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change. New Perspectives* (Berkshire, England: McGraw Hill/Open University Press, 2007).

[8] Yan, *Private Life*, p. 234.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

collectives such as workplaces and Party organisations, and thereby also to the Party-state. We present our analysis of data concerning (a) young people's negotiations of 'free love' (ziyou lian'ai) and 'freedom' (ziyou) in relation to their families; (b) their concepts of individual responsibility; and (c) their views of themselves as individuals and family members in relation to both state and non-state organisations. We conclude the article with a discussion of how and why young people from rural areas do not simply resort to self-indulgence and a destructive loss of solidarity as a response to the process of individualisation. They do in many ways experience disembedding from the family, which is one of the characteristics of an individualising society, but at the same time they respond to the social and personal uncertainties and risks that accompany individualisation by employing and engaging in a discourse on the family as the individual's main, and often only, collective unit of direct importance.

Fieldwork and the Biographical Approach

The fieldwork data presented and discussed in the following were mainly collected between 2004 and 2006 when we carried out longer (and often several) semi-structured interviews in villages in Shaanxi and Fujian Provinces. Our subjects included 100 young people (most between the ages of 16 and 28), and 70 people belonging to the older generations. Interviews were supplemented by many other forms of conversations that took place while participating in and observing local activities, including work and social life in two factories, in small shops and workshops, agitated village meetings about the distribution of land, and one local election. In Shaanxi we stayed in a private home in an agricultural village where most of the young people had temporarily migrated out to find work. We carried out interviews in periods when many of the young people were gone, and during the New Year Festival in 2005 when nearly all of them returned home. In Fujian we also stayed for several periods in the private home of a previous village head, in a larger semi-industrialised area made up of several administrative villages. In this area we also lived for several weeks during two different periods in a dormitory of a local factory, where many of our interviews were carried out with young workers who came from other places in Fujian, and other provinces, to work as unskilled labourers.

People's biographical narratives, when collected in this way, are seldom consistent, linear or neatly organised accounts. They provide scattered glimpses into their own analyses of experiences, their memories of episodes of special

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

importance to them, opinions on certain topics, all mixed with daily observations. The data we analyse in this article consist for the most part of what people *told* us, which topics they preferred to talk about, and the words they chose to express their ideas, experiences and opinions. We cannot, and do not, claim to know too much about how ideals and perceptions of social practices actually reflected people's own actions. While we argue that 'the family' was discursively constructed as the main—and for many the only—relevant 'collective', we do not thereby imply that the young people who work away from home necessarily send money back to their families, or that they for instance take better care of their grandparents than others do.

We do argue, however, that by comparing and analysing people's biographical accounts and the ways in which they choose to engage in discussions about topics of importance to themselves, we gained insight into some important aspects of how young people in rural China today perceive their own roles as individuals in a society which increasingly forces the individual to make choices, and to respond to the immediate and increasing experience of risks related to uncertain livelihoods and rapidly changing relations in the family and village communities. By using the biographical approach, we learned quite a bit about young people's own interpretations of these experiences, and how they 'put together the pieces of life's jigsaw'.[9]

Although Paul Henman claims that 'The individualization literature has clearly demonstrated the ways in which individuals in contemporary society conceive of and act on themselves',[10] this does not hold true in many parts of the world, and certainly not in the Chinese contexts of rapid individualisation and recent historical experiences of collectivisation. However, as also pointed out by Furlong and Cartmel, when employing a biographical interpretation, as we have in this article, one runs the risk of underplaying structure and of taking people's own interpretations at face value.[11] While obviously we have attempted not to fall into this trap, we are aware that the material we present is first and foremost based on people's stories and self-interpretations, and that there may be a larger disjunction between subjective perceptions and objective conditions than we have managed to grasp.

---

9) Furlong and Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change*, p. 7.

10) Henman, *Governing individuals*, p. 183.

11) Furlong and Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change*, p. 7.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Dilemmas of Individual Space, 'Free Love' and Family Commitments

During one of our interviews with a young man of 17, a text message from one of his two girlfriends ticked in. The man had just related how he had dropped out of his ninth school year, and that he was now trying to become a hairdresser. Getting serious about partnership was a bit too early at 17, he explained, 'you should wait till you have passed 20'. This was in accordance with his parents' views, as was the opinion that a good steady partner should not be one of those girls who 'spend a lot of money and go out to have fun all day'. The girlfriend who had sent the text message was in her second year of junior high school and only 15 years old. Nevertheless, according to our interviewee, the couple were now 'sincere' (zhenxin de), and he was able to make the choice between the two girls he had been dating for some time. He therefore also became quite excited when we translated the content of the message, which was written in the language of fashion—English—of which he did not understand a single word: 'I fall in love with you' [sic].

