The London School of Economics and Political Science

(Suffering) For the Family: The Mediated Structure of Feeling among the Rural Elderly in Post-Reform China

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Abstract

This thesis examines the mediated emotional experiences of rural elderly grandparents born before the 1960s. Against the backdrop of state-led neoliberal modernisation since the 1980s, it asks how the rural elderly experience their family life emotionally, whether and how the media culture has structured such experiences, and what is the significance of such emotions for the elderly, their families and, more widely, for China's uneven modernity. To answer these questions, I conducted a 10-month ethnography in two rural villages in Enshi, China between 2019 and 2020, including live-in studies with selected families.

This study found that the rural elderly's willing sacrifice and sense of inferiority in the family are connected to the feeling of (eating) bitterness. Such a bitter structure of feeling has historical significance for this generation and has been reinterpreted through the media content they engage with, allowing them to live life meaningfully in deprived conditions. Moreover, under persistent patriarchal and increasingly neoliberal structures that systemically disadvantage rural households, the media that perpetuates new norms, scripts, and expectations has been actively appropriated by different genders and generations within the family. Such mediated processes play a crucial role in structuring the family dynamics within the three-generational household. These processes tend to engender highly classed and gendered intimacy, distance, and tension between the elderly and the younger generations, often leaving the elderly with grievances, guilt, isolation, disappointment, and a faint sense of hope.

By examining the politics and formation of the elderly's structure of feelings in relation to media, I argue that China's modernization is largely enabled by and at the expense of rural elderly's 'cruel optimism'. In this regard, this study contests and contributes to the largely depoliticalised realm of Chinese family sociology by reintroducing power. It also contributes to media scholarship from the vantage point of the less (but increasingly) media-saturated region of the Global South. By the same token, it advances current theorisations of modernity, particularly individualisation. Through attention to a marginalised and understudied group – the rural elderly in China – this study advances the idea of an 'imagination of modernity from below'.

In memory of my grandparents, He Bingying and Long Anfu

Acknowledgments

I have imagined this moment for a very long time: the moment, I hope I have humbly earned, to express my deepest and earnest gratitude to so many people. I have reached 30 as this incredibly wonderful journey at LSE comes to an end. In Chinese culture, 30 is a particular age threshold whereby a person is expected to establish oneself as a responsible and independent being. This is a noble and challenging goal and I doubt I have achieved it. However, if by any chance I have come close to this goal, I know it is only because the people who supported me and inspired me not just in the past five years, but in all 30 years of my life.

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In the spring of 2019, I lost my grandfather suddenly. I did not get the chance to see him the last time, but his sanguine smiles and spirit will forever be enshrined in my heart.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

I lived in Shanghai for six years. Those bloody buildings - you cannot even see the top. Nights were like broad daylight. I could still get lost going back to the flat we rent. It was about an hour walking. I never took the bus. I knew it only took me one Yuan, but I wanted to save money. I earned 3,900 a month. I save 300 for myself, eating. I gave all the rest to my daughter-in-law. My daughter-in-law could take as much as she wants as the rent or bills (...). I ate and took showers in the hotel I worked in. So, I only sleep there. I do not need to use the water (...). There is no other way. No money. Money was all in the apartment they brought back home. Two grandchildren needed to go to school. It took more than 10,000 (per year) for schooling in Shanghai. The rent was also high. We all crammed into the two rooms we rent, my son and daughter-in-law, two grandchildren and me. I worked, sometimes cooked for them, and picked up the children (...) Yes, you are right, I could just farm my potato, and I won't starve. But I have no option. You know, people who dagong (打工, working for a boss) in the cities, like my daughter-in-law, need to do her face and hair from time to time. That also needed money. They ate all kinds of good things, ribs, fish, and crabs. I eat cabbage. My grandson asked me to try the crab and the ribs. I said I did not like it.

Liu Xuan, family 14

As night fell, Pear Tree village was engulfed in darkness. Having just finished a long talk with the old couple, Liu Xuan and Hu Shao, I set off to leave. I politely declined their kind offer of sending me home since it was not very far, and they were not in good health. I did not take the flashlight they offered either, which they often used for night walks. Instead, I opened the flashlight on my smartphone. The light from my phone's torch illuminated the narrow muddy path ahead of me, and I heard nothing but dogs' barks. I looked around, only scattered lights illuminating this quiet village, thousands of miles from Shanghai. The old couple's words and their deeply harboured feelings that lingered in their dilapidated living room reappeared in my mind. I could not help thinking about Liu Xuan's way back home under the dazzling lights of the metropolis, the place that speaks of the quintessential modern life of China. Was she lonely, afraid, amazed, or tired? As someone who is largely illiterate and can hardly read the road signs, let alone use a map app to find directions (she has an old mobile but not a smartphone), she might get lost in that overwhelmingly complicated city, even after six years. However, her tone betrayed that she had no doubt about where she was heading – the family.

This project examines the desires, attachments, disappointments, and fears for family life of such rural elderly people in a time when the world they live in has been profoundly mediated. As a generation born before the 1960s, these elders have experienced arguably the most radical and unprecedented modern transformation in China's history. Nowadays, however, they seem to be an awkward fit in modern China with its fast-growing GDP and stunning new digital technology. The younger generations are increasingly involved in an unprecedentedly mediated world and have their desires and aspirations profoundly shaped by media culture. However, the rural elders' stories, feelings, and attachments to family life, if not completely overlooked, are often too facilely categorised into "traditional" or even "backward". For many, the rural elderly are also considered the last group associated with media culture or digital technology. In academia, the modern transformation of the family has been sophisticatedly theorised from the vantage point of the young and the urban, as they seem to embody the trend and direction of modern life in the future. The tacit supposition is that the elderly were and continue to be in the margin of the modern society.

In recent decades, there has been growing concern about the rural elderly's increasingly deteriorated material and mental condition, which some call "the elderly crisis" (e.g., Jianlei & Cao, 2016; Ping, 2018). Scholars have found that many elderly people in rural villages are involved in "bottom-line survival" (Gui & Yu, 2010; H. Yang & Ouyang, 2013; S. Yang & Shen, 2000), a condition with basic subsistence and minimal consumption[1] (Dong, 2019; G. He et al., 2016). Despite high age and poor health conditions, many still practise farming, and some even work as migrant workers to fend for themselves and other family members[2] (Cai et al., 2012; Ping, 2018; Ye & He, 2009). According to studies on rural people's retirement decisions, the rural elderly only stop working when they are physically incapacitated, "gandaosi" (干到死, 'work until they drop'). Many left-behind elderly live in extremely economically unstable conditions, with precarious self- or spouse-provided everyday care (J. Sun, 2006; Ye & He, 2009).

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[1] According to the China Urban and Rural Elderly Survey (CURES) in 2006 (representative national sample), 19 percent of the rural elderly's consumption levels was below the official poverty line; 29 percent below the relatively higher "Basic Need Line". In contrast, only 6 percent of the urban elderly's consumption level was below the "Basic Need Line".

[2] In a survey conducted in 2006 on left-behind elderly's old-age maintenance (representative sample of 400 elderly people from 5 provinces), 80.9% mostly relied on their own (including spouse) labour income as maintenance. The second ranked source was family support (Ye & He, 2009).

Alongside this story has been a growing concern for the failing filial piety and moral degradation of the young who refuse to shoulder the responsibility of supporting their parents in old age. Studies show that in rural China, old-age support from adult children to their elderly parents tends to be insufficient, unstable or, in some cases, non-existent (Cai et al., 2012; C. He & Ye, 2014; Hershatter, 2011; Y. Wei & Jiang, 2007). Others have found that the rural elderly also face significant elder neglect, indifference or sometimes even abuse (G. He et al., 2016; Y. Liu, 2015). Numerous reports, news coverage, and media stories circulating in everyday life also show the growing problem of elderly neglect and abuse. The widely reported "Kenlao phenomenon",[1] or the story that a son and daughter-in-law kicked out their ageing mother, outraged many.

Worse still, scholars have noticed a significant increase in elderly suicides[2] in rural China, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Phillips et al., 1999; H. Yang, 2013; H. Yang & Ouyang, 2013; Yip et al., 2000). From 1991 to 2000, the suicide rate of the rural elderly was significantly higher than all other age groups, averaging 120 per million for people over 70 and 72 per million for people between 60-69 (Yip et al., 2005). According to some studies, some older people experience intense feelings of injustice and betrayal when their younger family members (primarily sons and daughters-in-law) disrespect them or mistreat them. Desperate and helpless, some choose to die by suicide. Some studies show disturbing findings that some older people show suicidal intentions because they consider themselves to be a burden on their family. Some researchers report hearing explicit or implicit views from young people and the elderly themselves that suggest "people should just die when they are old" (renlaole jiugaisi, 人老了就该死) (Y. Chen, 1980; Fan, 2000; S. Yang & Shen, 2000).

It was against this backdrop that my curiosity, suspicion and concerns grew: how do the rural elderly actually feel and experience their family life, as a generation who have been through such radical changes, now living often austere lives and seeming to fall behind in the modern society? If, as Thomason (2021, p.78) pointed out, the rural elderly "do not share the same kind of emotional and material mobility enjoyed by the younger generation of migrant workers who have been raised to value happiness and reflexive freedom", what values and feelings do the rural elderly experience? Moreover,

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[1] Literally meaning "eating the elderly", it refers to the phenomenon that the younger generation heavily depends on the elderly for material support and care work.

[2] Based on joint investigations in many rural villages, Yang Hua (2013) pointed out that even through the rate is high, there could still be a significant omission of suicide cases among the elderly in rural areas. They pointed out that this might be because, in public opinion, suicide was not as sensational among the elderly compared to younger people and thus was often overlooked. A second reason might be the deliberate concealment of the senior family members' suicide by their adult children because it is considered to be 'unfilial'.

supposing the ever-changing media culture has played a vital role in shaping young individual's longings, feelings, and aspirations, what role might it play in configuring the elderly's emotions? Are media and digital technology truly less relevant or irrelevant to the rural elderly's life and feelings? If not, how and to what extent is such technology relevant to them?

Before these questions can be explored in this thesis, it is necessary to establish the background of the study. I first provide a historical account of the transformation of the Chinese family in the past century. I aim to provide a sense of the historical contexts that impact the Chinese family and the institutional conditions these rural older people were and are facing. I then map out the changing landscape of media culture, particularly after the economic reform in the 1980s. Based on these discussions, I problematise the rural elderly's emotional experiences against the backdrop of family transformation and China's mediated modernity as a crucial question to be answered.

1.1 The Chinese Family in Transformation

1.1.1 The modern turn of the Chinese family

The beginning of the twentieth century marked a modern turn for the Chinese family. In the century-long empirical era, the Chinese family was organised under Confucianist and feudal principles that featured a rigid hierarchy of age and gender[1] (W. Deng, 1994; Freedman, 1970; Hsu, 1948; Parrish & Whyte, 1978). Marriage was conditional on parental permission, women had no right to initiate a divorce, and polygamy was accepted. The elderly (especially men) in a family often had supreme authority and power (Fei, 1945; Glosser, 2003; Hsu, 1948). However, facing national crisis and social upheaval since the late Qing dynasty, revolutionaries and intellectuals put the traditional Confucianist family at the centre of their radical critique of China's backwardness (X. Meng, 2013; Y. Zhao, 2018). For them, the "old family" (*jiushi jiating*, 旧式家庭) become a primary subject to be "revolutionised" to "save the nation" (*jiuguo*, 救国) (Y. Zhao, 2017). These intellectuals argued that under the Confucianist ethics codes, including filial piety, young people, especially women, could not be independent individuals free from patriarchal power. Therefore, as the foundation of the feudal society, the family helped to produce "slaves" and caused the political weakness of the

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[1] For example, one of the most fundamental moral and political requirement of Confucianism is "*Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues*" (Sangang Wuchang, 三纲五常). The Three Bonds refer to: a) the subject is subjected to the monarch; b) the son is subjected to his father; c) the wife is subjected to her husband. The Five Virtues refer to benevolence (ren, 仁), righteousness (yi, 义), propriety (li, 礼), wisdom (zhi, 智) and fidelity (xin, 信).

nation (H. Lee, 2007a; L. Yang, 2016). What they aimed to achieve was to turn *"jiaren"* (家人, family members) into eligible modern *"citizens"* (W. Deng, 1994), and "break the family to unite the nation"(weiguopojia, 为国破家) (Y. Zhao, 2018). During the May Fourth Movement (1919)[1] and the New Culture Movement (mid-1910s to 1920s), free love had been set as a battle between "tradition and modernity, East and West, feudalism and enlightenment, hypocrisy and authenticity, old and young" (H. Lee, 2007a, p. 5). Influenced by imported ideas of enlightenment, romanticism and Freudian notions of sexuality,[2] the iconoclastic May Fourth generation fiercely attacked the Confucianist family as hypocritical and inhuman.[3] Moreover, ancestor worship was considered superstition that could impede the development of science and modernisation.[4]

However, the issues above hardly impacted beyond the elites and educated people when most Chinese people were illiterate.[5] Their primary 'battlefield' was cities, schools, and print media. Newspapers, magazines, small booklets, and flyers were the "weapons" of these intellectuals.[6] Many of these arguments and plans for the family revolution remained "on paper" – even some intellectuals did not successfully reject marriages arranged by their parents. In the remote countryside and small cities and towns, these radical thoughts about the "new family" would be regarded as profane, if not insane.[7] Nevertheless, some of the most fundamental principles[8] in these movements have been widely accepted as the source of political legitimacy, establishing the groundwork for subsequent regimes.

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[1] The May Fourth Movement was an anti-imperialist, anti-feudal, cultural, and political movement that grew out of the student movement in Beijing on 4th May 1919.

[2] A large number of foreign books relating to these topics were translated into Chinese by intellectuals during this time (see, L. Yang, 2016).

[3] For example, in his powerful novel *Lunatic's Diary* (1918), pioneering figure of the May Fourth Generation Luxun described the Confucianist morality as "cannibalistic" (*chiren*, 吃人).

[4] The intellectuals forcefully advocated a rejection of traditional Confucian values and the adoption of Western ideals of 'Mr. Science' (sai xiansheng, 赛先生) and 'Mr. Democracy' (de xiansheng, 德先生) in place of 'Mr. Confucius'.

[5] The illiteracy rate was as high as 80% in 1949 (R. Huang, 2009).

[6] Hundreds of newspapers and magazines were founded by intellectuals, such as *Xinqingnian* (新青年, New Youth). More than twenty newspapers were founded in 1919 and 1920 just on women's emancipation from the feudal society (X. Lee, 2003, p. 21).

[7] There were also strong conservative forces arguing for a relatively moderate attitude towards Confucianist culture and family values, including filial piety, calling for "reform" but not "revolution" (Y. Zhao, 2017).

[8] For example, forced marriages were widely accepted as immoral.

Before 1949, China mainly existed under war conditions. The Nationalist Party (KMT), in power in China between 1928 and 1949[1] initiated the New Life Movement and legislated family codes (Glosser, 2003) that called for women's education and equality, more accessible access to divorce, and the abolition of concubinage and bigamy under the reformed principles of Neo-Confucianism. These codes had virtually no impact in rural areas and limited influence in urban areas. Divorce rates were almost as low as during the Imperial period (Diamant, 2000a). In the Shanxi-Gansu-Ningxia Border region controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), a different marriage code was carried out from 1939 which emphasised labour, class, collectivity, solidarity and the determination to fight against the feudal family (M. Feng, 2021; H. Zhang, 2018). It became the prototype of the first national Marriage Law (1950) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Cong, 2015; Y. Ma, 2011).

Radical thoughts were introduced and advocated by revolutionaries in the revolutionary era. However, the overwhelming majority of Chinese families were still primarily characterised by parental authority, patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence, and male superiority. Family property[2] was under the elderly's control, and social organisation was based on the clan system (Baker, 1979; Diamond, 1975; Parrish & Whyte, 1978). Orthodox Confucianist family moral values were also strongly persistent. For the vast rural areas of China, the "revolution" of the family had not really arrived until the introduction of a series of forceful state-initiated socialist campaigns and legislation after the foundation of the PRC (Y. Wang, 2018; H. Zhang, 2018).

1.1.2 Socialist reforms and the family in the Maoist era

One of the most significant outcomes of the series of socialist reforms in the Maoist era (1949-1976) was the weakening of aged-based patriarchal power (Y. Li, 1999; Yan, 2021a). In 1950, the central government of the PRC initiated the nationwide Land Reform. After the sweeping movement, big landlords (often with robust clan systems) were almost destroyed, and their land was redistributed to poor peasants. In 1950, the Party-state also launched the first national Marriage Law. The law mandated that

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[1] During the Second Sino-Japanese War, most of the provinces were taken by the Japanese army. The KMT mainly controlled the urban areas in South China, such as Shanghai and Nanjing, while the CCP controlled limited areas in the remote countryside.

[2] Family property includes part of the parents' inheritance from their ancestors, the accumulation of income by the parents themselves, and the children and grandchildren's income. In many Western countries, a family's property can be divided once the young generation becomes adults so that the children can be independent of their parents and the parents can be exempt from their duty to care for their children, an arrangement that has been in place since the Industrial Revolution (Z. Huang, 2011). However, in traditional China, family property was normally indivisible until the death of the patriarch.

"feudal" or "traditional" marriages, characterised by arranged marriage, bigamy, concubinage, "child brides", and purchased marriage, were not only immoral but also illegal (Diamant, 2000b). Marriages were now to be built on the "complete willingness of the two parties" (Article 3), "monogamy," and "equal rights for both women and men" (Article 1). This reform gained support from the younger generations by emancipating them from patriarchal power, offering them freedom of marriage and divorce, encouraging them (especially women who traditionally stayed at home) to participate in production and public issues.[1]

The following movements, including the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) and the People's Commune (1958-1978), further weakened parental control by abrogating patrimonial property ownership and organising commune working units collectively (Hinton, 1966; L. Zhang, 1998). Age began to reconfigure how worth was understood in family and society. For example, older people were awarded fewer work points under the planned economy than younger people (H. Li, 2005) . The political movements also favoured younger family members. Young women were specially empowered by participating in production and political leadership (Blake, 1979; Hershatter, 2011; Hershatter & Wang, 2008; Yan, 1997, 2006b). The age-based patriarchy and Confucianist family values were also shaken by campaigns against ancestor worship, superstitious activities, and popular religions. During the Four Clean-ups Movements[2] (1963-1966) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), individuals were mobilised to report suspect family members to authority (Kleinman et al., 2011; S. Lee & Zhang, 2011). These state-sponsored policies, campaigns, and laws significantly undermined parental authority and power. Generational hierarchy – one of the principal dimensions that defined a patriarchal family – was profoundly challenged by the radical interventions of the government (Davis, 2014; Parrish & Whyte, 1978; Yan, 2003).

However, with the high priority of the collective interest in production and class struggle, the CCP paid less attention to gender oppression and inequality in the domestic sphere (Hershatter, 2011; Judith, 1983; Phyllis, 1983; Wolf, 1985; W. Zheng, 2017). The gender hierarchy was challenged more in the public and production realm than in the private sphere. "Women's emancipation" (*funvjiefang*, 妇女解放) was a constitutive part of the socialist reform, which asserted that "women can hold up half the sky". Foot-binding was effectively abolished, and young women were encouraged

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[1] According to the Marriage Law (1950), Article 9 affirms: "freedom for both spouses to choose their profession, to work and to participate in social activities."

[2] Also known as the Socialist Education Movement, it is regarded as the precursor of the Cultural Revolution.

to participate in the public sphere, including production and political work. However, such a call for women to go out was "hardly accompanied by a call for men to share household work or child-rearing responsibility" (B. Meng & Huang, 2017, p. 7). Moreover, the 1950 Marriage Law's implementation met with considerable resistance from male peasants and their parents, who feared the possibility of losing the wives, for whom they paid a significant bride price (Phyllis, 1983; Wolf, 1985). In response to this and the tendency of treating the Marriage Law as solely a "divorce law",[1] "democratic and harmonious" (*minzhu hemu*, 民主和睦) were proposed as the principles of implementing the law based on later official instructions[2] (H. Zhang, 2018). Partly because of such guidance in emphasising harmony, solidarity, and stability, reform of the patriarchal family was limited[3]. Thus, even though parental power was effectively challenged, some patriarchal family arrangements and ideology were largely retained in rural China.

Patrilocal residence and patrilineal inheritance were two crucial patriarchal arrangements that had not been radically challenged in rural China (as well as urban China) in the Maoist era (Judith, 1983; Phyllis, 1983). Since Imperial China, the Chinese family has been organised fundamentally around the father (or parents)-son relationship. That is to say, the parents raise the son, and the son has an obligation to provide maintenance for his parents in their old age, honour the patrilineal ancestors, and make sure his future son can further carry on the family's name and legacy (Cohen, 1976). The centrality of carrying the patrilineal line son after son is usually described

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[1] The implementation of the law was a messy and heterogeneous process when it reached the grassroot level, involving much misunderstanding and miscommunication. In some places, the law was called the "divorce law". Many peasants understood the law to be *only* used for divorce. Some village cadres indeed implemented the law this way – they even stirring up conflicts within the family just to advocate divorce (Cong, 2015; H. Zhang, 2018).

[2] *Instructions of Central People's Government Administration Council on Implementing the Marriage Law* was issued in 1953.

[3] The ways in which the marriage law was implemented, and its outcome, were contingent on complex factors. For example, as rural life was organized economically and culturally around the peasant household but not on the individual (see a comprehensive discussion by Huang, 2011) it made the implementation of the law less rigid. Companionate marriage (as advocated by the May Fourth intellectuals) simply did not have a cultural basis in rural China. Such an understanding may complicate some liberal feminists' arguments that the Party-state's encouragement of family solidarity and harmony represented a betrayal of the women's liberation project and a dark collusion with the patriarchy and male peasants (L. Wang, 2015). While acknowledging the significant limitations of the socialist reforms concerning gender inequality, the situation was far more complicated (Cong, 2015). For example, not all divorce during that time marked a woman's liberation and many local cadres were aware of this. Since the patriarchal family had strong cultural roots, when a rural woman divorced, she often had no choice but to go back to her natal family, where she likely continued to be suppressed by her own parents, until she found another husband. Moreover, taking advantage of the Marriage Law, some parents used some young women to amass money by breaching multiple engagements.

as "*chunzong jiedai*" (传宗接代, carry the ancestor's line and reproduce the next generation). Under such cultural beliefs, patrilocal residence was commonly practised. The daughter customarily married out and joined her husband's family (X. Li, 2010). The parents often selected one son to live with and gave this son a little more than an equal share of the family property[1] (P. C. Huang, 2009, 2011a). However, other sons (if any) were also obligated to provide (less) material support to the parents. Another arrangement was "rotated maintenance" (lunyang, 轮养) (Z. Huang, 2011) whereby the parents lived with the sons in turn, and these sons equally shared the family property. In both arrangements, the three-generational family was effectively sustained, even if only in rotation. The parent-son bond was powerful with moral belief and economic linkage involved.

As mentioned earlier, parental power was greatly weakened, and the family property that was once in parents' hands became largely collective in the Maoist era. This did not necessarily mean that the parent-son bond was less powerful (P. C. Huang, 2009, 2011b). Some of the socialist reforms and laws effectively sustained such bonds[2] (Y. Chen, 2020; Tao, 2011). Apart from advocating the concordance and solidarity of the family in implementing the 1950 Marriage Law,[3] the mutual duty for the children and the parents was mandated. Article 13 says: "parents have the duty to raise, care and educate their sons and daughters, and the sons and daughters have the duty to support and help the parents. Both parties cannot abuse or abandon each party". Unlike laws in many other countries,[4] this rather vague code legislated the duty to support one's parents in almost any circumstances in practise (P. C. Huang, 2011b). The duty to support children is also not necessarily exempted as they reach adulthood.

Moreover, with the work points system, the people's communes distributed a year's

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[1] Before the One Child Policy, the rural family was rarely without a son. In rare cases when there was no son, "uxorilocal" marriage would be practised whereby the daughter was treated as a son and the son-in-law would be married into the woman's family. Their child would be named after the wife's patrilineal family.

[2] For a detailed discussion on family-oriented policies in urban China between 1949-1979, see Chen Yinfang (2012).

[3] This marriage law also acted like many other civil laws in practise, including inheritance law, property law and maintenance law.

[4] For example, the 1900 German Civil Code describes the children's obligation to maintain their parents conditionally: "a person is not bound to furnish maintenance if, having regard to his other obligations, he is not in a position to furnish maintenance to others without endangering his own maintenance suitable to his station in life" (Article 1603, cited in P. C. Huang, 2010, p.725). In many other countries, the duty to support the elderly ultimately falls to the welfare system (W. Chen, 2006). China's 1950 Marriage Law was vague about the circumstance in which one could be exempted from this duty: it basically says 'under any circumstances.

harvest according to the initial family property (e.g., farming tools, livestock) that had been contributed to the communes as well as the work points earned by all members of one household (Hershatter, 2011). Thus, even though property was collectively owned, the economic system of the people's communes in rural China was still organised around the peasant households (mostly three-generational families). There was no specific measure to challenge patrilocal residence as well. Women were still customarily married out and joined the communes of her husband's village. Despite the 1950 Marriage Law stating that men and women were equal in inheriting their parents' property, there was no compulsory enforcement in practise, nor did women come forward to claim this right since people accepted it as a cultural norm (Shang, 2009) .

Some welfare provisions were made available during the Maoist era, though they were implemented differently in rural and urban China (Frazier, 2010; Hu & Peng, 2012). In the 1950s, the government introduced the *hukou* system (户口, household registration system) nationwide, with industrialisation in urban areas as its prioritised goal (Chan, 2009; Chan & Zhang, 1999). Under the hukou system, the members of a household were registered together. There were two types of hukou, "agricultural" and "non-agricultural",[1] with the former covering the majority of the rural population and the latter the majority of the urban population. Most urban people worked in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) or other "*danwei*" (单位, work units), and a public old-age pension provision scheme was implemented in 1951 (Frazier, 2010). They also had public childcare, medical care and other provision, with some day-care services for rural citizens in busy farming seasons (Hershatter, 2011). However, the family remained the most important old-age support mechanism (Cai et al., 2012; C. He & Ye, 2014; Murphy, 2002; J. Sun, 2006; Y. Wang, 2012).

1.1.3 The Post-reform Era

Beginning with the Reform and Opening Up policy, the pursuit of the four modernisations (of industry, agriculture, national defence, and science and technology) became the top priority of the Party-state. Almost forty years of reform turned China into the "world's factory" with a remarkable growth in GDP (S.-J. Han & Shim, 2010; Lin, 2013). "*Song-bang*" (松绑, to untie) was a commonly used term to describe the institutional changes in the 1980s, including marketisation of the socialist planned economy and de-collectivisation of agriculture in rural areas (Lin, 2006; Yan, 2010, 2020). By 2005, 126 million individuals worked in the urban private sector, and

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[1] This agricultural, non-agricultural hukou classification was abolished in 2014 and changed to a resident hukou with the place of registration marked.

millions of peasants were engaged in private farming (Tsai, 2007). The massive influx of foreign capital into China after it joined the World Tread Organization (WTO) in 2001 meant that it became increasingly involved in the global economic system (Y. Hong, 2017; Lin, 2013). Many rural people migrate to the cities to perform cheap labour as *nongmingong* (农民工, peasant-workers). In 2020, there were 285 million *nongmingong* in China, up from only 4.8 million in 1986 (National Bureau of Statistics).

Alongside the economic reform process is a rather different picture of the Chinese family compared to the Maoist era. Demographic structure and family size have changed significantly since the reform era (B. Liu, 2000; Tang, 2005; Tang & Chen, 2012). There has been an increase in nuclear families, but the three-generational unit also remains strong (P. C. Huang, 2011b). China has shifted from a high-mortality, high-fertility society to a low-mortality, low-fertility on[1]. This process significantly changed the numerical balance between the generations (Murphy, 2020; Santos & Harrell, 2017). Under the overarching plan of socialist modernisation, the Birth-Planning Policy (also known as the One Child Policy, 1979-2015) was implemented in both rural and urban China[2] (W. Chen, 2012; X. Feng, 2007). However, this policy has been replaced by policies to encourage childbirth in recent years to address the ageing Chinese society[3] and falling fertility rates. Meanwhile, the divorce rate has risen greatly (Davis, 2014; Y. Li, 1999). Despite continued growth, divorce cases were rare before the economic reform. However, the divorce rate has accelerated greatly since then, reaching 1.05‰ in 2001 and 3.09‰ in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics).

In terms of family relationships, there have also been tremendous changes. Romantic love and companionate marriage seem to be increasingly accepted by younger people. The famous saying, "a marriage is immoral without love"[4], which was once popular among intellectual elites during the May Fourth Movement and the revolutionary era (L. Yang, 2016), is now by and large a common belief for today's Chinese. Some believe the family relationship has been "inverted" (Yan, 2020). That is to say, the once most respectful and powerful members of the family, the elderly, now have the lowest

[1] In 1950, life expectancy at birth was around 43.9 years. In 2015, it was 76.34 years. In 1950, the total fertility rate was 5.8 children, which dropped to 2.3 in 1980, and further to 1.7 in 2020 (National Bureau of Statistics).

[2] In most urban areas, the one child requirement was strictly implemented. For rural China, most of could have a second child if the first was a daughter.

[3] By 2020, there were 267.36 million people aged 60 and over in China, accounting for 18.9% of the population, including 20.56 million aged 65 and over, or 14.2% of the population (National Bureau of Statistics, Seventh Population Census).

[4] This was coined by intellectuals during the revolutionary era from Engels's famous book *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State (1884)*.

status within the family. Grandchildren, however, are treated as "little emperors" (Fong, 2004; Yan, 2006a) by the whole household. Some argue that the reform strengthened the economic leverage of younger generations, thereby further diminishing the lingering patriarchal power and authority of the elderly (Jankowiak, 2021; Santos & Harrell, 2017). Women's social status has also risen greatly (Jin, 2000). For example, the daughter-in-law, who was once an inferior outsider of the patrilineal family, seems to have an increasing say in family life (Yan, 1997, 2006b, 2021b). However, more family conflicts have been documented by researchers since the 1990s (Yan, 1997, 2003, 2006a; H. Yang & Ouyang, 2013). Filial piety is believed by academics and the public to be declining (W. Liu, 2012; Whyte, 1997). Since the reform, the "elderly crisis" mentioned earlier began to emerge.

To some extent, it could be said that the Party-state has largely withdrawn from private family life since the reform (Yan, 2003). During the Maoist era, when every part of social life was under the political and socialist agenda, people were left with very limited space to make choices in their private lives based on individual preferences (Rofel, 1999). However, since the late 1970s, under the ubiquitous supervision of the Party-state the family began to be "privatised" alongside the privatisation of the economy. The Party-state has largely retreated from its former mediating and interventionist role in "personal, familial, neighbourly and civic relationships" (W. Sun & Yang, 2019, p. 3). Since the reform, the state began to withdraw from public health, education, housing, childcare and elderly care with the dismantling of people's communes in rural areas and cancellation of *danwei* (work units) in urban China (Bray, 2005; L. Zhang, 1998). Such withdrawal has led to the familialisation (*jiatinghua*, 家庭化) of social welfare provision (X. Wu, 2015b, 2016). Most of the social reproduction responsibilities are now on the shoulders of the families themselves.

Moreover, in parallel with the celebration of spirits of the free market, the Party-state seems to champion the "rights" and "freedom" of individuals in society and in the market, which some might feel abhorrent to the socialist values it once advocated (S. Lee & Zhang, 2011). For example, judges tended to deal with divorce cases from a more familial perspective during the Maoist era (Y. Ma, 2011). They not only considered the two spouses but also their family obligations and position (e.g., in supporting the elderly, the children, the needs of the weak, and fault, including domestic abuse and affairs). The 1950 Marriage Law says, "upon divorce, the woman's pre-marital property belongs to the woman. Other family property to be divided by mutual agreement. If the agreement fails, then the people's court rules based on the principle

of protecting the interests of women and children" (Article 23).[1] However, in the 1980 amendment of the Marriage Law, no-fault divorce was introduced, stating that the family's debt should be paid by both parties (Article 32). In the revised version of Marriage Law in 2001, together with a series of "Judicial Interpretations" of the Supreme People's Court, the scales tipped further to the side of the individual, particularly individuals' property rights[2] (Jiang, 2011; X. Zhao, 2011). Moreover, until 2018,[3] income tax in China had long been levied on individuals regardless of their family obligations (Y. Chen, 2020).

However, for other dimensions of family life, the Party-state was far from withdrawn (the One Child Policy is a clear example). Although the principles that emphasise individualistic values have been implemented in some social domains, the state's policies apply conflicting principles in others, especially in terms of intergenerational relationships. For example, the legal obligation between family members has been extended and strengthened by law (Y. Chen, 2012, 2020; P. C. Huang, 2011b). The 1985 Law of Succession states that children who provide old-age maintenance for their parents shall inherit more, and those who do not get less (Law of Succession, 1985: Article 13, cited in Huang, 2011, p.474). For rural people who now have the right to the once collective household plot (zhaijidi, 宅基地) and the house they built on it, this law is crucial to the parents-son bond (since daughters are still married out and do not normally claim inheritance rights). The revised 1980 Marriage Law further added grandparents-grandchildren relationships and sibling relations as legal family relationships. They all have legal obligations to support each other (Marriage Law, 1980: Article 22 & 23, cited in Chen, 2020).

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[1] Moreover, Article 24 says that if there is no property obtained during marriage enough to pay the debt, then the man pays the debt.

[2] The 2001 Marriage Law stated that individual property would not become joint property upon marriage (Article 19). In its second judicial interpretation, it explicitly pointed out that the home the couple lived in, if it was paid by one party (and that party's parents) before marriage, remains an individual's property after marriage (Supreme People's Court, 2003: Article 22). In the third interpretation, it further stated that if after marriage, the parents bought a house for the couple to live in but under their own child's name, the house shall also not be a joint property of the couple (Supreme People's Court, 2010: Article 8). These laws raised great concerns among academics and the public. Public debate arose about whether people should now add their names to their property certificates, fearing that this would only makes marriage more materially-orientated. Many legal scholars strongly objected and publicly condemned these laws, arguing that this protected the people who had property in practise and reduced marriage to a market contract (Jiang, 2011; X. Zhao, 2011). Gender scholars also argued that this might be detrimental to women's interests, especially lower-class women (Xiong, 2012). Proponents argue that in the context of extremely high house prices and divorce rates, such a law would help protect the interests of parents who have used their life savings to buy a house for their children.

[3] Since 2018, after years of appeals and effort, the government added tax deductions for elderly support, childcare, and other family responsibilities (Chen, 2020).

China is among the very few countries without an inheritance tax or gift tax, which in effect encourages and sustains interdependence between generations (Chen, 2020; Huang, 2011). Against the backdrop of "failing filial piety" and the elderly crisis since the 1990s, the state launched "*Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly*" (中华人民共和国老年人权益保障法) in 1996. It enforced the obligations of the young to their parents and highlighted how children need to support their elderly parents and grandparents not only materially but also emotionally and "spiritually"[1]. It also states that the obligation of supporting the elderly cannot be exempted, even if the supporters renounce their inheritance rights (Article 19). Its revised version in 2012 further stated that "family members who live separately from the elderly shall frequently visit or greet the elderly" (Article 18). All these statements not only reflect the state's will in strengthening intergenerational relationships, but also show the degree of seriousness of the elderly crisis and their problematic material and mental condition.

Such a "crisis" is more evident and severe in rural China when most young people leave their village and *dagong* (打工, work for a boss) in the cities under the hukou system that has been in place since the 1950s. In such cases, the rural families not only deal with the prolonged separation of family members, but also with very limited social and material resources at their disposal as well as a much lower income[2]. As mentioned earlier, because of the hukou system, social welfare, public education, subsidised housing, and a wide range of benefits are linked to a person's birthplace[3]. In 2009, only 12.2 percent of *nongmingong* worked with medical care or insurance, 7.6 percent with retirement benefits, and 3.9 percent with unemployment benefits (Huang, 2011). For

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[1] Article 14: "supporters shall fulfil their obligations to provide for the elderly financially, to take care of them in life and to comfort them spiritually, and to take care of their special needs. Supporters are the children of the elderly and other people who are obliged to support them according to law. The spouse of the legal supporter shall assist the supporter in fulfilling the duty of support".

[2] According to the National Bureau of Statistics, the urban-rural income gap was 3.32 to 1 in 2007.

[3] After the "*Reform of Adjusting the Division of Revenue Between the Central and Local Governments*" (fenshuizhi gaige, 分税制改革) in 1994, the local governments had much less revenue and financially responsible for their own development. Economically, the local governments had no incentives to provide *nongmingong* with the same standard of welfare provisions as their locally registered citizens (local hukou), nor were they legally obligated to do so. For their locally registered citizens, however, the 1999 "Urban Residents Minimum Living Security Regulations" mandated the basic welfare provision according to local living standards. If a person wished to become a locally registered citizen in some cities, a common rule was to provide a real estate certificate (i.e., have a house under ones' own or spouse's name). Thus, the right to live in the area and the associated benefits are attached to the (real estate) market but not the citizen's rights themselves (Chen 2020).

urban citizens, the public old-age pension scheme has been widely implemented[1]. However, there was no old-age pension for most rural populations until recent years. In 2008, only around 10% of the rural population was covered by small scale voluntary pension schemes (Frazier, 2010). In 2014, the "New Rural Pension Scheme" (Xin Nongbao, 新农保) was introduced and gradually implemented nationwide. However, the amount of the pension was rather low: the benefit was only about 36.5 percent of the official poverty line, 8.5 percent of the average income in rural areas and 3.5 percent of the average pension of urban citizens (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015, cited in Williamson et al., 2017, p. 68). However, the old-age dependency ratio in rural areas (13.5%) is higher than in urban China (9.0%) (Cai et al., 2012).

In terms of the family residence and relationship patterns, the three-generational unit continues to be the norm but with some new arrangements after an increasing proportion of single children have come of age. In urban China, where the one-child policy was strictly enforced, there has been an emerging practise of dual-local post-marital residence called "*liangtouzou*" (两头走) with a bilateral kinship network (L. Song, 2020; H. Wang & Di, 2011; Yan, 2021b). Because of the policy, rural people also have fewer children but are rarely without a son (facing strong resistance and persistent son preference, the policy was modified to allow rural parents to have a second child if the first was a daughter). The increasing proportion of one-son families continues to form the typical patrilineal three-generational family that has a long history in China. For those who have two daughters, one arrangement is to marry out one daughter and keep another at home under an uxorilocal marriage. Some who only had a daughter began to follow the city in practicing "*liangtouzou*" marriages with both the wife and husband supporting all four elderly and inheriting their property (H. Wang & Di, 2011). For families in both rural and urban China, the elderly play a crucial part in childcare since both men and women in the middle generation need to work.

For the rural family, in particular, the massive rural-to-urban migration that began in the mid-1990s has had profound consequences on family arrangement and relationships. With able-bodied people seeking low-end, temporary jobs in the cities, a vast population of older people and young children remain in the rural villages, representing the large-scale "left-behind" phenomenon[2] (Biao, 2007; C. He & Ye, 2014; Murphy, 2002). There are a substantial number of "skip-generation households" (*gedaihu*, 隔代

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[1] A public pension scheme was introduced as early as 1951 for SOE workers and other urban residents. To date, the largest pension schemes is the Urban Enterprise Pension System (UEPS), which is contributed to by the state, the enterprise, and the workers (Williamson et al., 2017).

[2] In a recent survey, approximately 68 million children in rural China were shown to be left behind with their also left-behind grandparents (Chan & Ren, 2018).

户), with the middle generation working elsewhere as *nongmingong* but leaving their children at home with their parents (Murphy, 2020). There are also "empty-nest" households (*kongchaohu*, 空巢户) which are formed when the elderly live alone in the countryside (C. Ma et al., 2013; Y. Wang, 2002). The three-generational household remains very strong as family members are in practise highly interdependent, at least economically (P. C. Huang, 2011a). Apart from the laws mentioned earlier that mandated mutual obligations, there are also policies that encourage this. For example, the newly introduced rural old-age pension system has a "family-binding" policy. This says those who have already reached the age thresholds can have the pension without contributing to the scheme,[1] providing their children join and contribute to it (H. Liu et al., 2015; Williamson et al., 2017).

In the recent decade or so, scholars have found that the Chinese family has witnessed a relative mitigation of family conflicts compared with the situation during the 1990s and the 2000s, especially in urban China, but also in rural areas (J. Liu, 2017; Yan, 2017; Zhong & He, 2014). In a recent article, Yan Yunxiang (2017) related an interesting story about a village teacher named Liu. According to Yan's fieldwork in 1999, Liu and his wife had been expelled from their house by their son – the son and daughter-in-law did not want to live with the elderly couple due to daily conflicts regarding lifestyles and much else. However, according to Yan's 2008 fieldwork, the two families had reunited. In his 2015 revisit, Liu and his wife had moved to the city and started to take care of their grandson because they had "come to terms with" (*xiangtongle*, 想通了) the situation. However, studies also show that sometimes the elderly found their old-age maintenance from the middle generation to be based on how much they contributed to childcare, domestic work and other aspects (F. Chen et al., 2011; E. J. Croll, 2006; Santos & Harrell, 2017; Tao, 2011).

So far, I have provided a historical and macro-structural account of the Chinese family, starting from the point of its modern transformation. It is in such a historical context that I broadly situate my research since it is also a period of history the elderly in my study have experienced more or less personally. However, this research specifically focuses on the period from the 1990s to the present when market reforms took place, and when the media landscape changed dramatically. I now shift my discussion to the changing media system and media culture that parallel the changes outlined above.

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[1] Under this scheme, rural people are normally entitled to a pension after 15 years of contributions. There are different contributing levels, from 100 to 2,000 yuan per year, and the pension levels differ accordingly.

1.2 China's Mediated Modernity

1.2.1 Reforming the media system

Before the reform era in the late 1970s, ordinary people's access to media was very limited. The printing press had long been an elite form of media since most Chinese people in rural areas were illiterate. The first experimental television broadcast in China took place in 1958; the development of television was very slow and experienced long-term stagnation during the Cultural Revolution (Z. Guo, 1997; Y. Zhao, 2006). Television remained high-end technology throughout the Maoist era. In 1970, there were 30 urban television stations in total (Chang, 1989), with one in 164,000 people owning a TV set (XHNA, 18, February 1980). In the vast area of rural China during the collective era, the main modern media technology people could access was the radio, with its content distributed by loudspeakers.[1]

Apart from the loudspeakers that broadcast news bulletins, local messages of political gatherings, or "red songs" (hongge, 红歌, socialist revolution-related songs), rural people could occasionally get the chance to watch soviet or revolutionary films provided by "*fangyingdui*" (放映队, film projection group) (J. Guo, 2019; D. Li, 2006). Since 1958, state-governed *fangyingdui* started to develop in rural China; in 1964, there were 12,656 in total, mainly in rural areas (Q. Zhang, 2010). Before televisions were widely adopted in the late 1990s and early 2000s in rural China, the films projected by *fangyingdui* were largely rural people's only visual media[2]. Some elderly informants in my own fieldwork vividly remembered the unforgettable and joyous times when the *fangyingdui* came to their villages (or nearby)[3] in their childhood.