Like most of our other young interviewees, both male and female, this man genuinely enjoyed talking about the challenges and excitement of love and partnership, and he regarded the choice of partner as one of the major decisions in any person's life. There were girlfriends/boyfriends and there were wives/husbands. They belonged to two different categories, and the criteria for choosing them were therefore also different. It was one thing to date (tan lian'ai) for fun, but something else entirely to plan to find someone to marry. And while parents played a minor role in the first case, they became very important as advisors or even judges in the second. The concepts of 'talking about love' or dating (tan lian'ai) and 'free love' (ziyou lian'ai) were often brought up by our young interviewees, whether in the rural village of Shaanxi or in the more urbanised villages of Fujian. When talking about the ideals and practices of engaging in intimate relationships and finding marriage partners, about 40 per cent of our 100 young interviewees would spontaneously bring up the concept of 'freedom' (ziyou), and often specifically in connection with the expression of free love. The young interviewees often insisted that the ideal of free love was a modern (xiandai de) and for them very important practice which their parents and grandparents did not necessarily understand, and had certainly not been able to live according to.

Based on fieldwork in 1986–1987 regarding marriage practices in rural north China, Myron L. Cohen found that free love in the Chinese context 'simply means that husband and wife became acquainted and romantically attached on their own, or at least apart from any actions by their fam-

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ilies'.[12] Listening to isolated accounts by young people discussing the concept nearly 20 years later could easily give the impression that they were indeed also mostly concerned with choosing their own partners without having to consider parents, practicalities, economy or other earthly matters. Love was a matter of destiny (yuanfen), we were often told. However, the social implications of free love in practice turned out to be more complex than this. Implicit in the notion are both wishes and hopes specifically connected to an idealisation of the individual and individual choice, but in practice free love involves very pragmatic considerations involving the family, mainly parents and siblings, as a collective with great decisive importance.

Within the small Shaanxi village we studied, the rapid changes in marriage practices were reflected in the experiences accounted for by people from different generations, and we were also able to witness negotiations among family members on this issue.[13] Teacher Yuan, for instance, was born in 1925, and when he was nine years old his marriage was arranged by parents and a matchmaker. The couple met for the first time on their wedding day, when Yuan was 18 years old. 'I did not give this any special thought,' Yuan explained, 'this was just how it was and it was the same for everybody.' His neighbour, Mrs Jia, was born 45 years later, in 1969, and her experience was characteristic for a large number of people both older and much younger than herself. Mrs Jia was introduced to a man whom the family and the matchmaker found appropriate. They too did not know each other, but unlike the Yuan couple they were given the chance to meet briefly before the final decision of engagement was made. In 1989, when Mrs Jia was 20 years old, the couple married.

'Were you nervous at the time?' we asked Mrs Jia, who was normally a very talkative woman.

'No!'

'Were you happy?'

'What was there to be happy about?!' (gaoxing shenma?!)

This did not mean that Mrs Jia was *un*happy in her marriage. On the contrary, during the weeks that we lived in her family, we saw that she was

---

12) Myron L. Cohen, *Kinship, Contract, Community, and State: Anthropological Perspectives on China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

13) A number of publications have described and analysed changing marriage practices and changes in family law, for instance Elisabeth Croll, *The Politics of Marriage in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Cohen, *Kinship*; Yan, *Private Life*; Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell, *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

by and large satisfied with her husband and their relationship. However, she also realised that it was unlikely that her two daughters and one son would accept a similar form of semi-arranged marriage. She and many other adults in the village were aware that the younger generation, born from the 1980s on, emphasised so-called free love. Especially, those who left the villages to work in the cities would 'find somebody by themselves' (ziji zhao), and they would date several people before finally deciding to introduce one of them to their parents. As we observed in the village, the introduction to parents resulted in the parents acting as consultants, and sometimes intense negotiations with parents about the potential son- or daughter-in-law arose. This practice did not seem to raise any serious moral concerns or strong disapproval from the older generation. The right in principle to choose one's own partner was obviously much more accepted in this village in 2005 than in the village surveyed nearly 20 years earlier by Cohen. At that time, 'free love marriages' were regarded as being in conflict with family interests, and they generally raised a lot of talk and sensation among villagers.[14]

In 2005 'everybody talks about free love', as one our informants said, and as we also experienced during fieldwork. This reflects the changes, also described by Yan, in the power balance between the generations in stem families. Unlike in the traditional patriarchal family, it is now to a much larger extent the horizontal, conjugal ties that are at the centre of family relations.[15] In connection with this change we found that the notion of free love—understood as individual choice of partner through negotiation with parents—has become widely accepted as an ideal practice. It is even accepted (albeit sometimes as a necessary evil) by people who themselves had very different, but not necessarily bad, experiences of arranged or semi-arranged marriages.

It was the experiences of people above approximately 30 years of age to which the youngest interviewees compared their own ideal of free love and their role as individuals in the process of finding and eventually deciding upon a spouse. The final outcome of this process was determined by an undefined notion of 'destiny' combined with parents' advice, but up to this point it was the *individual*, not the family or the parents, who was the main actor in the process. Parents became increasingly important as thoughts moved towards the serious consideration of engaging in a lasting relationship,. At this point, individual choice was in reality inseparable from family negotiations in the practice of the free love ideal. In this respect there were striking similarities

[14] Cohen, *Kinship*, p. 87.

[15] Yan, *Private Life*.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

among nearly all the groups of young people we interviewed, whether they had grown up in the northern village of Shaanxi or in the more industrialised villages of Fujian, or had come to factories in Fujian from throughout China to take up unskilled labour.

Gender differences were reflected in the fact that men tended to emphasise the ideal of free love even more strongly than women, who on the other hand often spoke more about their family responsibilities. Nevertheless, nearly everyone agreed that before deciding upon marriage they would ideally meet with several persons of the opposite sex, date them for a longer or shorter period of time depending on age, and then reach a final decision. A sense of panic of not being able to settle down and marry in 'due time' set in at around 22–24 years of age for women and 24–26 for men. And while it was widely acknowledged that one could have 'fun' (not necessarily meaning sex) dating different people, interviewees agreed that one would certainly end up using a set of relatively clear criteria before making the final decision of whom to actually marry. In the period when identifying a marriage partner was not yet considered truly urgent, the young people stressed their own individual role and right to engage in personal relationships. However, as soon as they started to consider marriage and talk about their considerations and criteria for choosing a partner, parents and often also siblings were brought on to the stage.[16]

People become 'wild at heart' (xin yele) when leaving the villages to take up work in factories in the south or in the larger cities, we were often told. 'We live our lives on our own and we have freedom (ziyou)', a group of young workers explained, and indeed several of them were engaged in romantic relationships of which their parents were not aware. Nevertheless, it was remarkable to hear and observe how important feelings and acts of obligations towards parents and siblings were among many of those who left the villages for work. It was not uncommon that siblings pooled their money to share the expenses for the education of one of their brothers or sisters, and although it was hardly possible to get completely reliable information about how wages were spent, nearly all interviewees claimed that they regularly sent money home to parents and siblings, or at least brought home money for New Year. This was confirmed in some instances by parents, but finding reliable information about issues of private economy proved to be almost impossible.

[16] Unlike in rural areas, for instance Zhejiang Province, it was very uncommon in the villages we studied that young people lived together and had children before marriage. It happened in a few instances when families could not afford an appropriate wedding ceremony, and in those cases people largely tried to keep it secret.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The young people's sense of obligation should not be mistaken for altruism. It was based on practical and realistic assessments of how to live a life with room for individual choices and the pursuit of individual interests, while at the same time ensuring that the family remained a stable source of security. The family was crucial, as it was usually the sole source of social security for the individual in case of disease, the need for care, loss of property or unemployment, and it constituted a collective of indisputable social, emotional and psychological importance for the young people.

Traditionally the responsibility for taking care of parents was delegated to sons, while daughters married out of the family.[17] In our research material, we saw a clear tendency that many parents now rely to a large extent on their daughters' support, and daughters in general expressed a high degree of responsibility towards their parents. Very often both parents and daughters wanted to ensure that the daughter would marry a man who lived relatively near her own family. This was an especially important factor in the wealthier villages of Fujian when parents and daughters negotiated about possible and suitable husbands. With more parents in villages having daughters and no sons, interviewees also emphasised that it was becoming less of a stigma to take a son-in-law into the house.[18] Several families had already done so, and people in other villages rarely spoke negatively about this.

This structural change also meant that daughters were often under a lot of pressure to fulfil their filial duties. Older parents frequently mentioned to us that they actually felt more assured that daughters, rather than sons, would help them during old age, and those who only had sons sometimes expressed worry that daughters would in fact have proven more reliable caretakers than their own sons. There were also numerous examples in our data of how young women eventually gave up dating men from other provinces whom they had met at work, out of concern for their parents or to follow the will of their parents. However, daughters were rarely directly forced to give up such rela-

[17] E.g. Rubie S. Watson and Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

[18] Couples with rural household registrations were allowed to have a second child if the first was a girl. Due to widespread use of unofficial adoption of girls by relatives or friends, mostly in other provinces, and the use of ultrasound to determine the gender of a foetus, there were in the Shaanxi village about one third more boys than girls. Only six of 150 households had only daughters and no sons, and out of 128 women of the official child-bearing age (up to 49) there were only four who had two girls and who had been sterilised. There were 12 who had only one girl, but none of these were sterilised and they would most likely have one or more children later.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

tionships. More often, a young woman would go through a longer period of consideration and negotiation with her parents, and would reach the conclusion that everyone, including herself, would be better off if she married another man. While conflicts in families over such issues were mentioned quite frequently, especially by neighbours and friends but also by the implied parties themselves, it was nevertheless clear that most parents and young couples tried hard to reach a consensus for their preferred choices. Sometimes parents would tell us that in order to avoid escalating conflict they simply had to agree to what they thought was a bad choice of partner. Just as their children did, they expressed in various ways that their closest family made up a small collective which was so significant for both emotional and practical reasons that conflict over such an important issue as to whom to marry should be avoided. Such perceptions were probably strengthened by the fact that in both of the areas we studied, divorce was still considered a near-disaster, a loss of face, dignity and opportunity, especially for women but also for men, who often had even greater difficulties finding a new partner in the home region because of the shortage of women.