During this period, media content was mainly associated with the state, such as celebrating the Party's directives or the heroics of communist members (Chang, 1989; Y. Huang, 1994; W. Sun & Zhao, 2009) since the whole media system was primarily the mouthpiece of the Party-state. The printing press, broadcast and television organisations were set up to mobilise citizens and promote socialist values. The system

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[1] The radio content had usually already been translated into local dialect by village cadres then broadcast by the loudspeakers, which numbered in the tens of millions (Howkins, 1982).

[2] Towards the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s, almost every village had a film organization, with more than 140,000 *fangyingdui* nationally (D. Li, 2006). According to Gao Liang, deputy director of the Film Ministry of National Radio and Television Administration of China, at its peak there were 279 billion viewers annually, mostly in rural areas (cited in, J. Guo, 2019).

[3] Sometimes they walked a couple of hours just to watch a movie in a nearby village and came back with a torch.

followed a strictly planned model under the administrative control of the state's propaganda bureaus. As some have pointed out, during the socialist era, "China's media is more like a mirror of politics than a mirror of society" (Hong et al., 2009, p.52).

In the late 1970s, however, things started to change as the television industry began to receive private investment. The first commercial advertisement was broadcast on Shanghai Television in 1979, and the first advertisement for a foreign product appeared in the same year (B. Zhao & Murdock, 1996). Since then, the cultural landscape has been transformed under state-led marketisation. It has been further advanced by "cultural system reform" (*wenhua tizhi gaige*, 文化体制改革) aiming to bring the commercialisation of the media sector to a new level (Y. Zhao, 2008). In parallel with the burgeoning market in other sectors, China has witnessed a massive boom in the media industry. With huge revenue from advertisements, the commercial logic has swept through the media and cultural industry, which previously relied heavily on the financial patronage of the state. The once fully political-orientated "class culture" that dominated the theme of Chinese media has been gradually replaced by the "mass culture", which "does not intend to hide its relation to capital" (Li, 2000, p.3).

The television industry has pioneered the marketisation of Chinese media under pro-market cultural policies (Kong, 2014, p. 3) and has become the main source of news and entertainment for Chinese people (Neves, 2015; Zhu & Berry, 2009). In 1983, the "four-tier policy"[1] (*siji ban dianshi*, 四级办电视) was introduced, signalling the self-regulation and decentralisation of the television industry (Z. Guo, 1997; Y. Zhao, 2006). The policy allowed television stations to be built at provincial, local city, and county levels once the investment reached a certain threshold (Keane, 1998). Huge local investments were attracted to the building and development of television stations, and the local stations were granted chances and freedom to run them to a large extent (J. Hong et al., 2008). Many local stations started to introduce programmes from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and North and Latin America and cooperated with other local stations to exchange and purchase programmes (Fung, 2009). In 1984, there were only 93 television stations; by 1990 there were over 1,000 stations, rising to 2,740 by the end of 1995 (Y. Liu, 1994).

The rapid growth of television stations was accompanied by a surge in television sets due to technological innovations and falling prices. Since the 1990s, the penetration rate of televisions has grown greatly in urban and then rural China (Y. Liu, 1994; Lull, 1991), with around 98% national penetration rate by the late 2000s (Zhu & Berry, 2009).

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[1] Four ties refer to central, provincial, local city and county levels.

By 2002, there were over 700 television production companies in China (Kong, 2014). Some 436 TV dramas, totalling 14,685 episodes, were produced in 2010 (Pin Liu & Li, 2004). Around the early 2000s, with the development of new media technology and the importation of global media products, the mass media industry continued to flourish. In both urban and rural China, apart from television consumption, people were fascinated by various forms of "micro-media", such as entertainment compact discs (CDs, VCDs and DVDs from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the West) (Y. Liu, 1994; Lull, 1991), and pop music cassettes (Z. Li, 2019). Moreover, the Internet and digital technology started to develop in the late 1990s and took off in the late 2000s, significantly reconfiguring the media landscape (discussed later). Thus, the booming commercial media sector constitutes a crucial part of China's modernisation project and its modern outlook.

1.2.2 Between the "party line" and the "bottom line"

These phenomenal developments in the media industry coincided with the (partial) withdrawal of the Party-state from people's private family lives, known as the "normalisation" (*zhengchanghua*, 正常化) or "depoliticization" (*quzhengzhihua*, 去政治化) of social and family life (Y. Chen, 2015; B. Meng, 2018; Rofel, 1999). With entertainment and leisure as major themes (Bai & Song, 2015; Y. Zhao, 1998), media became a main space for Chinese people to experience alternative lifestyles, especially for those who were bored with long political campaigns and upheavals. The free spirits of the market have been zealously celebrated by and through the media industry, which clearly articulates a middle-class aspiration (W. Sun & Guo, 2013; Y. Zhao, 2008, 2011). Workers and peasants, who were the main heroes and heroines of media in the Maoist era, are now largely marginalised by commercial media. The booming media enterprises have encouraged various consumerist, individualistic and liberal values (R. Wei, 2006; WU & Yun, 2016).

As an extremely successful example, Hunan TV[1] (HNTV) has become a leading figure with its focus on "*yule*" (娱乐, entertainment) as its main commercial model. It has produced a series of extraordinarily popular television drama and programmes, some in co-cooperation with or borrowing from Taiwanese media enterprises (Bai & Song, 2015). For example, the historical drama *Return of Princess Pearl* (*Huanzhu Gege*, 还珠格格) earned an average rating of 45% and 50% for Season 1 and 2 respectively and earned huge revenues for HNTV.[2] With dramatic and unabashed depictions and

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[1] The provincial television station and industry of Hunan province.

[2] http://eladies.sina.com.cn/movie/movie/1999-05-05/585.shtml

celebrations of romantic love and the free spirits of individuals, the show has been intensely welcome by young people, rural and urban, but also criticised and despised by some conservative objectors for its irreverence and "degraded" values.[1]

However, the media system still operates under the regulatory control of the State Administration for Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT), even though it has been largely marketized with state monopoly (Y. Zhao & Guo, 2009). Such a dual track has been characterised as dancing between the "party line" (ideological correctness) and the "bottom line" (market profit) by Zhao Yuezhi (1998), a renowned scholar of the political economy of Chinese media. In the 1980s, the construction of "two civilisations" (i.e., material and spiritual) started appearing regularly in the mass media. The equal emphasis of both material and spiritual civilisations signalled the state's deployment of the socialist ethos (Keane, 1998) with the aim of "engineering an official culture" (Craik, 1996, p. 182). In an article concerning the quality of television drama, the vice minister of SARFT said: "television dramas are spiritual products", and their superior quality "can stimulate national spirit, mould moral sentiment, increase aesthetic appeal, and enrich cultural life. If inferior, they will damage the spirit of the people, foster an unhealthy atmosphere, lead to all kinds of social problems, especially influencing the healthy development of youngsters" (Liu 1997, p.3, cited in Keane, 1998, p.497). With the huge success of television drama, China's cultural bureaucrats began to see its "capacity to provide entertainment along with moral education" (Keane, 1998, p. 475).

In the new millennium, television continues to be the mainstream and most popular form of media in China (especially rural China since there are fewer alternatives), and television programmes have significantly diversified. Apart from television drama, which still constitutes an important genre with massive advertisement revenues, other programmes, including reality shows, talk shows and lifestyle television, have all appeared on Chinese screens. Many shows are intimately related to family and personal relationships. For example, "*qinggan* programmes" (情感节目, programs that feature people's family and private emotional lives) have found huge success (Kong, 2014; Kong & Hawes, 2014). A provincial television station, Jiangsu TV, even set "emotion and relationships" as its brand positioning and "intimate world, happy China" (*qinggan shijie, xinfu zhongguo*, 情感世界幸福中国) as a brand slogan which also won the

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state's warm endorsement.[1] With "emotion experts"[2] (*qinggan zhuanjia*, 情感专家), psychologists, sociologists and doctors as presenters and commentators, these shows advocate that their objectives are to change and transform people with a "complete and total overhaul of the body and soul" (*tuotai huangu*, 脱胎换骨) (W. Sun & Yang, 2019), in the words of one host. Ordinary people's[3] family conflicts, dating habits and marriage problems have all been transferred successfully to the TV screen.

However, from 2002 onwards, SARFT initiated a series of movements to "clean up the screen" (净化荧屏, *jinghua yingping*) to curb the "vulgar, narcissistic, crassly materialistic" values that indicate a so-called "moral degradation" of the Chinese society (Bai, 2014, p. 69). This is also a time when domestic social inequality and instability have risen greatly (W. Sun, 2013). Under an overarching agenda set by the state of "*weiwen*" (维稳, sustain stability) and promoting a "harmonious society" (和谐社会, *hexieshehui*), many extremely popular television shows that exploit the chaos and emotional turmoil of the private sphere went off the air or have been "cleaned up" (Y. Zhao & Guo, 2009). Consequently, television producers tend to manufacture programmes that have more "positive energy" (X. Chen et al., 2021) and advocate "socialist morality" (Y. Deng et al., 2013; Kong & Hawes, 2014) and, at the same time, maintain an appeal for the audience. That means they might still depict ordinary people's "ugly private matters" on the screen, but do so in a way that could "correct" and "redirect" people's problematic feelings back onto the right socialist track. For example, for reality shows, talk shows or the newly emerged "mediation shows" (Y. Deng et al., 2013; Kong & Hawes, 2014), this could be achieved by adopting various techniques, such as using educational, psychological and legal experts and governmental authorities as hosts, mediators and commentators. Similar logic has also shaped melodramas: there might well be egregious behaviour and monstrous villains, but with a constant socialist or Confucianist pedagogy and an ultimately moral ending.

1.2.2 Digital China and its countryside

Since the new millennium, China's media landscape has continued to evolve and been

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[1] "*The Happy Coming of Age of Jiangsu TV*" (2011.7.11) was published on People.com (人民网, Renmin wang). People.com (also People's Daily Online) is the online version of the official Chinese press *People's Daily*.
https://baike.baidu.com/reference/6570703/9ffcbhGDCu95JzH1_atMeVhYcDLThSY9ZozRfU-4VGGRncib1YimFkj0gVfPSgJWHquI_J25ygMvkA-eWbXb4RjDAy7C7L712aDkJ3nKoymCIIBJmbmbBxL9mg

[2] In many dating, family or relationship mediation shows, counsellors are often named this way.

[3] At least as declared by the programmes.

increasingly shaped by commercialisation, globalisation and technology changes of digitisation. By June 2021, the number of Internet users in China reached 1.011 billion (CNNIC, 2021), up from just 22.5 million twenty years ago (CNNIC, 2001). In the first ten years of the new millennium, most Internet users were in urban areas. In 2007, 125 million users were urban citizens, and the Internet penetration rate in urban China was 21.6%. In contrast, the penetration rate was only 5.1% in rural China, with 737 million total population. Young and urban individuals' lives have been mediated at a remarkable rate with television content or other media products easily accessible through smartphones, personal computers, and tablet devices (Lewis et al., 2016). For the rural population, however, the main media platform continued to be television, though the programmes they watched were not primarily designed for them, given their limited purchasing power (J. Guo, 2005; Lewis et al., 2016). Until the 2010s, the penetration rate of digital media in rural China remained relatively low. With limited use of "little smart"[1] (*xiaolingtong*, 小灵通) and the Internet café, scholars described these new adopters in rural China as "low-end ICT users", the "information have-less" (Qiu, 2009) or "unimagined users" (Oreglia, 2013) by designers of these digital technologies.

However, after the 2010s, the digital and telecommunication industry boomed and penetrated rural China at an astounding rate. Around 2004, under a larger state-led structural adjustment of the Chinese economy from a labour-intensive to a more capital-intensive, technologically sophisticated, and consumer-oriented one, masses of state and private capital flooded into the development of digital media and the digital economy in general (Y. Hong, 2017; Zhou, 2020). Rural China became an important target for this round of expansion of the digital economy. Consequently, the domestic market of digital media has largely expanded, particularly in rural villages and small towns that made up the "sinking market" (*xiachen shichang*, 下沉市场) of China. Moreover, to rectify the increasing geographic inequality between the urban and the rural, the state launched its "Telecommunication in Every Village" (*dianxin cuncuntong*, 电信村村通) project, aiming to bring modern ICTs services to the rural population, including those in extremely poor, remote or ethnic-minority regions. By June 2021, the number of rural Internet users in China reached 297 million, accounting for 29.4% of the total number of Internet users, with a 59.2% penetration rate (CNNIC, 2021). More than 130,000 administrative villages are now equipped with optical fibre and more than 50,000 4G base stations. Nationally, 99% of villages are covered with 4G access (CNNIC, 2021).

For younger generations in rural China, there was no "personal computer" phase, and

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[1] Litter smart is an form of inexpensive wireless technology with limited mobile communication service.

smartphones have become their unquestionable choice through which they consume various kinds of media content, seek jobs, and go shopping (Qiu, 2009; X. Wang, 2016). With the incorporation of state-owned telecommunication companies with private enterprises, the price of mobile phones and communication fees has declined significantly. Campaigns like "get a free phone for paying a communication fee" are popular in rural China. King card (*dawangka*, 大王卡) [1], a pre-paid SIM card service co-promoted by China Unicom and Tencent, proved to be very popular among many *nongmingong* and their family members in my fieldwork. It offers unlimited access to apps[2] developed by the two companies as well as their commercial partners. As a new development thanks to the flourishing smartphone market, rural people are offered chances to consume media content of their own choice on their screens (Zhou, 2020). Notably, according to the *Rural Internet Survey Report of China* by CNNIC in 2015, digital video had the highest growth rate (20.3%) among all entertainment applications, with 131 million rural users. However, the majority of rural Internet users are between 20-40 years old, and only 2.5% of users are over 60. Nevertheless, it still counted as a great increase in the proportion of the elderly from 2010, when only 0.8% of users were over 60.

Meanwhile, the once unimaginable online shopping has become a normality in rural China, through the low pricing strategy of many shopping apps. As the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) stated: "as the development of e-commerce in urban areas has gradually saturated, there is still huge development potential in the rural e-commerce market" (CNNIC, 2015, p.35). Apparently, rural China is now considered a promising "blue ocean" of the growing domestic consumer market, even though the income of rural families is still low. However, the development of digital media in rural China also has the goal of a "harmonious society", which is consistent with that of the traditional media. In 2007, the CNNIC issued its first report on rural Internet and digital media development. In the preface of this report, it states the importance of developing the Internet in rural areas:

> *Emphasising and strengthening Internet development in rural areas can effectively narrow the "digital divide" between urban and rural areas. It can promote the renewal of thoughts and values in rural China, achieve great economic and societal development leapfrog, and resolve the various contradictions and tension of the (rural-urban) dual structure. It is also crucial to respond to the Party Central Committee's call to build a new*

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[1] Kingcard: https://cyec.dgunicom.com/mobile/wk_dg.php?idd=pinz-pc

[2] e.g., Wechat, Tencent Video, Kuaishou Video (快手), Weibo.

socialist countryside and a harmonious socialist society.

Internet Survey Report of China (CNNIC, 2007, p.3)

1.3 Thesis Overview

As I stated earlier in this chapter, my concerns in this thesis lie in the feelings and experiences of the rural elderly in their family life, and how such feelings might be in some way mediated. In this introductory chapter, I have situated my questions within the broad historical, institutional context of the transformation of the Chinese family as well as the fast-changing media landscapes that have largely paralleled this transformation. Readers may now be as curious and sceptical as I was about the possible relationships between the elderly's feelings and the modern media, when many are still largely illiterate. In line with the stories and feelings of Liu Xuan that opened this chapter, when the younger generation are so familiar with the modern and digital world, where does that leave the rural elderly, caught up in the all-encompassing modern world we share? This is what I want to explore and resolve in this thesis.

In the second chapter, I turn to the theoretical foundations for this study. The first part of Chapter 2 provides a review of relevant literature. I divide this roughly into categories, including mainstream Chinese family studies – the reflexive literature – and the critical schools. The goal is to position this thesis in the field and identify research gaps in current literature. Based on a critical evaluation of their merits and limitations, I reframe the research questions in a more theoretically informed way. I highlight emotions, mediation, and the marginalized groups (the rural elderly in this case) as the focuses of this project. Towards the end of the chapter, I unpack the conceptual framework of "mediated structure of feeling" and how it provides a vantage point to address my research questions and concerns.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodological approach that guides this project. I start with the methodological rationale of employing ethnography to address the research questions under the theoretical framework of mediated structure of feeling. Informed by "ethnographical sensibility" (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Willis, 2000; Willis & Trondman, 2000), I provide the pinpointing process of my research focus of the rural elderly in particular and how such decision was informed by grounded ethnographical exploration. I then turn to the research design, which details the choosing of fieldwork sites, family cases and the procedures of the empirical investigation. The crucial and challenging process of rapport building is also discussed in this chapter, as well as the methods of data collection and analysis. Throughout the

chapter I highlight the impact of my identity and positionality on the power relations, ethical issues, and limitations of the study.

As the first empirical chapter, Chapter 4 examines the rural elderly's sense of inferiority and willing sacrifices and how this relates to mediated narratives around bitterness. I begin my analysis with the puzzling ethnographical observation that, although having alternatives, the rural elderly tend to prefer to live austere, inferior, and arduous lives. I discuss how they endure and overcome everyday difficulties and understand themselves through their bitter past life history. Through grounded ethnographical investigation, I discuss how such emotional experiences connect to their fragmented mode of television watching, their deep attachment to media content with narratives of bitterness and virtues, and their emotional denial of modern life and modern media technology. I conclude that their ascetic and self-sacrificing is a mediated struggle in which they strive to live a meaningful life under deprived conditions.

In Chapter 5 I shift my focus to family relationships and continue the discussion on the elderly's emotional pain and suffering. I examine the family tension that often centres around the relationship between the elderly and the daughter-in-law. I discuss how media relate to the elderly's fear of their sons' marriages and their mistrust of the daughter-in-law (and young women in general). I also explore the daughters-in-laws' resentment of their parents-in-law (the mother-in-law, in particular), and how their media engagement fuels and stirs up such feelings. The elderly's compromise and sympathy for the daughter-in-law is also discussed in Chapter 5. Through the analysis of such family tensions, I explore the elderly's feelings in relation to media, the persistent and renewed patriarchy, and the crisis of care.

In Chapter 6, I turn to the elderly's relationships with their adult children and their craving and frustration on intimacy. I firstly discuss the "expressive filial sentiment" that has emerged gradually in recent decades and cultivated by the modern media industry when traditional filial piety is less feasible and desirable. The elderly's desires and expectations for such filial practise are discussed in this chapter. Moreover, based on the daughter(s)' and son(s)' very different relationships with the elderly, I unpack the fulfilment and unfulfillment of such expressive filial piety and why the rural elderly tend to be caught up in disappointment. Crucially, I explore how such filial practise connects to masculinity, patriarchal family arrangements, and communication technology (e.g., smartphones).

Chapter 7 presents the conclusions of this thesis. Based on the findings and insights of my empirical analysis, I propose using Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism"

to understand the mediated structure of feeing among the rural elderly. I point out that, as a social group and a generation, the rural elderly's emotional attachment to the "good life" has its cruelty and their longing for intimacy is often beyond reach. I link these findings back to the existing literature discussed in Chapter 2 and outline my contributions to the scholarship concerning the elderly, the Chinese family, and Chinese modernity in general. I then discuss the theoretical implications of this thesis to a wider scholarship from the vintage point of what I term the "imagination of modernity from below". I end the chapter with a reflection on the limitations of this project and present suggestions for future studies.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Foundations

In the introductory chapter, I problematised the elderly's emotional world in the contexts of family transformation and an increasingly media-penetrated modernity. This chapter sets out important theoretical foundations for this study in three main sections: a review of relevant studies; the research questions based on the review; and the theoretical framework used in answering these questions. In the mapping of the field, I mainly unpack how the elderly and the transformation of the family have been understood and theorised in three strands of scholarship[1]: a) mainstream Chinese family studies, particularly in sociology; b) reflexive modernity literature on individualisation and emotional intimacy; and c) critical schools relating to the Chinese family, including but not limited to labour, gender and media studies. By underscoring these three strands' merits, gaps, and limitations, I aim to position my approach in the field and pose my research questions in a theoretical informed manner. I highlight mediated emotions among the rural elderly as the scholarly gaps focused in this thesis in particular. Finally, I turn to my own theoretical framework, which employs Raymond Williams' "structure of feeling" as well as the concept of "mediation".

2.1 Mainstream Family Studies: Moral Ambivalence and Administrative Agenda

Since the rebuilding of social science disciplines in the late 1970s[2] scholarly attention has been paid to the changes of Chinese family institutions, with the elderly's status and well-being one of the focuses of their enquiry. I tentatively label them mainstream family studies because: a) they tend to represent the main and dominant approach in current scholarship in mainland China concerning the family; and b) they largely fall under an administrative agenda that shows compatibility with the state's position and policy.

2.1.1 The modern vs tradition debate under the modernisation framework

Coinciding with the early enthusiasm for modernisation and marketisation in China, in the first few decades since the rebuilding of social science in the early 1980s family

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[1] These three strands of scholarships are of my own labelling for analytic purposes.

[2] In 1953, the new tertiary education was established based on the education system of the former Soviet Union. The "capitalist" disciplines including sociology have been abolished. In the late 1970s after the Cultural Revolution, most of the disciplines in social science have been restored in Chinese universities.

studies grew very quickly[1]. At this stage, researchers have mainly tried to find evidence to determine whether the Chinese family is moving towards the "modern form" or not. Here, the "modern" family is set in contrast with the "traditional Chinese family" – the dominant archetype of family in imperial China and the initial stage in modern times. As mentioned in the introduction, the traditional Chinese family is largely patriarchal, with elder male superiority, patrilineal descent, and patrilocal residence. Moreover, it is culturally organised under Confucianist values of filial piety that extols the importance of ancestor worship, respect and obedience of the elderly, and the significance of continuing the family line. For example, in Fei Xiaotong's (Hsiao-tung Fei) seminal work *Peasant Life in China* (1939), he regards the traditional Chinese family as an important economic, reproductive and child-rearing institution within which older members occupy a significant position. Similarly, Xu Langguang (Francis L. K. Hsu) also points out how people were living "under the ancestors' shadow" (1948) in traditional China, meaning that the Chinese people were primarily members of the patrilineal kinship than autonomous individuals.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, the Chinese family has witnessed tremendous changes in the last century. Therefore, the goal for scholars was to understand these changes and further evaluate them through the lens of modernisation. Fei observed in an academic conference in 1983 that: "some of the core questions for Chinese family studies should include whether and how the (family) patterns are changing in the process of China's modernisation, and to what patterns they are changing" (2007, p. 6). This "modern/tradition" research was mainly conducted during the late 1970s and late 1990s. It largely followed the structural-functionalist framework which asserts that society is a complex, integrated, and harmonised whole with functional social parts (e.g., the family), and involves evolutionism that holds a progressive view of social change. For example, many analyses were in line with modernisation theorists such as W. J. Goode and T. Parsons. They hold that extended families tended to move towards a conjugal nuclear family system as part of the global move towards industrialisation and urbanization because of the specialisation of labour (Goode, 1970; Parsons, 1943).

Under such a framework, many studies have been conducted to investigate the family size, structure, household composition, marriage models, economic functions, reproductive functions, family divisions, post-marital residence, and their changing patterns. For example, several large-scale surveys were conducted, including the '*Five*

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[1] However, the enthusiasm for family went through a short decline in the late 1990s. Wu Xiaoyin (2016) and others (Jinling, 2002) suggest that this happened because the research focus of Chinese social science shifted to seemingly more "pressing" problems (e.g., economic reform, rural-urban migration, social stratification) of China's modernisation project.

Cities Survey' and '*Rural/urban Family Survey*' to evaluate the degree of modernisation of the Chinese family. Many scholars argue that the size of the Chinese family has shrunk. The traditional extended family in China is moving towards the nuclear family model (Y. Li, 1999, 2001; Y. Wang, 2002, 2012) like its Western counterparts. In these studies, the size of the family is often associated with the level of modernisation, and the trend of nuclearization of the family is often treated as a sign of progress (Tang, 2008a). Family sizes in cities are usually smaller than in rural areas, reflecting a higher level of modernisation. Many scholars contend that, with the deepening of modernisation, family structures in rural areas would move towards those found in the cities, just as family structures in Chinese cities will move towards those found in Western cities (Y. Li, 2001). Similarly, large-scale quantitative studies have been conducted to measure the changing values of the family (Y. Li, 1999, 2001; Y. Wang, 2012). Traditional family values, including filial piety, are considered to have changing towards modern models characterised by conjugal intimacy, individualism, and equality among family members. In many studies (Y. Guo, 1994; Y. Li, 1999; C. Ma et al., 2013), the elderly's family status and values tend to be associated with the "traditional" and "backward" elements – an antithesis of modernity.

The studies mentioned above suggest that modernity tends to have a Western, urban and industrial face that is in sharp contrast to traditional (i.e., imperial, rural and agricultural) China. These changes have been attributed to the structural changes of the market and the state at the macro level. Some scholars follow Goode and Parsons, arguing that these are natural results of the deepening of industrialization (B. Liu, 2000; Tang, 2008b; Y. Wang, 2002). Others have pointed out that China has "unique" drives outside the "natural force" of the market concerning family transformation, that is, the state's intervention since the Collective period (Y. Guo, 1994). For example, land reform destroyed the family property system and shook the foundation of the elderly's power. The marriage law also empowered the younger generations with legal rights to pursue more freedom. According to these studies, an evident sign of modernisation of the Chinese family is the elderly's loss of status since the high-status elderly represents the traditional family model in an age-based hierarchy (W. Deng, 1994; Y. Li, 1999). Together with the downsizing of the family, early family division and more flexible post-marital residence, the elderly's loss of status and the weakening of filial piety are considered to be *natural* and *progressive* consequences of modernisation.

Driven partially by a "nationalistic desire" (Hershatter & Wang, 2008, p. 1420) to de-Westernise Chinese scholarship, some are sceptical about celebrating the "West model" and "Western theories" (D. Li, 2000; B. Liu, 2000; C. Shen et al., 1999; J. Wang, 1996), advocating for engagement with the unique features of Chinese society and its culture

to build an "indigenous" social science (X. Wu, 2019). For example, Xiong Yuegen (1998) pointed out that the Chinese family might not follow the predictions of modernisation theory when traditional family values are so powerful and fundamental to the Chinese people's meaning system. He proposed a separation between the economic family and the cultural family, arguing that the Chinese family will be "economically modern" but "culturally traditional". These accounts reflect the ambivalent attitudes towards the "traditional": they agree that the failing of patriarchal power among the elderly is progress and also hold that some of the "virtuous" traditional family values should be retained, including filial piety (although maybe in its "modern" form) (Tang, 2008a; H. Zheng, 2007).

Although most scholars agree that the decline of the elderly's status is largely a natural development of China's modernisation, many contend that the Chinese family might and should follow a unique path of modernisation somewhere between the "modern" and the "traditional" (W. Deng, 1994; Y. Guo, 1994; D. Li, 2007; Y. Li, 1999; B. Liu, 2000). That is to say, while modernisation is important and progressive, traditional values like filial piety are also crucial since they constitute the moral and cultural foundation of Chinese society. Using critical scholar Wu Xiaoyin's (2015b) words, such general support both for modernisation and the essential parts of the Chinese traditional culture (e.g., Confucianist morality) are the dual "political correctness" found in most Chinese family studies. As I will demonstrate in the following sections, such moral ambivalence about traditional culture and modernisation haunted mainstream family studies in the following decades, especially since the "elderly crisis" emerged in the 1990s.

2.1.2 The elderly crisis as social anomie and "unjust" family politics

Following the deepening of Chinese economic reform since the 1990s, various "social problems" have emerged, including soaring divorce rates, rising bride prices, left-behind children, grandparenting, failing filial piety, and the elderly suicide mentioned in the introductory chapter. Under such circumstances, from a pragmatic view, the focuses of mainstream family studies have shifted from abstractly diagnosing whether the Chinese family is modern or traditional to real "social problems". These new phenomena have been intensely debated with undercurrents of moral panic, especially the situations faced by the elderly. If the studies mentioned in the last section were relatively positive or at least ambivalent towards the declining status of the elderly, the literature I discuss here tends to regard this trend as more or less a crisis. Many studies have empirically investigated the severity of the elderly crisis from the lens of their problematic living standards, bottom-line consumption, deteriorated mental health and

rising suicide rates (Cai et al., 2012; e.g., C. He & Ye, 2014; Jianlei & Cao, 2016; Ping, 2018; H. Yang, 2013; H. Yang & Ouyang, 2013).

For this group of scholars, the elderly crisis is primarily a moral crisis resulting from the anomie of society in the process of modernisation. The morality that is at stake here mainly refers to traditional virtues and ethics that sustain family relationships, order, and reproduction modes – filial piety, for example. The state's intervention in such morality has been discussed by some. For example, Guo Yuhua (1994) noted how the state's power has profoundly disrupted rural social and cultural order. She argued that there has been "a substitution of state executive power for traditional social structures and operational mechanisms" (1994, p. 24), indicating the state's negative impact in violating local moral orders. However, the discussion of the state's intervention has been largely limited to the Maoist era (e.g., discussion of land reform and the 1950 Marriage Law) (Ping, 2018). Most of the studies focused on the more sweeping, fundamental, and thorough changes in the family that have been caused by marketisation since the 1980s (B. Chen, 2007; X. He, 2008; Y. Liu, 2015). For example, He Xuefeng (2003, 2008) noted that as market forces have increasingly penetrated rural China, economic structures have been reconfigured, and the moral and ethical system that sustains social orders in rural areas has been challenged.

For many scholars, their core arguments are organised around "family politics" (Jiating Zhengzhi, 家庭政治) and moral orders that have been reconfigured by market forces. "Family politics" was first proposed by anthropologist Wu Fei (2005, 2011) in analysing the suicide phenomenon in Chinese culture. Following the basic framework of Durkheim's theory on suicide and social integration[1], Wu Fei located the explanation of the Chinese suicide phenomenon primarily within the family. He argued that similar to the significance of religion in Western societies, the family has quasi-religious and ontological meanings to Chinese people. The Chinese family operates by certain moral rules, thereby maintaining relative balance with every member in their positions – this is what he terms "family politics". Therefore, when the balance is disrupted, family members tend to feel grievance, injustice, and meaningless, therefore risk dying by

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[1] Durkheim analysed suicide from the perspectives of social integration and regulation. By social integration, he refers to the quality of social ties that provide people with a sense of belonging and support. When social integration is too weak, people are more vulnerable to suicide (he terms this "egoistic suicide"). However, when the social integration is too strong, people might also die by suicide for altruistic reasons ("altruistic suicide"). By regulation, he refers to the norms and rules that govern social ties: too little regulation results in "anomie suicide"; while too much regulation results in "fatalism suicide". Wu Fei draws on Durkheim's framework and applies it to Chinese contexts. The difference is that Wu Fei holds that the family is of ontological significance to Chinese people while Western societies are organized according to religious "human-god" relationships.

suicide.

Drawing on Wu Fei's framework, many scholars have tried to understand the elderly crisis (including elderly suicide) from the perspective of family politics. For example, in *Family Politics without Justice: A Framework to Understanding the Current Rural Elderly Crisis,* Zhang Jianlei and Cao Jinqing (2016) contend that family property, morality, and power dynamics constitute the foundations of family politics, but all three dimensions were undermined when market forces entered rural China. There has been an imbalance of rights and obligations between generations, resulting in "injustice" in family politics. Similarly, Yang Hua and Ouyang (2013) argue that marketisation has brought stratification and competition to rural China. The more affluent, middle-class lifestyle is particularly attractive to young people. Under such circumstances, the younger generations are no longer bound by traditional morality and tend to extract as many resources as possible from the elderly, pushing the responsibility for care labour onto them, resulting in the elderly's heavy burden.

Directly adopting "anomie" and "strain theory", Yang Hua (2013) argued that the elderly suicide phenomenon is an acute expression of the elderly crisis. Such a phenomenon could be explained by the "mismatch of structure and values" in a given society. He contended that in traditional China, when Confucian family values were matched with the patriarchal system, the suicide rate of the elderly was low, and rural village life was relatively "peaceful". However, since the 1990s, rural China has witnessed unprecedented changes in macrostructures, including the state's invention and economic reform, which shook the structural base of traditional family values. By the early 1990s, modern Western values such as individualism, freedom and rights started to gain currency among young people. In contrast, the elderly's values still "stayed at the traditional stage". That is, the elderly were still living by "the logic of belonging" (*guishu de luoji*, 归属的逻辑) while the younger generation was living by "the logic of love" (*aiqing de luoji*, 爱情的逻辑). Therefore, there was a mismatch between the elderly's values and the structures they were a part of. Yang Hua gave an example of an older man who died by suicide because his son disobeyed him – the old man felt deeply humiliated. Here, young people's rebellion was endorsed by structural factors (e.g., economic power), thereby challenging the elderly's traditional value that "the young must respect the old".

Under a similar framework, Liu Yanwu (2011) and Zhang Xuelin (2015) approached the elderly crisis from the increased expense of marriage and the rising status of young

women. They argue that because of the unbalanced sex ratio[1] in rural China and the tendency of upward marriage, young women are in an "advantageous position" in the marriage market. Together with their husbands, they tend to lift the bride price and demand a house as a prerequisite for marriage. Therefore, they argue that through marriage, the younger generations manage to gain more family property from the elderly generations and control more family power. Meanwhile, they also minimise the responsibility of taking care of the elderly. Liu Yanwu (2015) also pointed out that with the celebration of consumerism and "city fetishism aspirations" in popular and mass media, economic rationality has been cultivated among rural young people, especially women, when choosing a husband. These studies contend that the younger generations tend to act according to instrumental and pragmatic market logic, leading to "intergenerational exploitation" (F. Chen, 2013; D. Wang, 2014; Y. Wei & Jiang, 2007; H. Yang & Ouyang, 2013) to a large extent. He Xuefeng (2008), Chen Bofeng (2007) and others pointed out that due to marketisation, there have been significant changes in terms of horizontal conjugal relationships and vertical intergenerational relationships, further resulting in an "imbalance of power" within the family. Therefore, the core of the elderly crisis lies in "family politics" and moral degradation under the shadow of ruthless market rationality.

To conclude, following a structural-functionalist approach, this strand of scholars primarily regards the elderly crisis as an acute expression of societal anomie in the context of rapid marketisation. However, as later scholars have pointed out, these studies tend to moralise the elderly crisis and underplay the elderly's agency. Moreover, structural causes are often mentioned as mere background. For example, rapid marketisation is largely considered by these scholars as an inevitable or natural institutional arrangement. That is to say, the project of modernisation (represented by marketisation) itself, together with its associated institutional arrangements (e.g., rural-urban duality), have not necessarily been questioned. In this regard, the crisis was ultimately regarded as an imbalance of "family politics" – a problem *within but not beyond* the households. Additionally, I argue that there has been an orientation of essentialising the so-called "traditional family values" and a relatively conservative normative standing. In claiming that the family is of "ontological significance" (F. Wu, 2005, 2011) to the Chinese people, these studies largely fail to view culture as contextually and historically contingent. Culture and family values tend to be "neatly coherent, logically consistent, highly integrated, consensual, extremely resistant to change, and clearly bounded" (Sewell, 2005, p. 169), pre-determined and corresponding to certain socioeconomic structures. Accordingly, policy advice made by

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[1] In 2017, the sex ratio in rural China is 122:100 (National Bureau of Statistics)

this strand of scholarship is often a moral reconstruction, including filial piety or to "restore the sanctity of the Chinese family" (e.g., Gui, 2010).

2.1.3 Family strategy and collateral damage of modernisation

The last group of scholars concerned with the elderly crisis relate to what I term the "family strategy" literature, mostly represented by the Huazhong Rural School[1]. In contrast to the "family politics" literature discussed above, they are dissatisfied with the miserable images of the elderly in these studies and treating the elderly only as passive bearers of social change. According to large-scale interview-based investigations in many rural villages across China, they found that although the elderly face difficulty in old-age support and negligence of their adult children, the elderly themselves tend to view this as "acceptable" and "reasonable" (F. Chen, 2013; Ping, 2018; Y. Wei & Jiang, 2007). Many older adults show tremendous understanding and tolerance towards their adult children's indifference and neglect, saying that their own sacrifice is necessary for the sake of the whole three-generational household. Therefore, these scholars argue that the elderly crisis cannot be fully understood without considering the elderly's agency. In contrast to the "family politics" literature, they argue that the elderly crisis should not be treated as a moral crisis of society in general since the "elderly is evidently following certain moral principles" (Ping, 2018, p. 72). In contrast, they argue that the elderly crisis is the collateral damage of rural households' rational *family strategy* under the pressure of modernisation.

The core concept these scholars propose to understand the rural elderly and their family is "half-worker half-cultivator mode based on the intergenerational division of labour" (*daijifengong weijichu de bangongbange*, 代际分工为基础的半工半耕)[2] (X. He, 2003, 2008). This refers to the rational family strategy of the rural household: the elderly stays at the rural home farming and taking care of the children, while younger people do paid work in the cities. Thus, the elderly's agency is recognised – they actively participate in the pursuit of wealth and social mobility of the three-generational family. However, they point out that the motivation behind these older people's sacrifice is different from their adult children, who desire a more affluent, middle-class lifestyle and ultimately relocation to the cities. What motivates the elderly is their Confucian

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[1] Focusing on the "three rural issues" (agriculture, rural villages, and peasants), Huazhong rural school is known for its criticism of the impact of market forces on rural China and its aim of developing better and more effective governing measures. It should be noted that some scholars' arguments within this school are more in line with the "family politics" literature.

[2] This concept is developed from Huang's (2009) concept of "half-worker half-cultivator" (*bangong bangeng*, 半工半耕).

moral belief to "carry the family line" (*chuanzong jiedai*, 传宗接代), which "provides them with ontological meaning" (X. He, 2003; F. Wu, 2005). Under such moral imperatives, they are bound in the increasingly formidable "life mission" (*rensheng renwu*, 人生任务), including raising children, helping them to marry and to reproduce the next generation (H. Chen, 2016; Gui, 2014; X. He, 2001, 2008). Before the economic reforms, such a mission was relatively easier and cheaper to achieve, plus the elderly did not need to provide childcare for grandchildren (since it was normally the task of the daughter-in-law). However, it is argued that, now, with much higher marriage expenses (including bride prices) and the additional burden of childcare, the elderly often find themselves in a situation of endless sacrifice.

It is thus argued that the elderly tend to willingly work very hard, tolerate their adult children's neglect, and endure difficulty in everyday life. The imperative "life mission" internalised by the elderly has put them in a very vulnerable position within the family, leading to "intergenerational exploitation" to a large extent. Such an explanation of the elderly crisis is held by the Huazhong rural school, among others. They do not view it as a moral crisis since it is precisely the traditional moral belief that has been evoked by modernisation (S. Yang & Shen, 2000). They contend that such moral belief of sustaining a traditional ideal family has long existed and is deeply rooted in Confucian culture[1]. This group of scholars shares important similarities with the "family politics" literature, especially in understanding traditional family values and morality. Although these studies recognise the agency and active participation of the elderly in family issues, they tend to essentialise their agency as motived by a "life mission" and "moral imperatives" rooted in traditional family culture. For them, more than a century of radical social change seems to keep the elderly's family values largely intact (however, they hold that the values of the younger generations have been significantly changed).

More importantly, the "family strategy" literature takes a more optimistic view than the "family politics" literature, although they share similar conservative outlooks. For them, since such "family strategy" is an economically rational choice of the rural household, and the elderly are actively participating in it, the elderly crisis seems to be much less problematic and even justified in the name of urbanisation and rural people's social mobility. For example, within the Huazhong rural school, many hold that the rural-urban duality and hukou system are "protective systems" for rural families. They argue that such arrangements allow the rural family to separate production (income earning) and social reproduction (e.g., child-rearing, elderly care) more effectively in seeking social mobility and urbanisation. Since *nongmingong* can always go back to their rural

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[1] For opposing viewpoints, see discussion in Section 2.2.

homes when needed, such "gradual urbanisation" (*jianjinshi chengshihua*, 渐进式城市化) can also be a "less risky" arrangement for rural families (X. He, 2014). Meanwhile, such arrangements are one of the reasons why urban China can spare itself from slum problems (X. Zhang, 2015). Therefore, the rural societies under the current institutional arrangements can be considered the "stabilisers and reservoirs of China's modernisation" (中国现代化的稳定器与蓄水池) (X. He, 2003, 2022).

For these scholars, the economic development of society (especially in the cities) is prioritised. Under an administrative agenda, the structural and institutional factors have been underplayed. Thus, the elderly crisis is considered more of an "heroic" sacrifice than the result of structural inequality. For example, towards the end of Li Yongping's book on the rural elderly, she writes:

> *In this sense, the current crisis of the elderly in rural areas reflects not only the experience of the elderly people but also the desire and pursuit of peasant families to integrate into modernity in this particular era. Ageing is the ultimate destiny of everyone, and the current family transition has opened up new opportunities and space for the mobility of rural families, although it has also come at a considerable cost. Therefore… it is important to see not only the pain of rural families but also the vitality and hope that emerges from this pain… The crisis of the elderly, in the light of this dream, has a sense of heroic tragedy.*
>
> *Li (2018, p. 238)*

So far, I have discussed three approaches within mainstream Chinese family studies concerning elderly issues. To summarise, during the initial years of economic reform (late 1970s to the 1990s), the decline of the elderly's status was largely considered to be a natural and somewhat progressive consequence of modernisation. However, many noted that the material and mental conditions of the rural elderly started to deteriorate greatly from the late 1990s. Concerning such "elderly crisis", "family politics" literature tends to theorise it as anomie or moral crisis of traditional family values under the pressure of modernisation. In contrast, the "family strategy" literature tends to acknowledge the active participation of the elderly in the rural family's urbanisation, arguing that the difficult situation the rural elderly is facing is collateral damage from China's modernisation. However, as I have demonstrated, both the "family politics" and "family strategy" literature tend to treat modernisation (economic development in particular) and virtuous traditional morality as "political correctness" under a largely administrative agenda.

2.2 Reflexive Modernity and the "Transformation of Intimacy"

Drawing on theories of "reflexive" modernity (also "late" or "second" modernity), including Gidden, Bauman, Beck and Beck-Gernshim, the second strand of scholarship theorises the transformation of the family through the lens of individualisation. In contrast to mainstream family studies, which primarily understands the family from macro, structural, and economic perspectives, the "reflexive modernity" literature tends to include changing family relations under the broader transformation of late modernity and examines the transformation of cultural identities and subjective experiences within such modernity. Notably, they emphasise the profound impact of the modern media system in shaping such experience and sensibility, to which mainstream family studies largely turn a blind eye.

2.2.1 Individualization and modern sensibility

First proposed by Giddens (1992a) and Beck (1986), the individualisation thesis aims to capture the large-scale social change in second or late modernity. Emerging in the post-war welfare conditions of Western Europe, individualisation generally refers to an ongoing process whereby individuals are increasingly less bound by traditional norms, identity, institutions, and social structures but increasingly become a reflexive project of their own. Previously strong social forms that organise and guide people's lives, including kinship, family, gender, or class, have been increasingly dismantled[1]. Individualisation is thus characterised by the process of "first, the dis-embedding and, second, the re-embedding of industrial society ways of life by new ones, in which the individual procure, stage, and cobble together their biographies themselves" (Beck, 1986, p. 13). The aim is to picture the more fundamental trend or thrust of "becoming individual" (Beck & Beck-Gernshim, 2002) under the "chaotic" surface of personal/family life in late modernity. Through this process, the "traditional" pre-established biography has been transformed into a "choice biography" (Bauman, 2000, 2001; Beck, 1986; Beck & Beck-Gernshim, 2002; Giddens, 1992a).

In China, despite the divergence in the paths and historical context, many argued that similar processes regarding modernity had taken place, including individualisation and the transformation of intimacy. In his seminal book *Private Life under Socialism: Love,*

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[1] For counterarguments, see Atkinson (2007) and Brannen and Nilsen (2005) as well as my discussion in Section 2.3.

Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village (2003), Yan Yunxiang first proposed understanding what he called the "great transformation" of the Chinese family through the lens of individualisation. Based on an extended ethnographical investigation between the 1970s and 1990s in a village in Northern China, he argued that the power structure and hierarchy within Chinese families had been profoundly reconfigured under radical political and socioeconomic changes. Patriarchy and parental authority have been undermined significantly by state-initiated policies, campaigns, and movements, resulting in the waning power of the senior generations and growing autonomy of the young (Boermel, 2006; Ikels, 2004). This trend has been more evident since the 1980s as individuals – young people particularly – have been attracted to and increasingly demanding independence, freedom, rights, self-fulfilment, personal satisfaction and conjugal intimacies against the background of privatisation of the economy as well as social life (Halskov Hansen & Svarverud, 2010; X. Wu, 2015a; Yan, 2011). Yan (1997) further conceptualised this transformation within the family as the "triumph of conjugality over patriarchy" or "the rise of the individual".

The rise of the young individuals in both rural and urban China marked one of the main features of China's modern transformations of family and society. As reviewed in the history section, since the structures and the moral bases of Confucianist hierarchy for generations have been undermined greatly since the 1950s, the younger generation born after the 1980s is said to have much greater control over their family and social lives. Instead of following the filial obligation to parents, the rigid moral codes of Confucianism and gender conventions, these individuals passionately pursue a very different family model that emphasises personal desire, affective ties and the centrality of conjugal relationships and companionate marriage (Shen Y., 2013). With aspirations to experience the excitement of the outside world, a significant number of rural young people in poor regions of China left their parents, families, and communities to work as migrant workers in coastal industrial areas, thereby moving in the direction of dis-embeddedness (Halskov Hansen & Svarverud, 2010).

However, Yan Yunxiang further argues that the Chinese path to individualisation has its unique difference, even though it also shares many similarities with the individualisation model of Western Europe. Yan pointed out that based on the main theorists of late modernity, including Giddens, Beck, Beck-Gernshim and Bauman, the individualisation process in Western Europe is socially "under conditions of cultural democracy, the welfare state, and classic individualism" (2010, p. 507). However, China's path to individualisation emerges from a context without the above institutional and cultural conditions. In contrast, the force that has been very powerful in the Chinese context has been the Party-state. With the forceful intervention of the state and the

absence of a sound welfare system, younger generations tend to show egoism in pursuing individual interests. In this regard, Yan holds (especially in his earlier works) that individualisation in China often leads to "uncivil individuals" who tend to emphasise rights while overlooking obligations. For example, some of them may treat their elderly parents badly (Yan, 2003, 2010). Therefore, with the rise of the young in the process of individualisation, the younger generation tends to treat their elderly family members with disrespect or indifference, or refuse to support them, or sometimes "exploit" their economic resources and labour – known as the "*kenlao*" (eating the elderly, 啃老) phenomenon. Family conflicts have also increased, especially during the 1990s and 2000s.

The trend of individualisation has been driven or facilitated by several interconnected social, economic, and cultural forces, including economic globalisation, universal education, and, particularly, modern media and communication (Giddens, 2008). In his ground-breaking book *Media and Modernity* (1995), John Thompson argued that the development of the media and communication system has "transformed the nature of symbolic production and exchange in the modern world", and it has been profoundly "interwoven in fundamental ways with the major institutional transformation which have shaped the modern world" (ibid 1995, p. 15). Shaun Moores (1995) argues that, using Giddens' phrase, television and more novel media forms can serve as a "dis-embedding mechanism" for individuals to go beyond their normal script of life and experience and connect with the regional, national or transnational world within private households. Media, including television dramas, self-help magazines, and social media, play a central role in enabling the reflexive organisation of personal life, thereby powering individualisation and reflexive modernity (Lewis et al., 2016). Moreover, the increasing appropriation of private and personal media helps to privatise everyday life as the shift from "family television" to "bedroom culture" amplifies a "screen-entertainment focused, privatised and individualised leisure culture" (Bovill & Livingstone, 2001).

Among other socioeconomic forces, the post-socialist reform and privatisation of the media system in China is also considered a crucial dimension in shaping personal and family life. As discussed in Chapter 1, the media system in China has witnessed tremendous changes since the reforms. Many argued that it was in such a media and cultural context that individuals started to gain prominence. With the "partial withdrawal of the state from the realm of domestic life" (Rofel, 2007, p. 45), the public and collective method of the reception was shifted largely to cultural consumption in the private homes of ordinary Chinese. Popular and mass media culture that zealously celebrates notions of independence, freedom, romantic love, and personal development

has been warmly welcomed by young Chinese. Themes relating to romance, love, self-feeling and "modern" lifestyles have provided new templates for intimacy, selfhood, and family, with desire at its heart (Rofel, 2007). The prosperous, de-politicised, entertainment-oriented media content and the relocation of media consumption all marked a turn towards the affective, private, and intimate realm of everyday life, contributing to the individualisation discussed earlier.

Even though investigations into the interrelation between media culture and the transformation of intimacy and family relationships remain relatively limited and marginalised in mainstream scholarship in China, there have been several productive attempts. For example, in his ethnography of Xiajia village, Yan (2003) found that young people credit their new thoughts to music from Gangtai (Hong Kong and Taiwan), saying that these love songs "made their hearts soft". Although not within his intended research agenda, Yan nevertheless noted that these rural youth were captivated by the material-rich middle-class lifestyles vividly depicted by television dramas or popular music. Similarly, in Harriet Evans' (2008) research on mother-daughter relationships in the early 2000s, she found that the newly invented notion of "communication" (*goutong*, 沟通) was disseminated by various forms of popular media, and further reconfigured the ideal mother-daughter relationship in urban China. With a pedigree in "Western" therapeutic culture, it tends to emphasise affective communication and mutual "spiritual" understanding between family members. In Lisa Rofel's (2007) *Desiring China*, however, with a much more careful examination on mediated subjectivity, she compellingly argued how the heart-wrenching television melodrama *Yearning* aired at the beginning of the 1990s and found huge popularity that offered an "early elaboration of desires" for urban Chinese.

In *Women and the Media in Asia: The Precarious Self* (2012), Youna Kim and others discussed the interconnection between female individualisation and popular media culture in China and other Asian countries. They found that with the transnational flows of media that have emerged in globalising Asia, the availability of a variety of cultural materials, from reality television and talk shows to television dramas, has become "one of the most important resources for individualisation" for young women in China, Singapore, Japan and other Asian countries since the 2000s. Wanning Sun and Ling Yang (2019) pointed out that new genres, forms, and styles of media products started to become popular on the Internet, reality television, and social media. The emergence of new media figures, such as experts and celebrities, provide bewildering suggestions and guidance on intimacy and personal life for individuals to "dis-embed" and "re-embed".

As a recent development, the relation between rural people's engagement with new media and their changing family life remains largely unexamined. Within limited endeavours, Wang Xinyuan (2016) and Tom McDonald (2016) have explored how social media has been increasingly embedded in young *nongmingong*'s family life and leisure. In particular, Wang argued that as the still relatively digital have-less population, they are "still in the process of becoming modern" (2016, p. 187). Moreover, for those young migrant workers who lack education (including parental education), since they left school and began to seek jobs in the cities from a very young age, social media acts as a form of "post-school" education for them to become modern individuals who try to write their "own biography" outside the family and rural communities. What has been increasingly agreed upon is that with the expansion of network infrastructure and the massive boom in the domestic smart-phones industry (Zhou, 2020), rural individuals, including migrant workers and people "left-behind", increasingly harness digital media as a way to meet their desire to "leapfrog into a more "modern" way of life" (Chio & Sun, 2012).

As discussed above, the transformation of the Chinese family since the reform era has been theorised under concepts of modernity as a trajectory towards individualisation. Based on existing scholarly exploration, I have also demonstrated how the changing media landscape relates to the "rise of individuals". These studies have been pathbreaking and fruitful in approaching the transformation of the family from the framework that emphasises people's experiences, emotions, subjectivity, intimacy, and sense of selfhood, in contrast to the more structural-functionalist approach that emphasises family structure, size or reproductive modes. However, a missing piece of the puzzle is the elderly, particularly the rural elderly, who tend to be much less associated with the modern sensibility or the modern sense of self. In the studies mentioned above, individualisation is seen not so much as "the rise of individuals" as "the rise of young[1] individuals". The aspirations, values, feelings, and longings in the family life of the vast aged population in China remain largely ignored, apart from some relatively reductive and descriptive accounts of them as "traditional" or the opposite of the young, mentioned only in passing. How the changing media culture could be relevant to their experience of family changes has been even less studied.

2.2.2 "Compressed modernity", "neo-familism" and emotional intimacy

In the most recent decade, scholars have noted that the complexity and heterogeneity of the individualisation process and the paradoxical side of the transformation of family,

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[1] Here, young people refers to people who are relatively younger, not a strict age group.

with the elderly, play significant roles. Therefore, in this section, I mainly discuss these new developments of reflexive modernity literature as they pertain to the elderly. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, many scholars have noted that the Chinese family has witnessed the relative mitigation of family conflicts in recent years (X. Wu, 2017; Yan, 2016; Z. Zhao & Chen, 2008). Moreover, despite the roaring advance of the market economy, increasingly universalised education and enhanced social mobility, scholars have found that the expected scenarios have not happened, including the centralisation of the nuclear family, the ultimate "triumph" of conjugality over vertical intergenerational bonding, or the vanquishing of individualism over "familism" (Jankowiak, 2021; Santos & Harrell, 2017; Yan, 1997). Instead, what became increasingly salient were intergenerational dependence and intimacy, flexible multigenerational households, and especially the phenomenon of "downward intergenerational transfer and grandparenting" (Yan, 2021a, p. 1).

Facing these somewhat puzzling and conflicting images of the Chinese family, some started to problematise and develop the individualisation thesis by advancing the heterogeneity of Chinese modernity and its different cultural traditions.[1] Scholars argued that in contrast to the Western model of family transformation, which is deeply rooted in its modernity and characterised by the spontaneous and "stretched out" modernisation process, the Chinese modernity is "compressed" and "compounded" (Halskov Hansen & Svarverud, 2010). Similar to other East Asia countries, including South Korea, Singapore and Japan, the "development of first modernity and the transformation to second modernity happen almost simultaneously and in a very short period of time" (S. Han & Shim, 2010, p. 468) in China. The modernisation processes came about as a response to a threatening external challenge (Robertson, 2012, p. 193) and tended to highly depend on the powerful bureaucratic authority's development-oriented policies (W. Sun, 2013). Therefore, with the rush to development, some argue that on the one hand, the individualisation process in China provides individuals with more choice, freedom, and mobility, but on the other hand, it offers them little institutional protection and support from the state (W. Sun & Guo, 2013; Yan, 2010). Individuals therefore face far greater intensity and complex risks in China than in the West (Shim et al., 2014).

What has been discussed above is understood as the objective-structural dimension or the "push energy" of Chinese modernity, including globalisation, social policies, and the expansion of the market economy. The dual dimension that has been identified is

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[1] This is also in line with Yan's (2010) argument about the unique path of the individualization process in China.

the cultural-discursive force. It refers to the rich tradition of "familism" and intergenerational reciprocity, which could be regarded as a crucial pull factor (Kulp, 1925; Shim & Han, 2010; Zhai, 2011). As Yan points out, what happens in China "reflects a kind of flexible collectivism... that enables the individual to embrace new possibilities and realise personal ambitions without losing the protective shell of the familial collectivity" (Yan, 2016, p. 255), which encompasses a "delicate, culture-bound balance between individual and family community" (S. Han & Shim, 2010, p. 483). In facing intense social risks and dramatic social changes, the family has become a significant institution for individuals to re-embed in (Zhong & Sui, 2014). As shown by the empirical evidence of the multigenerational household and intergenerational interdependence, many have argued that such a "partial return of familism" can best be understood as "family-oriented" individualisation or what Yan dubbed "neo-familism" (Yan, 2021a, 2021b).

Based on recent investigations in urban China, scholars have found that intergenerational intimacy that centres on the grandchildren has emerged as a "new bonding mechanism" (Yan, 2021b, p. 4). The elderly generation and the "middle" generation's resources, care, and attachment flow toward the third generation (the grandchildren). Family relationships have been negotiated, reinvented, and reimagined to achieve a more sustainable, desirable, and harmonious family unit in the face of increasing risks and social difficulties. The nature of the intergenerational relationship has changed into something that is based on "mutual need, mutual gratitude and mutual support for a two-way exchange of support and care" (E. J. Croll, 2006, p. 483). For example, in Liu Wenrong's (2012) study of the "*Kenlao* phenomenon", she found that in many cases, both the adult children and the elderly tend to believe that it is acceptable to "*Kenlao*" since it is good for their emotional bonding.

Particularly, the active role of the elderly in redirecting the family toward the "neo-family" that emphasises both family solidarity and individual development has been recognised by many scholars. Some argue that we should not solely attribute the elderly's motivations to essential Confucian moral imperatives since it obscures and simplifies the rich layers of elderly desire (W. Liu, 2012). For example, with soaring house prices, many urban parents voluntarily pour their life-savings into helping their adult children to buy a house and live with them together after the latter get married (Zhong & He, 2014). These older people hope to advance their bonding with the younger generation by actively participating in their adult children's lives, including providing material help or childcare.

In turn, the younger generations also consciously maintain the relationships with their

parents (J. Liu, 2016, 2017; Shen Y., 2013; Y. Shen, 2016; Zhong & He, 2014). Sometimes, it also leads to conflict when the adult children are not grateful or demand too much beyond what the elderly can provide. Similarly, Zhong Xiaohui and He Shilin (2012) argue that there has been an emotional turn in practising filial piety. That is, filial piety is no longer an unconditional moral imperative that requires the children to obey but the mutual working of both younger and older generations toward emotional intimacy. However, to build a more harmonious and intimate intergenerational relationship, researchers also highlight the fact that in many cases, the elderly need to be more tolerant and provide more material support to adult children but not the other way around (Tao, 2011).

In this regard, emotional intimacy becomes a core element in sustaining the family, and the elderly demonstrate great agency in making such intimacy possible. Under such circumstances, these scholars argue that the so-called "elderly crisis" should be viewed through a more positive lens since it represents the "resilience" and "potential" of contemporary Chinese families under pressure. In their account, terms like "compromise", "negotiation", and "intimacy" replace terms like "conflict", "crisis", "exploitation" in previous studies (X. Wu, 2019). In their relatively optimistic narratives, the "elderly crisis" might only be a temporary phrase concerning the family life cycle. That is to say, when such an emotional turn is completed, the older family members are likely to enjoy a new form of family that is more intimate and harmonious (W. Liu, 2021).

In contrast to mainstream Chinese family studies discussed earlier, cultural values in relation to the family are understood as changing but not static. The elderly's sacrifices and tolerance should not be understood as straightforward compliance with traditional values, but as a reflexive evaluation concerning emotions. This vein of scholarship resonates with me in the way it highlights emotions and cultural values in transition. However, there are limited discussions about the rural households: most of these studies are based on findings of urban (and often middle-class) families. As discussed in the introductory chapter, the rural family faces very different institutional contexts compared to urban families. Under these circumstances, whether the rural elderly are also following the similar logics of "emotional intimacy" is still a question to be answered. How the rural elderly feel, negotiate and connect with their family in facing increasingly deeper social inequality has not yet been considered. Moreover, at least for some scholars in this vein, the institutional arrangements (including the state and the market) have been taken as politically natural or given. Thus, I find the celebration of emotional intimacy problematic, as it risks underplaying the complex power struggles involved, within and beyond the household. This leads to the "critical school" I now

turn to below.

2.3 Structural Inequality, Uneven Modernity and the (Rural) Family

The last strand of scholarship I discuss here falls into what I loosely refer to as the critical school of contemporary Chinese society, including but not limited to labour, gender, and critical media studies. They cover a wide range of disciplines and research topics but share a focus on structural inequality and the power dynamics that underpin such inequality. They radically disagree with what the distinguished scholar of Chinese rural reforms Wen Tiejun (2004) calls the "mainstream intellectual discourse", which also includes the mainstream family studies discussed above. These critical scholars argue that such "mainstream intellectual discourse" believes that inequality is somehow justifiable because of its contribution to societal functioning (e.g., the elderly's suffering is necessary for rural family's urbanisation) (D. Goodman, 2013; W. Sun & Guo, 2013; X. Wu, 2015b, 2019). In this regard, the mainstream literature tends to produce mere descriptions of social structures and suspends the analysis of power relations that perpetuate such structures. Under the shadow of pro-statist ideology (X. Wu, 2012, 2015b, 2016, 2019), these studies tend to approach social phenomena under the guise of "natural" and "scientific" narratives. Similarly, although less administrative, the reflexive literature on the family's emotional intimacy tends to overstate agency and overlooks power relations and institutional structures (X. Wu, 2021).

In contrast, the critical school calls for careful examination of the structural inequality and uneven modernity engendered by complex power relations. As mentioned earlier, mainstream family studies tend to uncritically endorse current administrative goals and limit the discussion of the state's power within the collective era. Moreover, their critique of the market economy (e.g., the family politics literature) is built on the premise that the state is merely an outside regulator, which always has the marginalised groups in mind. Scholars using a critical lens have found it unconvincing to assume an antagonistic relationship between the market and the state (Zhou, 2020). Instead, they have found that the largely unchecked development of the market is precisely cultivated under the "technocratic logic of the state that prioritises economic growth and political stability" (B. Meng & Huang, 2017, p. 28). Most insist that current social structures can only be fully grasped when situated firmly within a historical and political context (Lin, 2013; B. Meng, 2018).

For example, scholars in labour and policy studies argue that *nongmingong* and the rural family's deprived circumstances are the results of the institutionally sustained rural-urban duality in the context of the neoliberal expansion of global capitalism in

China since the 1980s. Through the aggressive marketisation that the state has led and allowed, rural people have been turned into industrial workers in the cities, but without the rights and privilege to live in the cities (Chan, 2009; Gao, 2017; Murphy, 2002; W. Sun, 2014). They point out that the state's legislation and social policies, including *hukou*, tend to interlock with the capitalist logic, making *nongmingong* one of the most precarious groups and further exerting control over rural families (Kuruvilla et al., 2011; Tomba, 2002). Far from "emancipated workers" who are blessed with the opportunities to finally achieve "gradual urbanisation" and social mobility, *nongmingong* have been re-inserted "into the exploitative capitalist relations of production" (Zhou, 2020, p. 36) with no significantly increased income and urban-standard welfare provision. While young rural people work as cheap labour in the cities, their family members back in their rural homes shoulder the heavy responsibility of social reproduction (W. Chen & Wang, 2014; Jin, 2000; S. Song, 2011; X. Wu, 2015a). Under such arrangements, children, women, and the elderly within the rural households are often in extremely vulnerable positions. Particularly, the left-behind elderly are forced to turn from care receivers to caregivers to their grandchildren (J. Sun, 2006).

Other scholars found that the family has been strategically used as a governing tool of economic modernisation in the context of the systematic withdrawal of the state from social welfare after the reform (Zuo & Jiang, 2009). For example, Chen Yinfang (2020) found that behind the seeming "unclear goals" and "contradictory values" of China's family policies and legislation[1] are the institutional consistency in strengthening the family responsibility and setting the family up as an important welfare provider. In her analysis of the unlimited duty to support the parents that has been mandated by the Marriage Law, she pointed out that what marks out such legislation is "the passive dependence of the elderly who has no family property as an institutional guarantee and no welfare support from the nation" (2010, p. 152). Such legal and social arrangements left many social issues to moral, economic, political, and cultural systems, and thus left enough space for the government to operate and govern according to particular agendas. Similarly, Huang Zongzhi's (2011b) research shows that facing great social risks (e.g., unemployment, work injury) and a general lack of social provisions, members of the rural three-generational family are forced to be highly economically interdependent on each other.

Unlike mainstream family studies, which rarely mention the patriarchy, gender scholars

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[1] For example, as mentioned in Chapter 1, Chinese legislation sometimes favours individualistic principles of property protection and sometimes favours familial principles that mandate family members' obligations.

consider the patriarchy to be a still-powerful institution and have gained new momentum under the double endorsements from both the state and the market (Jin, 2015; Shen Y., 2013; Y. Shen, 2009; S. Song, 2011; X. Wu, 2015a). In her book *Patriarchy on the Move* (2015), Jin Yihong pointed out that the patriarchal arrangements of the rural family are particularly compatible with the patriarchal structure of the market. For example, one of the reasons rural young women became a convenient labour force for the capitalist factories is because they needed to go back and get married. Also, studies show that rural parents are using young women's income to fill the holes of pensions due to a lack of social welfare or unfilial sons. Patriarchal families based on a gendered division of labour are also encouraged by the state's discourse. For example, Song Shaopeng (2011) analysed the recent revival of Confucianism that underscores "women's virtues" (*nvde*, 女德) and the call for "women going home" (*funvhuijia*, 妇女回家). She argues that such conservative narratives have been evoked by official institutions to deal with the increasingly acute tension between economic production and social production.

Critical media scholars see the social inequality and unevenness of Chinese modernity as highly relevant to the media system. They examine both the capitalist mechanism and the authorities' logic in allocating cultural and communication resources and how such processes reproduce and reinforce social inequality (e.g., Y. Hong, 2017; B. Meng, 2018; Sparks, 2012; Y. Zhao, 1998, 2008; Y. Zhao & Schiller, 2001). Many have pointed out that the dual track of the Chinese media system that works between the bottom line and the party line is applying neoliberal strategies on the one hand and rearticulating the socialist ethos on the other (W. Sun & Zhao, 2009; Y. Zhao, 1998). For example, Meng and Huang (2008) pointed out that both popular and office media play a crucial part in turning Chinese citizens, especially women, into consumers. With various lifestyles, television and shopping programmes underscoring consumerism, current media culture celebrates middle-class identity and trashes the working class, many with rural *hukou*, by accusing them of low "*suzhi*" (quality) (W. Sun, 2014; W. Sun & Guo, 2013). Meanwhile, the media system is also under state regulation, with social stability as a prior goal. With direct reference to the family, traditional Confucianism and socialist values have been mobilised to sustain the stability of the family, and keep the family (women within it, in particular) as the social welfare provider (Bai & Song, 2015; Keane, 1998, 2005; Kubat, 2018; Lei & Liang, 2017). As pointed out by Zhou Yang (2020), the recent phenomenal growth of information communication sectors exerts further control of the working class and perpetuates neoliberal logic in the meantime.

2.4 Research Questions

I have discussed three approaches concerning the Chinese family and offered my evaluation along with the discussion. Although they took different approaches, most of these studies highlight the elderly's (especially the rural elderly's) problematic circumstances. The family politics literature within mainstream family studies views the elderly crisis largely as a crisis of the virtuous family values that result from the unjust politics *within* households. The reflexive modernity literature, however, argues that family values have changed in the individualisation process, and the elderly are active in seeking emotional intimacy. I found the latter to be more convincing with their understanding of cultural values as a *process* and their acknowledgement of the agency of the elderly. The family strategy literature regards the elderly crisis as mere collateral damage of modernisation and of the rural family's desire for urbanisation and social mobility. The critical scholarship radically disagrees with them by underscoring the power relationships and social structures that rural people and their families have been *forced* to confront. They are also unsatisfied with reflexive modernity literature's tendency to celebrate intimacy and agency but suspend the analysis of power relations. In this regard, my starting point is in line with the critical school.

However, there are evident research gaps. Firstly, even though the reflexive modernity literature highlights emotions and cultural values as dynamic processes, the focus of their analysis is disproportionately on the young and the urban. The rural elderly's feelings, experiences and values are largely overlooked in this strand of scholarship as well as in the critical school. Secondly, media has been highlighted by the reflexive literature as a driving force of reconfiguring emotional experiences, but again, the focus has not been on the rural elderly. For the critical school, media has been critically examined but primarily at the macro and institutional level and less on the subjective level. Even though there have been some very good analyses that combine both the structural and the subjective dimensions (e.g., Chuang, 2016; Pun, 2005; Zhou, 2020), the rural elderly is still a much less studied group. Thirdly, if the critical school is right in pointing out the role of power structures in shaping China's modernity, then what power relations are relevant to the rural elderly's emotions should be an important question to be answered. Lastly, if the elderly's agency is to be recognised, then the role their emotions play in their own life, in their family dynamics, and more broadly, in China's modernity is also a critical problem to be explored.

Therefore, with emphasis on the significance of the rural elderly as a historical formation (a generation) and a social formation (as *zubei*, grandparent generation, in rural families), I ask the following research questions:

1) **How do the rural elderly experience their life emotionally in post-reform China?**
2) **How and to what extent are their emotional experiences mediated?**
3) **How and to what extent do such emotions play a role in the elderly's life, in their family dynamics, and more widely, in China's modernity?**

As discussed, my approach is more in line with two strands of scholarship: the reflexive modernity literature; and the critical school. I value emotional, subjective experience as well as the power-laden structures. Although there are exceptions (e.g., Y. Shen, 2009; Yan, 2021b), there is a general tendency for the reflexive literature to overstate agency and relatively neglect subjective experiences and emotions in the critical literature. Therefore, I seek a theoretical approach that can acknowledge both sides without underplaying either side. Moreover, I seek a more grounded approach that could make visible the research subjects' own point of view. This leads to my conceptual framework of the "mediated structure of feeling", which I turn to below.

2.5 Mediated Structure of Feeling: A Framework
2.5.1 The concept of "structure of feeling"

The "structure of feeling" concept was first coined by Raymond Williams in *Preface to Film* (1954) and further discussed in *The Long Revolution* (1965) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977). The early version of this concept deals with the aesthetic and stylistic quality of arts and literature as lived experiences of a specific period of time. In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams elaborated on this concept and widened it to cultural experiences in a more general sense, not limited to works of art. Despite its relative vagueness and underdevelopment, later scholars regard it as a "sensitising concept" (Bulmer, 1979) with great theoretical purchase and potential openness to empirical investigation. Many further developed this concept theoretically (Coleman, 2018; Filmer, 2003; Highmore, 2016; Tygstrup & Sharma, 2015) and applied it in empirical studies (Best, 2012; Bonfiglioli, 2020; Curtis, 2020; Gao, 2017; Harris et al., 2019; H. Lee, 2007a; Nenga, 2003; Spronk, 2020). To analyse this complex concept and unlock its full potential, I proceed with my analysis by breaking down its deliberately (and brilliantly) oxymoronic composition of words – "structure" and "feeling" – individually and then in combination.

a) "Structure"

In *Marxism and Literature,* Williams opens his discussion of this concept by critiquing

how culture and society are often expressed in an "habitual past tense" in most analyses. He pointed out that under such circumstances, analysis is "centred on relations between these produced institutions, formations and experience", while the present only existed in that "produced past" and "the fixed explicit forms" (1977, p. 128). The main targets of his criticism were some Marxists who adopted an over-determinist view of culture and reduced complex lived social life to fixed forms. His critique also speaks to a much wider field of social science in general, including the structural-functionalist approach that is very much alive in today's Chinese family studies. For example, in mainstream Chinese family studies, the elderly's family values are often analysed in fixed and static form (e.g., Confucianist life missions) that have already been "precipitated", using Williams' term. In this regard, the complex, hybridised, dynamic cultural process that has actually been *lived* becomes problematically invisible. In contrast, the peculiar "something" Williams is looking for to break with this intellectual inertia is the "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" (1977, p.132). The concept of the structure of feeling aims precisely to capture the lived experiences and the totality of sociocultural life that is constantly in process and "*in solution*" (1977, p. 134 his emphasis)

However, he went on to point out that such a specific solution is "never mere flux" but a "*structured formation*" (my emphasis) and, in a sense, a "pre-formation" – the symbolic and emotional force struggling to actualise a particular cultural and historical structure through its' particular linkage, particular emphases and suppressions" (1977, p. 134). By pointing out that such lived experiences and "affective elements" have a "structure", he means that they work "as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension" (1977, p.134). Therefore, if the emphasis on the ineffable lived experiences (i.e., "feeling" in this formula; see below) is crucial in understanding this concept, "structure" has the same importance here. However, how can we understand the "internal relations" of structure? How can we analyse and operationalise the "structures" of something that is "formally undefined" (Gallagher, 1980, p.645) and constantly changing? Williams himself did not provide a fully developed answer. He admitted that when pushed to an epistemological extreme, such a totality of lived social life goes against the reduction of "social analysis itself" (1977, p. 129).

Although social analysis is ultimately a reduction of the totality of social life and epistemologically partial and limited, many see the importance of overcoming what Williams refers to as the analysis in past tense and meeting head-on with the difficulty of approaching the lived and felt. Scholars continued developing this concept, trying to conquer its theoretical vagueness and methodological unfeasibility without compromising its fluidity and openness (Dirksmeier, 2016; Huehls, 2010; Szablewicz,

2014). For example, Huehls (2010) noted that if the prior goal was to grasp the contingent interlacing of tensions and interactions, it is possible to "precipitate" such lived experiences in a quasi-stable form. Or, if the research aims to primarily examine possible trends and directions in a society, the fluidity should be maintained as the central engine that drives the analysis. Munoz-Gonzales (2021) further developed this idea by maintaining the richness on the one hand and problematising such rich sensibility as structurally "thin coherent" in a quasi-stable form on the other. I draw on their discussions and agree that the *lived complexity with structures* is precisely what is worth untangling. Particularly in terms of understanding *structures in process*, I found Giddens' theory of structuration offers a productive analytical toolkit.

In his theory of structuration, Anthony Giddens insisted that structures must be regarded as "dual" (Giddens, 2008; 1984; 2009; 1971). By this, he means that structures are "both the medium and the outcome of the practises which constitute social systems" (Giddens, 1984, p. 27). The term "duality" refers to a dialectic interrelation of agency and structure: it is social practises (enacted by agency) that sustain or reproduce structure, while structure, at the same time, both "enables and constrains" social practises. Thus, structure and human agency fundamentally presuppose each other. They are inseparable ontologically and two different aspects of social practises (Craib, 1992). Giddens, therefore, terms this the "theory of structuration", indicating that structure should be viewed as a dynamic process instead of a rigid, steady, fixed state. This is largely in line with Williams' theoretical ambition. However, what structure actually contains needs some unpacking. In Giddens' original formula, the structure consists of "rule" and "resource", but the interrelationship between the two is still relatively vague and sometimes contradictory.[1] In a later reformulation, William Sewell (1992) developed Giddens' theorisation by clarifying the *duality* between the two fundamental elements that constitute structure itself: the duality of "rule" (or

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[1] In Giddens' account, structure consists of "rules and resources" and is ultimately a "*virtual*" (1984, p.17) existence (i.e., as virtual principles of social system that can be applied to different contexts but not actual patterned practises in concrete social life). As many have pointed out, this is self-contradictory to his account of structure elsewhere: he implies that resources (as one constitutive part of structure) are *actual* and exist in concrete time and space. This has made his definition of structure ambiguous and unclear, and put his theorization of structure vulnerable in many cases. As some have noted, the emphasis on the "virtual" quality of structure leads to overlooking the constraining, material dimension of structure: since the "virtual" principles can be used by the knowledgeable actors in different contexts creatively, social system tends to be what people produce, but not what they are forced to confront (Archer, 1982; O'Boyle, 2013). Giddens' later works have leaned even more to the side of human agency, leading to his theorization of "reflexive modernity" and "the Third Way" (Giddens, 1994, 1998) in a "general rapprochement with neo-liberal capitalism" (O'Boyle, 2013, p. 1020). These accounts have received fierce critiques, especially from left-wing scholars. Although I fundamentally agree with Giddens on the duality of structure and basic principles of structuration, I found the above critiques largely stand and it is important to clarify the concept of structure itself in structuration theory.

"schema",[1] in Sewell's own formulation) and "resource".

According to Sewell, the structure is made of "virtual" schema and "actual" resource which "may properly be said to constitute structures only when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time". By virtual schema, Sewell refers to the "generalisable principles that can be applied in or extended to a variety of contexts of interaction" (1992, p. 8). Such generalisable principles of social life are available to social actors who are "knowledgeable", using Giddens' term. In a broad sense, such "know-how" or knowledge of everyday life can be understood as "culture" itself – according to either classic anthropology's definition of culture or Raymond Williams' famous definition – "a whole way of life". In this sense, the structure is a profoundly cultural phenomenon, and it is suitable to add the qualifier "cultural" before schema to become "cultural schema" (Sewell, 1992, 2005).

By resources, Sewell refers to "anything that can serve as a source of power in social interactions" (Sewell, 1992, p. 9). Resources are crucial to structuration because it is the enactment of resources that further constitutes actual social actions and connects to power. In contrast to the cultural schema that is fundamentally "virtual", Sewell argues that resources[2] are "actual". Here, "actual" does not refer to tangible material existence. Rather, to say resources are "actual" means they only exist in *concrete time-space* (Giddens, 1984). For example, a mother's love is not tangible to a large extent, but it is a form of *actual* resource. This is because such love is *observable* with *real* people who live in a *specific time and place* (in contrast, a virtual schema is generalisable, thus not directly relevant to a specific time and space). Therefore, with their concrete existence, resources cannot be reducible to schemas. Nor can schemas be reduced to resources.

The *duality* between schema and resource, however, is the key step to understanding "structure" and "structuration". That is, on the one hand, resources are "effects" or an "enactment" of cultural schema. According to Sewell, resources are produced and actualised by a certain cultural schema. A mother's love and sacrifice are a form of resource to her children, but such love and sacrifice are only legitimate, natural, and conceivable under the certain belief of motherhood. On the other hand, the cultural

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[1] Sewell (1992) uses "schema" instead of "rule" because it tends to imply something more formal, rigid, and fixed that might go against the *virtual* quality of structure that Giddens himself insisted on. For example, Giddens' intention is *not* to view a regulation on paper as "rules", because a regulation is an "actual" but not a "virtual" principle that is meant to be creatively applied to other social contexts by actors.

[2] Resources could take both nonhuman (e.g., production tools, food, money) and human (e.g., expertise, strength, emotions) forms (Sewell, 1992).

schema is also the "effects" of certain sets of resources since schema "must be validated by the accumulation of resources" (Sewell, 1992, p. 13). For example, a temple is not only made of bricks and concrete but is also the enactment of the cultural schema of Buddhism. However, without the existence of millions of temples, Buddhism, as a cultural schema, would eventfully be abandoned and forgotten. Thus, schemas and resources presuppose each other and exist not in static conditions but in a continuous *social process*. It is also in the dual relation of scheme and recourse where agency plays a crucial part. As Sewell elegantly notes:

> *Agency arises from the actor's knowledge of schemas, which means the ability to apply them to new contexts. Or, to put the same thing the other way around, agency arises from the actor's control of resources, which means the capacity to reinterpret or mobilise an array of resources in terms of schemas other than those that constituted the array. Agency is implied by the existence of structures.*
>
> (Sewell, 1992, p. 20)

With the operationalisation of "structure" through two crucial constitutive elements that are fundamentally dual, it is now much clearer when approaching the "structure" part in Williams's concept of "structure of feelings". That is to say, the complex lived experience that has "specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension" (Williams, 1977, p. 134) can be broken down into the analysis of the dual relationship between schema and resources sustained over time. However, structuration theory primarily deals with the consequential aspect of social life as Giddens employs "practise" as a core concept. For Raymond Williams and this thesis in particular, the focus is experiences – the subjective dimension of social life that has been lived and felt by actual human actors (i.e., the rural elderly's emotions). Therefore, I turn to my discussion of the second part of Williams' formula: feeling.

b) "Feeling"

As mentioned above, what Williams seeks to capture is the rich social experience (in its most straightforward use) that is actively lived and felt. Thus, the core subject of this concept is something that is utterly sensuous and concretely experiential (Milner, 1994, p.66). To keep the analysis in the present tense, Williams brilliantly adopts "feeling" as an alternative to "experience" in his formula of the structure of feeling (Williams, 1987, p.132). For me and many scholars who are interested in emotions or affects, the "feeling" element in this concept is particularly illuminating. For Williams, human experiences are fundamentally emotional precisely because they are experiential. As Jennifer Harding and Deidre Pribram rightly pointed out in their edited volume *Emotion: A*

Cultural Studies Reader (2009), the "structure of feeling" concept opens significant theoretical possibilities for studies of emotion. In what follows, I briefly unpack such possibilities in three aspects.

Firstly, Williams' conceptualisation of feeling is fundamentally against the irrational formulation of emotion. In Western philosophy, there has long been a sharp contrast between reason and emotion, with the former having a superior status (and often associated with men) and the latter an irrational nature (associated with women)[1] (Alison, 2009; Sewell, 2005; Sewell, 1992). Such a dichotomy is also widely assumed by many Chinese family sociologists. For example, in family strategy literature, the motivation behind the elderly's sacrifice is often assumed to be a relational choice to maximize the three-generational household's economic interests. However, for Williams, such a distinction between reason and emotion is considered counterproductive. Instead, he argues that the "structure of feeling" concept should precisely capture the "characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: *not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought*" (1977, p.132). The artificial binary between reason and emotion has been denounced, and a more promising route is opened: to study the affective or emotional[2] experiences. The once rigidly oppositional two forms of human consciousness now blur with and interpenetrate each other, forming a more holistic approach to understanding experiences. In a way, reason informs emotions, but the reverse is also true.

Secondly, Williams's conceptualisation is against the essentialisation of emotions and insists approaching emotion as a dynamic process. As discussed in previous sections, emotions are often analysed in fixed and "precipitated" form. For example, in mainstream family studies, the elderly's voluntary endurance of hardship and their feelings of devoting themselves to the three-generational household are understood as motivated by a form of Confucianist sensibility. For these scholars, the elderly's emotions are *fixed* in a way that is determined directly by the Confucianist moral system.

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[1] For example, Plato portrayed emotions, such as anger, as irrational urges that need direction from reason (cited in Alison, 2009).

[2] The differences between the concepts of affect and emotion have been discussed by many (Cavalcante, 2018; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Harding & Pribram, 2004; Hemmings, 2005; Lupton, 1998; Nelson, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015; Stets & Turner, 2014; Tygstrup & Sharma, 2015). Normally, affect is considered as a dimension of bodily experiences that emerges automatically and quickly – often before the mind can consciously catch them. In contrast, emotion is more intelligible and communicative. It can be viewed as recognized affect with identified intensity. In this thesis, following Cavalcante (2018) and Nelson (2016), I view affect and emotion in a continuum – they are not drastically opposed to each other but mutually transferable. Therefore, I use both concepts in this thesis according to contexts.

However, by emphasising that the structure of feeling is constituted by utter "complexities, the experienced tensions, shifts, and uncertainties, the intricate forms of unevenness and confusion" (1977, p.129), Williams considers emotions to be constantly changing and contingent to specific contexts. Other scholars recognise emotions' fluid nature but pay less attention to the formation process of emotion in particular contexts. For example, in reflexive modernity literature, the turn to emotional intimacy has been largely understood as an inevitable consequence of modernity and individualisation. The complex process of how exactly such an "emotional turn" comes into being remains unclear. In contrast, one of the most crucial theoretical implications of the "structure of feeling" is to tackle such complexity in its formation process.

Lastly, the concept of the structure of feeling provides a vantage point to examine the *active role* emotions play in social life. Williams notes the methodological consequence of this concept:

> *(T)he specific qualitative changes are not assumed to be epiphenomena of changed institutions, formations, and beliefs, or merely secondary evidence of changed social and economic relations between and within classes. At the same time they are from the beginning taken as social experience, rather than as "personal" experience or as the merely superficial or incidental "small change" of society… although they are emergent or pre-emergent, they do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalisation before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action.*

> *(Williams, 1977, p.131)*

Following Williams, I view emotions not just as a reflection and representation of personal experiences, but more importantly, as playing a crucial role in redefining and reproducing self, sociality, and social life at a broader level. This is also why my third research question concerns the role of the rural elderly's emotions in their own lives, in their family dynamics, and more widely, in China's modernity.

c) "Structure of feeling"

I have discussed the elements of "structure" and "feeling" in the formula separately so

far. I now turn to the combination of them as a whole[1] and explore the implication at the social level. Although Williams uses this term to refer to lived experiences of the whole culture, he emphasises it as a periodising and class-linked concept. It is "a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or a period" (Williams, 1977, p. 131). Therefore, this is not just a concept with abstract theoretical purchase, but it also has empirical and historical specificity. He also discussed this concept in relation to class. Thus, structure of feeling has a collective dimension because it is "generated by specific social groups in the course of their experience of and participation in everyday social life" (Pickering, 1997, p. 33). Structure of feeling is thus not universal, perennial, or transnational, rather, it entails time-space specificity (Filmer, 2003).

I submit that this theoretical implication is particularly relevant to this project. Firstly, I note that class in this formulation can be further generalised as a particular form of social relations or groups in relation to power (gender, ethics, the rural elderly, etc.). Secondly, I find the historical specificity of this concept provides a vantage point to bring back history. In this regard, this concept captures lived experiences with an emphasis on certain social groups in a given time and space. For this project in particular, I understand the rural elderly, who are now grandparents (as social identity) and born before the 1960s (as a generation), as a social group of people who share similar historical experiences and are situated in similar social contexts. My aim is not to understand the structure of feeling of the society in general, but that which has emerged from the rural elderly's life and experiences.

I have so far discussed the concept of structure of feeling, including its analytic forces, operationalisation, and theoretical relevance to this project. How such structure of feeling could be "mediated" is not yet unpacked. For Williams, the concept of structure of feeling is intimately connected to media forms – this concept was meant to theorise the interrelationship between cultural products (arts and literature) and lived experiences. Elsewhere, Williams (1974, 1980) also discussed how media technologies, including television and radio as both (material) technology and (symbolic) cultural forms, mutually shape society and culture. However, media culture has developed further since Williams' original discussions. Drawing on Williams' and many others' insightful works, I now shift to the discussion to my theoretical framework in relation to media.

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[1] It should be noted that the discussion on "structure" and "feeling" respectively is of course at once the discussion of whole concept. However, the separate analysis of "structure" and "feeling" is analytically more abstract.

2.5.2 Mediation as a contextualised approach

In Chapter 1, I confessed that one of the reasons that led me to this project in the first place was the suspicion that media could be relevant to rural elderly's emotional experiences. I believe I was not alone in my concerns, since compared to younger people or the urban population, the rural elderly is indeed one of the relatively less-studied groups in media scholarship. For many sociologists in China studying family or the elderly issues, media is also outside their research agenda. This says something about the ways in which media is normally understood in our modern world, as well as how it has been theorised. Suspicious of the idea that media is irrelevant to rural elderly, I sought a theoretical approach to open such enquiry empirically instead of simply settling for this assumption. I propose adopting mediation as a contextualised approach in this regard.