Yan's study of families in rural north China pointed to a degeneration of social relations due to the rise of the individual, which had negatively manifested itself in egoistic, consumption-obsessed behaviour among young villagers.[19] Yan's examples of such behaviour are numerous, and in our material we also recognised similar cases of young people's self-centred behaviour and disregard for parents. At the same time, we were surprised to learn how strongly nearly all of our interviewees emphasised, directly or indirectly, in their accounts or actions, the importance of their family (not the traditional Chinese extended family, but mainly their parents, grandparents and siblings) as their main collective—a collective the individual needed to cater to and to safeguard. This is not necessarily in contradiction to Yan's findings, but it adds another dimension. Many of the young people we interviewed told of how they experienced the demands and possibilities that the rapidly modernising society offered in terms of jobs in ever-shifting places, encounters with people from very different areas of China, moving out of their parents' homes at an early age, sex before marriage, and patterns of consumption. While all these options and demands seemed to promote a strong degree of individualism and focus on individual choices, our data nevertheless show that many of the young people put special weight on the importance of close family ties in

[19] Yan, *Private Life*, p. 234.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

their own biographical narratives. Data concerning other topics of conversation than family and partners, for instance concerning work experiences, relations to friends and colleagues, and views on organisational life and political authority, suggested that the role of the family as a collective has changed, but that it remains strong, especially due to the lack of common welfare and alternative collective opportunities for these rural young people without education or secure jobs. As we show below, young people were highly individualistic in their perceptions of success and failure, but they were also very conscious of their own dependence on family support and on their need to nurture the family collective.

'In Love You Rely on Destiny, in Work on Your Own Efforts': The Burden of Individual Responsibility

Among our 100 young interviewees, 22 were currently students or had studied beyond the compulsory nine years of junior secondary school. Nearly 80 per cent had nine years or fewer of schooling. The well-documented prestige and status connected to higher education in China was, not surprisingly, visible in the attitudes of the young people with whom we spoke. Among virtually all our interviewees, regardless of age, gender, education and place of origin, there was a strong perception that the young generation in rural China could be divided into two main groups: those who studied at the level of high school and beyond, or had a job based on such an education, versus those who left school after nine years or earlier and had to work as unskilled labourers or peasants, or remain unemployed. This dominant perception of education as the major criterion for how to define different groups of young people, and as a marker of success versus failure, is disseminated through the media as well as in the schools, and was also largely internalised by interviewees. Among those who had failed to continue school after nine years, or had dropped out earlier, it was common to describe this as an unfortunate event, not necessarily at the time when it happened but seen in the longer perspective of a personal working career and income. It was especially those in their thirties or older who looked back on their time in school with regrets of not having succeeded to continue to higher levels of education. Few, if any, of those above 30 years of age were proud of having chosen or been forced on to another path than that of schooling, something which was hardly surprising considering the strong emphasis on formal education in Chinese society.

The same perception of a deep divide between those who have studied and those who left school to work was expressed by young people currently

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

within the educational system. One 24-year-old female student from a rural village told us that she (unlike many other students we talked to) had in fact maintained contact with friends who had dropped out of school. She consciously avoided speaking about school with them, however, because this just 'put psychological pressure on them':

> I can put myself on their level, although I am not like them … They envy all of us who study, they feel that they do not share our language, and therefore they do not want to be with university students. Many students feel that they are more important than them, or maybe they express it without knowing it.
>
> (24-year-old female student)

Not all of our interviewees without education were embarrassed about it. After all, they shared this experience with the majority of villagers, and several expressed a sense of pride in how and why they *themselves* chose to quit school and find work instead. Regardless of what really happened when people dropped out of school, we were surprised to observe the extent to which the majority of our young interviewees tended to take individual responsibility for both failure and success in work as well as education. While some would mention the bad economic situation in their families as a reason for their own individual lack of educational opportunities, there was a remarkable tendency among the young people to place responsibility almost entirely on their own shoulders. Some emphasised how the decision to quit school was entirely their own, and others blamed themselves for not having worked hard enough to make it possible to continue through the educational system. In either case, the main responsibility was first and foremost attached to the individual rather than to other legitimate external factors, such as the lack of proper schools, costly education, fierce competition, parents lacking the abilities to help their children with homework, long distance to school, to name a few. 'In love you rely on destiny, in work on your own efforts,' one young man concluded, mainly to himself, and many of our other interviewees would probably have agreed.