One of the reasons why media is often considered less relevant to the rural elderly in China, in my view, might result from a popular assumption that media only functions when it is directly used or engaged with (this might be a view that goes beyond academia). On the surface, such an assumption indicates that the media's effect is limited and relatively weak (as some Chinese sociologists assume)[1]. However, I found such a perception also sometimes comes from a rigid media or technologically determinist framework. For example, when mass media, such as radio and television, first became widely available in the industrial West, media scholars from the "media effect paradigm" were interested in whether and to what extent media, with its message and content, had a (negative or positive) effect on people's cognition, perception, and behaviours (Alasuutari, 1999). In this "sender-message-receiver" mode, the media's "function" or "effect" is linear (Livingstone & Das, 2013). Individuals' perceptions and behaviours are considered in largely simplistic, top-down, and more or less clear-cut correlations considering the variables of the medium. The message of media is often isolated as one determining factor posing structuring effects. Such an overly determining and linear approach that studies media and only media largely led to a rather narrow framework for understanding the role of media. This might also partly be the reason why "sociologists abandon communication" (Katz, 2009), since such an

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[1] In 2020, I interviewed several Chinese sociologists from mainstream family studies, concerning their views about media.

effect paradigm is still very much alive in current media scholarship in mainland China[1] (Qiu & Bu, 2013; Qiu & Chan, 2004).

The mediation approach that suggests experiences, society and culture have all been profoundly mediated offers an alternative perspective. Firstly, mediation is a theory about *media culture* instead of one medium or single communication technology. Hepp (2009, p. 124) offers a good definition of media culture: "all kinds of culture whose primary resources of meaning are mediated or provided by technical communication media". Thus, media becomes often taken for granted infrastructures (Couldry & Hepp, 2016) and building blocks of how meaning is constructed and communicated in today's society. The notion of "media environment" (Livingstone, 2002; Rosengren et al., 1989) could also be relevant here. As many have observed, from the perspective of mediation (Couldry & Hepp, 2016; Fornas, 2000; Grusin, 2015; Lievrouw, 2009; Livingstone, 2009; Mattoni & Treré, 2014; Silverstone, 2005), media technology no longer functions in isolated and singular form but in combinations and through networks, constituting the media culture of today.

Mediation, as a theory concerning the role of media culture in society, acknowledges the centrality of media in modern society (Silverstone, 2005). However, crucially, this does not mean that everything is mediated by media directly or that everyone is related to media in the same way. Nor does it imply that all resources are provided exclusively by the media (Hepp et al., 2015, p. 3). It is not media per se at the centre of society. Rather, the "mediated" are now at the centre (Couldry, 2012; Mattoni & Treré, 2014) since, as well as being an important social process at the institutional level, everyday life is directly or indirectly, in one way or another, linked to media. It is the "huge second-order complexity" (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, p. 30) that is captured by the concept of mediation.

For example, from the story of Liu Xuan I documented at the very beginning of the thesis, we know that she is largely illiterate and does not own a smartphone. The media landscape has changed dramatically since the 1980s in China, from the loudspeaker to televisions, and now digital media has increasingly penetrated the rural. Liu Xuan might not be a digital media user, but her grandson and granddaughter are, and so are the

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[1] When American media theories were introduced in the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese media scholars (most of them in the Journalism department) felt particularly enthusiastic about this relatively more 'scientific' and depoliticised way of doing research after the Cultural Revolution. Ironically, to keep distance from Marxist theory, the critical schools, including Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies, were found sterile and even dangerous by these scholars (H. Liu, 2015), and was pushed to humanities disciplines.

villagers around her. Her home is equipped with Wi-Fi, and her villages are covered by a 4G signal. She might be not familiar with the "new media", but she watches television during the rainy days and knows perfectly well how to make a phone call to her beloved daughter, living far away as a migrant worker. Therefore, she lives in a media culture, despite her life being less media-saturated than, say, her son. What this means to her, however, remains a crucial puzzle to untangle *empirically* through the lens of mediation.

Moreover, mediation refuses to analyse media culture in any simplistic and linear way. As Silverstone pointed out, the empirical implications of mediation include, firstly, "a recognition of the impossibility of reading from one level of the process of mediation to another: ownership does not determine content; content does not determine reception" (2005, p. 226). It also means that we need to see the "flux and fluidity" (Silverstone, 2005) in the communication process and recognise that mediated meanings might go well beyond the point of consumption. Media audiences, for example, are diffused (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998), elusive (Ang, 1996), and "everywhere and nowhere" (Bird, 2003). However, this does not mean that media is in a chaotic relationship with society, and thus impenetrable and inexplicable. Instead, mediation theory invites a return to the "complex and contradictory terrain, the multidimensional context, in which people live out their everyday lives" and scrutinises how the media exercises power at the conjunction of the economic, the symbolic and the political (Thompson, 1995).

Many insightful, grounded works have been conducted empirically to guide the way, much of them relevant to the "ethnographical turn" (Ang, 1996; Liebes & Livingstone, 1994; Morley, 1986; Morley & Silverstone, 2002; Radway, 1991; Seiter et al., 1989; Silverstone et al., 1991). For example, in Janice Radway's (1991) examination of readers of romance novels, she found that housewives' act of reading in itself should be understood as an active action to fight for more space and time, as they are structurally denied such freedom in patriarchal domestic life. In researching how television has been embedded in everyday life, a number of audience ethnographies have been conducted relating to the context of the family (Lull, 1990, 1991; Morley, 1986). For these studies, the meaning-making process is "contextually resourced and often context dependent" (Fiske, 1992, p.350), and it emerges not from the site of the text or the audience but from the interaction between the two (Livingstone, 1990). Similarly, by adopting the concept of "audiencing", Fiske understands the audience in a systematic process that is profoundly embedded in the sociocultural contexts (Fiske, 1992, p. 350).

As Silverstone puts it:

The analysis of mediation… requires us to understand how the processes of mediated communication shape both society and culture, as well as the relationships that participants, both individual and institutional, have to their environment and to each other. At the same time such analysis requires a consideration of how social and cultural activity in turn mediates the mediations, as institutions and technologies as well as the meanings that are delivered by them are appropriated through reception and consumption.

(Silverstone, 2005, p. 204)

Therefore, mediation profoundly links back to the social process that is, in Williams' terms, "in solution". It also opens space for both structure and agency to interact with each other, therefore producing and reproducing social life. In conclusion, to put it plainly, the question mediation theory seeks to answer is what role media culture plays in everyday life, in social experiences, in people's relationship with each other and in power dynamics. In this regard, the emotional experiences in the process, as structure of feeling, can be seen as mediated and examined from the vantage point of mediation. To approach this theoretical approach methodologically, as I mentioned above, I seek the aid of ethnography, which I will discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter addresses methodological considerations, the pinpointing process of the research questions, and the methods design of this study. In Chapter 1, I discussed my curiosity and concerns regarding the rural elderly based on a comprehensive review of the historical and institutional background. In Chapter 2, I addressed the research questions in a more theoretically informed way and proposed theorising the rural elderly's emotional experiences as mediated structure of feeling. However, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, my particular focus on the elderly is also fundamentally a product of grounded exploration through ethnographical methods and the ethnographical sensibility (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Willis, 2000; Willis & Trondman, 2000). As ethnography is epistemologically "a nonlinear dynamic system" (Agar, 2004), I consider ethnographical exploration a crucial part of shaping the outlook and direction of the study.

Before I set off for the fieldwork, I intentionally kept my research questions relatively broad and open-ended. Nevertheless, at that time, I had conducted a thorough review of the literature and a study on the relevant historical and institutional contexts. I therefore set my broad interests in the mediated emotional experiences of the rural family. In particular, I decided to focus more on intergenerational relationships because, as I reviewed in both Chapter 1 and 2, there has been an elderly crisis, and the mediated intergenerational intimacy of rural families has been largely understudied. However, without setting foot in the field, I could not determine, in complete confidence, what mattered the most for the largely voiceless rural population and was genuinely intellectually valuable. Therefore, with core and broad interests in mediated emotions, intimacy, intergenerational dynamics, and the rural family, I set out on my ethnographical journey with an open mind, hoping to find the most urgent question to pursue based on grounded exploration. I believe such openness is epistemologically necessary and fundamentally in line with my theoretical framework of mediation and structure of feeling (Williams, 1977).

In what follows, I first discuss my methodological rationale in choosing ethnography as the research method, how I pinpointed my research question through my ethnographical encounters with the rural elderly, and the epistemology of ethnography. I then turn to the research design and fieldwork process, including data collection and analysis. Finally, I discuss reflexivity, self-positioning, and ethical considerations.

3.1 Ethnography: Methodology and Epistemology

3.1.1 Rationale

Based on my theoretical framework of the mediated structure of feeling and my concerns about disadvantaged rural families in China, I identified ethnography as the most suitable method to conduct this study. In this section, I discuss the methodological rationale in four aspects.

Firstly, ethnography, "by its purpose", is a methodology to study complex lived experiences in concrete cultural contexts (Forsey, 2010). As discussed in Chapter 2, Williams (1977) critiques how vibrant, intricate, and ever-changing social life is often studied in an "habitual past tense" and fixed forms. In contrast, he advances the concept of structure of feeling to capture the lived experiences firmly embedded in sociocultural contexts that are constantly changing. Following Williams, I stated in Chapter 2 that the *lived complexity with structures* is precisely what I want to shed light on. Therefore, the focus of the study calls for a methodology that captures the complex interaction and interrelations between structure and agency in the process. Thus, ethnography is considered optimal for my purpose. With a diverse repertoire of data collection and analysis methods, ethnography aims to apprehend the experiences, practises, and contexts of a group of people in a *holistic* manner (P. Atkinson et al., 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Musante & DeWalt, 2010). Unlike many other methods, ethnography requires the researcher to actually participate in people's natural unfolding of life for an extended period of time in natural social sittings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 2). Through "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of underlying patterns, experiences, feelings, contexts, codes, norms, and internal dynamics, ethnography is designed to analyse what Williams (1958) would call "the whole way of life".

Secondly, with grounded sensitivity, ethnography has its strength in probing effusive and delicate emotions that emerge from relationships and everyday life, especially in non-Western contexts (Ginsburg et al., 2002; Mitchell, 2000; Willems, 2014). As a fundamental element of "structure of feeling", the affective dimension of lived experience is of particular concern to my study. However, as many have discussed, emotions, especially the lived emotions in the process (i.e., not necessarily in a retrospective and reflexive manner), are very difficult to access methodologically (James, 1989; Reddy, 1999). Moreover, scholars have found that emotions are even harder to access and analyse in some non-Western cultures because people do not talk about feelings or express them overtly (Abu-Lughod, 1986; Potter, 1988). Therefore, interviews might not be a productive way to elicit data on emotions among the rural Chinese (especially formal interviews, as I will discuss later). However, ethnographical

methods, with their underlying openness, could be potentially fruitful in unravelling emotional experiences through "thick description" of everything around such feelings, including body gestures, facial expressions, changes of tone, and minute actions. In line with Williams' understanding of structure of feeling, feminist scholarship has further developed ethnography to be more sensitive to emotions as feminist scholars emphasise emotions as ontologically and epistemologically crucial (Stanley & Wise, 1993). Additionally, with contributions from post-colonial scholarship, ethnography is found to be particularly constructive in approaching emotions in non-Western cultures (L. Abu-Lughod, 1986; Lutz & Abu-Lughod, 1990). I will return to these contributions when discussing specific methods of researching emotional experiences of the rural Chinese.

Moreover, as a contextualised methodology, ethnography is considered to be highly compatible with the theorisation of mediation. Since the 1980s, ethnography has been adopted by media scholars and has marked the pivotal "ethnographical turn" in audience and reception studies. As Ang (1996) observed, ethnographic work entails a form of "methodological situationism". An ethnographical approach, therefore, underscores "thoroughly situated, always context-bound ways in which people encounter, use, interpret, enjoy, think and talk about media in everyday life" (Ang, 1996, p. 60). As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, mediation seeks to capture the "flux and fluidity" (Silverstone, 2005) in the communication process that is multi-layered and multidimensional. Instead of only looking at where media is directly involved, mediation requires an open-ended methodology to see how media actually "enter into life" and further become an organic part of social life itself (Bird, 2003; Fiske, 1992; Schlecker & Hirsch, 2001).

For example, the ethnographical observation of who holds the television remote control has been found to be productive in understanding the power dynamics of the family (Morley, 1986; Seiter et al., 1989). Chatting and observation while watching television with informants in their own homes has also been widely used in capturing audiences' comprehensive involvements and the "dialogic nature" of mediated encounters (Katz & Liebes, 1990; Liebes & Livingstone, 1994; Wood, 2005). Concerning the elderly's use of media technology, ethnography has also proved to be particularly relevant (Miller et al., 2021). Fundamentally, mediation refuses the linear logic of how media works. Instead, in line with the basic principle of ethnography, it approaches media's role in society in a "holistic" manner (P. Atkinson et al., 1999; Bird, 2003; Brewer, 2000; Livingstone & Das, 2013; Radway, 1991). The starting point of mediation is often not a single medium or an isolated form of media text but actual social life from the bottom up. Thus, ethnography offers a vantage point to dive into a dynamic lived life without

too much prescribed assertion of how and what forms of media are relevant in a given context.

Lastly, ethnography has great potential to give voice to the voiceless. Since the 1970s, ethnography as a method, a methodology and an epistemology, has undergone careful reflection and crucial decolonial critique concerning its role in "othering" and suppressing the subordinated groups (Banaji et al., 2018). Considerable efforts from various strands[1] have been made to redirect ethnography to empower marginalised groups and cultures. Through interaction with marginalised groups in their actual everyday life, embodied experiences of the problems they face in contexts, and the gestures of "speaking to" (Spivak, 2003), ethnography provides a chance for scholarship to focus on disadvantaged groups and to produce new possibilities for historical narratives. Therefore, I consider such ethnography fundamentally compatible with my humble wishes to give the rural Chinese a voice and make their interests visible through this project. I will return to my reflexivity and ethnographical epistemology again in a later section.

3.1.2 The "ethnographic encounter" of the rural elderly

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, I entered the field with a conscious choice to leave my research questions relatively open, although I was aware that I needed to pinpoint them to gain an intellectually targeted focus and a manageable scope for the study. In the meantime, my review of relevant literature and background materials guided my initial exploration concerning mediated emotions, intimacy, and intergenerational dynamics in rural families. As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, existing literature has been disproportionately focused on the urban and younger population, especially in media studies. Although with some doubts, I also once largely took for granted this assumption that media is less relevant to the rural elderly at the beginning. However, as I immersed myself in the field, after around three months (around Stage 1, see next section), the urgent and pivotal concern of this research gradually emerged from what I actually saw and heard on a daily basis: the rural elderly.

In an early periodic reflection note that portrays different generations of the rural families I studied, I described the rural elderly as a "forgotten generation":

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[1] For example, among them are collaborative and public anthropology (Lamphere, 2003; Lassiter, 2005) and feminist and postcolonial scholarship (Behar & Gordon, 1995; Mbembé & Nuttall, 2004; Mignolo, 2011; Willems & Mano, 2019).

As grandparents or great-grandparents in the families, I found this generation needs our attention. They got married and had their first few children in the collective era. Their experiences are profoundly shaped by China's collective past – extreme poverty, limited literacy, and morality that emphasises silent sacrifice. I call them the 'forgotten' generation. Because according to what I observe, they have been largely 'abandoned' and 'forgotten' by society and sometimes by their family members (I think they have also been forgotten by the literature I have reviewed!). Despite their great effort and sacrifice, the desirable family life seems very difficult to achieve, and their feelings tend to be very pessimistic and self-abandoned. Both their material and emotional condition are highly problematic.

Particularly, I notice their engagement and emotional distance to modern media, which is somehow contradictory. In contrast to other members of the family who tend to be heavy users of smartphones, very few older people own smartphones. Not only because they cannot afford it or know how to use it, but they also considered such hi-tech and expensive items were not "appropriate" (a mindset) for the elderly to use. The contact list on their old cell is often limited to their family members. However, they rarely make any calls to their children and grandchildren – even though apparently, they miss them very much. Instead, they wait (why! How do they feel about this?). Television remains the main media for them. However, they tend to deny their television engagement even though they watched and were highly emotionally involved in the process…

(6th August 2019, fieldwork notes)

My definition of the rural elderly here is a bottom-up and inductive one. Instead of defining the "elderly" by rigid age category, I asked my local informants "who can be counted as the elderly" or "when or under what circumstances do you call someone elderly". It turned out that "elderly" is both an age-related and an identity-related concept. It not only refers to a relatively higher age but also connects to the identity of being grandparents. Even if someone is relatively young, say around 55 years old, they can still be regarded as "the elderly" in the family if they already have grandchildren. However, age also matters – if one becomes a grandmother/grandfather in their 40s, people might feel hesitant to call them elderly. These much younger grandparents (in their 40s) also show less similarity with the older grandparents. The boundary is relatively vague and context-dependent. Based on local people's own definition, I

identify the elderly as a group of people who are *zubei*[1] (祖辈, grandparent-generation) in the family and born roughly before the 1960s. I found this group of people to largely share a similar mindset, behaviour model and emotional pattern – described above as the "forgotten generation".

As Goulet (1994) observes, the "ethnographic encounter" often plays a crucial role in determining the key problematics of an ethnographic project. It is the ethnographic encounter of the rural elderly that guided me to rethink and re-evaluate the foci of this study and the intellectual gap in the literature I reviewed. The rural elderly's actual engagement with media pushed me to be critical of the literature that largely turned a blind eye to them. At the same time, their emotional-driven sacrifice for the family and their largely unfulfilled longing to be intimate with the family enabled me to consider the reflexive modernity literature, which largely understands emotional intimacy as being heavily biased towards the urban and young population. Moreover, their highly problematic emotional and material condition alerted me that the rural elderly might be among the most excluded and voiceless groups who urgently need scholarly attention. They are a particular social group situated at the conjuncture of two forms of marginality (rural/urban and young/old) in Chinese society. With several rounds of back and forth between literature and data I had already collected, I pinpointed my research focus to the mediated emotional experiences of the rural elderly by the end of Stage 1 (in August 2019, see later discussion). I now discuss details related to site choice, family cases selection and fieldwork stages.

3.2 Fieldwork Sites, Fieldwork Stage and Family Cases

For classical anthropology, ethnography was often conducted in a "remote" and "exotic" location, especially when it was associated with colonialism and the goal was to study the "other". However, "anthropology at home" has been gaining increasing legitimacy and popularity – this is when researchers study their own culture, sometimes in their own hometown (Jackson, 1987; Madden, 1999; Mughal, 2015). Such home anthropology/ethnography has certain advantages especially concerning easier access and rapport-building, shared language and culture – though it does not necessarily mean there is no risk of othering others. It is also equally challenging, especially when the researcher needs to balance the role of insider and outsider. Nevertheless, considering

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[1] *Zubei* in Chinese not only refers to the roles of grandparents, but a *generational location* in the family. Here grandparent is not only an identity based on the grandparents-grandchildren relationship, but also refers to the elderly's relationship to other family members, including middle generation and the broader kinship network.

these factors, I decided to conduct the ethnography in my hometown – Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture,[1] located in the mountainous south-west of Hubei province.

Figure 1. Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture

Figure 2. Hubei Province

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[1] Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture has two country-level cities, Enshi and Lichuan, plus six more counties. With a total population of 3,456,136, it covers 24,061 square miles of land. With 54% percent of the population ethnic minorities (mainly Tujia and Miao ethnicities), it belongs to one of 30 prefecture-level ethnic minorities autonomous administrative divisions in China. There are 29 ethnic minorities in Enshi prefecture in total; the rest of population is of Han ethnicity. However, the Tusi system (土司制度, native chieftain system) of ethnic minorities in the Enshi area was destroyed as early as the Ming and Qing dynasties in the 1700s after "*gaitu guiliu*" (改土归流, movements to abolish the rule of local tusi and replace them with mainstream direct administration). Therefore, politically, Enshi area had been under the control of the central imperial government since the Qing dynasty and has been culturally fused with Han ethnicity. After the founding of the PRC, it became an autonomous prefecture under the National Minorities Policy of China and has a certain degree of autonomous rights.

Firstly, given its goal to study emotional experiences, intimacy, and dynamics within the family, the nature of this study is highly private and likely intrusive. Therefore, a very trusting relationship needed to be built between the informants and the researcher in order to conduct this kind of study effectively. Thus, it would be beneficial if I could access the potential fieldwork sites through intimate and private connections (in contrast to official[1] or governmental gatekeepers). Therefore, I chose arguably the most important and intimate form of connection in Chinese culture, the family network, to gain access. Born in a rural village in Enshi, I have a reliable and rather broad kinship network in this area as my four grandparents have many siblings. The second reason to choose this site is language. As DeWalt and DeWalt (2010) noted, the ability to speak the local language or dialect is identified as a key element in conducting ethnography. Fluency in local dialect is considered crucial since my research topics on emotion and intimacy are rather delicate and sensitive. I believe familiarity with the local language gives me a strong advantage in identifying subtle emotions through the nuanced use of language. It also promises cultural proximity that would generate natural intimacy and trust that are vital considering the nature of this study.

More importantly, Enshi area can be regarded as an example of China's rural-urban, coastal-inland, ethnic minority-majority, and east-west polarities. With the lowest GDP per capita in Hubei province,[2] Enshi is the only part of Hubei included in the Chinese government's Western Development Program.[3] Agriculture remains the mainstay of the economy of Enshi, and it is one of the largest labour export areas of Hubei. In 2020, 892,100 Enshi people were *nongmingong*, constituting around 27% of the rural population (Enshi Bureau of Statics). In 2019, per capita disposable income of the rural population in Enshi was only 11,620 yuan (National Bureau of Statics), around one-third of the national figure and one quarter of the urban figure. Thus, I consider Enshi area to be largely representative of China's highly disadvantaged rural area.[4] It fits the nature of this study, which aims to make visible the marginalised groups.

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[1] As my parents are local middle school teachers, I planned to use their connections in school but I later dropped this plan, fearing that such an approach might carry unequal power relationship and underlying ethical issues.

[2] In 2018, the GDP per capita of Enshi area was 25,848, among the lowest of the 17 regions of Hubei province. The average GDP per capita of Hubei was 66,616, and the number for Wuhan is 135,136 – more than five times that of Enshi (Hubei Bureau of Statistics).

[3] Proposed by General-Secretary Jiang Zeming in 1999, the China Western Development Program is a developmental strategy for the Western region of China. This region contains 71.4% of mainland China's area, 28.8% of its population, and only 19.9% of its total economic output.

[4] In 2019, the disposable income for the rural population nationwide was 16,021, higher than the figure in Enshi (11,620). Thus, Enshi can be considered more representative of the more disadvantaged rural areas, including underdeveloped rural villages in the western regions of China.

Ethnography has been conventionally focused on a single location with an assumption that a location contains a whole and relatively closed cultural system (Ferguson, 1997). Such an assumption has been challenged by the increasingly interconnected and global social orders (Marcus, 1995). In this regard, the multi-sited ethnography has been developed to capture the interconnection and complexity of culture. Under such principles, I further developed a plan to select specific fieldwork village sites. In order to keep relatively distant from my own family,[1] I contacted a couple of distant relatives in my family kinship network to help me find possible villages as fieldwork sites. I also considered the possible field sites' economic situation, geographical location, and mainstream family patterns. Initially, I went to four villages, including Golden Arch, Pear Tree, Bule River, and Seven Cloud. Golden Arch and Bule River are economically more developed, with tea as their main industry. In contrast, Pear Tree and Seven Cloud are relatively underdeveloped. Growing tobacco is their main agricultural practise, and a high percentage of the population work as migrant workers. As I explain below, I eventually chose two of these as my fieldwork sites – Golden Arch and Pear Tree.

Figure 3. A view of Golden Arch

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[1] The main reason to keep a distance from my own family network was to avoid potential ethical dilemmas.

Figure 4. A view of Pear Tree

As Morley and Silverstone (1991, p. 160) observed, "ethnography is a multi-faceted process in which the requirements of detail and richness, rigour and systematicity, have to be carefully balanced, and where there is no single methodological procedure". My ethnographical exploration is by no means a linear one. Instead, it encompasses a series of adjustments as well as trial and error along the way. I divided my fieldwork into four rough phases (see Table 1), including the initial sites choice in Stage 0, the exploration and pinpointing of research question in Stage 1, the main investigation in Stage 2, and the final Stage 3, which was disrupted by Covid-19.

Table 1. Fieldwork Stages

Stage 0	Stage 1	Stage 2		Stage 3
2019. Jan., Feb. early Mar.	2019. Jul., Aug.	2019. Sep. Oct. Nov.	2019. Dec. 2020. Jan.	2020. Feb.
Four villages	Golden Arch	Pear Tree	Golden Arch	Pear Tree Golden Arch
Gaining access, site decisions, building rapport	Exploring the field, and RQ pinpointed	Lived in study	Lived in study	Leaving the field Disrupted by Covid-19

In Stage 0, I completed the recruitment of family and the initial evaluation of fieldwork sites. However, as mentioned, this was a relatively experimental situation since I was not sure how many family cases I could actually access. I went for family recruitment around the Chinese Spring Festival when most family members were at home. I chose this time to gain consent from family members in person. The procedure went as follows: I first visited the distant relatives (often middle-aged or elderly relatives who know the villages better) in potential villages at their homes, accompanied by my close relatives (e.g., grandparents or parents) and carrying appropriate gifts. I explained my project to them and asked if they were willing to provide me with some guidance and help introduce me to potential families. After I obtained their consent, I invited them to provide information about their villages, including economic conditions, family arrangements and mainstream structures, and other things I needed to be aware of. Then, I asked them to nominate some potential family cases based on the following principles: different economic conditions, diversified family structures that could represent the general patterns in the local area, and those with the greatest possibility of letting me access their private lives. I asked them to provide me with 10-12 families to choose[1] from.

I further discussed each of the families in detail with my relatives, weighed up the different cases' conditions, and further decided on the ones I would visit and try to gain consent from. After this, I approached these potential case families (around 6-10 in each village), accompanied by my local relatives and with appropriate gifts.[2] With the help of my relatives, I explained the nature and goal of my study – to understand their family life and relationship, their feelings and opinions, as well as their media engagement. To my surprise, I was warmly welcomed by practically every family in the four villages. Most of the family members were both curious and cooperative about my project – though some told me humbly that they were afraid they were "not worthy of being studied". Despite my explanation that this was "research", many interpreted my study as "doing internship" and "a big homework" and felt very happy that they could help me. Similar to many researchers who have conducted ethnography in China (e.g., Heimer & Thøgersen, 2011; Zhou, 2020), I did not provide formal consent forms for

[1] Since my relatives were the gatekeepers, the family cases were limited to those with relatively good relationships. However, since my relatives all enjoy a good reputation in their villages and are 'average' (economically) representatives of the villages, I do not consider this had too much impact on the validity of the case selection.

[2] According to my relatives, appropriate gifts are normally food and life necessities. For example, cooking oil, noodles, rice and milk (for children). These are also normal gifts of family visits during Spring Festival.

them to sign. In a culture where a formal contract is a relatively new phenomenon (especially for the rural population) and has been historically associated with a hidden governmental agenda under China's political climate, signing paper could be the opposite of reassuring (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2011). It also tends to reinforce existing power differentials arising from social status. Therefore, oral consent became my first choice to gain their permission. I made clear to them that their information would be anonymised, and they could withdraw anytime without worrying about anything.

As I gained more knowledge of each village and each family, I found that my initial assumption of the diversity (of the villages and families) was relatively overestimated. Golden Arch and Blue River share many similarities regarding socioeconomic conditions, geographical structures, and family living arrangements, as do Pear Tree and Seven Cloud. Moreover, the number of families willing to give me consent was also much higher than estimated. Therefore, I eventually decided to only choose two sites (Golden Arch and Pear Tree) because focusing on two villages and more family cases could balance the breadth and depth of the study. After making this decision, I finalised 11 cases in Golden Arch and 9 cases (two dropped out of the study later for personal reasons) in Pear Tree. I then went to the families in Blue River and Seven Cloud again to explain the change of plan and expressed my apology, with gifts, for disturbing their life.

It should be noted that although I did not directly use any data from family cases in Blue River and Seven Cloud, the information I gained there provided me with a much more holistic and comprehensive picture of rural villages and their everyday family life. The family visits in all four villages (34 families in total) also offered me a vantage point to evaluate the generalizability of the family cases I eventually chose. After finalising the cases, I went to Golden Arch and Pear Tree for a week to build rapport towards the end of Stage 0. After that, I returned to London and adjusted my methodology plan based on my progress in Stage 0. In July 2019, I started the second phase of fieldwork – exploration and pinpointing the research questions. I went to Golden Arch first; I lived with the relative who introduced me to the village during July and August. As discussed earlier, I pinpointed my research focus on the elderly by the end of this stage. Based on this adjustment, I re-evaluated 18 family cases based on my definition of the elderly (see Appendix II for introductions to all family cases).

During Stage 1, I visited the families during the day to collect data (I normally asked in advance whether one family was available for me to visit and devoted my time evenly to each case). However, I soon found a significant shortcoming of this approach. That is, the family often made a big deal of my occasional visit. They prepared good food

for me and suspended things they should be doing just to cater for my visit – no matter how I explained to them that I should not be treated as an "honourable guest" and that they should continue their normal life. I realised that my visits should be normalised somehow to avoid being treated as a special, unusual event. Therefore, I changed my plan to live with the families, and my relatives thought it would be appropriate to do so with financial compensation.[1] I ruled out five families before asking because they did not have extra rooms for me to live in, or a family member had a medical condition that was unsuitable for too much disturbance. Two families politely declined my request, saying that they would welcome me anytime during the day. In the end, 11 families agreed for me to live with them for 7-10 days each.

Therefore, in Stage 2, I conducted the live-in study in Pear Tree and Golden Arch. However, it should be noted that in Pear Tree, I did not engage in the live-in study immediately after my arrival. Instead, I spent more than a month doing regular visits to the family since I had not yet built a strong rapport with them (I had already built intimate relationships with families in Golden Arch during Stage 1). By the end of January 2020, I had finished the main part of my ethnography. I planned to leave the field and make some final additions[2] in February 2020. However, by then the Covid-19 pandemic had begun. Hubei province (and later the whole nation) was soon locked down and it was no longer ethical or practical to continue the study. Luckily, I had basically finished all work for the data collection. My plan to revisit and thank the families in person was disrupted, so instead I contacted them by phone or WeChat to express my gratitude for their participation in the study and to check on their health.

3.3 Rapport Building and Self-sensitising

Rapport building is a task that was carried out throughout the research process. As discussed earlier, my rural-born identity and familiarity with local dialect and culture facilitated a good trusting relationship at the beginning of the research. Using my relatives as gatekeepers and introducers also turned out to be very productive. However, it was still challenging to gain the degree of intimacy that was required by the nature of this study. The first month after I arrived at Golden Arch and Pear Tree, I considered rapport building a priority task. I brought gifts to children in every family and helped with schoolwork if necessary. I helped to take care of toddlers and domestic chores. I

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[1] They suggested an amount of 200 yuan as red pocket money plus other material compensation.

[2] I intended to visit Pear Tree again during the Spring Festival since during the 2019 Spring Festival I was in Golden Arch.

found people were most friendly when I got along with their kids (which I am rather good at). Moreover, I went farming (picking tea and chillies, planting potatoes, weeding, or collecting firewood) with them, humbly learning the techniques and helping as much as possible. I considered this process crucial for building a trusting and relatively equal relationship. Although as an overseas "*daxuesheng*" (大学生, college student), I was very different from them, I felt that they gradually acknowledged my eagerness and sincerity to remember and regain my "rural roots".

Sometimes, however, rapport was built "by chance". Once I was at dinner with one family and, after eating, the daughter-in-law Gao Qinqin asked if I wanted a disposable plastic cup for some water. I declined, saying that the bowl would do the job. So, I poured myself hot water using the rice bowl I had just used for eating with a few food residues and grease stains still in it. The family was awestruck by this action, especially the grandmother Li Yue. She praised me to the family: "Hao is such a *dongshi* (懂事, sensible and considerate) girl! She is thrifty with everything. She uses the bowl just to save the very drop of oil!" I smiled humbly, saying that this was just a habit that I learned from my mother[1] and that the water would cool much faster using the bowl. Li Yue replied, "yes, sure, your mother must know all the bitterness. She is a model of a kind heart, and you learned good things from her." After that time, I found my relationship with Li Yue and her family became much closer.

Nevertheless, through this incident, I realised that the basic knowledge of their life and history, a shared belief, and true respect for their lifestyle could greatly enhance the relationship with them. Through careful observation and conversation, I gradually learned and adjusted my behaviours, trying to achieve equal, honest, and genuine relationships with them. For example, I used to ask people, "where do you *dagong* (打工, work for a boss)?" but then only found myself immediately in an awkward and distant position. I later realised that this term (*dagong*), commonly used by academics, is rather rude and rarely used by villagers themselves when they talk to each other.[2] Instead of using *dagong*, I noticed people asking others, say, "where do you *facai* (发财, make a fortune) these days?" with compliments and respect. I soon learnt to use *facai* when talking with villagers, and the distant feeling disappeared. There were numerous examples of these tacit cultural norms that I learned and then gained trust using them. Moreover, as a part of my own identity, I did not overdress and wore no

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[1] Born in the 1960s in a rural village, my mother indeed used this method to save "every drop of oil" when famine was common during the collective era. Such shared experiences of famine might be the reason why the grandmother Li Yue immediately recognized this method and interpreted my gesture in the same way.

[2] Instead, they use this term when talking about themselves in a humble and self-mocking way.

make-up – the villagers also recognised this as a part of the "rural identity". In everyday life with them, I paid extra attention not to waste anything, like food or electricity. In some ethnographic method discussions, scholars mention the tricky issues, including potential deception, self-impression management and courtesy in order to achieve their research goals (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). I did not find this an issue for me since "being rural" is indeed a dimension of my identity (see discussion on reflexivity).

However, apart from rapport building, I came across another big challenge in the field because of my relative familiarity with the local culture and everyday life. Conventionally, ethnographers attune themselves to the different ways of thinking and feeling though say, language learning or learning cultural norms (Brewer, 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). However, with a taken for granted familiarity with the local language and the culture, I found myself sometimes viewing things as "too quotidian, mundane and uninteresting" (fieldwork notes, 19th July 2019). Therefore, I developed a strategy to "unfamiliarize" and sensitise myself in order to balance the role of an insider and outsider. Firstly, I documented as much as possible the daily activities, conversations, gestures, tones, and interactions in my fieldwork notes. Then, I pushed myself to raise questions about them to determine if I could explain them satisfactorily. I often found myself unable to explain because these were precisely my taken-for-granted knowledge. However, as soon as I started to problematise my "habitus", I found the position of the "outsider" emerged.

3.4 Data Collection

3.4.1 From interview to conversation

With rapport starting to be build, I gradually turned to more targeted data collection with semi-structured interviews. However, it did not take long for me to realise that such formal interviews were very unproductive with my informants, especially middle-aged people and the elderly. After I indicated my intention to carry out an "interview", even at their own house, they became extremely nervous even before I turned on the recorder. Before the interview, they tended to confess, with an apologetic tone, that they did not know anything, their opinions were just too uncultured (没文化, *meiwenhua*), or "what if I say something wrong?" One woman even warned her husband not to "talk stupid things in front of a college student". Some automatically changed from dialect to awkward Mandarin when answering my questions – although I told them they absolutely did not need to, and I preferred that they spoke in dialect. Even with my comforting and explanation, very few could truly feel at ease under the interview

framework (a question-answer model). They often answered my questions with short sentences and very low confidence.

In the study of Melanesian culture, Keesing (1985) observed that in many ethnographic accounts, women appear to be "non-reflective", "silent", or "muted" within their culture. However, he found that this was profoundly intertwined with the methods used by the ethnographer. He insightfully pointed out that "the interview is itself a communicative event with particular norms and rules", and that the ethnographical encounter is deeply embedded in a specific micropolitical context, which inextricably includes the ethnographer themself (Keesing, 1985, p. 20). Others have argued that the question-answer model, guided and dominated by the interviewer, often involves a hierarchical relationship, especially when the interviewee has less social and cultural power (Bird, 2003; Oakley, 1988, 2000). As Camitta (1990) pointed out, the interview, "as a social genre that is often controlled by the interviewer, is a form of mastery over object, acquisition of knowledge through control of language".

Drawing on these insights, I realised that the interviews turned out to be unsatisfactory in my fieldwork because the interview genre involves a power structure that puts rural people in a subordinate position in the first place. In China, with the ongoing cultural discourse of the rural population being "uncultured" and of low "*suzhi*" (素质，quality) (Anagnost, 2004), their low social status implies they are "incapable" and "unqualified" to speak in a so-called "interview". Interviews are often associated with governmental authority, experts, educated people, the eloquence of formal language like Mandarin in everyday life and media culture (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2011; Zhou, 2020). In this regard, the interview is by no means a neutral and universal method that can be applied in any circumstances. Rather, it is a "power-charged verbal encounter" (Bird, 2003) that intertwines with specific social dynamics (Briggs, 1986). Therefore, researchers must examine carefully and critically the compatibility of the interview with "the communicative norms of the interviewees" (Keesing, 1985, p. 202) and robustly evaluate the micropolitics that might reconfigure the process.

Given the pre-existing pattern of power and my more "educated" and "authoritative" identity, I realised that I needed to do some additional work to challenge such power structures, at least within the interaction between my participants and me. Data collection is not a practise that happens in a vacuum. It is the researcher's duty to be reflexive and facilitate basic common ground of equality as much as possible, and to strive for a safe and bigger space for them to give voice. Being consciously aware of all these issues, I adopted the following strategies to achieve my research goals.

Firstly, I abandoned formal interviews and turned to a more collaborative and equal form of conversations and informal opportunistic chat (Goulet, 1994). Instead of formal interviews, I managed to merge my questions and concerns into everyday conversations. It turned out that conversations and chats in the rural villages were full of possibilities to be connected to the themes and topics I was concerned about. Most of the time, I chatted randomly with my informants, and I was constantly surprised how their shyness was transformed into a rich corpus of articulated accounts of their life and feelings. Instead of using the recorder in occasional and isolated interviews, which often adds a layer of formality, I kept it on all day long after getting their consent. Keeping the recorder running was essential since opportunistic chats became my main data source. More importantly, keeping the recorder on all day is a gesture by itself to show that I truly highly valued the ordinally talking, expressions and chats that they deemed as "meaningless" or "vulgar". With these measures in place, I found participants started to drop their guard and feel relaxed. One might reasonably doubt that they was because they forgot about the recorder, therefore this was ethically problematic. However, I consider it less of an issue since I always kept the recorder in a prominent place. I think their later acceptance of the recorder occurred because I deliberately redefined the context in which it was normally used and diluted the social power it might carry.

Secondly, in everyday interactions with my rural informants (especially the elderly), I renegotiated my relationship with them by deconstructing my privileged identity and reconfirmed their voice as valuable and legitimate. For example, I frankly and sincerely admitted to them that though I might have some "bookish knowledge" (*shuben zhishi*, 书本知识), I knew very little about the real world that they lived in and lacked "knowledge of the society" (*shehui zhishi*, 社会知识) in which they were the experts. I challenged the idea that the educated are superior in the conversation with them and acknowledged their contribution to society. I expressed to them how I felt such a reality is unjust and unfair. When they sometimes attributed my higher social status to my high "intelligence" and their deprived condition to their stupidity, I explained how I did not think that was the case. Crucially, I showed respect to their opinions and feelings and presented myself as a humble and keen learner of their world. Gradually, I felt the barrier of relatively equal conversations being shattered bit by bit (though not completely removed). Once when I told an older man that I felt it was wrong that people farming the land gained such a low income compared to those who sat in the offices, he became very emotional and agreed with me firmly. Then, he talked to me at length about his life and past in rich detail.

Moreover, I actively evoked history and events to facilitate the talk, especially with the elderly. According to some methodology discussion, researchers should avoid

providing clues and directions for the interviews to reduce the possibility of bias and distortion of the data (Madison, 2005). I do not fundamentally disagree with this principle, however, when I only asked general questions without concrete contexts and information, I found the conversations with my informants were unproductive. However, when I started a conversation about specific events and historical details, they were much more involved and engaged. Before the fieldwork, I had several talks with my own grandfather, who was once the accountant of the local commune during the collective era. He provided me with great details of local history, including the names of the major communes of Enshi during the collective era. I utilised what I learnt from my grandfather as the start of conversations with the rural elderly and elicited numerous emotion-laden stories of their own. When introducing me to her neighbours, one older woman said: "Hao is a little girl who really knows us rural people. She is not like others. She is willing to listen to our old shitty stories". Connected to my earlier point, this strategy (actively evoking memories of the history and details) was essential because in the existing power structure their history has been devalued and forgotten (see discussion in Chapter 4).

Additionally, drawing on feminist ethnography and feminist theory (Douglas, 1985; Stacey, 1988), I tried to develop conversations based on empathy and mutuality. In conventional methodologies, the self-disclosure of the researcher's biography and experiences is often considered a way to "establish rapport" and not necessarily a part of the data and analysis. However, with a feminist epistemology, many scholars call for methodologies that can transfer such exchange and interaction into the foundation of understanding others (Behar & Gordon, 1995; Moss, 2002; Stacey, 1988). In a classic paper, Oakley (1988) argued that interactive self-disclosure should be an essential part of the dialogic and collaborative feminist research process. I found such an approach to be particularly fruitful when studying emotions. In my fieldwork, I expressed genuine interest in my informants' stories, feelings, and opinions, and exchanged my own stories with them. Sometimes I started with my personal life and troubles to hear their opinions, and they were often also very frank with theirs. I put myself in their position, trying to feel what they felt as much as possible. When I could not, I encouraged them to talk more. Thus, unidirectional data collection became a collaborative meaning-making process.

Regarding the themes and topics of the conversations, I prioritised the things my informants cared about. I did not normally change the subject of the conversation if my informants showed interest in some topics, even if they did not seem to be directly relevant to my research. However, apart from the things they brought up and showed enthusiasm to discuss, I also actively raised topics in the conversations concerning the

key issues of the study. Drawing on life stories interviews (R. Atkinson, 1998, p. 128), one main theme of the conversation is my informants' narrative of their own lives. As one of the "most effective means for gaining an understanding of how the self evolves over time", conversations about their life stories are crucial to understanding their emotions. Moreover, I had numerous conversations with them about media content they engaged in and their habits or feelings of (not) using media. Sometimes I watched a television drama with them and had a conversation in parallel. I also used media stories to start a conversation. For example, I sometimes showed my informants a short video or a piece of news I found popular in the villages and asked their opinions or feelings after seeing it. Finally, it should be noted that although my focus is on the elderly, and I did spend most of my time talking to them, I also talked to other family members. However, as some of them were not at home most of the time, I could only partially achieve this goal by contacting them online or by phone. Additionally, the conversations were also open to any visitors and people passing by.[1]

3.4.2 Participant observation and contextualising media

Fundamentally in line with the method of communication and conversation discussed above, participant observation is also an ethnographical method that uses the researcher as "the research instrument par excellence" (Hammersley & Atkinson, p.18). Rather than "engaging in futile attempts to eliminate the 'effects' of the researcher" (p.17), ethnography sets about understanding such effects and views active participation in the realities of other people's lives as a necessary path to understand such realities. Apart from observation, some add more dimensions to this formulation to incorporate participant listening (Forsey, 2010) and feeling (Du Bois, 1983; Stanley & Wise, 1983). As Coffey (1999) rightly pointed out, ethnographical fieldwork is necessarily an embodied activity. As discussed earlier, the ultimate goal of participant observation (as well as listening and feeling) is profoundly ethnographical: to achieve a holistic understanding of the phenomena under study by employing all possible senses of the researcher (Musante & DeWalt, 2010).