Nearly 80 per cent of our young interviewees were working in factories, shops or agriculture, or they were temporarily without work. In our interviews and conversations with them, the most common topics were therefore those directly related to their working lives. 'Why do you work?' and 'What is important when looking for a job?' were questions we tried to raise in interviews, initially with the feeling of asking very stupid questions to which the answers might be so self-evident that respondents would find them meaningless. How-

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ever, it turned out that many young people had a variety of opinions on the topic of what working life might and ideally should provide for them as individuals and for their family. The answers went far beyond the simple issue of having to make money for a living. From our observations in the factory, where we spent time talking to people while they were at work, and when they were resting in their dormitories or outside, it was also clear that working life often created the very situations where friendship and partnership were developed, where people amused themselves, and where new ideas and aspirations for how to live were formed.[20]

'Freedom' was certainly not what came to our minds first when we started spending our days with female workers who worked up to 12 hours a day in a factory, enduring a terrible chemical stench and ruining the skin on their hands making small packages of incense sticks. But the concept of freedom was nevertheless often brought up by interviewees when talking about work. The longing for 'freedom' was sometimes used either to explain why interviewees dropped out of school to work, or to account for a certain job or a certain workplace. The incense factory, for instance, was dirty, of low prestige and had low wages, but it was described by many as having the great advantage of allowing workers to come and go freely, and to work when they wanted to (because all wages were calculated on the basis of production!).

Notions such as freedom, independence (duli) and personal development (geren fazhan) were all used to express variations of the importance of being able to *move*—move away from and back to family, move from the village to a city, move from the familiar to the unknown, and back. It was especially the youngest interviewees (with little work experience and not yet engaged or married) who emphasised notions of freedom and the importance of their own personal choices. They often moved from one place to another:

> I did not want to continue school. It was not my parents who did not want me to study. I told them that this was the road I chose to walk and there was nothing to be done about it. I have never regretted it. I had always envied those who went out to work and came back with money. I felt that by leaving, they had some freedom (ziyou yidian).
>
> (18-year-old factory worker)

This woman expressed a commonly encountered perception of freedom, namely something which allows you to leave the village, leave your parents, find work

[20] See also Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 152–163.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

wherever you see the opportunity, and make your own money. Others of her age would agree that 'freedom' was to 'come and go' (pao lai pao qu) as you pleased, or that 'freedom is when you have a job where you can simply leave if something more important turns up', as a 17-year-old male worker explained.

The youngest people had the greatest tendency to idealise choice, even when it was recognised that the choice resulted in long hours of tedious and physically hard, sometimes even hazardous, work.[21] In underground internet cafés[22] in villages and small towns in Fujian we often met young male workers who were travelling around the country from factory to factory, leaving for a new place whenever they got tired of the work and location. They explained that they enjoyed this kind of 'freedom' and the opportunity to see the country, although the work in itself was uninteresting, sometimes dangerous, and wages far too low. Both men and women in this category explained that they experienced a sense of freedom because they could engage with new friends in circumstances similar to their own, have romantic relations without their parents knowing about it, and make their own money, and if they got too fed up with work they would move on to a new place.

This perception of freedom may also help to explain the deep mistrust many of them had for signing labour contracts: 'A contract is a way of binding workers. It is just a system to the advantage of the enterprise. If you sign a contract they will "fry you till you drop",' one young man explained. While we assumed that a labour contract would be a kind of insurance for workers, guaranteeing stable and predictable working conditions, our interviewees rejected this assumption almost without exception, and claimed that the employer was in full control once the contract was signed. By emphasising their 'freedom to come and go', workers who were bound to carry out manual labour for

21) The exploitation of migrant workers is not a topic in this article, but it has been thoroughly documented, for instance in Anita Chan, *China's Workers Under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy* (Armonk, NY: East Gate Books, 2001); Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, 'The internal politics of an urban Chinese work community: a case study of employee influence on decision-making at a state-owned factory', *The China Journal*, No. 52 (2004), pp. 1–24; and recently in a report from Amnesty International, 'People's Republic of China. Internal migrants: discrimination and abuse. The human cost of an economic "miracle"', online at http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa170082007 (accessed 8 May 2007).

22) During our fieldwork in 2004, villages in Fujian were still under the influence of the 2002 national crackdown on Internet cafés with fewer than 100 computers, and in the villages we studied, access to Internet cafés was only possible by personal agreement and in secrecy during the evenings.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

long hours discursively manifested themselves as subjects in power, rather than as the mere objects of misfortune, deprived of pride, opportunity and dignity—an image that dominates the official, as well as popular, discourse on migrant labourers and school drop-outs.

While the youngest workers (15 to 19 years old) often emphasised personal choice and freedom as important aspects of their current lives as workers away from home, workers above the age of 20 seemed much more conscious of the restraints and pressures related to their work situation. These idealised versions of personal choice and the possibilities to 'tour the country' paled considerably with experience. From around the age of 20, the majority started to express a strong sense of worry for their future:

> I try out different kinds of work looking for something that suits me. It is anyway all more or less the same. There is no future in it. It is different for the people from universities who look for jobs. They have a future. They find jobs which suit them. Compared to them we are illiterates.
>
> (male worker in his early twenties)

In their twenties, most of our interviewees had realised that their job prospects would probably not change considerably in the future, that their wages (to the extent that they were paid out at all) were hardly enough to save money for building a house, sending children to school, keeping a reserve in case of illness, or supporting aging parents with no form of health insurance or pension, not to mention providing for themselves or their closest family members in case of illness. At the same time, they had started to seriously consider establishing their own families. Those who had remained within the educational system were somewhat less worried about the future for themselves and their families, but in general everyone, regardless of education, gave voice to feelings of obligation and responsibility towards one major collective, namely the closest family. In addition to how to choose an appropriate partner, there were three main topics young interviewees brought up which emphasised the importance of family and family obligation: whether or not to provide economic support for siblings and parents, where and how to find work, and what constitutes proper behaviour in relation to parents, children and siblings.