As many have pointed out, doing participant observation inside the family is intrinsically difficult (Bott, 1957; Lull, 1990; Silverstone et al., 2006). The interruption of family members' routinised activities might result in obtaining inauthentic and superficial data (Silverstone et al., 2006). However, as discussed earlier, the lived-in strategy largely mitigated such problems. As the main body of this study, live-in study

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[1] I introduced myself to them and gained their oral consent to record. After a while most of the villagers were more or less aware that there was a "college student doing research" in their villages.

ensured that I could participate intensively in family life with an already established rapport. Under such an arrangement, the family members no longer treated me as a guest who needed to be catered to specially[1] and they largely returned to their normal life routines.

I did not use on-site notetaking since the appearance of a pen and a notebook seemed to be intrusive and awkward. Instead, since I had my recorder on all day, I managed to retrieve the details from my memory with the aid of the sound by the night when I wrote fieldwork notes. I also used the recorder to "write" fieldnotes and the technology allowed automatic transcription of my voice into words. This method enabled me to write more detailed fieldnotes as it is less time consuming than typing. I wrote 2,000-5,000 words per day, including descriptions of conversations, events, observations, as well as thoughts and reflections. However, I found it hard to remember everything, especially regarding visual elements (as I had sound recordings only). Sometimes, I used the memo function on my phone to unobtrusively jot down important details at the time they occurred (e.g., the name of the television drama watched).

Since my primary focus is the elderly, I mainly followed their routines rather than other family members.[2] However, I also balanced my time with different family members to obtain a whole picture. I not only paid close attention to family members' actions, micro-expressions, silences, gestures, tones, and interactions, but also observed their dress, living conditions and everyday routines. Since I lived in the villages for a considerable time, I managed to get a sense of what the rural life "felt like". For example, I was sometimes woken by the rooster crowing at 5am and felt too cold to get back to sleep since there was no heater in the bedroom. During the summer, however, one had to face constant power cuts because of heavy rain and unreliable infrastructure. I could no longer easily buy my life-saver coffee – it was a product that was impossible to find in the local store.[3] I also got a chance to see the disappointed face of a grandmother (and experienced such feeling myself) when she and I worked a whole day under the scorching sun picking chillies that only sold for 19 yuan (around £2.10) at the next day's local fairs.

All the embodied observations and experiences of their lives and interactions provided

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[1] Although initially they felt they should be polite, they realized that it was just impossible to sit all day with me. Additionally, I repeatedly encouraged them to do whatever they planned to do.

[2] For example, if the son or daughter-in-law went out and the elderly stayed at home, I stayed at home with the elderly in most cases.

[3] Golden Arch has two local stores selling things like oil, cigarettes, wine and washing powder. However, for Pear Tree, the nearest store is one hour's walk away.

me a vantage point to further contextualise media. As discussed in Chapter 2, the theory of mediation requires us to put media back into its context and understand its role within the seamless web of everyday life. The key is to contextualise media, not as any given medium in isolation but as the "media ensemble" of the household (Bausinger, 1984), within the family dynamics and the structure of daily life. That requires us to view mediated family life as an interrelated and interlocking system (I. F. Goodman, 1983). Therefore, I paid close attention to how media merges into social life in an integral way (Morley, 1986; Morley & Silverstone, 2002). I documented in detail when, where and how media has been used or engaged. For example, during dinner, some families might have their television on. I noted the details of who switched it on, who held the remote control and different members' reactions to different contents, and how mindful they are. I observed the habits of the elderly in making phone calls, who were in their contact books and when they carried their phones with them.

Moreover, I also intentionally paid close attention to where the media was seemingly "absent" and carefully observed how media might play a role in indirect ways. For example, I monitored the use of language, particularly the sudden use of Mandarin. I found the use of official Mandarin is intimately connected to the media content they consume. Also, I found sometimes, when the elderly were out farming they would hum the old songs they kept on their phone – or sometimes they brought the phone with them to listen to music. Drawing on discussions of the methods of gathering data from online spheres (Bakardjieva, 2005; Baym, 2000, 2010; Miller et al., 2021), I "friended" most of my informants on social media, including WeChat, short video accounts, and music app accounts. I discussed the content they watched or read with them – sometimes, I watched side by side with them and asked them to talk to me about the content. I was added to some family WeChat groups and one village-level WeChat group.[1] As mentioned earlier, I sometimes used the media content popular in these communities to initiate conversations with my informants. I also observed the interactions and the absence of interactions within these online groups and sought explanations by speaking to relevant people. I also took screenshots or downloaded relevant media content with consent.

3.5 Data Analysis

My fieldwork generated a massive amount of data, including recorded conversations,

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[1] After the consent of the leader of the village group, I introduced myself to every member. The entering of the family WeChat groups was done with every member's consent.

fieldwork notes, photos, and media material. As I always kept the recorder on, it was almost impossible to transcribe everything. Therefore, guided by my fieldwork notes, I skipped the parts that were environmental sounds and listened again to the parts that might be interesting and important. Then, I transcribed selected parts in Chinese (attached with descriptions of tone and feelings). The task was still daunting and time-consuming. Since the conversations were in dialect, I hired my college friend, also from Enshi to help me transcribe half of the recordings.[1] In the end, together with my fieldwork notes, the fieldwork produced around 800,000 words of data.

I conducted thematic analysis on these data to identify the important patterns and themes contained within "in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Aronson, 1995). As a widely used analysis method for ethnography, thematic analysis aims to explore various aspects of data from the most direct meaning to the interpretative level of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). Following my theoretical framework, I developed a codebook covering the most important aspects of the research, including emotions, mediation, and different family relations (including intergenerational, conjugal, in-law). However, I also paid close attention to the themes that emerged from the data set and constantly revised the codebook accordingly. Therefore, the analysis is both deductive and inductive. I focused on recurrences, discordance with the literature, diversity under the same theme, implicit and indirect connections, and comparisons between cases. I paid close attention to the contradictory parts between observed data and conversations. The techniques of "triangulation" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019) were applied in the analysis.

The analysis units were not rigid or unified. To keep the ethnographical unfolding of events largely intact, I sometimes used the continuous event as the analysis unit. However, I used paragraphs or sentences as the coding units for a more detailed and close-up analysis. I adopted NVivo 12 to assist coding, but I also printed out all the data and read them intensively and repeatedly in chronological order to gain a more holistic picture. As Riessman (2011) points out, it risks losing the detail and specificity of each individual case when focusing on the commonalities across interviews and participants. Therefore, although it is important to compare data across individuals, in this study especially, it was more important to inspect each family case and their network as a system (I. F. Goodman, 1983). Regarding the presentation of data in this thesis, I used long quotes when needed to maximise the informants' original voice – though these quotes inevitably are, at the same time, my own selection.

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[1] I listened to the recording first and let her know the parts she needed to transcribe.

3.6 Reflexivity and Ethical Reflection

As with all knowledge and truth, ethnographic truths are "partial" and "situated" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Hartsock, 2019). Since the rise of post-modern critique, reflexivity became pivotal in an ethnography as the construction of 'reality' is always connected to particular locations and embedded in power relations (Haraway, 2013; Hartsock, 2019). The first step is to rigorously interrogate the bearing of the researcher's biography, location and positionality (Maher & Tetreault, 1993). As I already mentioned, I was born in a rural village. However, my identity straddles the realms of the urban and the rural. My parents are also rural born, but they later became local middle school teachers as "officials".[1] Their work gave them the "urban/non-agriculture *hukou*", and I inherited the same *hukou* from them. My father is the eldest child and the only son of my grandparents, who still live in the rural village on the land and with a lifestyle they cannot easily abandon. Therefore, our nuclear family still has a strong bond with my grandparents like other patrilocal three-generational families. The family arrangement of my childhood was that we went back to live with my grandparents every weekend (and during the long summer and winter vacations) from the town where my parents worked. I left then for higher education in big cities, including Wuhan and Beijing.

Therefore, it is fair to say that I spent almost half of my childhood in the countryside. Additionally, most of my relatives are also rural people. I believe this is why the bonding between my informants and me is, to some extent, a natural result of my experiences and identity. However, coming from a much better-off socioeconomic background and higher formal education, it is hypocritical to claim that I am truly "one of them". Just as the people I met in the villages pointed out, my life is a "blessed one" and an "exception" far beyond their reach. Moreover, I was often associated with an authority figure with my higher education and my parents' respective profession. As demonstrated in earlier sections, such unequal social status brought many problems concerning rapport building, data collection and the validity of this study. Accordingly, I applied several strategies to mitigate these problems, including changing formal interviews to casual conversations, actively striving for a safe space of equal interaction and deconstructing my superior status. The familiarity of the local dialect and the introduction of my relatives was also helpful in this regard. More importantly, the initial intention to conduct this research was also rooted in my rural experiences – I witnessed

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[1] In the late 1980s, colleges students' jobs were allocated by the government as the "iron bowl" and worked as state's officials. Working as teachers in public school, my parents are treated as officials and paid by the state directly. Officials were often entitled to have an urban *hukou*.

how the rural population had been marginalised in our society, and I felt the urgency to change the status quo by giving them a voice.

Moreover, since my research focus and main concern is the rural elderly, I spent much time and effort building rapport with them. However, both my identity and my effort to bond with the elderly came with a negative implication on my relationship with younger people nearer my age. As a "good student" with higher social status, I was in sharp contrast to the younger rural people who were often "bad at study" and "a failure" from their parents/grandparents' (and society's) perspective. It was hard for me to build very intimate relationships with the young. Moreover, as I will discuss in the empirical chapters, there were tension, conflicts and distance between generations. Under such circumstances, my courtesy to the elderly generations at the same time often alienated me from the younger generations. I remember once hanging out with a group of daughters-in-law of my age in Golden Arch, and they used winks and sly smiles to avoid disclosing their secrets in front of me. I was also never permitted to join some of their small WeChat groups – one told me that they thought their "dirty jokes" were not proper for a college student. Even though I tried hard to show my sincerity, that I have so few shared experiences with these young people shows the limited degree of trust that I was able to build. Nevertheless, although the relationship was not as intimate as desired, I managed to form a certain degree of trust and rapport.

As many scholars have pointed out, gender also has a significant impact on researcher-researched dynamics and on what kind of data can be collected. As a woman ethnographer in my late 20s, I found my gender had both advantages and disadvantages for the research. My apparently 'meek and harmless' femininity allowed me to earn the trust of people naturally. I found that women in my fieldwork were particularly willing to disclose to me their feelings and even secrets. However, men, especially young men, often felt awkward and shy talking to me. They also tended to keep a distance to avoid any gossip. Additionally, since most of the young men were out working, I did not get a chance to interview an equal number of men. Therefore, although I did my best to incorporate complex family dynamics to contextualise the rural elderly's mediated emotional experiences, the study is limited due to these issues. However, as Rose (1997) pointed out, "no gesture towards reflexivity will ever achieve complete transparency". It is an extremely challenging and serious task to be reflexive about the complex interplay of power relations in the research process. Therefore, on top of the rigorous self-reflexivity of oneself, the communities (including academic readers and the general public) are in the position of providing valuable insights and reflexivity from the vantage point of their different "positions". In this regard, I treated this thesis as fundamentally an "unfinished text" that in open to criticism and future self-criticism.

Reflexivity is also paramount to ethnography because it situates "the research and knowledge production so that ethical commitments can be maintained' (Sultana, 2007, p. 376). With ethnographical writing, the researcher is not only speaking about the subject that has been researched, but also, to some extent, inevitably speaking for the subjects (Alcoff, 1991). With robust and rigorous reflexivity, an ethnographer is not an "objective" and "neutral" observer, but a (politically) committed *author* (Banaji et al., 2018). In line with my wishes to give voice to the voiceless, I consider this project stands with the growing critical scholarship which aims to re-narrativize and re-explain history and reality for the sake of a more just future. Instead of pretending to be natural and thinking in a detached manner, I agree with many feminist scholars that "passionate scholarship" is a necessary "heresy" (Du Bois, 1983), and that our emotional and intellectual commitment to disadvantaged groups are justified and desirable.

However, many have pointed out that "speaking for others" can be a dangerous practise, risking self-righteousness, arrogance, and unethical outcomes (Alcoff, 1991; Hartsock, 2019; Spivak, 2003). As Gayatri Spivak (2003) famously argued, we should seek to "speak to" rather than "speak for". I fundamentally agree that we should create whatever possible condition and space for equal practises of "speaking with" and "speaking to". However, as Linda Alcoff (1991) forcefully argued, "speaking for" is also crucial and necessary because such practise "exists in the very structure of discursive practise, no matter its content, and therefore it is this structure itself that needs alteration" (1991, p. 23). She calls for the practise of "speaking for based on speaking with/to" and relentless reflection on the researcher's aim and position. Therefore, I consider this thesis an attempt to "speak for" the rural families (the rural elderly in particular) based on my endeavour of "speaking with" them in the socioeconomic background that has already disadvantaged their voice. However, I do not naïvely and superficially take my informants' words as the direct truth of their life. Rather, I try to understand their narratives and practises within the complex structure of social relations of which I am also a part.

As Stacey (1988) warned in *Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography*, the celebration of more egalitarian and collaborative ethnography often risks underestimating the underlying danger of ethical problems and potential exploitation. Ethnographical knowledge production involves huge responsibility and accountability that one must face and deal with carefully (Bowles & Klein, 1983; Du Bois, 1983; Stanley & Wise, 1983, 1993). The more interactive relationship between the researched and the researcher is an important step but not a guarantee to eliminate exploitation and inequality in the research process (Bowles & Klein, 1983; Stacey, 1988). The intimate

relationship that has been formed with the informants is also potentially harmful. For example, I found it particularly hard dealing with "by standing" during family conflicts. Normally I stood as naturally as possible during conflictual interactions but showed modest sympathy to each party when alone with them. However, potential harm can be real to either party since they deemed that I was close to them. Moreover, I developed profound relationships with some of my informants, especially children. That I left the field might hurt their feedings – although later I talked with them online sometimes and I plan to revisit them after I return to China. I have to admit that these tricky ethical problems exist, and I can only solve them to some extent.

To conclude, this chapter discussed important issues regarding the methodology of this research. It addressed the issues of methodological rationale; the ethnographical encounter of the rural elderly and the pinpointing process of the research question; the research design with site/case selection and fieldwork stages; my positionality and reflexivity as a young, educated woman who has a dual rural-urban identity; as well as some delicate ethical issues. In the next chapter, I turn to the empirical discussions and findings based on the data collected for this research.

Chapter 4 Virtuous Bitterness and Voluntary Inferiority: The Mediated Struggle of the Rural Elderly

After more than two hours of talking about her bitter life, grandmother Liu Xuan (family 14) asked me with caution and humbleness:

> *Liu Xuan: Do you like to talk with me, this old grandma?*
> *WH: Of course, I really like to talk with you about these things.*
> *Liu Xuan: You have grown up without eating bitterness. What do you know?*
> *You don't. (smiles and sighs)*

When I finished my 10 months of fieldwork and started to revisit the data – thousands of chat sequences and hundreds of stories of the rural elderly and their families – these couple of sentences hit me like a shock. For anyone born after the 1990s in rural China like me, "you haven't eaten any bitterness" was more or less a familiar thing one hears from senior family members. I and most of my peers, I assume, listened with indifference, antipathy and even disdain, especially when we were young, because it felt garrulous and patronising to complain of being spoiled and ungrateful. However, after hundreds of nights and days spent intimately with my participants, I gradually realised that the bitterness and suffering they talked about was much more than dreary complaining but a significant constituent element of the rural elderly's emotional world and identity, and it had a consequential impact. Across so many long nights and rainy days that I sat with an old rural man or woman, sometimes with the television on, the bitterness and hardship was something they often brought up – though they frequently paused to ask me if they were annoying, just as Liu Xuan did above.

In this chapter, I intend to unfold the bitterness and explore the subtle inferior feelings of the rural elderly – their shapes, textures and far-reaching consequences. In the end, I found that the stories of their unfortunate childhoods, toilsome adulthoods and helpless parenthoods that were embedded in China's modernisation, together with their tedious and austere daily lives, their emotional attachment to television dramas, and the distance from prosperous modern life all seemed to merge into one single story.

4.1 Understanding the Present Through the Bitter Past
4.1.1 The inferior elderly and their ascetic life

In the dim living room of their old tile-roofed wooden house, grandparents Wu Ping and Yao Xinhai (family 15) welcomed me with a full table of dishes in the middle of a cold November in Pear Tree village. The wooden floor was worn down and squeaked

constantly, as did the front door and the door to the kitchen. There was no room for a sofa, only a couple of self-made chairs set around the fireplace in the middle of the room, which smoked the ceiling and the walls. A small television sat on a plain black table covered by a piece of used sheet. A faded wall calendar of the year 2017 hung by its side – it was a giveaway when they bought fertiliser. By the side of the windows, there were two small study desks, one blue and one pink, cluttered with textbooks and exercise books – the desks were for grandson Yao Yinqi and granddaughter Yao Ting, bought by their fathers, Weihong and Haihong, respectively. These two desks seemed the only bright colour in this room, though a little dirty because of the fireplace's dust.

Yao Xinhai, born in 1947, inherited this house from his father who was categorised as a "poor peasant"[1] during the Land Reform in the 1950s and luckily got this rather good wooden house (at that time) reclaimed from the landlord. Apart from the living room, there was a kitchen and three small bedrooms. Next to the kitchen was a pigpen and a pit toilet they built themselves after they got married, and a bathing room with a water heater that just built this summer with the government's special subsidy.[2] There was also a mudded yard in front of the house – they told me they have no money and no need to pave the yard, not when their three sons need money to build new houses.

Through the back door of the old house, only a few steps away, were three newly built houses standing side by side. These belong to their three sons, Weihong, Haihong and Xiaohong, who all worked as migrant workers far away in coastal areas and came back only once a year during the Spring Festival. One day Wu Ping gave me a tour of their sons' houses, which were two-storey with simple structures commonly seen in the Enshi area. Haihong's was not quite finished, and his two brothers' were just completed but with basically no furniture inside – just bags of corn and sundries in the corner and bed frames in the two bedrooms, waiting for their hosts to come back and sleep for a few nights during the coldest time of the winter. Wu Ping explained to me awkwardly that they have no money that can be spared to furnish the houses for now and that they might need to wait two or three more years to get it settled. It was very common in the rural village that a house could take years of work with the limited and unstable income and because "everything needs money".

Most of the time, Wu Ping, Xinhai and two grandchildren stay in the living room of the

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[1] During the Land Reform, rural people were categorized by different classes, including landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants and employed peasants.

[2] A project to improve the living conditions of the poor rural population under the Targeted Poverty Alleviation (*jingzhun fupin*, 精准扶贫).

old house where the only fireplace is.[1] The electric heater in Haihong's new house was only switched on when their sons came back and if they had some friends over and played poker together (the heater was also turned on for me during my visit). Grandson Yinqi slept in the main bedroom of the old house with Wu Ping in the bedroom next to him – a very dark and small one with no window. The last bedroom next to the living room was actually warmer and bigger – but I guess Wu Ping would like to be closer to Yinqi. She mentioned that she could hear everything that happened in Yinqi's room. Ting, however, slept in her father Haihong's unfished new house – Wu Ping told me that she "insisted" on doing so and thus grandfather Xinhai slept in the room next to Ting to keep her company.

Apart from picking up things and sleeping, Wu Ping and Xinhai rarely went to the three new houses, even though they supported them financially. They also participated in the building process and cooked for the workers when their sons were not generally at home. There were many rooms in the three houses, so I asked Wu Ping which one was theirs. She replied with a laugh: "those were not mine – why they prepare rooms for us?" She told me that the old one was perfectly fine, and she and Xinhai would continue to live in the old house "till their death, which will be quite soon" – they spoke about death in a remarkably equanimous and careless way. Death is literally just "around the corner" – their two coffins had already been made ready by themselves and put in the main hall[2] of the house just beside the living room.

Such living conditions and arrangements of the elderly were common in the two villages I visited, as was the elderly's attitude towards such arrangements. In recent decades, with the policy endorsement of the New Socialist Countryside[3] (*shehuizhuyi xinnongcun*, 社会主义新农村) launched by the state government, house construction rapidly developed in rural China. Building a new house or buying an apartment also became a perceived standard requirement before young people got married. However, the elderly are often just "guests" of these "modern" residence, despite their huge investment in them.

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[1] This form of fireplace is normally seen in Enshi area. It uses firewood or coal as fuel. More often than not, the elderly used firewood they collected themselves because coal costs money.

[2] Remarkable as it may seem, it is rather common in the area to have coffins in the main hall where the funeral will be held in the future.

[3] A project aimed at promoting the development of rural areas. The core requirements are: "prosperous production, affluent life, civilised ethos, tidy village and demarcated management". Funding uniform and semblable construction of houses was one of the concrete measures. Many of my informants decided to extend or rebuild their old houses with a subsidy provided by the government.

In an inconspicuous corner of the first floor of their son's newly built house was Jin Yun and her husband Hu Guo's (family 13) bedroom, with half of the room piled up with bags of corn and an old wooden bed on the other side. Their son, daughter-in-law and two granddaughters all lived upstairs. During my one-week stay with their family, Jin Yun only went upstairs twice, both for laundry – the only washing machine was in the bathroom upstairs and she washed the whole family's clothes. She and her husband used the pit toilet next to the pigpen but not the one upstairs with a flushing water tank. She always called her two granddaughters or me by the staircase with a rather loud voice and never went upstairs to fetch us. It gave me a feeling that the upstairs was like a forbidden place for her to go. Finally, she told me that she thought she might dirty the floor because of her muddy shoes. In other cases, the elderly tended to explain to me voluntarily that they lived on the first floor because it was more "convenient" since they are old. Sometimes it was true, but more often than not, those who found it "inconvenient" to go upstairs were also the ones who did all forms of toilsome farming.

Similarly, Liu Xuan's son bought an apartment in the nearby town but worked in Shanghai. Liu Xuan commuted every week between this apartment and the old house in Pear Tree because their granddaughter and grandson went to school in the town and she needed to farm at the weekend. Liu Xuan explained to me with a little resentment why she had to leave her own house: "Qinqi (her daughter-in-law) told me to move here (the apartment) in school days. She was afraid that the walking (commuting from old house to the school) might exhaust her 'precious' (ironic tone for emphasis) daughter". When I praised how spacious this apartment was and how filial her son was to buy such an apartment for them to live, she immediately corrected me, saying that this was bought for "their own two children" but not for her and her husband. The one that belonged to her was the old leaky one that, during my visit, her husband Hu Shao finally got some money and time to fix.

The old house, the relatively poor living conditions, the new apartment and "the upstairs" seem not only to have physical implications but are also loaded with symbolic and emotional significance. It seems that it was not only a secondary place in terms of space but also an invisible secondary place culturally. However, the feelings behind this were complicated, subtle and somehow contradictory. The patterned talking of "not mine", recurring worries of "dirtying" or "damaging" the house and the facilities and the feelings of the opposite of "precious" were one important layer of the feelings that implied the rural elderly's inferiority and the possible unevenness of the family structure (Mary Douglas, 1966). It also makes one wonder why the relatively comfortable and modern living conditions were close at hand for these elderly but they still chose to voluntarily reject them (in extremely rare cases in the two villages I went

to their adult children forbade them from accessing these conditions). Their willingness to tolerate and endure the poor conditions was remarkable and at once intriguing. To see them as pathetic and miserable would be an oversimplification. The key question becomes why they seemed to "willingly" live in an inferior place and what the consequences of that choice might be.

4.1.2 Continuous hardship and the sense of destiny

A simple explanation to the question above might be that "they have experienced worse". That was also a response that I got from the elderly themselves. Whenever I marvelled at how difficult their lives were and how hard they tried to live them, they always responded by laughing that today's hardship was just trifling and unmentionable compared to their life in past decades. They did indeed endure forbidding conditions, especially from the 1950s to the Reform and Opening in the 1980s. For the elderly in my study, that was when they were teenagers, young adults or new parents, a time when China went through one of its most turbulent and profound transformations in modern history.

For the older generation, hunger was one of the most painful memories and having food to eat was an important concern in the collective era. The sweeping national famine happened in 1958 and 1959 because of the movement of the Great Leap Forward and severe drought was a most unforgettable memory among the older elderly. The images of people walking and dying along the road still haunted them. Many lost brothers and sisters (sometimes parents) because of hunger and malnutrition. When I asked the elderly about what they thought of today's life in general, they always answered comparatively: "it is definitely better than before – no one suffers from hunger at least", or "it is richer and more plenteous" were some of the most common answers. On reflection, today's life for these elderly is thought of first and foremost in terms of its material abundance and situated against the past.

For younger elderly, material shortage was relatively eased but continued. Notably, there was an emerging ethos of being "on one's own" at the beginning of the 1980s (Yan, 2003). The support of the socialist collective community was withdrawn and the land was reclaimed by individual households under the Household Contract

Responsibility System.[1] One still needed to work very hard to support the family, including paying the agricultural tax, children's school expenses and sometimes extremely high fines incurred by violating the "One-Child Policy"[2] (these were also the experiences of the older elderly). The exhaustion of farming, endless domestic work and being short of help was ubiquitous in these elderly's stories.

Notably, behind such hardship, there was a strong sense of destiny that could not be broken away from. Liu Xuan recalled her miserable life as follows:

> *My life was bitter from my teens and then a lifetime. Bitter to my grave would be perfect (in an ironic and angry tone). My parents both died when I was 14, within a month. Do you think my life is bitter? My father caught cold because he worked too hard to earn work points. Coughing. I was alone at home. My brother went to the hospital with my mother. She was ill first, in the town hospital. My father lay down and asked me to buy some medicine for him. I was small. I know shit. I thought he was just lazy and did not want to go to work. After two days, he could not move. Just slept and slept. Died in five days.*

> *(Paused for a while then continues)*

> *So, I was 14 and I carried 80 jin (40 kilograms) firewood, all the way to Shenjia (town 8 kilometres away) to sell. Only a few Li (1/10 for a Chinese cent) for one Jin firewood. I did not have one single school day. I was completely illiterate. I could not even recognise money when I was young. I never saw red money (100 Chinese Yuan is red) before. Now I see it, but I dare not use it. This was my life, my life was a bitter one. My destiny. My life was just an unfortunate one. Do you believe this?*

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[1] The Households Contract Responsibility System was first illegally experimented on by 18 peasants in Xiaogang Village in 1978 and then extended nationally in the early 1980s. It kept the collective ownership of the land but redistributed it to individual households for them to farm and the peasants could claim the yields. Before this, the land was collectively owned and collectively farmed, which led to inefficiency and low morale.

[2] Considering that in the early 1980s, peasants basically had no extra income, the fine for the violating One-Child Policy was extremely high, sometimes five to six times their annual income. Some of my informants said that the early 1980s was the hardest time for them because of the fine. However, some of the senior women in my study revealed that although it was hard and pitiful during that time, they felt somehow relieved from the painful pregnancy and exhausting child-rearing labour when reflecting on their whole life. This was also found by Gail Hershatter (2011) in her study.

In this emotional and devastating account, the shock of her father's death was still vivid and painful for her to revisit. It was inexplicable for young Liu Xuan that she had to be on her own and face such brutal truth. She answered herself that this was destiny. She made a causal connection between her extra heavy life burden, illiteracy, poverty and her parents' sudden death that was, to her, fatalistic. Although clearly her hardship was much more than fate, it had historically specific causes. Her life seemed doomed at that moment, and this meant for her that hardship would only continue.

The pain was individually experienced and sometimes very personal with their own fashions. However, across my data, the feeling of destiny was reflected, narrated and organised not only around the circumstances of different individuals, but also around the experiences of different generations. A strong sense of irresistible fate emerged as I talked with the elderly. For the elderly who grew up in the collective era, such feeling was relatively stronger than those who experienced their adulthood mainly in the late collective era and early reform times (1970s to 1990s) since the former's life was much more unpredictable and hazardous. While for younger people (born after the 1980s), the sense of destiny was largely non-existent for many.

As Guo Hua (family 2) concluded to me with confidence after she talked with me and her aunt (age 76) about her past hardship:

> *I have thought this through the other day. The generation of her (her aunt) was the hardest. Then it was us. We are relatively better, but hard still. Younger ones, like my son and daughter-in-law. They were born into a good life.*

To return to the question at the beginning of this section, we can see that the elderly did experience much worse circumstances in previous years. However, because "they have experienced worse" does not logically lead to their willingness to endure hardship today. One may well be more eager to live a better life and break away from the past misery for good. The competence of "eating bitterness" does not equate to the willingness to continue "eating bitterness". One may argue that the feeling of fate might explain this puzzle since the elderly seemingly accepted their hardship as a predetermined destiny that is continuous and unescapable for a lifetime. However, this explanation is partial and not satisfactory on its own. As I argue in the next section, their belief in fate was less a strong genuine, superstitious belief but a feeling with rich layers of cultural meaning.

4.2 Virtuous Bitterness and Television Viewing
4.2.1 Bitterness as a cultural schema

In the 1940s and 1950s, "bitterness" was a significant emotional and political resource employed by the Party-state to mobilise the peasants to support the redistribution of land and the new regime (Y. Chen, 1980; Hinton, 1966). On numerous occasions of "speaking bitterness" led by the grassroots Party cadres and activists, poor peasants were encouraged and taught to speak out about their painful experiences of oppression "caused by the gentry".[1] Through the practise of speaking bitterness, almost all forms of suffering experienced by the peasants were drenched in the colour of class struggle. The narrative of bitterness together with the public accusations against the oppressors became one of the main themes of rural life in those times.

Practises and discourses relating to bitterness did not die down after the accomplishment of the land reform. During the collective era, bitterness was again harnessed by the state to solve privation and shape the socialist subjects (Rofel, 2007). "Yikusitian" (recalling the bitterness of the old society and thinking about the sweetness of today) was implemented as a political slogan and a grassroots movement in China in the context of the destitute "primary stage of socialism". The "three olds" (old poor peasants, old workers, old Red Army) were invited to schools, villages and work units to recall their past hardship and express their gratitude to the new society in order to educate the young to cherish the precious life they had (An, 2010, p. 9). Countless "*laomo*" (model workers), such as Lei Feng, Shen Jilan and Jiao Yulu, were selected from the crowd and propagandised as role models for their willingness, willpower and ability to "eat bitterness" and sacrifice for the construction of socialist China via newspaper, broadcasts, outdoor films, routine political meetings and school courses.

Nevertheless, "bitterness" was not just a tool for the state to build a socialist state and remake its socialist heart, but it was also used by the peasants themselves to fight for their interests and express their feelings – whether they related to the state project or not. Some argued that although "speaking bitterness" was not a project started by the peasants themselves and the ways of speaking it were limited to a frame that the state provided, it nonetheless offered the peasants a chance to speak up and express their feelings that had long been oppressed and ignored (Y. Wu & Chen, 2012). For example, women were said to feel empowered and emancipated by having their suffering

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[1] The causes of hardship and tragedy were, however, complicated and multi-layered (Y. Wu & Chen, 2012). The suffering was nonetheless attributed to the dominant class in a framework of class analysis in order to achieve the transformation from a feudal society to a socialist one.

recognised by themselves and others. They also gained dignity and confidence by publicly displaying their ability to "eat bitterness" – the ability they had long possessed but which had been disparaged (Hershatter, 2011).

However, although I heard time and time again about the elderly's painful stories in the field after I gained their trust, the talk and recognition of bitterness were, to my surprise, significantly absent in their daily lives – especially compared to the past when bitterness was publicly discussed and significant in rural life as mentioned above. When I observed their life quietly, watched and listened to their day-to-day routine and interactions with others (to be discussed in Chapter 6), hardship was a hard truth that was not to be "seen" or voiced. It seemed to me that it was like a wound the elderly licked alone at night, not something that was suitable or needed to be shared and exposed publicly. However, I soon noticed that there was one single place that their bitterness could be responded to and consoled: in the media, especially in television dramas and sometimes through smartphones. Although ironically, I was told repeatedly they did not like watching television, let alone using smartphones (this "dislike" will be discussed later). The following account took place on a typical occasion when I watched television with the elderly in the fieldwork.

I sat down with Yang Chunmei (family 5) when she had finally finished her chores and watched television with her while talking randomly. As the background music intensified, the scene on the television caught Yang Chunmei 's attention: on a train station platform in 1958, a nuclear scientist and his pregnant wife arrived, carrying secret files about China's first nuclear weapon. They were ambushed by foreign agents who tried to steal the files. In the chaotic chase, the files were regained, but the scientist's wife died of premature labour and postpartum haemorrhage despite a nurse's best treatment. When the scientist was heartbroken and crying by his wife's sickbed, Chunmei looked away and told me the following story:

> When giving birth to Pinhong, I was hoeing. I felt bellyaching. I have no idea when the date was. My eldest son was less than three and was with me on the field. She (her mother-in-law) told me not to stop hoeing, so I kept hoeing. Later I said I have to go back. She said, you bring back the hoe with you. I said I need to hurry up and go back! I can't take it anymore – I still did not know I was about to go into labour. Our generation, you cannot tell (if one is having a baby) as it does not bulge much (possibly because of dystrophia). We had a cow at that time. Just the very next day, I got up and fed it. Now you see how "zaolie" (pitful) I am.

When I gave birth to my eldest son, I was climbing the tea tree and gathering tea fruits. That tea tree was so damn big. The old women of Yin family saw me and told me I was about to go into labour. She saw my water broke. I went home and slept for a while and then my eldest son was out. His father does not know. At that time, my mother-in-law and I were not in a good relationship. She was always yelling. She said to fetch a midwife. I said no need! It has already finished. My husband came back and he was laughing outside. (WH: laughing?) Yes, he was laughing. He said, you screamed so hard, the old uncle next door can hear you. I said I do not give a damn what he hears. It was painful as hell, I needed to scream as hell.

Chunmei recounted a story that perhaps was one of the most painful experiences of her life, although without direct reference to the story we had just watched on television. One could say that the stories experienced by the scientists' wife and Chunmei were nothing alike. However, for Chunmei, it was a scene that reminded of her own bitter story. Two possible links between her and the scientist's wife were their shared hardship and the pain experienced during childbirth, despite huge differences in their roles and causes of their tragedy, and the surrounding people's (opposing) attitudes. Very likely, Chunmei did not notice much about the identity of the man and women in the drama and the patriotic narrative behind the plot since this was a drama that we watched by chance. It was also possible that she selectively ignored this or simply did not care. What resonated with her the most, clearly, was the suffering, including the childbirth and the cold family relationships she had to face.

If the movements of "speaking bitterness" already belonged to the glorious history, clearly "bitterness" was not. It was still very much alive in the rural elderly's lives, though instead of in the public domain, it presented itself in a relatively private way – in the company of private media such as the television, in their limited and fragmented leisure time by themselves. With a remarkable and nuanced continuity to the past, "bitterness" was still a crucial emotional resource for the elderly themselves as a way to fight against the harsh living conditions they face today and to provide them with meaning and strength, which I explore further in the following section.

4.2.2 Bitterness as an emotional resource

Almost all elderly people in the fieldwork impressed me as extremely industrious people who were busy all the time. Jun Yun (family 13) was one of them. She took care of their tea and chili land by herself, together with four pigs and the vegetable garden that fed the family. She also cooked dinner for the whole family, did laundry and

collected firewood. Like other seniors, she carried a sense of fate and performed all the labour uncomplainingly. During my stay, she did not switch on the television once, thus I was almost convinced by her "dislike" (as he termed it) of television. One day after she finally finished cleaning and feeding the pigs, she sat down with me. I proposed to switch the television on and she agreed. I was surprised to learn that she did not know how to switch the television on herself. She told me that after her son and daughter-in-law changed the old-fashioned television to an "Internet television" two years ago, she had not switched it on herself but just watched "whatever they watched". After we browsed a couple of channels, I asked her if she had ever watched one good television drama. She thought about and told me that it was called *The Disguiser*, if she remembered correctly.

This was a typical Chinese drama genre: the anti-Japanese war drama. I was a little surprised because this genre was normally characterised by violent warfare, political conspiracy and a representation of traditional masculinity that men tended to prefer. She told me this was the only drama that she followed throughout, and it was the "family's choice" (she forgot who held the remote that night when the drama began but it was clearly not her). The whole family[1] watched together during the nights the previous winter when their works were relatively eased. Then I found this drama on the television and started to watch the first episode with her. As we watched, she introduced me to who was who in the drama. She showed particular interest in one female character, Minjing, the big sister of the Ming family. She was a successful businesswoman who was patriotic at heart and helped the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) greatly in fighting against the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and the Japanese. She had three younger brothers, all CCP secret agents.

> **Jin Yun:** *She (Minjing) was the eldest and she was really great. She cared so much for her brothers... Because of them, she did not even get married. Can you believe this?*
> **WH:** *Why was she unmarried? Because of them?*
> **Jin Yun**: *She just didn't. She was like a mother. She had so much to worry about... Whenever her brother was in danger, she came out and saved them, risking her life. It was not easy. It was not easy. Their parents died early and just her and her brothers. Now such a big factory (Minjing's business) and outstanding brothers. She ate a lot of bitterness, alone, by herself. She died in the end, saving her youngest brother from the Japanese. She took a bullet for him.*

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[1] Jin Yun and her husband, her son and daughter-in-law, two granddaughters.

Without talk much about the "outstanding brothers", Jin Yun's primary focus was the virtuous, caring big sister Minjing, despite the fact that in the first episode, the brothers appeared often while Minjing only showed up once. But she left Jin Yun with the most profound impression after nearly half a year[1]. In Jin Yun's eyes, Minjing was a mother-like woman who basically sacrificed her whole life for the sake of her brothers and died in the end. Her bitterness was expressed as something she had to endure because of her unconditional and even martyred love for her brothers. However, it was worthwhile because what she did was so great, honourable and virtuous.

Later that night, after we had watched *The Disguiser*, Jin Yun recounted stories of when she was a teenager. Her two brothers were married and started their families in other places and thus she became the oldest child in the family. She shared a lot of burden in helping her parents take care of her three younger siblings and other chores. She remembered how she carried the youngest brother in a basket on her back to school and had to constantly step outside the classroom because he kept crying. She also recalled how she needed to finish feeding the pigs before going to school at dawn.

These stories were told by Jin Yun with mixed feelings. Her tone belied a fateful feeling of self-pity, but also a sense of nostalgia, pride and dignity. She wanted to emphasise how hard her life was but at the same time, how meaningful her efforts and sacrifices were. In her account, no explicit link was made by her between her experiences and Minjing's story in the drama. But it was made clear that she shared Minjing's motivations and feelings at heart.

The emotion generated within Jun Yun through her identification with Minjing was undeniably because of Minjing's hardship, and more importantly, her self-sacrifice and altruism. Here, bitterness and hardship gained their meaning by connecting to the virtue that followed and more intense than the bitterness and more impressive was the virtue. It was, after all, worthy and even noble to "eat bitterness" and practise an almost ascetic life.

4.3 Fragmented Viewing Mode and Emotional Distance from Media Technology

Television watching was a very fragmented activity for the elderly because they always had seemingly endless farming to do, miscellaneous domestic chores to finish, and attention-grabbing grandchildren to care for. Many told me that they "do not like

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[1] We watched it in September 2019.

watching television" because they did not have time and a whole series was simply too long and too distracting – they felt guilty watching them. For most of the elderly in my fieldwork, watching television only happened when they had finished all of their tasks, at night when the grandchildren fell asleep, during heavy rain day or when they felt unwell.

However, they were skilled at being able to tell if a drama was their type or not by just a couple of glances at the clothing, setting and the way characters talked – they told me they did not like watching people in fancy clothes or fast cars, for example. Or they could be caught up by a single plot that might contain elements of hardship without being interested in the whole episode, as Chunmei did. Dramas about "*jiachang liduan*" (family trifles, 家长里短), about the past and rural people's lives were their favourites. They complained that it was no longer easy to find dramas they really liked and many were just about urban young people's "*qingqing aiai*" (romantic love, 情情爱爱, this term implies a feeling of scorn and disgust) instead. Sometimes they just got started watching and annoying advertisements cut in or an episode was over. So they often switched from channel to channel – when they were alone and had the remote control. Sometimes a series was broadcast on several channels but not at the same time. If one episode was over on one channel, they switched to another to watch – sometimes not in the right order and they watched repeatedly.

As in the case of Chunmei described above, the discontinuous but deeply emotionally engaged encounters between the mass-produced media content and the elderly's own bitter experiences were countless in the field. The hardship became one thing that touched them the most when they watched television dramas. Similar suffering experiences, such as the death of parents, partner or children, the heavy burdens of money-making, hunger, natural disasters, political persecution, sickness, domestic violence, misunderstanding and betrayal all became relevant when they watched TV. They paid great attention to such plots and much less to others (like romantic scenes or about urban lifestyles). The unfortunate stories of the characters in the dramas could often elicit their hidden painful memories. Sometimes the stories did not even need to be similar. They told completely different stories that had nothing to do with what was going on on the television. The only connection might be the shared feeling of agony between their sufferings and the storylines of the drama. They could talk a lot if encouraged, sometimes with tears in their eyes.

However, there is a dilemma that requires explanation. I found that the elderly tend to show strong emotional denial of their television viewing practises, but at the same time, are deeply engaged with television dramas that encompass elements of bitterness. For

example, Jin Yun mentioned earlier concluded to me that she enjoyed the drama *The Disguiser* very much – it seemed contradictory with her earlier firm statement that she "does not like watching television". The television watching pattern of the elderly became clearer towards the later stages of my fieldwork. They kept telling me that they not only "have no time for it" but "really do not like it". Indeed, in my observations, they seldomly watched as long as they could find other things to do. More precisely, the elderly in the poorer families had less leisure time and showed much less interest in television watching. Despite their different economic conditions, however, an emotional distance to television and other forms of technology was clearly shared by all.

The logic of this contradiction was coherent at its core. Just as the Smithton women in Radway's incisive ethnography *Reading the Romance* (1991) felt that they needed to justify their reading of romantic novels because it was considered superficial and time-wasting, the rural elderly feel guilty and inappropriate when consuming media content because it was at odds with the virtues they identify with. Refusing the television, a media form increasingly connected to leisure and entertainment since the market reform in the 1980s, was the very practise of being virtuous since the virtues they identify with were industriousness, abstinence and frugality. It was no wonder that even a few elderly people who actually watched a lot in their leisure time still felt that they needed to justify their viewing by saying "I only watched in bad weather" or "I never watch too long".

Considering my position reflexively, the elderly might well have "performed" in front of me and disguised their real watching behaviour. They tended to deny this – not out of insincerity but more from internalised guilt and shame. Watching television led to an ambivalent and contradictory feeling because this was an action that served to either recognize or deny of their virtues. Therefore, beyond the text and meaning of the drama they were watching, television watching (and non-watching) should be regarded as "a form of behaviour operated as a complex intervention in the ongoing social life of actual social subjects" (Radway, 1991, p. 7). That means the practise of media use and its content/interpretation should and can only be understood against the wholeness of their life.

4.4 The Continuity and Discontinuity of Mediated Bitterness

So far, I have discussed how bitterness has been mediated and related to the rural elderly's emotional experiences and their everyday lives. Classic ethnography is often considered to be good at capturing the wholeness of people's lives, but still, it is largely

a "synchronous" approach that focuses primarily on current situations and immediate events that might sometimes be ahistorical.[1] As William Sewell observed, "every cultural analysis necessarily entails a synchronic moment of this sort, but... that the synchronic moment should be dialectically related to an equally necessary diachronic moment" (2005, p. 178). Therefore, the "wholeness of life" cannot be comprehended without considering the continuity or discontinuity of history, both personal history and history in general. In this section, however, I zoom in to set such life experiences against the broader historical and structural background of China's modern transformation to get a better sense of the elderly and their mediated struggles. I attempt not only to put the audience back into "audiencing" contexts (Fiske, 1992) but also into audiencing history.

Qian Sheng (family 3) was a construction worker in Beijing who became a grandfather in the summer of 2019 when he was 56 years old. During my visit, he asked for a month's leave and came back to Golden Arch for his newly born granddaughter Xuanya and for some rest because of chronic backache. He was an incredibly caring father who had a very close relationships with his two daughters (he and his wife had no son). He was also the only senior in my fieldwork who used an iPhone – Xuanya's mother, his elder daughter Qian Yuqing, who worked as a programmer in Shenzhen, bought it for him two years earlier. When I asked what he usually did with his iPhone, he revealed that apart from news and weather, he watched television dramas on it on rainy days[2] and his favourite was *Taking the Wrong Ride*. Qian Sheng found this drama on his Tencent Video App and showed it to me. He opened the final episode, which was on the top page of his browser records (the date of the record was recent) and explained the storyline and the characters to me. He told me he had watched it more than twice and it was "a really good one".

It was a touching story about a deaf man, Donglin, and a girl, A'mei. The drama began with the dumb man's discovery of a new born girl who was abandoned at his front door. Kind Donglin adopted her without hesitation even though he was just a rubbish collector. Donglin worked very hard to support A'mei's study at a music school for her singing talent, remained unmarried and finally got cancer. In return, A'mei was grateful and filial, sang the song she wrote for Donglin in the final singing competition and won.

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[1] See Haiyan Lee's (2007b) critique on Potter (1988) and William Sewell's (2005) discussion on time, history and culture.

[2] The construction work cannot be done on rainy days and thus are considered workers' "holidays" – of course, that also means no income is earned on these days.

While watching, Qian Sheng revealed his feelings ("*" refers to audio from the drama):

> **Qian Sheng:** *This man worries about other people his whole life.*
> **WH:** *Who?*
> **Qian Sheng:** *Everyone in the family. The girl he found and adopted. A'mei.*
> **A'mei*:** *For my whole life, I owe the greatest gratitude to my father. The following words he might hear or might never hear… (on the stage of the Young Singers' Award)*
> **Qian Sheng**: *All these (referring to A'mei and her achievement on the stage) are this dumb man's effort.*
> **A friend*:** *Little Mei is back to you. She won the Young Singers' Award! (said to Donglin beside his sickbed)*
> **Qian Sheng**: *He has a good conscience, a really good one. He collected wasted bottles to support this girl. Above all, he is just a dumb man. It is really something… Now he is dying… but he wakes up in the end – his little Mei is back. This is a touching story. Don't you think so?*
> **WH:** *Do you think this is something that might happen in real life?*
> **Qian Sheng:** *Of course. Of course. Maybe not as hard as this man, but yes.*

Clearly, this is a drama about the hardships of life and the virtues of the people. The connections between bitterness and the altruism of the characters were in line with what I discussed earlier. The close and heart-warming father-daughter relationship between Donglin and A'mei somehow echoed Qian Sheng's own relationships with his two daughters. Indeed, he recalled many bittersweet memories of raising his daughters during my stay, with a fulfilling smile on his face. For Qian Sheng, in his lonely rainy days on a construction site in Beijing, this drama might offer profound comfort and support to endure exhausting physical work as well as his backache, giving him hope and strength to keep going for his family, especially for his beloved daughters.

Towards the end of the drama, A'mei stood on the stage, gave an emotional speech for her gratefulness for Donglin, and started to sing the theme song "Are there any Empty Bottles for sale". Qian Sheng was totally immersed in the plot and rhythm and tears glistened in his eyes. It must have really meant something to him, as he could not even hold back tears in front of an outsider (me).

The song goes:

> *Are there any empty bottles for sale?*
> *How familiar the sound was, with me through all the hardship.*
> *If you never raised me, provided me with a warm life*

If you never protected me, what my fate will turn out to be

It was you who brought me up, and listened to my very first word.

It was you who gave me a home, and we shared it together.

Although you cannot say a word, you tell the black and white, truth and falsity

Although you cannot express your feelings, you sacrificed your heart and soul.

...

Needless to remember because I never forget.

No sky, no earth.

No home, no you.

No you, no me.

Your familiar sound coming from afar, reminds me of your kind heart.

When can I return to you, and sing with you:

Are there any empty bottles for sale? Are there any empty bottles for sale?

This was a very familiar song, to me as well, though I do not recall the first time I heard it – I just remember that it was broadcast everywhere when I was a teenager. Qian Sheng told me he was searching for a drama for his rainy days and opened this one randomly; he was immediately caught up by the rhythm and realised it was so familiar. He recalled that when he was younger, in his 30s and 40s, a similar story about a dumb man and his adopted daughter was so popular on television, together with this song. Then he started to watch without hesitation.

The drama Qian Sheng watched was produced in 2015 in mainland China, broadcast on more than 12 channels, according to incomplete statistics, and with top audience ratings on most of them. There was indeed an earlier version produced in 2005 (very likely the one Qian Sheng watched before), which was also well received with many famous stars at that time in the cast. However, the original version[1] turned out to be a film produced in Taiwan in 1983[2] that was again extremely popular – with 11 nominations from the 20th Golden House Awards. I still remember how confused I was at the title of the theme song in the past because it was in the Minnan dialect of Taiwan. It is clear that Qian Sheng's preference for television drama involved its continuity, and his iPhone allowed him to choose a drama that he could deeply relate to – even if it was

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[1] The main storyline was the same but there were adaptations as well, including the identity of Donglin, family situations, his marriage status, and stories about A'meis parents. The adaptations of this drama could form a study on its own for its diverse narratives that signify multi-layered cultural meanings and changing historical contexts, including the transformation of the Chinese television industry.

[2] The English title of the film was *Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing*, while the Chinese title was *Da Cuo Che* (literally 'taking the wrong ride'). The Chinese title of the theme song was "酒干倘卖无". It is a transliteration of Minnan dialect, meaning "are there any empty bottles for sale" in Mandarin.

based on a very old story that was first filmed in the early 1980s.

Beyond Qian Sheng, the recognition of bitterness in the media content the elderly consumed, past or present, became a clear pattern when I investigated the rural elderly's media engagement. Apart from their current preference for "plots of bitterness" within television dramas, they showed great interest and passion for the films provided by local "*fangyingdui*" (film projection groups) during the collective era[1] and *Kuqingxi*[2] on television, that had been popular since the 1990s,[3] although in many cases they forgot the titles and plots. Even for the elderly who did not watch television much today, they sometime talked at length about past audience experiences when they felt they deeply resonated with bitterness. For example, grandfather Hu Guo (family 13) who rarely watched television told me that he missed the "old drama" brought to the villagers by the film projection groups during the collective era.

> *Do you know "the little girl named Cabbage" (xiaobaicai, 小白菜)[4]? It was better than many dramas today. I say this to many people. Today's young people do not know how bitter the old society was. We are from the old society bitter as hell… That girl Cabbage, also a bitter fate (kuming, 苦命).*

Hu Guo was an elder who often complained to me, with a sense of nostalgia, that what they watched in the past was "better" than today because it was more about the "bitterness" of "*jiachang liduan*" (family trifles). This might because mass-produced media products have been increasingly targeted to the urban middle class or the young, not the rural elderly. The elderly also revealed that they actually spent more time watching when television and films were "*xiqi*" (稀奇, rare and interesting) and the storylines were "understandable" and "moving" in the past. As shown in this chapter, bitterness, as a recurring rhetorical theme and a cultural text, proved to be enduring in the rural elderly's life trajectory.

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[1] In his ethnography of the *fangyingdui* in Yunnan province, of the Derung people (an ethnic minority in China), Jianbin Guo (2019, p164) also found that many elderly had especial emotional connections with the films in the 1960s and 1970s.

[2] Literally "bitter emotion drama", referring to melodrama that particularly exaggerates people's suffering.

[3] In 1994, the television coverage rate reached 83.45%. There were 27,487 television sets nationally, while in 1978, the percentage of households that had television sets was just 2% (J. Guo, 2005, p. 59). It was not until after the 1990s that television started to become available to most rural households.

[4] This classic film was first released in 1955 and has been remade several times (in 1963, 1990, 2006, 2012). It told of the tragic life of a girl named Cabbage, which occurred in the late Qing dynasty.

In 1958, the very first China television drama, *A Bite of Vegetable Pancake*[1] (*yikou caibingzi*, 一口菜饼子) was broadcast by Beijing Television.[2] It was a short story "recalling the bitterness and thinking about the sweetness" (*yiku sitian*, 忆苦思甜) that was discussed earlier. Such mediated propaganda, together with the incessant "struggle/political sessions" of "speaking/eating bitterness" all aimed to advance the "socialist morality" in constructing the industrial modernity of China. The honour of labour, altruism and sacrifice in communities, and the shame of indolence and waste were some of the main themes that featured in this type of morality. With much longer roots in Chinese culture, the cultural schema of being diligent and frugal was reinterpreted through socialist projects and movements during the collective era. To some degree, it could be said that these sweeping cultural movements of "bitterness" permanently changed the ways in which the peasants talked about and understood themselves. The narrative and logics of bitterness have been widely and profoundly internalised. In line with the celebration of the working class and the ordinary people as the "hosts" of the country, the ability and mentality of eating and enduring bitterness were celebrated officially and publicly as socialist virtues.

From the late 1980s when the Reform and Opening process started, however, bitterness continued as an important cultural theme, but was expressed in a different manner. That was the bitterness that ordinary people eat in *everyday personal and family life* instead of in the public sphere for the sake of the grand goals of socialist modernisation. Only seven years after *Taking the Wrong Ride*, mentioned earlier, was imported into China the first grand "in-door" drama *Yearnings*[3] (*kewang,* 渴望) with its 50 episodes was produced by Beijing Television Art Centre and gained phenomenal success across the nation. It was said to be the "first popular programmes devoid of socialist politics" in China, according to Western newspapers (Rofel, 2007). Influence by soap operas from America, Japan and other places (Z. Guo, 1997), it was clearly a product that sought both commercial success and ideological pedagogy (Y. Zhao, 1998). The storyline of *Yearning* was remarkably similar to *Taking the Wrong Ride*. Apart from its clichéd melodramatic storylines such as adoption and heat-wrenching life coincidences, it again featured characters that were the paragon of "noble conscience" (*liangxin,* 良心) such

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[1] The main storyline was: the younger sister was wasting cakes on dogs and was stopped by her older sister. The older sister reminded the younger one of their miserable past when they were young and starving, and the bitter experience that the landlord refused to give them food and their sick mother gave the last bite of a vegetable pancake to the younger sister and then died. Then the younger sister was educated and regretful in the end.

[2] The later China Central Television (CCTV).

[3] See a detailed and thought-provoking discussion on *Yearning* and its political implication in Lisa Rofel's *Desiring China* (2007).

as Liu Huifang, who tolerated everything and sacrificed all for her family.

Therefore, since around the 1980s, the virtues of eating bitterness were less connected to the collective project of socialism but were transformed into something that was meaningful and worthwhile for its connections to "*renzhi changqing*" (人之常情, natural feelings of ordinary people), particularly emotional connections between family members, such as parents and children, husbands and wives (H. Lee, 2007b). Such nuanced change in terms of how "bitterness" has been framed is profoundly related to the broader transformation of China's modernity after the economic reform in the 1980s. To some extent, the recognition of family and personal emotions is compatible with the "depoliticization" (Wang, 2010) of politics and the reform in economic and cultural realms. When the soap opera became a popular narrative and offered early elaborations on the worthiness of virtues in domestic life from the late 1980s, it created an "emotional space" (Kong, 2019) for rural people to have their hearts and their thwarted feelings conciliated. Therefore, personal desire and family intimacy have gained legitimate cultural space since the post-reform era in China.

However, others have pointed out that there has been an intricate interplay between the state, the individual and the family and the space for individuals and family also leads to a heavy responsibility (including childcare, education and old-age support) that was once collectively shared (Yan, 2020; Sun, 2006). For example, Chen Yinfang pointed out that when the collective institutions such as collectively-owned land, working units and rural mutual aid groups disappeared, feelings and emotional bonds of family members were actively mobilized by the state in order to advance the Chinese modernisation project (Y. Chen, 2020). Alongside the advance of market reform since the 1980s was a fundamental change in the outlook of modernity in China. The once honoured "host" grassroots people, including the working class and peasants, have been increasingly marginalized economically and culturally. In contemporary China, "speaking bitterness" or "eating bitterness" is no longer a formal mainstream narrative since it is largely at odds with the ideology of neo-liberalism that was needed for China's transformation to a market-driven society.

However, as I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, it is the television dramas that offer a possible channel for talking, thinking, and acknowledging bitterness among the rural elderly. The once public and collective celebration of virtues around bitterness is now a *private* and even lonely event for the rural elderly, in the company of television. However, such private mediated activity means a great deal to them. The connection between bitterness and virtue coded in these dramas is crucial to understanding the elderly' emotional world and their willingness to keep sacrificing and submitting to

inferior positions. The plots and scenarios with their elements of bitterness help to build, encourage and emphasise the connections between bitterness and virtue, and provide a language for showing what might otherwise have been silent, unacknowledged or forgotten.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to discuss the rural elderly's feelings of voluntary inferiority and their connections to mediated narratives of bitterness. I began with the perplexing ethnographical observation that the rural elderly tend to always willingly practise an ascetic, inferior, and arduous life even they do have other options. Through their own narratives of their own stories, I found that their mindsets were intimately related to their past experiences of hardship and bitterness. However, I further discovered that "bitterness" was not relegated to the past, but very much a living narrative that has been mediated through their private engagement with modern media, especially television.

Historically, the narratives of speaking and eating bitterness were forged and developed in the collective era when the elderly in my fieldwork were still teenagers, young adults or newly married. Through sweeping social movements and mediated propaganda, the socialist morality relating to bitterness (e.g., industriousness, diligence, and frugality) was widely accepted and internalized. Although such public and collective celebration of virtues around bitterness has largely disappeared today, I found that the rural elderly nevertheless embodied bitterness as a cultural schema to make sense of their lives and at the same time, used it as a crucial emotional resource to live meaningfully in a deprived condition. Instead of treating the rural elderly as mere passive victims of deteriorated material conditions or the neglect of their adult children (as do the mainstream family studies discussed in Chapter 2), I found that they are actively constructing their meaningful lives through the mediated construct of virtuous bitterness as a "structure of feeling".

This has been made possible by their engagement with television drama that contains elements of bitterness and hardship. Apart from the "*kuqingxi*", the legitimate and common genre of "bitterness" seen in dramas such as *Taking the Wrong Ride* or *Yearning*, they also tend to actively search, identify, select, and regroup the scenes and plots that contain the narrative or the elements of bitterness and then emotionally engage with them, just as Jun Yun enjoyed the anti-Japanese war drama *The Disguiser* that her family chose to watch. However, as demonstrated through the ethnographical lens, the rural elderly's watching mode is rather fragmented (in terms of temporality and the programmes they watched), and sometimes involuntary (in terms of their

control over what and when to watch). The elderly shared a sense of emotional distance from television and other modern media technology even though they did engage emotionally with these media. I found such emotional denial to be coherent with the virtues they identified with from the media content in the first place.

However, I found their active mediated meaning making process has a sense of "cruelty" (Berlant, 2011). The elderly's "optimism" – they believe a "good life" can be at hand as long as they continue to "eat bitterness" – seems to only bring them disappointment and despair. As mentioned, in the initial founding stage of the PRC, "speaking/eating bitterness" was a revolutionary horn and a mainstream narrative that functioned as a form of grassroots mobilisation of the peasants to support the new regime. It continued to be prevalent during the collective era as a way of taking their own life and fighting for their living. However, in parallel with the marginalisation of the grassroots people since the economic reform, the official and collective celebration of virtues relating to bitterness has been increasingly marginalized. In the past 30 years, as these people become grandparents and great-grandparents, and China has entered its second decade of the new millennium, the sound of them speaking bitterness seems to be getting quieter and quieter, or it is unseen because no one listens to them. Media today is increasingly concerned with the urban middle class and the young and much less with the rural elderly. This echoes their highly problematic positions within families as well as in society.

From the 1980s onwards, popular mediated content has responded to ordinary people's hardship in the long-forgotten domestic sphere by connecting bitterness and suffering to people's genuine love for and devotion to family. However, it is also accompanied by the state's systematic withdrawal from the public good and welfare provision. As documented in both Chapter 1 and the first section of this chapter, the rural household is facing tremendous life pressures and the elderly are facing deteriorating material and mental conditions. The rural elderly's emotional commitment to eating bitterness and willing sacrifices have been mediated in this particular moment of contemporary China, when their sacrifice is essential to sustain their own family and the broader project of modernization. If the younger generations find the 'talk of bitterness' annoying and patronising, its meaning for the elderly emerged precisely in this regard – that for a generation that grew up in market-oriented post-reform China, or in the context of China's modernity in general, speaking, watching, acknowledging and imagining 'bitterness' becomes a significant emotional resource for their dignity, sacrifice and hope. It is somehow the other side of China's modernity or its recourse to modernisation – that there is a group of people in rural China, who live ascetic and self-sacrificing lives in their later years, which gives their lives meaning in their sometimes lonely

mediated struggles.

Chapter 5 The Family Rift and the Elderly's Pain: Media, Misogyny, and the Crisis of Care

If we think of what will happen in the future, I am afraid we cannot even fall asleep... If only they could be good. Find a wife and build a family. Two kids can be tinghua (docile)… We two old ones can just die and save them the troubles.

Wu Ping

It was a cold winter night at around ten, Wu Ping said this to me with a self-mocking laugh. Different from Wu Ping, her husband Yao Xinhai rarely talked or smiled. A while ago he left with his grandchildren to sleep and turned off the television – the dark living room became quiet and even more bleak. Wu Ping sat across from me, with one of her hands on her forehead and her eyes on the floor. Her face looked spiritless and eyes sunken. I asked if she had a headache or felt tired. She forced a smile and shook her head. Her voice was evidently lower than in the daytime when she busied herself in endless farming and domestic works. She sounded exhausted. Or even worse, behind such exhaustion, there was a sense of despair that she struggled to hide. Then, I could not bear to ask any more questions and urged her to have some rest though she told me she "cannot fall asleep anyway".

Here, "they" in Wu Ping's opening remarks above referred to their three single sons, two divorced[1] and one still single in his forties, who had left two grandchildren, Yinqi and Ting, at home with the old couple while three empty new houses stood solitarily. The family's economic condition was not good but also not the worst in the village; the old couple was relatively healthy compared to their peers and they had three sons – a satisfying situation considering the long-lasting 'son preferences' in rural China. However, Wu Ping and Yao Xinhai were among the saddest people I met in my fieldwork. When I lived with them, I felt strongly that they were heartbroken by their sons' marital situation. Meanwhile, there was a widely circulated rumour in the village that Wu Ping was the cause of the familial tragedy of her three sons. Although I was unable to speak to the former daughters-in-law, villagers and neighbours told me that they had "terrible" relationships with their mother-in-law, Wu Ping. It was said that they "constantly quarrelled over money" until finally the daughters-in-law "left for good".

This already "broken" family might be an extreme example of the grave rift between

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[1] The second son was probably divorced or separated. Wu Ping and her husband were reluctant to verify.

the elderly and their daughters-in-law. However, I found that such rifts and tensions are far from the exception, but a pattern widely shared across families. Since the majority of young and middle-aged men worked as migrant workers elsewhere and only returned home a few weeks a year, it is the daughters-in-law who actually live with the elderly. The feeling of fear, burnout, powerlessness, and even anger tend to evidently be carried, in various capacities, by the elderly I met in the two villages. Some complained to me that nowadays "the daughter-in-law is on the sky" – they need to be extra careful, so they do not "run away". Some believed that the daughter-in-law tended to foment dissension between the bigger family (three-generational family including the elderly) and the smaller family (nuclear family of the middle generation). Younger people, however, tend to think that it is the "older ones", especially the mother-in-law, who likes to stir up family conflicts. Either way, it was evident that there is a pattern of rifts within the rural family and it has caused great pain to family members, especially the elderly. In this chapter, I focus on the tension and discordance within the rural household. I examine how the tension has been mediated affectively, and consider the social underpinnings, institutional arrangements and cultural conditions behind such rifts, mistrust, and conflicts.

5.1 The Tension Between the Elderly and the Daughter-in-law

After I moved in with Li Yue's family, I started to sense the undercurrents of tension between her and her daughter-in-law Guo Qinqin. After several moments of latent friction and sarcasm, Guo Qinqin revealed to me that she felt hurt because she thought Li Yue "preferred the other two sons":

> **Guo Qinqin:** *I saw she was very sad after the funerals[1] – she cannot hold tears, barely standing in the yard of the old house. So I said, mother, come here to live with us. But a month passed, she is still here. The other two (sons) never said a word. She did not either. People always tend to bully the kinder one. She took care of the other two's kids, only not my Shuoshuo.*
> **WH:** *Why?*
> **Guo Qinqin:** *I don't know. God knows. I think she just doesn't like me…*

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[1] Li Yue's (family 12) husband and mother passed away on the same day in 2019, a month before my visit. Her husband's health started to deteriorate four years ago when she was still in Wuhan city taking care of Zhou Hen, one of her grandchildren. She then came home for her husband. After the funerals, Li Yue lived temporarily with Zhou Bo's wife Guo Qinqin and grandson Zhou Shuo in the new house the couple built.

In this quote, Guo said that she invited Li Yue to come to live with them out of care and understanding for her bereavement. However, she felt hurt as her care did not get the response she wanted. Then, on the fifth day of my stay, I witnessed Guo's discontent finally explode. At lunch, she and Li Yue had a quarrel – a very unpleasant conversation in which Guo Qinqin explicitly expressed to Li Yue her resentment and demands. She stated that if Li Yue wanted to live with them, it was fine but the other two sons should give compensatory maintenance. The conversation sounded polite and civil but stony cold and distant – she used the honorific "you" to refer to her mother-in-law throughout the conversation and emphasised that she would never "abuse" her. She stated her demand in an unrelenting manner with words full of implied condemnation, complaint and even threat, leaving Li Yue painfully mortified and embarrassed. Throughout the conversation, Li Yue stared at the floor and barely said a word. Later, when I was alone with Li Yue, she was apologetic for letting me witness the "disgrace" of their family. Then, she revealed to me the reasons why she thought Guo Qinqin was so discontented:

> *I know, she is not happy that I took care of the other two grandchildren but not her Shuoshuo. You know, I took care of Zonghao (eldest sons' son) for many years, at that time the twin brothers were still young (unmarried).*

> *That daughter-in-law (He Xiao, Zhou Tao's wife), the one lives in town now, is a city girl. She is from the suburb of Wuhan. Her parents were fiercely against the marriage, saying that Enshi is a poor mountainous place. Then she was pregnant, but her mother called and said no way. Her parents even claimed to sue us. They did not get the marriage certificate because her mother held her 'hukou' (household registration) and refused to give it to her. Only when Henhen (He Xiao's daughter) was six, and He Xiao's mother started to soften and they got the certificate… When Henhen was born, they (He Xiao and Zhou Tao) worked in Wuhan. I thought, I need to go there and help with the childcare. I had no choice. The heat in Wuhan was unbelievable, and I knew no single person there. The situation was like this. A daughter-in-law from such a remote place… and if I do not help them and give them a chance to earn some money; if they do not have the apartment now in the town…. If the daughter-in-law runs away, then it's doomed. We (with her husband) made the decision, that I went to Wuhan to take care of Henhen and he stayed at home for Shuoshuo (Guo Qinqin's son)… This one (Guo Qinqin) likes to blab and calculate. She is a good home maker… Her tough personality was only because of her bitter childhood. Her father died early and mother remarried. You see, I did good to one but neglected the other. That's my bad, but what can I do?*

You see, what can I do with what she just said… She means that the other two need to give money. How can I even open my month – they already bought a lot of things for me, food and cloth. In the Spring Festival, they will all come home, I will propose to move to the old house and live by myself… Do not worry. Do not worry. I eat alone – rice or porridge, sooner or later. I decide myself. It will even be better. It's better for everyone.

Here we see an altruistic mother-in-law who found herself caught in the middle because she could only "do good to one". She compliantly endured her daughter-in-law's public censure and decided to live alone in the old house. On the other side, we see a daughter-in-law whose feelings were hurt because she deemed her mother-in-law to be biased. Apparently, Li Yue was highly reflexive about the relationship with her daughter-in-law and rightly sensed her dissatisfaction, and accepted it as reasonable and fair. She then blamed herself for everything but at the same time felt that there was no alternative. When Li Yue said "do not worry", she was comforting me – probably because I looked concerned. But it might well be she was comforting herself that she would be just fine as long as the family was good.

If we move beyond the point of pointing figures or apportioning blame and dive into the emotional world of Li Yue and Guo Qinqin, we can ask some more fundamental questions about the implications of such tensions. To begin with, the ultimate "cause" seemed to be that Li Yue took care of two grandchildren but not another because Li Yue tried to save Zhou Tao's marriage, which she considered was riskier. It was likely a hard decision for the old couple because it was clear that they (Li Yue, at least) were aware that another daughter-in-law might be unhappy because of this. Accordingly, they weighed the situation and made the expedient decision to divide their resources to each small family. For Li Yue, Zhou Tao and He Xiao's marriage was riskier than Zhou Bo and Guo Qinqin's, not only because of the opposition of He Xiao's parents,[1] but also because He Xiao was a "city girl"[2] and "from a remote place" (while Guo Qinin was born in a rural village nearby).

It seems that in Li Yue's view, the stability of a marriage depends on economic, social, and geographical distance between the two parties but not necessarily their romantic

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[1] The reasons behind He Xiao parents' opposition were also narrated by Li Yue as economic, social and geographical ones.

[2] He Xiao was not strictly a 'city girl'. She was from a suburban village near Wuhan City. Her father was a migrant worker, and her mother was a farmer and housewife.

bond.[1] Li Yue was further convinced that helping He Xiao with childcare was imperative for saving their marriage because it would allow the young couple to save money and buy an apartment. She parted from her husband, with whom she had a profound attachment, and went to a strange place alone for more than seven years. She believed she had no other choice, otherwise the Xifu (daughter-in-law) might "run away". The risk was real and imperative to Li Yue. On other occasions, she revealed to me that she only considered such conflicts to be innocuous trifles because she already felt very lucky and proud that her three sons all "found good wives" – she referred to Wu Ping's family as a devastating, pitiful and unfortunate case in contrast.

Li Yue's feelings were shared by many of the elderly I met in the fieldwork, so was the mindset of Guo as the daughter-in-law. Between elder parents and the daughters-in-law there was often tension, distance, distrust, misunderstanding and alienation. The fear of losing the daughter-in-law or not finding one was real for many elderly people who had sons. In the meantime, they also felt it was difficult to build trusting and intimate relationships with the daughters-in-law. The focus of tension was often between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law but such tension also manifests more broadly between the bigger family (the three-generational family) and the small family (the nuclear family of the middle generation). The father-in-law is often "on the side" with his wife and, more or less, in an adversarial relationship with the daughter-in-law. The man "in-between" with the role of the son and the husband, however, is often complicatedly involved in the tension and sometimes swings between sides. The crucial and not yet fully answered questions are: why are their emotions and relationships patterned in this way? What are the social underpinnings, institutional arrangements, and cultural conditions behind such family rifts? Where do fear, risks, and feelings of precariousness, distance, distrust and alienation come from, and in what sense are they "real"? In the following sections, I put these emotions back into the socioeconomic context and examine them from a mediated perspective.

5.2 Mediated Mistrust and Misogyny
5.2.1 Precarious rural marriage and the fear of the elderly

While I was watching television with the rest of the family after dinner, a sudden burst of laughter came from the grandmother Yang Xiuju (family 4), who was amused by a short video on her WeChat Moment posted by one of her peers. She said it was so funny and then played it again to us. It was something like a short sitcom played by actors

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[1] In my later conversations with He Xiao. She revealed to me that the (romantic) feeling between her and Zhao Tao was very strong so they made up their mind to get married despite her parents' fierce opposition.

speaking dialect in everyday rural settings. In the video, a man was farming and a woman came by, suggesting that he should go back home immediately because some man had bought his wife a golden necklace. Later, the same woman came by and saw the man had literally carried his wife on his back while farming, saying that "now she could not run away" – exaggerated canned laughter was heard and the logo of Douyin appeared as it was shared from Douyin.

Yang Xiuju's husband was also amused by this video. I asked why they found this particularly funny. "Because it is so realistic – you need to watch closely in case the wife runs away. So many divorces today", Yang Xiuju said. Her husband added: "it's just the kind of things that could happen in villages. Ironic rural stuff". Clearly, carrying one's wife on one's back while farming is by no means 'realistic' in a rural village. However, Xiuju and her husband found this realistic, ironic and typically rural. It was possible that what they identified as "real" and "ironic" in rural life were, as they stated, "many divorces today" and that "wives run away".

In a sense, their worries are real. Since the late 1950s, the crude divorce rate of China continued to rise and has accelerated since the new millennium, from 0.98‰ in 2001 to a remarkable 3.36‰ in 2019 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). In recent years, the rural "*guanggun*" (bachelor, 光棍) problem has drawn great public and scholarly attention and concern. Studies show that it is increasingly hard for rural men to find a wife and that divorce is also common (F. Chen, 2013; D. Wang, 2014; Y. Wei & Jiang, 2007; H. Yang & Ouyang, 2013). Some sociologists hold that the difficulty of rural men's marriage is a "structural" problem. They argued that rural young women tend to be located in an "advantageous" position in the marriage market, not only because men are outnumbered because of the stubborn boy preference and the "One Child Policy", but also because rural women tend to "marry up" with men who are higher on the social-economic ladder, leaving poor rural men in a deprived position (Gui & Yu, 2010; Y. Liu, 2011, 2015; Y. Wang, 2002).

Though the figures from the National Bureau of Statistics were not likely known by or made sense to the villagers in my fieldwork, divorce and the difficulty of getting married were strongly felt and widely discussed. For the elderly, fear and condemnation were the most common feelings. As mentioned in Chapter 1, for rural families, this happens in the rare cases where people do not have son(s) since the son still plays a crucial role in carrying the family line and providing old-age support. Under the structure of the patriarchal three-generational family, I found it is common that the elderly worry deeply about their son(s)' marriage, fearing they cannot find a spouse or end up with a divorce. They counted the number of divorces among younger people in

the neighbourhood to me with a sigh and a sense of nostalgia. Some elder men even said that the government should make some laws to ban "casual divorce". They also complained to me that the expenses of marriage continued to go up and there were still many single "healthy and sound" men in the neighbourhood who "cannot find a wife". For example, grandfather Jiang Li (family 9) said to me, sentimentally:

> *Time is different, and I no longer understand it. Today marriage is like children's game. No one is responsible anymore. Young couples have a fight and then the women leaves for good, no matter if the children are crying. It is very common here, indeed. I do not know about the situation in the cities. I guess more or less the same (then he asked me about the situation in the UK)… There are at least eight divorces I know just in this area. It is hard, for the older ones. You earn money for a whole life, prepare the bride prices and build the house for them, but they might end up with divorce in a blink. Old people can only be more attentive and coax the young women to stay, or your grandson might grow up without a mother. It is difficult to find a wife anyway. I can count a dozen men who are single in their forties or late thirties and they are all fine lads! In the past, no matter if you are crippled or blind, you always find a wife, better or worse. You see, your aunt (my relative – the gatekeeper) was so worried about her son last year. Now she is so content and happy as Pingyi (my aunt's son) got married this year. But how can she ever relax! The bitter days have just begun for her.*

However, I soon found that far from immediate local experiences or being purely shaped by demographic and economic structures, their rather negative and pessimistic perceptions and feelings towards marriage and divorce were largely configured by the "mediated reality" which I discuss in the next section.

5.2.2 Demonizing young women

Divorce and the high expense of marriage were popular everyday topics in both Golden Arch and Pear Tree. I found that some phrases and sayings about marriage and bride prices were repeatedly mentioned by different people. For example, many used catchy phrases like "ten thousands of the purple, thousands of the red and the green"[1] (wanzi *qianhong yipianlv*, 万紫千红一片绿), "a house and a car and a fortune" (*fangzi chezi*

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[1] This was originally a rural saying to describe the high bride price in Shandong province (far away from my fieldwork site). Purple, red and green are the colours of different Chinese notes. It totals around 150,000 yuan.

piaozi, 房子车子票子) or "cry if you have two sons" (*liangge erzi kuyichang*, 两个儿子哭一场) to illustrate their points about high bride prices. Some told me that they learned them from their smartphones while sometimes they were not sure about the source. However, when I asked about the bride price of their own sons and daughters or close relatives, they often admitted that it was fair and moderate – as an exception in the high bride price market they deemed to be 'cruel but realistic'. There seemed to be a discrepancy between these catchy sayings and the life they "actually live".[1]

As the time I spent in the villages grew and my degree of involvement in village life deepened, a loose village network where various forms of media content circulated and were disseminated started to emerge. These mediated experiences have been largely enabled and facilitated by more affordable smartphones and the thriving digital content industry in recent years. The themes that were popular, particularly among middle-aged, elder people and younger men, concerned about divorce and the high expense of marriage. Some were sitcom-like short videos, played by amateur actors (very likely originating from rural or small towns) hired by agencies of the MCNs (multi-channel networks) (Shi et al., 2020; Topklout, 2019), others were tabloid-like short pieces with sensational titles and images. Titles like "*good news! The state will allocate wives to 30 million "guang gun" (bachelors)!*",[2] "*Unbelievable! 300 yuan, bring a Burma wife home*", "*How much is the bride price in 34 provinces – you cannot believe which is the lowest*", "*Wedding Day, the bride refused to step out of the car because red envelopes were too small – the groom slammed the door and went away*" were common ones that were widely circulated and constantly reposted and retold. All of these tended to explicitly or covertly depict young women in a highly instrumental manner as the ultimate reason for men's failure in marriage.

Moreover, within the loose network of village acquaintances, various forms of media content were only circulated and disseminated via online platforms but also profoundly woven into people's lives through everyday occasions such as encounters in farming, shopping, funerals and weddings. The following was a conversation between people at the same table at a funeral I attended with grandmother Zhou Biyang (age 62, family 1) in Golden Arch village. It was towards the end of the year and many young people returned from work for the upcoming Spring Festival. One of the men (A) in his 30s

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[1] Here I am not saying that the bride price was not relatively high (compared to the past and with region differences). Instead, my point is that there has clearly been a discrepancy between their lived experiences and the mediated one. More importantly, the feelings and attitudes towards their own immediate experiences of marriage expense and general marriage expenses also involve discrepancies and feelings of ambivalence.

[2] Slang expression for bachelor, implying they are ruffians.

was watching Douyin and started to talk to the man next to him about the sitcom-like video he had just watched. Then other people joined the conversation.

> *Young Man (A): Check this out. This woman got beaten.*
>
> *Young Man (B): What happened?*
>
> *Young Man (A): She accepted the gifts but turned the man off.*
>
> *Young Man (B): Well deserved! (Laughs)*
>
> *Middle-aged Woman (C): Let me have a look… Oh. Poor woman. But today many young women are indeed shameless.*
>
> *Zhou Biyang: Yes. Yes. "zuan qianyan qule" (only care about money, 钻钱眼去了). Men as well.*
>
> *Middle-aged Man (D): Not a big deal! The other day, the news said that a man killed a woman because the woman refused to return the bride price or something.*
>
> *Elder Man (E): What can you do? Nowadays, the "xingshi" (形势, situation) of divorce is here. His family condition is good, but I want an even better one – there are always richer men. So there are so many divorces.*
>
> *Middle-aged Woman (C): Yes. For example, you earn 10,000 yuan (per month), but I want a man earns 20,000. Just yesterday, on Douyin, I saw a woman, insisted on having a divorce. She had another man outside. I say, the small boy was the most pitiful – only 2-years-old. How cold was that woman. The mother-in-law cried without tears in the end… Her son was almost 35. A divorced man cannot find a wife that easy. Women would be easier…*
>
> *Young Man (A): Yes. There are 30 million "guang gun" (bachelors) in China now.*

In this conversation, young women were depicted as evil, covetous, inordinately materialistic and heartless in marriage and family life who could easily abandon a husband and children for higher-class and wealthier men. They were presented as the ultimate causes of suffering and unfortunate not only for men, but also for the parents-in-law and young children. Even violence and crime were largely legitimated and defended in the narrative. As cultural theorists have forcefully argued, systems of representation have never been neutral or detached, but a place of struggle and domination. It is far from a realistic mirror of "reality". Rather, it is highly selective and gains leverage and power through controlling visibility and generating a preferred reading (Ang, 1986, 1996; Fiske, 1992; Hall, 1997; Morley, 1992). Here, we see the media content the villagers consumed played a crucial role in stereotyping and normalising a particular version of women in "real life" and structuring the ways in which the high divorce rate could be understood, interpreted, and explained.

If we go beyond the level of the representation and text itself and enter the "moment of reception" (Press & Tripodi, 2021), we can further anchor this media content which has targeted a newly discovered "sinking market" (*xiachen shichang* 下沉市场)[1] in the meaning-making process of rural people's everyday life. Beginning with a sensational moment (a woman getting beaten) in the "virtual world", this conversation was quickly directed to the issues that mattered in the rural villagers' everyday life, such as divorce, high marriage expenses, and infidelity. Different genders and generations in the community were involved and they were all actively engaged in this meaning-making process. Their stand points were differed slightly. However, when fear and anxiety of divorce, financial loss and detriment of masculinity flooded into the conversation, a consensus seemed to emerge as the dialogue advanced.

Middle-aged woman C was relatively sympathetic towards the woman who had been beaten in the video and Zhou Biyang pointed out that men could also be avaricious. Comparing the younger men's entitlement and indignation, the elder man E seemed to feel more prostrate and powerless in facing the situation. Nonetheless, as the conversation advanced, divorce and misfortune in marriage found a scapegoat. The reference to "30 million *guang gun*"[2] in young man A's last quote first appeared in a newspaper in 2004 and has now been widely circulated in different media forms ever since. It was a conjecture by some demographers that there could be around 30 million single men by 2020. This narrative was later reappropriated frequently by sociologists and policymakers concerned with the "problem of rural bachelors" mentioned earlier. There are 1,650,000 search results of web pages and articles using this phrase on Baidu alone.[3] When young man A stated the "truth" of unbalanced sex ratio with an unquestionable and authoritative tone as evidence of men's plight, he seemed to be endowed with the power of jurisdiction over who were the visible and true victims.

Similarly, the middle-aged woman C and the middle-aged man D also turned to media content they encountered as reference points; both tried to stereotype and normalise young women as the ones who should be blamed when it comes to family miseries.

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[1] Sinking market: recent marketing jargon referring to the mass, 'to be developed' market of lower-income households in small towns and rural areas in China.

[2] The earliest coverage of "30 million *guang gun*" was from *China Youth Daily* (7th March 2004). It said that, according to officers of the Population and Family Planning Commission and demographers, there would be around 30 million single men by 2020 due to the unbalanced sex ratio. See: https://www.chinanews.com/n/2004-03-07/26/410407.html

[3] Baidu is China's biggest search engine.

What we can observe is something very similar to what Banet-Weiser described as "popular misogyny" (2018, p. 3), which is expressed and practised on various media platforms and demands to narrativize man's plight as the fault of women. The highly misogynist media content the villagers consumed played a central role in structuring the ways in which high divorce rates could be understood and interpreted, thereby further instrumentalising and normalising young women in conventional gender roles. In this process, the participants of the conversation actively mobilised the symbols and meanings the media industry produced and helped themselves and others make sense of the social predicaments they faced in everyday life. As Fiske pointed out, it is a process of audiencing which is produced "through lived experience, of their own sense of their social identities and social relations, and of the pleasures that this process gave them" (1992, p. 353).

These mediated moments are crucial to the formation of the rural elderly's feelings towards their family members. As I demonstrated in Chapter 4, the elderly (especially the older elderly) were not active users or direct audiences of the content that was popular on social media platforms. However, they actively engaged in interpersonal encounters and occasions where people talked about their everyday issues and concerns with media's more or less visible presence. Therefore, the rural elderly still lived a mediated life through their everyday participation in the local "offline" social life. Media has been profoundly woven into the web of their lives – albeit sometimes indirectly. Such mediated interactions answered and responded to their deepest and innermost anxieties and fears.

Moreover, just like many other conversations, we can see that in the above, the middle-aged and the young people seemed to dominate the themes, directions and tone of the conversation with powerful endorsement from today's media that was readily available to (and targetted at) them. They have greater authority in defining their reality as they had closer access to the media-rich modernity. Therefore, the elderly were not only living an already power-laden mediated life, but also a "guarded" media culture in which the younger people around them acted as gatekeepers. All these powers have shaped the ways in which they understand family life – in this case, the immediate and overwhelming risk of their adult children's marriage and family and its cause – young women.

Such ambivalence of fear and resentfulness that the elderly held towards young women in general profoundly reconfigured the ways in which they interacted with their own daughters-in-law. Fear was the dominant feeling of the elderly when their adult children's marriage was still in place and it was expressed primarily in economic and

pecuniary concerns. For example, Guo Hua (family 2) secretly revealed to me that she was not very satisfied with daughter-in-law Jin Jing's frequent online shopping and extravagant spending on her new iPhone. Still, she generously offered 100 yuan when Jin Jing showed her longing for a kind of relatively expensive snack. Guo Hua said to me: "*No other ways. **They** need to spend money otherwise they become unhappy. I am fine with working more, as long as those two (the young couple) are good*". Notably, she used the plural "they" instead of a specific "she" (Jin Jing) in this sentence, implying that she tended to generalize her daughter-in-law as one of the young women who needed to be carefully catered to with their unconstrained material desires.

If we return to Li Yue's story with her daughters-in-law, we can see that Li Yue's perception of whose marriage was riskier was based on the understanding of who might be more susceptible to economic hardships and have more power leverage in marriage because of her economic and social background (in this case, the "city girl" Hu Xiao). Similarly, when the grandfather Ran Minyao (family 17) explained to me why he thought his neighbour's marriage had failed, he said: "*It's not worth making a fuss – the girl ran away. It is just that the poor lad did not make enough money*". The risk of marriage was primarily understood, evaluated and imagined by the elderly based on a presumption that young women tend to be materialistic. When an adult sons' marriage broke down, hatred and enmity toward daughters-in-law overtook the emotions of the elderly. As in Wu Ping's case, she and her husband explicitly described their two former daughters-in-law as "pure evil", "cruel", "extremely selfish" and suggested that they "never intend to settle down". As I demonstrated in this section, such mistrust of the elderly towards their daughters-in-law is far from inevitable or natural. Rather, it is a mediated reality that has been constructed and reinforced by media culture within a context of structured misogyny.

5.3 Daughters-in-law's Grievances

In the previous sections, I have demonstrated how the elderly's mistrust towards the daughter-in-law (and young women in general) has been mediated. In this section, I shift the analysis of the family rifts to the perspective of the daughters-in-law. I found that the daughters-in-law tended to feel resentment towards their parents-in-law, especially the mother-in-law. Further, I demonstrate that such resentment and grievance is again a mediated configuration, articulated through a particular socioeconomic structure.