One of many examples of young people worrying about family relations was a young man who was only 17 years when we got to know him. He was a worker in the incense factory, and with his reddish-dyed, longish hair and fashionable clothes, he looked like most of the other young men from the

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

neighbouring Fujian villages who had had only nine years of schooling and were often hanging around in the streets. He was popular with the girls, and very self-conscious in his first meetings with us. At first he also seemed very egocentric, and concerned only about his own future and career. However, he was also an only child, and after some time it became clear that he had a deep concern for his parents and the state of his family. When he talked about his own personal hopes and aspirations, he always emphasised the desire to leave the village and find better work elsewhere, but he could not help starting to cry when speaking of the difficulties this would create for his parents and grandparents. His parents often fought, and he wanted peace (hemu) in his family even more than he wanted money. As so many other of our young interviewees, this man felt personally responsible for ensuring peace and a basic standard of living for his elders, and he felt that eventual failure or success was first and foremost determined by his own efforts and abilities.

Many other interviewees stressed that since they had missed out on the opportunity to get an education, the least they could do was to support their siblings' schooling. One 26-year-old unmarried female worker explained:

> A daughter is responsible for giving money to her family. The individual (shen) is just one part of a family, and you have to make yourself useful. My younger brother is a good student, and this year I bought him a Western suit for 1,000 yuan. For myself, I never buy anything that costs more than 100 yuan. He is now doing his 'practice period', and I said that we had to get him something good, otherwise he would not make a good impression on people. My aunt said that spending all my money on my little brother will get me into trouble when I have to marry and leave the family. I do not think that is a problem. Maybe our family will be a little bit poorer, but the most important thing is that the family is harmonious. I am an older sister, I have this responsibility. I have strong ideas about family.
>
> (female worker)

Our material contains numerous other examples of how young people argued that since one of their siblings performed better than they themselves did in school, they should help support his or her education, and we have examples where this also happened in practice. Most would also argue that since their parents had brought them up, they were responsible for taking care of their parents during old age. Hardly any of them expected the state to take any responsibility for the old, and they took it for granted that they would have to support the elderly. For many, supporting their siblings or taking care of their parents during old age was the 'custom' (xiguan), something expected from them and not to be further explained or discussed, and many interviewees,

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

regardless of age, were concerned with the fact that other people might 'talk about them' if they did not behave properly as family members.

The degree to which the family constituted the most (or even only) significant collective for people was obviously contextual, and differed among individuals as well as between people in different stages of life. The family was also by no means the only collective institution or unit that people spoke of or engaged in. However, as will be returned to in the following, we found that even in situations where people decided to act collectively as villagers, it was first and foremost because family interests were at stake.

Collective Engagement and Family Interests

One of the issues we wanted to study during our periods of fieldwork was how young rural people perceived the Communist Party (CCP), its youth associations and different forms of societal collectives. We were interested in learning with which organisations they were familiar, and which they found relevant for themselves. Were there collective units or activities of any kind, permanent or temporary, in which young people with a rural background, no education and low-paid jobs could and would engage?

The unequivocal perception of the CCP and its youth organisation among our young interviewees (with or without a longer education) was that membership was completely irrelevant unless you had a higher education or were employed in a state unit. Also, when discussing this topic, those interviewees who were the most interested in it tended to emphasise personal *choice*, rather than the obvious strong structural barriers preventing their own enrolment. It was not so surprising that all the students in higher education planned to enrol in the Party. The Party was explicitly trying to recruit them, and they knew that there were advantages connected to membership. However, in spite of the CCP's lack of interest in including uneducated peasants and migrant workers into the Party ranks, some of our interviewees in this category also emphasised personal choice when talking about membership.

The views on the role of the Party were clearly related to differences in status, education and age. Most of our interviewees above the age of 50 viewed the Party in its historical context as the vanguard of a popular movement to promote equality and ensure land for the peasants. Many displayed a high esteem for Mao Zedong's leadership, regardless of their negative memories of the Cultural Revolution, and they were also generally in favour of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao, whom they first and foremost praised for the abolishment of the unpopular taxes for peasants. The central government as represented by the

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

president and prime minister was 'good', while local representatives of the state were mostly 'corrupt'. Our younger interviewees had less to say on the topic of Party membership and Party associations. Most would simply say that they 'were not interested' (bu gan xingqu), or they would argue that their opinion on this did not matter. Others had a more pragmatic attitude, and explained that the Party as a collective had nothing to offer them—it was the efforts of the individual which counted:

> I would certainly not join the youth organisation even if I could. After all, they [the CCP] have never done anything to help me. My family is poor and they have not helped us. Why would I rely on them? It is much better to rely on yourself!
>
> (23-year-old immigrant worker from Guangzhou)

This same attitude was reflected in many young people's scepticism towards village cadres and Party secretaries, and sometimes village collectives in general:

> I do not care about village affairs. I care about my own affairs ... What would it help to join the Party? Those with jobs can advance if they are Party members. Even if we peasants join the Party, we remain peasants!
>
> (28-year-old female shop attendant)

Our data contain numerous stories illustrating how our young interviewees, to a much larger extent than their parents, lack trust in the Party as a collective where peasants, migrant workers and people without education can bring their concerns to the forefront and find help. Their first concern was whether or not the Party's local institutions could give them, or their family, any advantages or support, and nearly all of them concluded that this was not the case. Party membership was only seen as being advantageous for university students, especially jobwise. The vast majority of peasants and workers considered membership to be something for the educated, for the local officials or for the older activists in their villages, but it was not relevant for themselves. They probably realised that the Party would not really want them as members, but they nevertheless argued that they *personally* lacked interest in membership.

Village elections were of only slightly more interest to young people than Party politics and membership. Many of our 100 younger interviewees regarded village elections as uninteresting (mei you yisi), but here there were clear differences between people in Fujian and Shaanxi, which again were related to whether or not elections were seen as being advantageous (haochu) to individuals and their families. In the Shaanxi village, most young people

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

had left for other parts of the country to work, and the village was poor. Land was not a big issue because no one was interested in buying it for industrialising purposes, and among the younger people no one paid attention to the elections. In the Fujian village, on the other hand, most young people had stayed in the province and were either students, workers in factories and shops nearby or unemployed. The village was only a few hours from Xiamen, and much of the arable land had been bought up for industrialising purposes. Practically all local families took part in the elections and attended numerous meetings where people gathered to discuss, even argue, with the officials who were held responsible for selling out the land too cheaply years ago, and for having benefited personally from the sale. People were paid 15 yuan each for their participation in each meeting and for voting, and this obviously added to people's interest in joining in.

In the Fujian villages, unlike the Shaanxi village, there were a few alternative organisations and collectives in which people could engage. The reactivated lineage organisations, and the officially established Old People's Organisation (laoren xiehui) attracted members, especially among retirees with previous connections to the Party and government.[23] None of these organisations has raised the interest of the young people we interviewed, and even the lineage organisations were for the most part regarded as being of interest only to older people. The result of the government's repression of truly autonomous societal organisations, Yan has argued, is that young villagers come to disregard the need to work for larger collective interests, and instead indulge in a destructive type of individualism built on growing demands for consumption.[24] Our research supports some of Yan's findings, but also suggests that this individualism remains to a large extent inseparable from the individual's identification with his or her family. Therefore, it was especially in cases where the interests of the family collective—not merely the individual—were threatened, that people spontaneously became engaged in collective actions beyond the family.

In the Shaanxi village, this happened when the provincial government decided that all graveyards were to be transformed into fields, and people were forced to follow the rules of cremation. Using large sections of land for family graveyards was considered a waste of arable fields, and in February 2004 the county government enforced the levelling of graveyards in the villages. Villagers responded directly to this threat against family traditions by organising a col-

---

23) Mette Halskov Hansen, 'Organising the old: senior authority and the political significance of a rural Chinese "NGO"', *Modern Asian Studies*, 42(5) (2008), pp. 1057–1078.
24) Yan, *Private Life*, p. 234.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

lective rebuilding of all the graveyards during the Qingming festival in April, when many young people came home. In some of the villages in Fujian, on the other hand, many young people joined their families in expressing strong dissatisfaction with local officials selling the sections of land that were collectively owned. A conflict regarding this issue had been going on for years, and it intensified in connection with the unauthorised local 'redistribution of land' in 2003. Large groups of villagers—old and young—gathered during village meetings where land was supposed to be redistributed based on the current size and composition of families. Intensive disputes erupted because villagers had been lured into selling land very cheaply, while large sums of money had disappeared, seemingly into the pockets of previous officials. The current officials had had nothing to do with the sale but they were nevertheless held responsible, and villagers directed all their discontent towards these representatives of local government who were, regardless, considered to be as corrupt as their predecessors. Local young people whom we interviewed and watched taking part in meetings were outraged; they expressed a very high degree of distrust in the officials' motives. They normally did not care much about the village as a community and they did not support attempts to collect money for common public goods in the village, but in this case issues of family property were at stake, and this engaged everyone.