5.3.1 Melodramatic short videos and the crisis of care

As mentioned earlier, many older people cohabit with their daughter-in-law.[1] However, it impressed me that their relationships are physically close but emotionally distant, sometimes even tense and conflictual. If the daughter-in-law was at home, a typical night would see the grandparents sit down watching children's programmes with their grandchildren (or just sitting and resting) while their daughter-in-law was also in the living room,[2] but with her eyes on her smartphone. I had several nights like this with the families in the two villages. Most of the time the elderly and the daughter-in-law did not talk much with each other unless I asked questions and brought them in on one topic. More often than not, if I observed quietly, they interacted very little – the elderly watched television while the daughter-in-law was on her phone, which recreated different and separate spaces for them. The daughter-in-law did various things with the smartphone, sometimes scrolling shopping apps such as Pingduoduo,[3] hoping to buy something cheap and useful for her children, herself or the household, or watched short videos or dramas on their phones with volume set at a level only they could hear.

Once, during that kind of night, while Li Yue was watching a cartoon with grandchild Zongshuo, Guo Qinqin quietly sat and watched Douyin on her OPPO[4]. I approached and asked what she was watching. "Just the ordinary stuff. Family stuff. Sometimes the mother-in-law deliberately stirs up conflicts", she replied. When she said, "the mother-in-law deliberately stirs up conflicts", I took a glance on Li Yue – she was still watching TV without any facial change – I could not tell if she did not hear it or pretended not to. Then Guo Qinqin seemed to feel reluctant to explain further and suggested that she could send some of her favourites later. That night, she sent me a short video from Douyin.

It was a video posted by an account "Xiao Lan and the mother-in-law" which mainly posts self-directed[5] family situation plays. It was a rather popular account with 900,000

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[1] There were also some daughters-in-law who worked as migrant workers. However, some choose to work in a relatively closer place. Compared to their husbands, they returned to the rural home more often and stayed longer to take care of "family issues".

[2] Especially during winter when it was very cold, and the living room was the only heated room.

[3] A shopping app aimed at the 'sinking market' with its extremely low prices.

[4] As a mobile phone company targeted at lower-income population, OPPO has a very high market share. It is one of the most common brand used by my informants.

[5] More often than not, these short video were not self-directed but rather seemed to be. Uploaders might have begun to produce self-directed plays in the beginning but after initial success, they were often funded and employed by MCN agencies. The stories and scripts were often made under the supervision of the MCN. In my research on these short video, I encountered many identical scripts produced by different uploaders, indicating wide imitation in this industry and the production mode of such content.

followers and 6.88 million historical likes.[1] Nearly all 64 videos contained only three main characters – Xiao Lan, her husband Xiao Chao and her mother-in-law (sometimes also Xiao Chao's younger sister). The acting was rather unsophisticated, overwhelmingly focused on conversations (with nonstandard Mandarin) between the characters and the setting was almost all inside a typical rural house. The following is a sketch of the video she sent to me:

Xiao Lan went in and served food for her mother-in-law who stopped her with excoriation, complaining that Xiao Lan had no manners, serving food without calling her mother. Then Xiao Lan said with discontentment: "I really do not know where does your confidence come from, requiring me to call you mother? When Xiao Chao and I were newly married, you drove us away – you said that that house belonged to the elder brother. Even this we accepted. However, when I just had my children and Xiao Chao went out for his small business but lost hundreds of thousands of money. I thought, you can help me take care of the children so Xiao Chao and I can work and pay the debt. But you said no. You said you need to help the elder brother and had no time. Do you have any idea how hard we were? We worked day and night. Children were small. The elder (child) took care of the younger (child). Sometimes had food, sometimes hunger. So many times we came back home late, children fell asleep without dinner. Two small children snuggled together – do you know how heart-breaking that kind of scene was? Do you even know? Do you have any idea how hard that was and how I endured all the hardship? I really do not know where your confidence comes from, asking me to call you mother. I already handed the food to you – what else do you want?"

The mother-in-law was furious. She called upon Xiao Chao from upstairs and said: "Look what kind of "good" Xifu you brought in. Gave me this kind of food with her bloody poker face and refused to call me mother". Xiao Chao then started to lecture his mother with a seemingly sensible but upbraiding tone: "Mother, you should know our economic condition. You merely eat what we eat and we never abuse you. You often say that the elder brother is more filial. But if he truly was, he wouldn't send you over to us when you were ill. How come you never see that the reason why you eat well with the elder brother was just because you were still capable of working, you can help with domestic chores and take care of his children. But now, you are old and cannot move, then he sent you to us. We did not say a word. For these days you were

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[1] By June 2021.

sick and I was out working, it was Xiao Lan who took care of you. Why she refused to call you mother, don't you understand yourself? How did you treat us? You have good thinking yourself". Then, Xiao Chao walked away and went to comfort his wife who was upset in the bedroom. The video finished after Xiao Chao apologised for his mother to Xiao Lan and Xiao Lan expressed her feelings of "I can treat her well but just could not call her mother".

During my fieldwork, I found that among young and middle-aged women, melodramatic short videos occupied much of their leisure time. By melodramatic short video, I loosely refer to short videos on various digital media platforms that are themed around every day and family issues with melodramatic characteristics. They include self-directed sitcom plays, edited short clips from television dramas or reality TV, or vlogs narrating melodramatic stories. In these videos, a typical "villain" is the mother-in-law. There are popular tags such as "evil mother-in-law" (*e'popo*, 恶婆婆), "*po-xi* problems" (mother-in-law/daughter-in-law problems, 婆媳问题) on short video platforms such as Douyin, Watermelon Video or Volcano Video. There are also many accounts specifically focused on rural mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations that my women informants followed. For example, in the viewing history on the Volcano Video App of daughter-in-law Guo Zhen (family 9), there was a short video titled "the status of the wife".

> **The mother-in-law:** *Tie your hair up! Why are you always so sloppy? You're married, remember!*
> **The daughter-in-law:** *(Tying her hair obediently and looking aggrieved)*
> **The mother-in-law (calling a relative):** *She is real a pain in the ass, my lazy daughter-in-law! I cannot stand her anymore. She spends a lot of money and doesn't earn much. She can't even take good care of the children. I don't even know why my son chose her…*
> **The daughter-in-law (to her husband):** *I don't know what to do. I have tried my best. Does she have any idea how late I stay up working? That's why I don't have time to groom myself! The baby cried all night, but she never thought to come and help…*

Such melodramatic short videos were widely enjoyed by women who shared their roles as daughters-in-law. The narratives in these videos were organized around everyday hardship, including housing, risky and burdensome entrepreneurship, debt, overwork and lack of assistance in childcare. In the video sent to me by Guo, the "value" of having a mother-in-law was brutally pointed out by the man Xiao Chao – his brother only

treated their mother well because she was "still capable of working" and "could help with domestic chores and take care of his children". In the video "the status of the wife", the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law were also pointing fingers towards each other because of money, work, and childcare.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the issue of domestic labour remained largely untouched in the socialist revolution. Work of social reproduction has long been shouldered by women and remained unacknowledged, unappreciated and unremunerated. From the 1980s, with the market reform in the shift to "patriarchal capitalism" (B. Meng & Huang, 2017), women continued to take a pivotal role in the production realm as a market force. However, the Party-sate has been reluctant to correct discrimination in the workplace or implement radical social policies to correct gender inequity across social spheres (Y. Chen, 2020; B. Meng & Huang, 2017). The burden of women – specifically working-class rural women – reached an unprecedent level while their hardship has been largely invisible in terms of policy, public debate, or any other structural levels. Moreover, the welfare system based on the urban-rural divide and *hukou* system resulted in unfair allocations of resources and heavy burdens on the poorest members of society. Issues that have no voice in the public sphere are thereby rendered invisible as public issues.

However, though there seemed to be no accountable party in sight, these problems still needed to be dealt with one way or another. These problems were pushed to families and further to the mother-in-law as the "natural" caretaker of the family based on conventional gender norms. When these social problems are not appropriately addressed collectively, and when the concrete, unbearable struggle must be faced, the media has largely redirected the responsibility onto mothers-in-law and framed their help as natural, a necessary sign of caring motherhood and a precondition for old-age support from children. It should be noted that although the father-in-law was less a theme in these videos, the daughters-in-law's grievances were nevertheless directed to them to some extent as well. Some daughters-in-law complained to me that their fathers-in-law did not help solve their problems and even added to their care burden. However, here I am not redirecting the blame back to young women who tend to *feel* their parents-in-law were responsible for their misery. I discuss how such feelings have been evoked and mediated below.

5.3.2 Imagined moments and the feeling of aversion

The second day I was alone with Guo Qinqin, I asked what she thought of the video she had sent me and why she liked it.

Guo Qinqin: It was real. Don't you think? Of course, I know they were acting. But the stories were very true. Sometimes also in Law programmes, Douyin and Watermelon Video. Bad po-xi relationships, disputes between brothers, and how the mother-in-law deals with these things. Stuff like this.

WH: Also in television dramas?

Guo Qinqin: Yes, but I do not watch much of them. Too long. You just got started when you finally have time and your son wanted to watch his. There were short clips of television dramas on Douyin as well. I only watch when I am done with my things. But I enjoyed it. Many were well said. Sometimes I got increasingly angry as watching – the popo were really awful. It jieqi (解气, vents anger) as well and says people's words from the heart (xinlihua, 心里话).

WH: How?

Guo Qinqin: For example, the one I sent you was about the mother-in-law buguanxiaode (不管小的, does not help the young). In general, if the sons got married, then the old ones just let them. They care about nothing and just let you, the young, shoulder everything. Just like grandma (Li Yue), she was like that. She does not think if you still have rice in your rice barrel the second day… My son, Shuoshuo, learned to cook at age eight. No other way. You see, I have to farm the land till late. He came home from school, so I asked him to put rice in the cooker, add water and press start. He did well after a few failures. It was just that, no other way.

Just like Guo, daughters-in-law often explained to me that they enjoyed watching because it was "realistic" and "well said". They resonated with the narration of their own plight and the "inaction" of their mothers-in-law. One woman, Wu Xiang, in her 40s, said to me with a strong feeling of injury:

When I first came (married) here, I was just nineteen. Now we built this house from a shack, and two boys went to high schools. She (her mother-in-law) did nothing, not even hold the boys while I cook. So, I say they (videos) were well made. Some of them are not real, just acting – but "haokan" (enjoyable, 好看). When you open the comments, you will see a lot of people are saying the same thing. Those mothers-in-law are just the same.

Wu Xiang, family 8

As Ien Ang observed, "popular pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure of recognition" (1986, p. 20). The reason why these daughters-in-law liked to watch these videos was

clearly because they identified with the stories – seeing themselves and their mothers-in-law in the videos and feeling the videos were real and close to life. I want to further the argument that such recognition is fuelled by imagination which stirs up emotions. Realism is crucial in understanding the audience's reception (Ang, 1986; Radway, 1991), that is, to identify something as familiar, real and believable in watching or reading media texts. However, mediated realism cannot be achieved without some form of imagination.

As Illouz (2012) rightly pointed out, imagination is a dimension of real life but not the opposite. It is not about using the mind to form something that does not exist at all. On the contrary, in most cases, imagination is "the capacity to substitute for the 'real' experience of the real object, by feeling sensations that are close to what they *would be* in real life. Imagination thus does not annul reality, but, on the contrary, tries to imitate it by relying on the sensations, feelings, and emotions which make present that which is absent" (2012, p. 200). As seen in the case of many daughters-in-law, imagination was exercised when they engaged with melodramatic short videos. In recounting their own stories, we see that those videos not only evoked strong identification, but also enabled them to relive their own painful and angry experiences through means of their imagination.

Crucially, such imagination features strong aversion towards the mother-in-law. Such videos tend to depict mothers-in-law as extremely tyrannical, overbearing and imperious. For example, in the video "the status of the wife" mentioned earlier, the mother-in-law despised her daughter-in-law greatly, scolding her in a bossy manner for not being tidy and wife-like. In the video Guo sent me, Xiao Lan's mother-in-law was also extremely spiteful. However, in my fieldwork observations, mothers-in-law rarely acted in this way. On the contrary, ageing mothers-in-law were rather humble and tolerant. Nevertheless, most daughters-in-law found these videos "realistic" and largely an imitation of real life. Why was this? A woman called Jiang Ju, in her 30s, said: "I think they (the mothers-in-law) are just pretending to be nice, for their sons. Behind your back, you don't know how she swears at you… the videos just told the truth". Jiang Ju's experience was shared by many other daughter-in-law participants. Here, we see the *absent but possible* "evil mother-in-law" was called upon through such mediated imagination.

Examining the affective nature of such imagination, it clearly tends to visualize the "areas of internal psychological disturbance"(Ang, 1986, p. 62). In my interviews with daughters-in-law, the term "*shuang*" was frequently used. It can simply be understood as "feeling good", or more precisely, a feeling of a thrill often when "justice" is done

in a sometimes unrealistic or unacceptable manner, with a slap to the mistress's face, for example. Such feelings are largely made possible by the textual structures of such videos with extreme and stereotyped characters, such as the evil mother-in-law and the virtuous daughter-in-law with a drastic and ultimately triumphal confrontation. In Guo Qinqin's account, "*jieqi*" can be understood as the feeling of "*shuang*". Connecting to earlier sections, feelings of anger, frustration and being overwhelmed in an unbearable everyday life seemed to find an outlet through a largely imagined vicious mother-in-law.

Such imagination is further facilitated by the genre-attributes of melodramatic short videos including their length and their overwhelming focus on conflictual encounters. As mentioned earlier, apart from numerous short "self-directed" videos, melodramatic short videos also include short clips from television programmes, including melodramas, law programmes, talk shows and reality shows. After the "clean up the screen" campaign in the 2000s and the overarching agenda set by the state for promoting a "harmonious society", many popular and sensational television programmes that exploited emotional turmoil in the private realm were "cleaned up" (Bai, 2014). In order to achieve high ratings, television producers might still put ordinary people's "ugly private matters" on screen, albeit in a fashion that could "correct" and "redirect" people's problematic feelings back onto the right socialist track (X. Chen et al., 2021). A similar logic has also shaped melodramas – there might well have been egregious behaviours and villains but with a constant socialist or Confucianist pedagogy and an ultimately moral ending (Y. Deng et al., 2013; Kong & Hawes, 2014).

However, as I will demonstrate in the next section, the audience for these programmes were mainly mothers-in-law while the audience for the *short clips cut from these programmes* were often daughters-in-law. This slight but significant difference is crucial in understanding their different emotional patterns. I found that the original programmes changed their focus after being appropriated by short video platforms with very short time limits[1] and purposive editing. These videos often begin with dramatic expressions – an outrageous condemnation, a heartbroken confession or a controversial statement. The stories are then unpacked, continuing with a focus on verbal utterances and the sensational. The content is directed prominently to the interpersonal, to others, and to the conflicts between the intimate members of the family. Therefore, compared

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[1] On popular video-sharing platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou, there is strict and hierarchical access to the length of the video. For example, for Douyin, it was only one minute for ordinary users and longer for users with more followers.

to seemingly everlasting soap operas, melodramatic short videos, in their condensed and abridged form, focus on the most discordant moments of family life and deliberately omit more mundane and peaceful moments. The primary focus is on moments of tension. The harmonious and pedagogic elements are largely removed, and what remains is unchangeable and absolute feelings of grievance, anger and antagonism, particularly between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.

Therefore, these sophisticatedly tailored short clips were able to evoke imagined scenes and enable young women to taste the feeling of *shuang* that they might not have otherwise experienced in real life. Intense emotions were activated and stirred up by this mediated imagination, more precisely by a highly selective, carefully designed, commodified and mass-manufactured mediated imagination that underlined domestic interpersonal conflicts. One notable point was that a day after my conversation with Guo about the short video, she quarrelled with Li Yue, as documented earlier. She seemed to be encouraged somehow by Xiaolan's video, and our talk about that video and her oppressed feelings. Any connection between the two events was not definite but still conceivable. Many other daughters-in-law admitted that after they watched the Douyin, they often felt sick just seeing their mothers-in-law. It could be imagined that there might be some moments when the daughter-in-law was struck by feelings of resentment while watching these videos, and then carried that feeling into her everyday cohabitation and interaction with her mother-in-law.

5.4 The Compromising Elderly

So far, I have discussed and analysed the family rifts that have centred around daughters-in-law and the elderly. However, just as with the quarrel between Guo Qinqin and Li Yue documented at the beginning, the elderly always tend to be the ones who compromise in conflicts. Under such a delicate situation, Li Yue finally decided to go back to the old house and live alone to mitigate the tension in the family's relationships. Obviously, the daughter-in-law Guo Qinqin's discontent was strongly felt by Li Yue. She further generalised Guo's feelings to her other sons and daughters-in-law and came up with a plan that was "better for everyone". Similarly, I encountered many elderly people who were willing to live alone or made all kinds of compromises to maintain relative peace and harmony in the family.

However, as discussed in Chapter 2, scholars have found that, particularly during the 1990s and the early 2000s, the intergenerational conflict was grievous in rural China. Facing radical social changes, many older people refused to compromise, and some chose to die by suicide when they found their sons and daughters-in-law were reluctant

to give them respect and material support. However, as documented by Yan Yuxiang and others, more and more elderly people seem to have gradually "come to terms" with the situation, especially since the new millennium. As discussed in Chapter 4, I argue that this is closely related to the mediated reinterpretation of bitterness as virtues which gives meaning to their willing sacrifice and inferiority. On top on the meaningful bitterness that drives the elderly, I want to discuss here the mediated emotional experiences of the elderly women who had a "double identification" as daughters- and mothers-in-law.

As discussed, Li Yue willingly and compliantly accepted everything as seen in her reaction in the quarrel, from her defence of her daughter-in-law when explaining the situation to me and her decision to live alone. One sentence was crucial here in Li Yue's utterance, that she was "also once a daughter-in-law". In my fieldwork, almost all the elderly women were proud of how they treated their daughters-in-law, in contrast to how they were treated as daughters-in-law themselves. Their identification was two-fold – as a mother-in-law at present and having been a daughter-in-law in the past. I argue that this double identification was a profound historical and mediated cultural project and contributed greatly to the structure of feeling the elderly now shared.

When I finally got some time alone with Yang Chunmei (family 5, age 76), she revealed to me her bitter experiences when she was a young mother and a daughter-in-law. She married Zhen Deng when she was 19 years old and had their first son a year later and then the second son in 1964. It was the collective era and people worked collectively to earn work points. Chunmei and Zhen Deng both worked throughout the day. Zhen Deng's mother was in her late 60s and stayed at home due to her health condition. Chunmei told me one day that she came back from work and saw her older son who was still an infant crying with a pained expression on his face, while her mother-in-law "sat behind the door and ignored him".

> **Chunmei:** *She just let him. Careless to pick him up and said to me in a sarcastic tone to breastfeed him. She refused to take care of the kids...*[1] *I had to bring them with me working... When I first came here, I was just a girl and I do not know how to make cloth and shoes. She made cloth and she scolded me for this. I got yelled at for many things, cooking, farming and everything. But I was not afraid of them. Even once they beat me together. She and him (Zhen Deng) together. Beat me. I*

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[1] When I asked further about why her mother-in-law "ignored" her son, she softened her voice and told me that "this women" had 12 kids but only four survived to adulthood and she "hated kids and found them annoying".

beat them back, like crazy with my eyes closed… Later when she was old and sick, other people said that I could just leave her. It was even reasonable for me not to provide her with food and anything. But I treated her well. I took care of her for more than two years when she cannot move. I cooked for her and fed her. Carried her here and there like a baby. Bathed her. Sometimes even carried her out to get some sunshine. Her son and daughters? Did shit... Never mind, just as the people on the television said, 'good people have good karma' (haoren you haobao, 好人有好报).

In the long collective era in which my elderly informants spent most of their adulthood, the work of social reproduction largely stayed within the domestic realm and was shouldered primarily by the daughter-in-law who also needed to perform her "work" alongside men outside the home. Women earned fewer work points because they were seen to be "not as capable as men" and were not fully committed – they also needed to do the housework, childrearing, elderly care and make clothes and shoes for the whole family. Chunmei's story was instructive here, regarding the burden and workload she endured, her feelings of helplessness and resentment towards her mother-in-law – the only one she thought could help her out.

Similarly, Liu Xuan (family 14) shared similar experiences with her mother-in-law Yang Shi.

Liu Xuan: *She treated me awfully. She never thought that she still needed us (the daughters-in-law) to fushi (服侍, serve) her. People say that it is important for a girl to find a good mother-in-law. I was unlucky. I found such a bad one. I can bear a hard life. I only want a mother-in-law who can treat me a little better. When I was pregnant, she did not even talk to me. When I carried my older son on my back to get an abortion,[1] she cursed me to die. She often said to me that we were enemies in a previous life… but when out working (in another province), I was concerned (for her). Even though she treated me like this, I said, no matter what… I bought her milk, at least two crates a month. The oil, I asked Hu Shao to buy good ones for her. What's past was past. If I stick to what she did to me before, I can even turn my face against her. I gave birth to three kids and I never got her a single spoon of soup. Why do I have to be filial to her? I do not have to. But I thought what's past was past. The two words "zhong xiao" (忠孝，loyal and filial) are still needed. Be filial to the old ones is tianjing diyi (天经地义，natural and right). Just like today, taking care of the grandsons is tianjindiyi (with a self-mockery sneer).*

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[1] Because of the one-child policy.

In both Chunmei and Liu Xuan's accounts, we can see a narrative that they were burdened by their work inside and outside the family and heavily depended on the mother-in-law who "heartlessly" failed them. Filial still, they heartbrokenly found their filial piety had no emotional anchor. This can also be found in short clips that the daughter-in-law watched. However, when I asked Liu Xuan if she liked to watch '*po-xi*' drama on television, she denied it immediately with a defensive tone: "No. Why do I need to watch those? I know everything about *po-xi*. I will never treat my daughter-in-law like that".

She denied her engagement with the *po-xi* genre because she already knew "what it is about" and she "will never" mistreat her daughter-in-law. Though I cannot be certain whether she watched or not, it was evident that she knew what these dramas were about, from her own reception or from others'. Her defensiveness could be interpreted as her decisive act to draw a line between herself and the "evil mother-in-law" (*e'popo*, 恶婆婆) that was frequently presented in television dramas. By claiming she knew "everything about *po-xi*", she seemed to take her own experience as evidence that she would never mistreat her own daughter-in-law – they shared the same identity and she decided not to put another person in her once miserable position. That meant she was willing to try her best to help out her daughter-in-law, to share her burden and show her care. She did so in practise – albeit not enough to solve all problems since there were so many.

Liu Xuan's answer about *po-xi* drama was in a way a unique one,[1] since other elderly women tended to admit that their engagement with *po-xi* dramas or dramas about "family". Chunmei's case might be more representative.[2] She loved to watch television dramas "of the past" and "about family trifles" as she took the "people on the television" as a reference point. Notably, although both the mother- and daughter-in-law in my fieldwork liked to consume media products themed on *po-xi* and family trifles, elderly women tended to watch the full television programmes[3] on television but rarely saw

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[1] The family of Liu Xuan was among the poorest in the two villages. In my observation, she rarely watched television. She thought it cost electricity and she tended to fill her time with endless work. She was deeply worried that others (including me) might think she was not a good mother-in-law.

[2] Chunmei's husband even complained to me that how Chunmei "watched television drama till 3 o'clock in the morning". Then, Chunmei rolled her eyes and replied to her husband: "You have a problem? My work was all done".

[3] Although, as I discussed in Chapter 4, the elderly rarely watched full dramas to completion. Instead, they watched in their fragmented time. Here "full drama" is used to contrast with the selective "short clips" the young women liked to watch on their smartphones.

short videos or clips on smartphones. This is a significant difference because what the elderly watched and preferred were the "non-edited", "uncut" full programmes that met domestic tension head-on but returned constantly to socialist and Confucian morality including harmony, self-sacrifice, tolerance and reciprocity. By saying "good people have good karma" (*haoren you haobao*, 好人有好报), Chunmei imagined that her sacrifice and grievance could be atoned by a heroic and poetic justice to come.

Under such double identification that was rooted firmly in their life experiences and sustained by the mass-manufactured media products that widely circulate at individual and cultural levels nowadays, it was no wonder that despite their own mothers-in-law treating them badly, the elder women still tended to be filial daughters-in-law, and at the same time, struggled to be good mothers-in-law who could reduce the burdens of their sons and daughters-in-law. Liu Xuan told me she would love to die right after she raised her last grandson. She believed that only death could release her from the inescapable burden of "*caoxin*" (操心, worrying).

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to analysis the affective mediation of the family tension that has been centred around the relationship between the elderly parents (the mother-in-law, in particular) and the daughter-in-law. I found that in such tense family relationships, the elderly suffered greatly with feelings of insecurity, burnout, powerlessness, alienation and even anger. As discussed in Chapter 2, scholars within mainstream family studies regard such tension and its negative consequences as a constitutive part of the "elderly crisis". However, their arguments often focus largely on the power dynamics within the household. For example, some argue that such tension resulted from the rising status of young women, who now have more economic and cultural power and are at an advantage in the marriage market (Gui & Yu, 2010; Y. Liu, 2011, 2015; J. Wang & Hai, 2019; Y. Wang, 2002). Therefore, according to them, such an imbalance of power with the family has led to "intergenerational exploitation" (H. Yang & Ouyang, 2013) and the elderly's suffering. However, taking a critical approach that pays close attention to the mediated formation of emotions, I found such tension is a form of affective mediation that emerges within the context of structured misogyny, patriarchal family arrangements, and the systematic exploitation of the rural population under the crisis of care.

First, I found that behind such family rifts was largely feelings of mistrust and prejudice by the elderly parents towards their daughters-in-law and towards young women in general. The elderly parents tend to feel very worried about their sons' marriages –

fearing that they might end in divorce or without a wife. However, I found that their feelings were profoundly connected to the misogynist media culture that tends to depict young women as the causes of divorce and rural men's difficulty in building a family. With the rapid development of the digital content industry and the wide use of smartphones in villages, the elderly have been actively engaged with or surrounded by various misogynist media content that describes today's young women as materialist, mercenary, and cold-hearted. Under such circumstances, many elder parents have found it hard to truly trust and build intimacy with their daughters-in-law and family rifts tend to grow as a consequence.

Daughters-in-law, however, tend to hold great grievances towards their elderly parents, especially their mother-in-law. My study shows that many daughters-in-law enjoyed watching melodramatic short videos on their smartphones. These short videos are often centred on the topics of mother- and daughter-in-law tension in short, carefully edited plots. Under the narrative frame of such videos, the villain is often the mother-in-law who tends to act in an extremely overbearing and insensitive way and the story often ends with the (moral) victory of the daughter-in-law. As also discussed in Chapter 1, with very limited welfare provision and a very low income, the rural families are often caught up in severe life difficulty and crisis of care – they do not have enough resources for old-age support, or for childcare. According to persistent conventional gender norms, the work of care is still considered women's work. Therefore, I found the daughters-in-law in my fieldwork were largely at a point of burnout under strong life pressures. It is in such a context that the daughters-in-law found these video psychologically satisfying as they tended to redirect blame to the mother-in-law and framed the elderly's help as a natural and necessary sign of love. With such affective mediation, even when the mothers-in-law are not actually the "villain", the daughters-in-law tend to imagine them that way. Consequently, their relationships are characterised by distance, coldness, and hostility.

However, I further found that in such conflictual family relationships, it was the elderly who tended to compromise and sometimes swallow the pain by themselves. Connected to what was discussed in Chapter 4, the unedited media content (compared to the edited short videos younger people consume on smartphones) such as television drama have provided them with emotional resources to endure pain and maintain their sacrifice for the whole household. I found that, with past bitter experiences of being daughters-in-law themselves, the elderly women tended to feel profound sympathy for their daughters-in-law. Such double identification of being both daughter-in-law in the past and the mother-in-law in the present has also been sustained and evoked by the media content (mainly television drama) that the elderly women consume. However, endless

emotional caring risks the elderly women's mental health.

To conclude, I found that the above affective mediation of the tension between the elderly and the daughter-in-law is largely a product of persistent and *newly developed* patriarchy. Two important patriarchal arrangements – patrilocal residency and patrilineal inheritance – are still the main practises of rural families. Women are still customarily married out and join the communes of her husband's village, and having a son is considered essential for the family to a large extent. This is the institutional backdrop of such mediated tension between the elderly and the daughter-in-law. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 1, despite the fact that the socialist revolution has considerably empowered women since the 1950s, gendered labour segregation inside the family has generally gone unquestioned and unacknowledged (Davis, 2014; Hershatter, 2011; Judith, 1983; Phyllis, 1983; Wolf, 1985). Women – represented as both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law – are caught up in the same cage of the hegemonic gender structure that symmetrically burdens them with responsibility for social reproduction. In conjunction with these socioeconomic and institutional structure, the highly misogynist media culture has penetrated rural family life and perpetuated family rifts – although at the same time, they have provided temporary "solutions" for the elderly and the daughters-in-law who experience precarious emotional conditions.

Chapter 6 Expressive Filial Sentiment: The Expectations and Disappointment of the Elderly

In the previous chapter, I discussed rifts and tensions within the family; in this chapter, I turn to intimacy in the family and the elderly's expectation sand disappointment around it. By focusing on the changing meaning of filial piety and the elderly's relationships with daughters, sons, and grandchildren, I hope to further advance our understanding of the mediated emotional experiences of the rural elderly.

6.1 Filial Piety: From the "Earthbound" to the Expressive
6.1.1 *Renao* and its absence

After Zhou Biyang and her husband Jin Shan (family 1) recounted their bitter stories of raising their son and daughter, earning money to support them and taking care of the granddaughter who suffered serious disease, I asked them candidly:

> *WH: So, what is the point of having children if old people like you are so drained by them all your life? You can save the money for yourselves?*
> *Zhou Biyang: Yes… but it is still more "renao" (热闹, boisterous) with offspring. Renao is better than nothing.*
> *WH: Renao? But your sons and daughters were all away.*
> *Zhou Biyang: Yes… Whose children are not away these days? Time is different. Sometimes my daughter calls me, you know, WeChat video, she and the grandchildren. She was really good to us, sweet mouth (smiles). And in the Spring Festival, when they come back, (it is) still renao!*
> *Jin Shan: Yes. That's it. What else can you ask for from them? (a bitter smile).*

The quote above demonstrated the significant transformation of filial piety and the changes of the elderly's emotional expectations towards their family life. In this section, I intend to show that *renao* (or the absence of it) and the fact that the elderly were content that their child (here the daughter) bonded with them via media is the key to understanding such change.

To understand the change of the elderly's emotional expectation, we must first take a closer look at the phrase *renao*, which is not only central to Biyang's narrative but also appeared throughout the elderly's language in general during my fieldwork. It is a term that is difficult to fully translate and carries rich and subtle cultural meaning. Basically, it describes a kind of atmosphere or situation that is filled with people, joyful feelings, and vivacious sounds (e.g., chatting, laughing, sound of firecrackers or Chinese *suona*).

Opposite to lonely, desolate, and bleak, it almost always indicates physical co-presence and regularly relates to ritualised occasions. During the Spring Festival that Biyang implied to be an occasion of *renao* when the children came home, I observed many joyful moments among the elderly, such as when the family was watching television, eating and making food, playing poker, and practicing some traditional rituals together. When it comes to family intimacy, *renao* emphasizes the atmosphere of merry companies but does not necessarily involve much "heart-to-heart" conversation or self-disclosure like a "pure relationship" (Giddens, 1992) would do. Like Biyang and Jin Shan, the elderly enjoyed such *renao* moments and regularly described it as their ultimate reason for raising children and making sacrifices. I soon found that in the moments of *renao*, filial piety was also largely made possible. For example, in a very mundane moment that constituted *renao* feeling of the Spring Festival when a son handed his father a cigarette and lit it for him, it was in effect a practise of filial piety showing respect, gratitude, and closeness.

Naturally existing in the atmosphere of *renao*, filial piety has long been a highly localized, "earthbound" (Fei, 1945) practise that has been firmly woven into the everyday cohabitation life of Chinese peasants. It has been structured and institutionalized by a comprehensive set of localized arrangements, including living structure (e.g., same living space, working together), everyday/religious ritual (e.g., manners between generations, deity/ancestor worship, birthday ceremony, and caring in sickness) and confirmed by the most elementary mechanisms of social recognition including body gestures, conversations and smiling. Although as early as the late 1900s, filial piety started to be understood based on sincere emotional bonding between parents and children, for rural people, it has been slow to convert to a form of bonding that is sustained and confirmed by open expression of attachment or "communication" as happened with their urban middle-class counterparts (Evans, 2008). Instead, intimacy, trust, and strong feelings have been sustained and developed within the localized everyday routines through stable anticipation of "inarticulate" interactions.

However, such a localized, earthbound mechanism of filial piety structured by everyday rural life has been largely disrupted by marketization since the 1980s when numerous peasants migrated to urban places to seek jobs. As Biyang said, today the adult children are all away. In 2020, there were 285.60 million peasants who had left their hometowns and worked as migrant workers (National Bureau of Statistics). When the Spring Festival came to an end and the adult children went away again, *renao* occasions disappeared for the elderly. Nevertheless, as Biyang's words indicated, the WeChat video call made by their daughter who has a sweet mouth seemed to become a substitution of the co-presence of *renao* and enabled the practise of filial piety.

Although it is mediated by communicative technology, which I will elaborate on in the next section (6.2), a significant difference between the co-presence of *renao* moments (filial piety exists in such moments) and the mediated one is that the former does not necessarily entail linguistical or verbal articulation, where the latter tends to place an emphasis much more on the openly expressive element of intergenerational bonding.

In what follows, I intend to demonstrate how this change has been cultivated by media when the 'unspoken' mechanism is no longer readily available. That is to say, if intergenerational intimacy and filial piety lost the opportunity to perform 'in silence', it might need to be *spoken out* in some way in order to be recognized and sustained. Since the market reform in the 1980s, physical separation of the rural family dovetailed with the penetration of mass and digital media in rural China, which heavily and sophisticatedly excavated and advocated the emotional and expressive side of human bonding.

6.1.2 Expressive filial sentiment and its logics

As discussed in Chapter 4, although with a fragmented watching mode and an emotional denial of watching television (some used smartphones), the elderly enjoyed watching melodramas and short videos that would give meaning to their bitter lives. These media products they consumed, themed around 'family trifles', have another crucial feature: they tend to openly address and express feelings regarding everyday family life, particularly children's gratitude towards their aging parents. For example, the following are extracts from television dramas or short videos that my elderly informants enjoyed and described as "well said", "touching" or "humane".

Extract 1. Daughter was having dinner with her parents before she left for college.

> *Daughter: Once I woke up in the middle of the night, and I saw you, dad, weeping on the couch. That was the first time I saw dad cry. From then on, I swear I will never do anything annoying to you, mom and dad.*
> *Father: Yes. I see you have grown up.*

* Television drama *Don't Say Love This Winter*. Watched with Song Meifang and her son Zhen Wangmin (family 4).

Extract 2. Son was calling his foster mother with his birth parent by his side.

> *Foster mother: I hear that your birth parents are having dinner with you? Hand the telephone to them, please. I want to talk to them.*
> *Birth father: How are you! I thank you so much. You raise the child to be a good man. I am ashamed.*

Birth mother: Thank you!

Foster mother: No. It was me who should thank you. I treated him as my own. (To the son) you need to be grateful to your own parents. If they did not bring you into the world, our journey is also impossible. Please promise me, hug your parents!

Son: Yes mom! I am hugging them!

* Television drama: *Nation's Children*. Watched with Li Yue (family 12).

Extract 3. An adapted traditional ballad performed by a young man and a young woman.

Young man: Mom and dad are 76 years old this year; should enjoy their lives.

Young women: Mom and dad are 76 years old this year; still working day and night.

Young man: Mom and dad raise us; wish we can live a good life.

Young women: Weeping when I think about them; just remember their love.

* Short video *Weeping on Thinking of My Parents* on short video platform "Good Video". Watched with Deng Zhen and his wife Yang Chunmei (family 5).

Extract 4. Son asking for forgiveness from her mother after he was educated by the 'emotion specialists' in the show.

Son: Mom, I stand in front of you. Mom, I was wrong. I will be responsible. Please forgive me.

Mother: Just stop crying. (The son on his knees, then the mother hugged him)

* Short clip of reality television show *Golden Mediation* on short video platform "Volcano Video". Watched with Yin Qiang (family 18).

These are expressions that do not normally occur in real life in rural China – open and explicit expressions of love, gratefulness and inner feelings. However, such expressions are common, even clichéd, in various forms of media content the elderly consumed, such as television dramas, reality shows and short videos of family life, all of which tend to give the historic but deeply harboured feelings of gratitude and love a linguistic, eloquent, and concrete form. I found these expressions were particularly attractive to the elderly and further profoundly shaped their emotional structure and expectations of family life. On the one hand this is due to the insurmountable physical distance between them and their children, but on the other, intimately connected to the particular textual or semiotic structure of these mediated expressions as I will discuss below.

To begin with, one crucial feature of these expressions is that they are all primarily

unidirectional expressions of gratitude, love or guilt by children *to* their parents.[1] For example, in Extract 1, the daughter recounted an emotional scene in which she saw her father cry because she did something wrong. She was shocked and deeply remorseful, then swore that she would never do anything to hurt her father again. Her father, on the contrary, was rather undemonstrative, without much self-exposure on how he felt, how much he cared, or without revealing why he cried. However, this does not indicate the father had no feelings toward his daughter – quite the opposite, such humble taciturnity creates a rhetorical effect suggesting that the parents' love is universal, self-evident, and unconditional. It was the children's feelings that needed to be confirmed by language, not the parents' love. Therefore, such expressive intergenerational bonding has a unique feature, which I term 'expressive filial sentiment' – the articulation of filial sentiments on the children's behalf.

Secondly, such intergenerational bonding is largely built on the pre-existing social roles which makes such bonding largely a virtuous project but not a project of free-willed individuality. In Extract 3, for example, the parents' old age and their sacrifice based on their roles as parents was emphasized. Extract 2 offers a more extreme example – although the birth parent did not even raise the son (a special parent-child relationship is thus impossible), by saying "*if they did not bring you into the world, our journey is also impossible*", the foster mother affirms that the birth parents' greatness and love is based purely on their pre-existing identity. However, as shown by the tears, tone of voice and intimate gestures of the children, the filial piety demonstrated in this media content was not emotionless, ethical conduct but natural expressions with deep-felt feelings. Such feelings were coded in these media materials, indicating the adult children's awakening to their parents' "*enqing*" (恩情, love with unconditional giving) – an emotional debt to ones parents due to the almost self-evident love that comes with their parental role.

Filial piety has long been a key concept for understanding Chinese families and intergenerational relationships. In orthodox Confucianism, it tended to be rigid "socioreligious ethics" (G. Huang, 2006; U. Kim et al., 2006; W. Liu, 2021) with relatively strict moral requisites and behaviour codes to discipline and socialize people. As Haiyan Lee (2007a) pointed out, the linkage between emotion and identity is largely absent in the orthodox Confucian model of personhood. However, since the 1900s, with the cult of "*qing*" (情，love), emotion that was once in the margins of the moral field was brought to the centre and made "a foundational principle of identity" (2007a, p.

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[1] In Extract 3, such gratitude was expressed through the foster mother's mouth but ultimately implies the gratitude of the son to his birth parents.

15). Filial piety has been transformed significantly with the attack on its 'empty formality' and celebration of its emotional dimension. That is to say, throughout the 20th century, there has been an increasing consensus that no family bonds can legitimately exist without emotional feelings with free-willed commitment.[1] The cold and insurmountable ethical imperative of filial piety has been reinterpreted by numerous popular novels, folk opera or folklore since the late imperial Qing dynasty and the early 20th century as deeply felt reciprocal bonds between parents and children but not the hierarchical system.

In this regard, the above media content that codified the filial sentiments are significantly different from subgenres such as "urban romance" or "urban melodramas" (Kong, 2014; Pin Liu & Li, 2004) that are mainly popular among the urban middle class and younger rural population which advocate an individualisation ethos (Yan, 2011). It is also different from therapeutic media products (Illouz, 1997, 2003) which tend to celebrate "communication" (*goutong*，沟通) and a "friend-like" parent-children relationship (Evans, 2010). In contrast, as shown in Extract 3, they tend to have structural and symbolic homology with more traditional art forms, including folklore, folk tales and ballads that might draw heavily from the "Confucian structure of feeling" that Lee Haiyan identified in describing the affective structure that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century in China.

As a "dispersed element of modernity", Lee argued that the Confucian structure of feeling is "essentially modern formation in its celebration of feelings as fundamental to human existence, and its rendering of ethical codes into subjectively meaningful experience" (2007a, p. 15). That is to say, although personal feelings have been made a foundational principle of identity, at the same time it "works within the parameters of Confucian ethics, endeavoring to reinterpret the essential Confucian virtues as homologous and substitute affective reciprocity for ritual hierarchy" (ibid., p.15). In this case, consistent with the Confucian understanding of the nature of parenthood, the parent's love for a child is inherent in their roles as mother and father.[2] Such love is morally honourable precisely because of its humbleness, obscurity, selflessness and unrequited features. However, for children, the feelings of gratitude, love or guilt need to be somehow evoked and further expressed since it is no longer a moral imperative as the orthodox Confucian would have it, but a feeling *contingently felt*. Therefore, I

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[1] See Haiyan Lee's groundbreaking work on the genealogy of love and her discussion on how emotion based on voluntary choice formulated radical transformation of the 20th century in China.

[2] In Extract 2, it was even more telling, as the birth parents did not even raise the children, but their love was still self-evident.

contend that this asymmetric structure of intergenerational bonding in these media products is crucial to understanding the elderly's expectations for family: they expect their children to express their love and gratitude as a confirmation of their own silent but wholehearted love and sacrifice.

Lastly, apart from its intimate connection with the emotional and virtuous Confucianist tradition, such an expressive relationship has been constructed as a higher and more desirable way of bonding because of the cultural hierarchy that has been established alongside the advance of neoliberal rationality since the 1980s. Different from the collective socialist era when peasants, urban workers and intellectual elites were ideologically much more equal, since the 1980s there has been a rising discourse of rural people with "no culture" or as "low *suzhi*" (quality) firmly undergirded by neoliberal ideology (Anagnost, 2004). Lacking reading and speech skills and even being illiterate, I found that most of the rural people were particularly ashamed and embarrassed about their 'cultural level' and linguistic incompetence and emphasised to me that the reason they liked watching these videos was that they used 'smart words' and 'beautiful words' that they do not know how to say themselves. Therefore, the reason the narratives above are so powerful is also partly because they represent a higher, more sophisticated and more culturally legitimate form of conduct.

As demonstrated by many recent studies, such an expressive way of bonding has been warmly received by urban middle-class families and has largely advanced the intimacy between family members (Shen Y., 2013; Zhong & He, 2014). However, as I demonstrate in the rest of the chapter, in contrast to their urban middle-class counterparts, the rural elderly more often than not suffered precisely because of the new norms of intimacy which have been vividly depicted by mass-manufactured media products that celebrate verbal communication and outward displays of affection.

6.1.3 Expecting expressive filial piety in everyday life

According to interviews with the villagers and other sources, as early as the late 1990s when television started to become accessible to some of the rural families, "television ethics dramas" (Keane, 2005; H. Zhang, 2016) that underlined such expressive filial sentiments started to emerge. From around the 2000s, numerous open expressions of filial sentiments in traditional ethnic ballads, folksongs and operas had been reappropriated through modern media technology including cheap tape and VCD and widely circulated in rural areas (Q. Zhang, 2012). However, as discussed above, as early as the 1900s, such expressive filial sentiment started to be celebrated in traditional art forms. This raises a question about what is different now, regarding such expressive

filial sentiment that has been widely codified in these 'modern media'.

In studying Bedouin poetry culture, Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) found that there was a remarkable discrepancy between people's emotional awkwardness and inarticulation in everyday life and the effusive expression of love in more exceptional cultural forms like poetry. She argued that the former is deeply rooted in the hierarchy of the power system while the latter exists as a form of defiance and autonomy. There are similar mechanisms in China where once the orthodox Confucianism tended to regulate emotion within its rigid ethical code, since the 1900s various cultural forms became popular as ways of resistance and rebellion. However, such a dualistic structure between "the inarticulate everyday" and "the emotional artistic forms" is a historically contingent one. Since the 1980s, with the proliferation of mass-manufactured media products and physical distance, rural China has also witnessed a growing trend whereby people expect and long for the expressive and the emotional to *go beyond* the extraordinary and exceptional forms of songs and folklore to become a part of *ordinary* life itself.

In the fieldwork, many of my elderly informants openly claimed that they valued their adult children and daughter/son-in-law's '*huayan huayu*' (话言话语, words or expressions) a great deal. They even longed to hear sweet words and caring sentences much more than they wanted to receive money or other forms of help. The once unusual expression of filial sentiment is *expected* to be expressed openly in *everyday life*. When an elder woman (age 68, a villager of Pear Tree) urged her cousin Ran Xiaoli (family 17) not to live with her only daughter who married recently, she said:

> *Will she say, oh! Mom, you are so tireless – you wash our clothes uncomplainingly and selflessly! Oh! Mom, you cook for us and prepare everything on the table, and we are so grateful! She will not say that! She just takes it for granted.*

Her argument was clearly based on the foreseeable disappointment that her cousin's daughter might fail to feel and then naturally express her gratitude to her mother. In her view, her cousin was doing something unworthy because she might not hear these sweet words (based on real feelings). The tone to describe such an expected expression of gratefulness – interjections such as 'oh! Mom' – was effusive and typical of the exaggerated and dramatic expressions of melodrama. Phrases like 'tireless', 'uncomplainingly' and 'selflessly' were very bookish and sounded awkward in local dialect when she was saying them. However, these phrases frequently appear in media when it comes to parent-children relationships. Ran Xiaoli later confirmed to me that

her aunt was indeed a television lover, who would spend much of her time watching melodramas about family relationships.

In my fieldwork, there were numerous examples of "television-like" (an informant's phrase) expressions which, since they were very different from the local dialect, were easy to recognise, including the word "love". These effusive expressions were further naturally woven into everyday rural life through the work of media representations. For example, one evening, I watched a melodrama with Liu Xuan (family 14). She shed tears about a particular plot: a pair of rural parents die trying to save their four children in an earthquake. At the funeral, the children cry hard. The older sister and brother soon pull themselves together and make a moving speech about how they will take care of the younger sister and brother and not let their parents down in heaven.

> **Liu Xuan:** *Listen to them. how nicely said!*
> **WH:** *Indeed.*
> **Liu Xuan:** *It was miserable as well.*
> **WH:** *You mean your life?*
> **Liu Xuan:** *Yes. But he (her husband) never said such things to me. Nor did they (her adult children). In my hardest time, no one said these to me.*

Liu Xuan clearly yearned for such open expression of sentiment from her children (and her husband). Although the plot of this rural family's tragedy was highly theatrical, it nevertheless evoked Liu Xuan's miserable experience as *ordinary family life.* Therefore, the vivid representation of ordinary people's family life gives such eloquent and unusual speech a face of the everyday, of something reachable, natural and ordinary. Similarly, the short video my senior informants called "Yunnan[1] folk song/drama" (Yunnan *shangeju*, 云南山歌剧) and enjoyed very much was in many cases a combination of ordinary life scenes and adapted traditional ballads – often these videos begin with the amateur rural actors performing a short scene, such as a mother being abused by her children, and then actors start to sing songs condemning such behaviour with an open expression of love and gratitude. These media products are routinely codified by the passionate and poignant confessions of the children, making them desirable models of performing filial piety.

In short, in facing the new conditions of physical separation and the cultural celebration of expressive filial sentiment, the rural parents' expectations of receiving children's

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[1] A southwest province of China with diverse ethnic groups, famous for its folk songs. It has a dialectal proximity to Enshi.

emotional and expressive gratitude and love has become increasingly stronger since the 1980s. However, as I will demonstrate in the following pages, their expectations have only been partially satisfied and further cause their emotional frustration and disappointment in family life.

6.2 Mediated and Gendered Practises of Expressive Filial Piety

As much as the elderly are longing to be comforted by the younger ones' openly expressed love and care, such "sweet words" are unfortunately not very common in senior people's lives. However, when they do hear such sweet words, they hear them (a) almost solely via (smart)phones and (b) almost solely from their daughter(s), making the achievement of expressive filial sentiment highly mediated and gendered. In this section, I try to show how expressive filial piety as a mediated practise intersects with gender identity and patriarchal institution and how these further lead to the elderly's limited emotional satisfaction and general frustration with family life.

6.2.1 Expressive daughters, mediated liminality and the remaking of *renao*

"Daughters are the best" – this has become almost a consensus among the elderly I talked to. This was a remarkable comment since the son-preference tradition has lasted many centuries[1] in Chinese history (Croll, 2000). When I asked why this was the case, the common answers were: "because daughters are dear and sweet", "they are thinking about their parents all the time", and "they have sweet mouth". However, just like adult sons, daughters were also not by the elderly's side, although the reasons were often different – they were *married out* if they had brother(s). In China, daughters and their intimate relationships with natal family have been widely discussed and acknowledged in academia in recent years. Some have pointed out that the intimate bond has long been relatively strong but was largely confined by physical distance and patriarchal structures (Hershatter, 2011). This was confirmed in my fieldwork, as many old women told their bitter stories of how they wanted to visit their natal families, but their husbands or parents-in-law sometimes disapproved. However, as one elderly woman pointed out, "it is very different now – people have phones".

Zhen Guo's (family 10) bitter life was largely comforted by his dear daughter. When he recounted how his wife passed away in 2006 and his only son died falling from scaffolding while working a year later, he was almost in tears. But then he smiled, saying that he has a great daughter who cares for him very much. He said that his

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[1] In a sense, this is still the case as I will demonstrate in a later section.

daughter Zhen Juqin bought him a cell phone and called him regularly since she and her husband worked in another province. One day, on his birthday, I witnessed his daughter Juqin's call. He was obviously a little nervous when he picked up – he pressed the wrong button and accidently hung up. Then Juqin called again, and he picked up successfully – he put it on speaker since he always found the voice too quiet.

> *Juqin: Dad, I am Juqin. What are you doing?*
> *Zhen Guo: I am eating. Yes. Yes. I am eating.*
> *Juqin: Today is your birthday. Did you eat anything good?*
> *Zhen Guo: Yes. Yes.*
> *Juqin: Pan Cai (her husband) just came back from work. It is really cold today. Did you receive the cloth I bought you?*
> *Zhen Guo: Yes. Yes. Thank you! (sounded inarticulate with face a little flushed)*
> *Juqin: Duoduo (Juqin's daughter) said she missed you!*
> *Zhen Guo: Yes. Yes. (smiled shyly)*
> *… (The conversation went on for a while)*
> *Juqin: Dad, happy birthday! Take care!*
> *Zhen Guo: Yes. Yes. Hahaha (laughs). Yes. Yes. Hao is also here; do you want to talk to her! (He suddenly handed the phone to me).*

Although Zhen Guo was unquestionably pleased by the call, it was a little awkward as Zhen Guo was apparently not used to such talk. He was nervous, acted awkwardly and did not know what to say. Particularly, when Juqin said "dad, happy birthday", he handed the phone to me probably because he did not know how to respond since the phrase "happy birthday" was considered very formal, emotional and "non-rural". Such a phrase is new to rural everyday language, although it has been much codified in mass media as a part of urban people's lifestyle. At three older people's birthday celebrations I attended in the two villages during my fieldwork, no one said this phrase to the host in person – the happiness and blessing were permeated in the atmosphere of the tacit *renao*. However, with the mediation of the cell phone, the daughter said this phrase to the father and created a special moment for the relationship.

I suggest that the *mediated liminal moment* is facilitated by modern communicative technology. In studying how practises of romance renew intimate relationships, Eva Illouz (1997) parallels romantic practises such as travel to the "liminal ritual" that Turner famously suggested. She contends that during a trip, "getting into nature" and far away from the crowd, a couple manages to "remove themselves, geographically and symbolically, from the normal conduct of their lives" and this is similar to the liminal ritual in which people, through symbolic behaviour, can be detached from an "earlier

fixed point in the social structure or from an established set of cultural conditions" (Turner, 1967, p. 34). In the act of a phone call, a similar thing happens since such mediated communication creates a certain degree of detachment and unfamiliarity from everyday rural life and fulfils the fantasy of closeness and desirable filial piety. The characteristics of the phone which overwhelmingly rely on verbal communication seem to create a new space that is not constrained by normal codes that regulate the behaviour of rural parents and children. The potential of the simple phone call is just like the liminal ritual: to 'invert', 'subvert' and transform the existing social arrangements and to make way for harboured desires and new possibilities for relationships and social structures.

Similarly, smartphones with more visual and semiotic functions also provide the possibility of liminal moments. Zhou Miao (family 18) told me a story of how her younger daughter Yin Huizhi once deeply moved her. Zhou Miao herself did not own a smartphone but her husband Yin Qiang did. Zhou Miao told me that two years ago, Huizhi sent a video she made herself on Douyin through WeChat to her husband's smartphone and asked her father to show it to her mother. Huizhi was singing a song of how she missed her mother and wished her "happy Mother's Day". Since Zhou Miao said that the video did not sound like her daughter, the song probably was not really sung by Huizhi but likely a readily available soundtrack provided by the app. However, she described it as an unforgettable moment and it made her cry. She told me that it was the first time that she knew that day was Mother's Day – before that she only sometimes saw it on television. The overseas festival of Mother's Day made its way through young rural women to their mothers through communicative technology because it facilitated such liminal moments and encouraged the exposure of feelings.

Moreover, apart from the liminal property, communicative technology largely recreates a sense of co-presence and the feeling of *renao*. Jiang Qinyi (family 16) was a woman who received a smartphone from the government under the 'Targeted Poverty Alleviation' scheme. During my time living with them, she always kept it charged because she said, "what if my daughters call?" Her daughters did call a lot – her elder daughter Ran Ziyan called basically every week[1] on WeChat video ever since Qinyi's house installed broadband in 2016. The following was a WeChat video call from the elder daughter Ran Ziyan that I documented:

(On the screen, Ran Ziyan was preparing food for the pigs she kept. She put

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[1] It should be noted that this was a high frequency among my case families. For most of the seniors, their daughter(s) called between once every two weeks to one month.

the phone on a holder so her hands could be free to work)

Ran Ziyan: Mom, what are you doing today. Is it cold?
Qinyi: Nothing much. Staying at home. You dad was outside farming. Cold as hell. How about you. What are you doing?
Ran Ziyan: What else (laugh)? You see, I am feeding my fortune!
Qinyi: Hahaha! (laugh) Yes. Yes. Feed them well and earn a lot of money!
Ran Ziyan: Come and bring some pork home! When you come, bring some chili with you. I miss eating our chili.
Qinyi: Sure, sure! (laugh)…

Although Qinyi later told me they were just joking about going to Ziyan's home, which was 164 kilometres away in another province, she was obviously very pleased by their talk. With joy still on her face, Qinyi said to me: "nowadays, people have this video thing. She (Ziyan) was just like sitting next to me, right?" As Qinyi pointed out, the remarkable thing about the smartphone is that it somehow virtualized the 'co-present' situation in a long-distance scenario. That is also why, in the beginning of the chapter, Biyang indicated that her daughter's video call could be a substitution for the *renao* moment. Therefore, aided by synchronous visual technology, Qinyi felt that her daughter was just beside her. Meanwhile, the new mediated space that lacks a conventional interaction script and its heavy reliance on verbal communication contributes to the liminal dimension of exposing feelings.

However, having discussed the mediating features of the communicative technology, the role of expressive daughters should not be ignored. Although compared to early examples, Qinyi and Ziyan's video conversation here seemed to be relatively quotidian and vulgar, such "mundane talk" (Rodriguez, 2014) is still highly expressive and requires certain communicative competence, particular on the daughters' side. As seen in Qinyi and Ziyan's conversation, Ziyan managed to keep the talk funny ("I am feeding my fortune"), caring ("come and bring some pork home") and emotional ("I miss eating our chili"). As one of the conventional traits of femininity, women are said to be more comfortable with verbal communication and self-expression regarding feelings and emotions. Some have also argued that being the main recipients of the "women's genre" (Curti, 1988; Kuhn, 1984) such as melodrama, women tend to be more skilled and proficient in expressing themselves because they are exposed more frequently to these emotional methods of communication in their everyday life. They are not only good at it, but also desire to have more intimate talk.

6.2.2 Masculinity and unrecognised filial piety

In contrast to daughters who have 'sweet mouths', sons were often described by seniors as they "do not know how to talk" and "hang up after two sentences". During my fieldwork, I encountered many times when the daughters called or made a lengthy WeChat video call with their parents but only on a few occasions did a son call. All these calls lasted just a couple of minutes and only because the sons had "things" to discuss. Some of the young men I interviewed even showed disdain for the idea of calling, telling me that "there is nothing to say", "why call if you have no big deal?" or that they were too busy and had "no time to do such things". One day during my stay with Liu Xuan and Hu Shao (family 14), their son Hu Qinhua called – he had sent 4,000 yuan to Liu Xuan's account and wanted her to check it.

Hu Qinhua: Mom, I sent you 4,000 yuan. Check it.
Liu Xuan: Okay.
Hu Qinhua: Is Hongzi (his daughter) behaving at school?
Liu Xuan: Just the same.
Hu Qinhua: Okay. Remember to check the money. (He hangs up)

It was an incredibly short and succinct call with extremely limited exposure of feeling. After the call, I said to Liu Xuan that I thought their son was filial since he sent money to them. However, Liu Xuan denied my speculation: "no, he only sent it to his son and daughter". When I got a chance to speak to Hu Qinhua afterward and asked about this money, he told me that it was "of course for all of them". However, apparently, Liu Xuan did not interpret it that way but firmly believed (or would prefer to believe) the money was just for Qinhua's own son and daughter.[1] In contrast, Hu Qinhua considered it to be obvious that the money was for "all of them" therefore he did not think it was necessary to say so explicitly. He not only did not express himself on this particular matter, but generally, according to my observation and the interview with Liu Xuan and Hu Shao, did not openly express his care, love and gratitude towards his parents at all. Liu Xuan and Hu Shao were seemingly not confident in their son's love for them, because they lacked confirmation and recognition. While their son sent money to them, because it did was not accompanied with expressions of feeling, it was deemed suspicious.

Across the cases, such tenuous faith towards their son(s) was evident and widely shared. When I visited Golden Arch village the second time, it was near the Spring Festival. The old couple Zhen Deng and Yang Chunmei (family 5) were preparing for their two

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[1] 4,000 yuan was far from enough for "all of them".

sons to return for the festival. Zhen Deng told me they kept two fat pigs for a whole the year for the festival and he planned to butcher them any day soon for the family reunion. When I asked the exact day, he said:

> *Zhen Deng: I do not know yet. (Because) I do not know when they are coming back.*
> *WH: Why? Did they not tell you? But it is only a week (to the festival). Did they not call?*
> *Zhen Deng: No.*
> *WH: Maybe call them?*
> *Zhen Deng: I do not call them. I do not call them. Why call? They are busy (Long pause). If they decide to come back, then they come back. Sometimes they come back two days before (the festival); sometimes on the morning (of the festival). Nobody calls.*
> *WH: So, you wait.*
> *Zhen Deng: Of course. What else? Wait for them to eat the pigs we kept, wipe their mouths and leave the second day. Hahaha (ironic, bitter, and awkward laugh).*

Zhen Deng's view here was heartrending but very representative among the elderly who (only) had sons. As shown above, even when the communicative technology was readily available, the most basic communication of informing of a return date did not happen, let alone more open expressions of inner feelings from their sons. Just like many other elderly people, Zhen Deng felt uncomfortable initiating a call as well, which was likely a negative reaction based on past unpleasant experiences given that he said, "they are busy". The consequence was grievous for the elderly – the feeling of insecurity and disappointment was more than evident. By joking that he would "wait for them to eat the pig we kept, wipe their mouths and leave the second day", Zhen Deng's interpretation of his sons' 'not-calling' behaviour was a cold exploitation of their love and sacrifice. In my fieldwork, the frustration Zhen Deng had towards his sons was shared by many elderly people. Conceivably, in aged parents' long empty time by themselves in their rural home, they waited and expected their son(s) to call them, as a recognition of their enduring and humble sacrifice.

Although there were a few exceptions, most of the adult sons showed clear reluctance to express their feelings to their aging parents. But it should be noted that not all of them were as "heartless" as it may seem. Some of them I interviewed believed that the best way to be a filial son was to provide for the parents materially and to be there (physically) when they were in need. For example, Zhou Kui (family 12) explained to

me how he understood filial piety:

Filial piety is nothing but "sheng yang si zang" (生养死葬, provide when alive and host funeral when dead). But you know, nowadays, it is difficult. Everyone's life is hard because of money. No young man is at home these days, all out working. When my father died. It was (emotionally) hard for me. I was not home most of the time (Long pause) (I was filled with) regret after all. It was good that I did send money to him every year and bought him what he wanted to eat before he died.

Therefore, for many young men, providing material support and company were primarily what they considered to be filial piety. However, as pointed out earlier, such co-present filial practise was largely impossible because of young people's migrant working mode. Moreover, sons' material support of the elderly was also scant and highly unstable, partly because they were also struggling, partly because they and their nuclear family were 'caught up' in the attractions of a middle-class lifestyle that celebrates consumption. I found that many old parents tended to show tremendous understanding toward their sons when they failed to provide them with material support (sometimes it was the old parents who supported the sons), saying that they knew perfectly well that their son's own nuclear family was struggling to make a living in present day society. However, it was under such circumstances that the elderly's longing for expressive confirmation of love and appreciation of their sacrifices was more pressing and, consequently, their disappointment was even more profound and deep-felt.

However, the reason these sons did not communicate more with their parents was never because they were unfamiliar with media technology or lacked access to it. Like their women counterparts, young men were skilled in using media technology, except in different ways. They not only treated it as much less of an emotional communication tool, but also consumed very different media products through it. Most of the time, they consumed news, political infotainment (Zhou, 2020), played video games or read fantasy novels themed around an individual's struggle to succeed. During the Spring Festival, when one of Zhen Deng's sons, Zhen Pinhong, returned, I noticed that he spent a lot of time watching Douyin, but rarely content related to the "expressive filial sentiment". On occasions when such content did appear on his account, he immediately skipped it, thus the app's algorithm would feed him less similar content. When I asked about his experiences in watching Douyin and why he skipped such content, he said:

I am just not interested. Not funny. Those tears and speech annoyed me. I only

watch things that are useful and interesting. I cannot stand such "yaosiyaohuo"
(要死要活, literally death and living, meaning dramatic) groan.

His attitude towards such media products was consistent with his behaviour of not expressing feelings. However, instead of blaming individual men for not being sensitive, filial and caring, I would argue that the situation I depicted in this section profoundly relates to working-class men's cultural identity as macho breadwinners. As Willis (1977) argued, working-class men's masculinity is mainly built on their physical strength, toughness and insusceptibility. In their process of socialization, they tend to be led to believe that verbal expression and too much exposure of feelings are signs of weakness and femininity. That is to say, emotional sensitivity and talkativeness are primarily associated with women, who are considered structurally and culturally inferior. Being a construction worker for all his adult life, Zhen Pinhong expressed his disdain for such open expressions of filial piety by saying that "tears and speech annoyed" him and he "cannot stand" dramatic groans. It is no wonder that sons "hang up after two sentences" and ask "why call if you have no big deal", if phone calls and expressing filial piety is considered a threat to their masculinity. Like the working-class lads in Willis' ethnography who actively resisted a feminine school culture, rural young men in my fieldwork tended to reject a more expressive culture of practicing filial piety, despite their parents' longing and expectations.

6.3 Persistent Patriarchal Family Structure and Awkward Elderly

At this point, it could be argued that if the elderly did have caring daughters, their disappointment could be at least relatively balanced or eased. However, my observation of the elderly's emotional well-being was rather gloomy: the disappointment was profound and the despair distinct, although those who had daughters were indeed a little better. In what follows, I demonstrate how the persistent patriarchal family structure intersects with the gendered practise of expressive filial piety and further configured the elderly's deep frustration.

Like other families who have at least one son, Jin Yu and Hu Guo's (family 13) two daughters, Yizhen and Yiqun, moved to live with their husband's families elsewhere after marriage. One day the younger daughter Yizhen, who lived in another town in Enshi region called Jin Yu and mentioned that Jin Yu could come and visit her if she had time. She did not refuse directly on the phone. But later, when I asked if she would be going, she denied it:

No. I went once this year. It is not good if you visit too much. You think if you

spend a month in your daughter's place, it's a good thing? and your son will be happy? People talk. People wonder if your son treats you badly and you hide in your daughter's place. Old people should not do such things. Embarrassing your son and your daughter-in-law would not be happy. Tonnes of things waiting to be done back home, if you have time… For your daughter, too. If you spend a month in your daughter's place, her husband and mother-in-law will also complain, just not to your face. She (Yizhen) was just saying. One should know how to be an old person. If (you) cause family discord, then very bad, right? So, I say, call, from time to time, will do.

In the above quote, Jin Yu's reflection on how everyone might react to her (long or frequent) visit to her daughter's and how to be 'an old person' indicated the profound persistence of the patriarchal family institution. Jin Yu made it very clear that calling from time to time was appropriate but not long or frequent visits to her daughters' marital family, since it might provoke the son, the daughter-in-law, and the daughter's mother-in-law and invite gossip and criticism. She also interpreted her daughter Yizhen's invitation as just being polite and casual talk. Similarly, as mentioned in the earlier section, in Ziyan's WeChat video call with her mother Qinyi and when Ziyan warmly said that her mother should come to her place and get some pork, Qinyi interpreted it as a joke not only because Ziyan's place was too far away, but also it was not an appropriate thing to do. Qinyi told me later that: "she has her own family. You do not really want to go there. Plus, who is going to pay for the train tickets? And if you go away, who is going to take care of the grandchildren?"

Behind Jin Yu's and Qinyi's words, there is a commonly shared rationale. That is, for people who have at least one son, it is the son not the daughter who makes up the three-generational family which contains the old parents, the young couple and their unmarried child. It is the son who signifies the unbroken continuity of the family line, and the inter-generational flow of resources is largely between the parent and son. That means it is the son(s) who should shoulder the responsibility of old age support of the elderly and therefore also enjoy the right of inheritance[1] and general support from their old parents, including childcare. Daughters, in contrast, are like 'spilled water' because after marriage they join the husband's three-generational family and become a member of her husband's kinship system. This has been argued by anthropologists to be one of the reasons for the long-standing son preference in China and other societies in East and South Asia (Croll, 1987, 2000).

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[1] In practise, the patrilineal inheritance largely persevered in rural China, although the law declared that women could also have the right to inherit.

As discussed in Chapter 1, such patrilocal and patrilineal family arrangements have stubbornly persisted in rural China for many centuries. With higher priority given to socialist projects in the public realm, such arrangements remained in place throughout the Collective era and persist today. In some respects, it has even been intensified and exacerbated with the radical march of the economic reform. While the individualist principles are gaining potency in certain social spheres, the economic, legal, and cultural bond of the patriarchal three-generational family has been strengthened in effect by a series of policies and laws.

Under such arrangements, long and frequent visits to the daughter's house, among other issues (such as taking care of the daughter's child[1] or receiving too much money from the daughter), are considered a potential threat to the existing family structure. The son will not be happy about such conduct, not only because it could imply that they are unfilial, but also because it could be a threat to the continued flow of resources between them and their parents. The daughter-in-law also might oppose it since she largely attaches to her husband's patriline family and might also wish to maintain the current structure (the same logic applies to the daughter's mother-in-law). The daughters' position is awkward. During my fieldwork, I encountered (or heard) some daughters had conflicts with their husbands and parents-in-law because they "value her natal family too much" and "treat her own parents better than the parents-in-law" (leading to family tension, as discussed in Chapter 5), or were in tension with their brothers because they "embarrass them". Or in many cases, the daughters consciously limited their conduct to maintain a delicate balance – not too much to annoy their own marital family and brother(s), and not too little to hurt their parents' feelings. Therefore, in most circumstances, they call; they make WeChat videos; they send small digital red envelopes or make Douyin videos to express their love, gratitude, and guilt to their aging parents.

Therefore, what the elderly are facing is rather dire. Although in the beginning, I mentioned that the elderly agreed that 'daughters are the best', this was speaking from their subjective and emotional experiences. Because of the long-standing patriarchal family system and scant state support of old-age care for rural people, perhaps ironically the seniors still largely hold that their relationships with their sons are (or should be) the strongest – so strong that they would hold on to it even if the sons provided little

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[1] The elderly parents normally do not help taking care of the children of the married-out daughter – it is against the cultural norm. However, it happens in some cases, for example, if the daughter's parents-in-law have passed away or are ill. Normally the daughter's nuclear family will make financial compensation to the elderly for such labour.

support, rarely expressed their gratitude or even treated them badly. Consequently, the elderly's expectation of filial piety is doubly unfulfilled. Although daughters' expressive and caring gestures that are mediated by communicative technology provided rural elderly with joy and comfort, these filial practises have been nonetheless largely constrained within communicative technology because of daughters' marginalized position within the patriarchal family configuration in rural China. Sons, who largely failed to fulfil the elderly's emotional expectations, were still considered to be the orthodox centre of the patriarchal family as old age supporters of the elderly and heir of the family, leaving the elderly in an awkward, unhappy and insecure position.

6.4 The Silver Linings
6.4.1 Bilateral family arrangement and the only-daughter family

The situation described above largely exists under the patrilineal three-generational family arrangement. However, as already discussed by some, bilateral family practise has been increasingly popular in both urban and rural China when the family do not have a son, only daughter(s) (L. Song, 2020; H. Wang & Di, 2011; Yan, 2021b). Such family arrangements are not the mainstream as the proportion of families with only daughters is not very large.[1] Among the families I investigated in Pear Tree and Golden Arch, this family arrangement was practised by several families (e.g., family 3, 6, 7, 11, 17, 18). Under such circumstances, families practised a new family arrangement the villagers called "*liangtouzuo*" (两头走, dual-local post-marital residence). That means the daughter was not "married out" but the marriage resulted in a joint big family containing the couple, their unmarried children and their respective parents.

In line with other scholars, I found that under the bilateral family arrangements, the families were often recognized in the villages as the happiest and the emotional well-being of the elderly in these families were also among the best (Jankowiak, 2021). For example, Ran Minyao and Zhang Lihua had two daughters, with the second, Xiaoli, under a bilateral marriage.[2] Xiaoli and her husband worked in Jiangsu province but regularly called and sent money to Minyao and Lihua. During my visit, Ran Minyao was sick and underwent a small surgery. Xiaoli took a month off work and travelled home all the way from Jiangsu to look after her father. Neighbours all spoke highly of Xiaoli's filial conduct and told me that "this is the advantage of having a daughter 'at home'" (where 'at home' means not married out and performing the son's role) and

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[1] There is still a son preference. Under the birth planning policy before 2016, a couple in rural China could have a second children if the first one was a daughter, as mentioned earlier.

[2] The elder daughter Xiaoqin was married out to another province.

"son and daughter-in-law will never be so considerate". Xiaoli told me:

Of course, I should come back. It is my duty. They only have me. I do not have brothers… Money (her income was cut off since she came back) cannot compare to one's own father and I cannot leave my mother to all the mess. She had it hard enough. It is good to come back anyway. I "qian" (欠, dialect for miss) them a lot.

Different from a typical patriline family with son(s), the elderly with a daughter 'at home' are materially and emotionally supported by their daughters' nuclear family. Under such a family arrangement, it is culturally legitimate for daughters to shoulder the responsibility of their elderly parents and at the same time entitle them to the support and heritage of their parents. Across my family cases, the elderly were much more content with daughters 'at home' as the daughters tended to be more expressive and caring. Moreover, since the daughters were not married out, their support of the elderly was free from the gossip and criticism of in-laws. The married-out daughters can only act within a certain range (e.g., calling is appropriate but frequent visits and too much material support is not), while the 'at home' daughters do not have this problem. Additionally, there were much fewer in-law conflicts compared to the patrilineal three-generational family with sons and daughters-in-law discussed in Chapter 5.

6.4.2 Intimacy with grandchildren

Another silver lining for the rural elderly is found in their intimate relationships with their grandchildren. Like most of the rural families with the middle generation as migrant workers, it is common that grandparents take care of their grandchildren in Pear Tree and Golden Arch. A considerable number of studies have centred on the 'problem' of the left-behind children who often endure long separation from their parents (Biao, 2007; Lie, 2017; Murphy, 2020). However, instead of overly and only emphasizing the negative side of the left-behind problem, I found – in common with others (e.g., F. Chen et al., 2011; W. Chen & Wang, 2014; Murphy, 2020) – that the intimate relationships between the left-behind grandchildren and the grandparents were curative and rewarding.

Children tend to be very expressive of their attachment to their grandparents. In the absence of the expressive filial piety of the elderly's own adult children, sweet words from the grandchildren were considered precious and comforting by many elder people. For example, grandfather Zhen Wanmin and grandmother Yang Xiuju (family 4) had taken care of their grandson Yanyan since he was born as his parents were both working elsewhere. One day during my live-in study, Wangmin and Xiuju told me a precious

memory of Yanyan before he went home from school.

> **Yang Xiuju:** *My Yanyan is such a cutie pie. I laughed so hard that time! One day he asked me: 'grandma, do you know that you are the second happiest person in the world'? I said, haha, why so? He said: 'because I am the number one happiest person in the world because I have you!' I was laughing until I cried (laughs). I wonder why today's kid is so good at such talk and tricks!*
> **Zhen Wanmin:** *haha (laughs), What else could it be? It's only because of watching too many Douyin (short videos)!*
> **Yang Xiuju:** *Yes, yes. He cannot let go of his phone as soon as he finishes his homework. He is very clever and always learns things so fast.*

Later I got the chance to confirm with Yanyan that he did learn that trick from a Douyin short video. It was a video about "tawdry romantic prattle" (*tuwei qinghua*, 土味情话) that was popular on the platform. Although it was romantically designed as lover's prattle, he nevertheless creatively appropriated it to express the feeling to his grandmother. Expressive and intimate interactions between grandchildren and the grandparents were ubiquitous. Young grandchildren rarely felt shy uttering the words and expressions that their parents might find embarrassing. In turn, when the grandchildren openly expressed their love to the elderly, the elderly also showed their love to the children in an overt way. In this regard, the new norm of intimacy that emphasizes overt expression of affection shows its potential to provide emotional fulfilment for both the elderly and young children.

Many older people told me that they felt their sacrifice and extra hard work taking care of their grandchildren was worthwhile – the sweet burden they were more than willing to shoulder. The children also felt much less alone when they enjoyed a close relationship with their grandparents. However, sometimes it was hard as the children got older and the elderly felt increasingly powerless to cope with the changing demands of helping the children in education that involves media technology. Moreover, in a change of circumstances, the elderly often face separation with the children after a profound bond has been build. The elderly (and the children) normally do not have a say in family decisions concerning changes of living and caring arrangements. I came across several older people who suffered greatly because their grandchildren they brought up from the very beginning had moved to other places for some reason.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter continued the discussion on the rural elderly's emotional experiences and

family relationships, with a focus on intimacy. As discussed in Chapter 2, mainstream family studies argue that the emotional suffering of the rural elderly is largely caused by "unbalanced family power dynamics" (F. Chen, 2013; Jianlei & Cao, 2016; E. Lee et al., 2003; J. Wang & Hai, 2019; H. Yang & Ouyang, 2013). Such imbalances happen when the elders still act according to the traditional moral framework (e.g., to complete the 'life missions' and strive to 'carry on the family line') while the younger generation is less willing to comply with such moral codes (e.g., being filial) (Gui, 2010, 2014; X. He, 2008; H. Yang & Ouyang, 2013). My findings in this chapter complicate and contest this narrative. I found that the elderly's longings and expectations were much more complicated and nuanced than merely aiming to achieve the conventional Confucian family mode (having filial sons to continue the patrilineal family line, for example). Through the ethnographical investigation of the changing conditions of filial piety, this chapter has shown that it is increasingly difficult for filial practise to exist in an 'earthbound', co-present and inarticulate manner when the rural family endures psychical separation. Instead, filial piety has been expected to be performed in a more expressive and effusive way with the codification and advocation of mass media and digital media products.

Such expressive filial sentiment, as a desirable form of intergenerational intimacy, is gaining increasing potency and popularity in rural China. However, my analysis of the media texts shows that such filial sentiment has relatively different characteristics from the popular 'friend-like' intergenerational intimacy found among urban middle-class families in China (Evans, 2008, 2010; W. Liu, 2021; Shen Y., 2013; Zhong & He, 2014), or the 'pure relationship' and intimacy that emphasizes self-disclosure and individuality in the Western context (Beck & Beck-Gernshim, 1995; Chambers, 2012; Giddens, 1992a; Morgan, 2011). Rather, drawing on resources and schemas from traditional cultural forms (e.g., folklore, popular novels, folk opera, and songs) that more closely relate to the "Confucian structure of feeling" (H. Lee, 2007a) since the 1900s, the expressive filial sentiment is distinguished by unidirectional expression from the children's side and the presupposition that the parents' love and sacrifice are utterly selfless, universal, and self-evident. Different from the conventional Confucianist values which demand the children's respect and obedience to the parents as unquestionable and unconditional, expressive filial sentiment implies that the children's gratitude is only a sincere inner feeling that can be contingently felt. I found that such expressive filial sentiment not only exists in cultural and media texts but is expected by rural elderly in their everyday lives.

However, such expectations among the elderly have only been partially fulfilled in real life. I discussed in section 6.2 how such expressive filial piety has been practised almost

solely through communication technology and exists in a highly gendered model between daughters and sons. With the aid of communication technology as mediated liminal rituals, many expressive daughters successfully reconstructed the *renao* atmosphere and facilitated intimacy with their elder parents. In contrast, sons rarely practised such expressive filial piety as such behaviour is incompatible with working-class masculinity, even though media technology is readily available for communication. I further discussed how such gendered practises of mediated filial piety intersects with stubborn patriarchal institutions in rural China and leads to great emotional disappointment and misery among the elderly. Finally, I highlighted two silver linings concerning the intimacy of the rural family: the family relationships that exist under bilateral arrangements; and the precious but also precarious closeness between the elderly and 'left-behind' grandchildren.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

Cruel optimism is, then, like all phrases, a deictic – a phrase that points to a proximate location. As an analytic lever, it is an incitement to inhabit and to track the affective attachment to what we call 'the good life,' which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it.

Cruel Optimism. Lauren Berlant (2011)

I began this thesis through a mixture of curiosity, suspicion, and concern about issues faced by the rural elderly as a generation and as grandparents of rural families – I was curious about how exactly they experience their life emotionally. I was suspicious about the common narrative among the public and implicit assumptions of some scholars (e.g., Chinese family sociologists and some media scholars) that the rural elderly's life is less important or simply irrelevant in the modern media system. More importantly, I was concerned about the rural elderly's deteriorated material and mental states in the power-laden modernization process of China, and I was eager to discover why and how it is the case, and what should be done. On top of this, I wondered why they tended to be so often and so facilely understood as anachronistic and unimportant to modern society.

With this intellectual puzzle and emotional concern in mind, I journeyed to two rural villages in China's Hubei province and conducted a 10-month ethnography that closely studied 18 families. Theoretically, I adopted Raymond Williams' concept of the structure of feeling to probe the elderly's feelings in its forming process. Moreover, through the lens of mediation, I refused to settle for arguably linear and simplistic assumptions regarding the connection between the rural elderly and the modern media system but looked beyond, into the empirical and grounded complexity of their interrelations. In this concluding chapter, I return to my initial curiosity, suspicion, and concerns, to determine whether this thesis has provided a "good enough story" (Hershatter, 2011) to open further discussion and reflection.

In Liu Xuan's narrative, which I documented at the very beginning of the thesis, she told a story with a sense of hope but also a hint of despair. She remembered how she got lost in the modern city of Shanghai and how she saved every cent of her money earned in the city and handed it over to her daughter-in-law. She suggested that she had no other option but to do whatever she could to help her sons' nuclear family. She also bitterly but also proudly recounted how she refused her grandsons' invitation to have

some of their good food by lying and saying that she did not like it. During the intimate time I spent with her and many other grandmothers and grandfathers, as well as their family members, I heard numerous emotion-laden stories like this. I am now closer to understanding such bittersweet and multi-layered feelings that they share as a social group and as a generation.

In this concluding chapter, I first provide a recapitulation of the main findings of the project and employ Lauren Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism" to understand the mediated structure of feeing among the rural elderly. Then, I connect these findings to the existing literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and address my policy and theoretical contributions to these debates. The theoretical implications of this thesis to broader research are then discussed from the vantage point of what I term the 'imagination of modernity from below'. I conclude the chapter by discussing future studies and reflecting on this project's limitations.

7.1 'Cruel Optimism' as a Mediated Structure of Feeling

As discussed in Chapter 1, there has been a worrying condition concerning the rural elderly's deteriorating living conditions since the 1990s – some describe it as the elderly crisis. Such a crisis manifests in many ways, including the elderly's bottom-line living standards, minimal consumption, problematic mental health, as well as rising suicide rate (e.g., C. He & Ye, 2014; Jianlei & Cao, 2016; H. Yang, 2013; H. Yang & Ouyang, 2013). In the meantime, scholars have noted that what emerges from such a crisis is the elderly's willing sacrifice and self-acknowledged inferiority. Many of them voluntarily endure harsh living conditions and work, farm, or take care of the grandchildren until they reach the point of physical incapacitation (Cai et al., 2012; Ping, 2018). They also tend to tolerate and show tremendous understanding to their adult children's neglect, indifference and, in some cases, abuse (X. He, 2008; H. Yang & Ouyang, 2013). My own fieldwork in Golden Arch and Pear Tree largely confirmed such observation. However, the question is how to understand the elderly without simply categorizing them as miserable victims as this tends to obscures their agency and oversimplify the picture.

According to the mainstream family studies discussed in Chapter 2, the logic behind the rural elderly's sacrifice and their endurance of hardship lies in enduring the Confucianist moral belief of "carrying the family line" (*chuanzong jiedai*, 传宗接代) and the moral imperatives of completing their familial "life mission" (*renshen renweu*, 人生任务) (i.e., helping their children to build their family and reproduce the next generation) (Gui, 2010, 2014; Gui & Yu, 2010; X. He, 2003, 2008). They argue that

such Confucianist moral beliefs provide the rural elderly with ontological life meaning but also put them in a vulnerable position within the household. The reflexive modernity literature, however, refuses to accept that the elderly's cultural values remain the same as they were in the imperial era. Instead, they consider that the elderly actively seeks emotional intimacy in the process of individualization. With a relatively positive outlook, some argue that such emotional intimacy is largely based on mutual understanding and reciprocity between generations within the family, and demonstrates the resilience of the Chinese family under the pressure of rapid modernization.

However, my study tells a rather different and more complicated story. I found that the emotional experiences most of the elderly in my fieldwork shared were neither nonreflexive compliance of the traditional Confucianist morality, nor seeking the same emotional intimacy as their middle-class counterparts. Based on a grounded ethnographical investigation, I argue that the complex and lived emotional experiences of the rural elderly are a type of mediated structure of feeling that are profoundly embedded in China's modernisation process. Further, inspired by Lauren Berlant (2011), I conclude that such structure of feeling could best be described as a form of cruel optimism, in a sense that what the rural elderly craves, desires and is deeply attached to is precisely what promises and at once denies their happiness. I found that such cruel optimism operates around the intimate politics of the three-generational family, which is characterised by gendered and class-related tensions, hopes, distances, and intimacy. However, such politics goes well beyond the household but connects closely to the uneven modernity of post-reform China. This cruel optimism has been profoundly mediated and interlocked firmly with other socioeconomic structures, all of which, at the intersection, encourage the rural elderly's longings and at once break their dreams.

7.1.1 The emotional attachment of the 'good life' and its cruelty

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Berlant asks why people stay attached to the moral-intimate-economic project called 'the good life', and how such attachment turns out to be a cruel disillusion in neoliberal America. She demonstrated how such a 'good life' has been affectively politicized by neoliberal logic and then betrayed by the very mechanism that cultivates such attachment in the first place. Her works have been particularly inspiring for me. However, while Berlant's research primarily address the neoliberal subjectivation process in capitalist contexts, this study is situated in post-socialist and post-reform China. I found that the rural elderly's attachment to the good life is deeply embedded within the paradoxical process that combines both the mobilization of socialist ethos on the one hand, and the aggressive advance of neoliberal capitalism on the other. The rural elderly's longing, sense of meaning, as well as disappointment and

despair have all been organized around the emotional attachment and politicization of the 'good life'. Based on my empirical findings, I now revisit how such attachment to a 'good life' has been politicized and how it can be cruel.

To begin with, the 'good life' for the rural elderly is associated with the socialist virtue of eating bitterness while the cruelty lies in the disavowal of such virtue after the market reform. As discussed in Chapter 4, the rural elderly's voluntary sacrifice and sense of meaning in enduring hardship are connected to the projects and narratives around the notion of 'bitterness' in their life trajectory. Since the early days of the PRC, 'speaking bitterness' (*suku*, 诉苦) has been employed by the Party-state as a significant emotional and political resource to mobilise peasants to support the new regime (An, 2010; Y. Chen, 1980; Hinton, 1966). During the collective era, 'eating bitterness' (*chiku*, 吃苦) was again harnessed by the state to reinterpret privation and reshape the socialist subjects (Rofel, 2007). With deep cultural roots, the willingness, willpower, and ability to 'eat bitterness' has been widely recognized and celebrated in the public realm as a form of socialist virtue. Many elderly informants in my study reminisced proudly about how they endured and overcame hardship with their fortitude and ability to eat bitterness. They understood the ascetic life they choose to live to be a way of practicing eating bitterness, which involves precious virtue. According to the narratives of their lives, I found that these cultural experiences of 'bitterness' profoundly reconfigured the ways in which they understood themselves. The virtue of enduring, overcoming and embracing bitterness has clearly become part of the dignity of a good life.

However, after the 1980s, with the notion of 'development is the hard truth' advanced by the Party-state, the market economy and its associated values gained supremacy. The once glorious 'working people' (*laodongrenming*, 劳动人民) and their virtues became much less honourable compared to the affluent middle class and their associated ethos and lifestyles (W. Sun, 2013, 2014; Y. Zhao, 2011). Even though hardship and bitterness continue to be a hard truth for the rural elderly, it tends not to be seen and no longer voiced today. The political, public, and official recognition of eating and speaking bitterness (i.e., living and praising a virtuous and frugal life) is much less visible, especially when the consumerist culture has gained ascendancy since the reform. Moreover, although television programmes (melodramas, in particular) continue to provide a space for acknowledging bitterness, the space is shrinking – as many older people admitted, it is more difficult to find the content they can relate to nowadays. This is because the screen is increasingly dominated by content that primarily targets a younger population with more purchasing power. In this sense, the good life organized around bitterness, diligence, and thriftiness was partly disavowed and