Conclusion

We have assumed in this article that China is undergoing a process of individualisation where more and more of society's demands, controls and constraints are directed towards and imposed upon the individual, where people tend to disembed from family and village communities, and where they are tied into new networks through the labour market, the legal system and social welfare, which is also for the most part designed for individuals.[25] Most of the scholars who develop or employ the 'individualisation thesis' do so in the context of European or North American societies. They refer to late developments of modernity ('second modernity', 'reflexive modernity' or 'high modernity') where democracy, welfare systems and wide access to education are both characteristics of and prerequisites for the development of the kind of new alliances and societal engagements that at least, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue, are positive results of individualisation in second modernity. One of the

[25] E.g. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*, pp. 2–3.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

decisive features of individualisation processes, according to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, is that they not only permit but demand contribution and choices by the individual.[26] The individualisation thesis does not reject the continuing power of, for instance, gender and class to inform and direct individual life opportunities, nor does it claim that people become free to 're-create the world in increasingly diverse forms'.[27] Individualisation, rather than being a precise definition of a certain type of society or stage of development, is presented as a 'designating trend' that calls for investigation into how it manifests itself in certain groups, milieus or regions, and how people respond to it.[28]

Proponents of the individualisation thesis also argue—and this is particularly relevant in our study of rural Chinese perceptions of the individual—that in highly individualised societies, people increasingly come to regard failure and success, setbacks or progress, as individually determined, rather than as results of structures or situations beyond their own control. In a modernised society, characterised by the experience of risks, individual subjectivity becomes an important force. In their study of young people in Western individualised societies, Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel argue that in spite of the fact that young people's experiences continue to be shaped by class and gender, the wider range of choices available creates in them an impression that 'their own route is unique and that the risks they face are to be overcome as individuals rather than as members of a collectivity'.[29]

In our study of one delimited aspect related to the individualisation of Chinese society—young rural people's perceptions of self and family—two results came to the forefront: first, the degree to which the young people who came from often poor villages tended to take individual responsibility for what they saw as social failure, although they in reality did not have that many options or choices; and second, the way they emphasised their closest family as the only collective of importance to them, while at the same time arguing strongly for their own interests, rights and aspirations as individuals. Unlike their parents or grandparents, the young people had not experienced the collectivisation period, and relationships within families were changing rapidly, partly because of the fact that most individuals—men or women—often had to seek work far away from home, and therefore also became involved in new relationships and experienced life in cities.

---

26) Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*, p. 4.

27) Furlong and Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change*, p. 5.

28) Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*, p. 5.

29) Furlong and Cartmel, *Young People and Social Change*, p. 9.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The individualisation of Chinese society has led to a range of new varieties of relationships between the generations, and they take very different forms in different areas, not merely following the increasingly artificial rural/urban divide. However, one of the general trends seem to be that old people can no longer take for granted that children or grandchildren will provide for them, nor would they necessarily want them to, had they any choice.[30] Furthermore, neither village collectives nor the state have emerged as stable providers of social security for individuals in rural areas who fall ill, have no children to take care of them or are disabled. There are also no autonomous societal organisations available to the majority of the rural population, through which they can legally and with an impact express their interests collectively. In a rapidly individualising society and economy, this, according to Yan, has created an extreme form of individualism and egoistic concern for personal interests and consumption among young rural people.[31]

In this article we have argued that individualism among the young people we studied—reflected in their life choices, behaviour and personal narratives of freedom, free love and independence—remains entangled with their perceptions of the family as a collective of indisputable economic, social and emotional importance. The individualism they exhibited was to a large extent indistinguishable from their concern with collective family interests. Each person needed to find an appropriate partner, but the process involved negotiations with family, and broader family interests were taken seriously into account. Much was done on both sides—parents and children—to avoid conflict, and young people were often willing to abandon a partner if the relationship could not fulfil the common interests of the family.

Collectives consisting of colleagues at work or friends, not to mention official collectives such as Party youth organisations or village communities, played on the other hand a very small role in the personal accounts of our interviewees. Again and again we were struck by the interviewees' expressions of concern, first of all about parents' opinions and support, about siblings' opportunities for education or their own contribution with an income, and their own wishes to find partners who were both desirable from the individual's point of view and appropriate from a broader family perspective. In conversations and interviews with young people, they often emphasised the sense of insecurity they experienced when facing necessary choices of where to work, what to do, how

---

30) See Stig Thøgersen and Ni Anru, '"He is He, and I am I": Individual and Collective Among China's Rural Elderly', *EJEAS*, this volume.
31) Yan, *Private Life*.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to save money, whether or not to send money home, how to find a partner, and on more general level how to perform as members of the socio-economic collective that their families still constituted. They were very explicit in their expectations as individuals with dreams, hopes and aspirations to create meaningful lives for themselves and their families. They emphasised—sometimes we felt that they even idealised—the power of personal choice, and they tended to blame themselves, rather than the Party-state, the school or their families, for failure to succeed, such as in achieving the education they all believed would have provided themselves and their families with more comfortable, secure and—not least—respected lives.

This content downloaded from 132.174.255.3 on Sat, 20 Oct 2018 00:22:07 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms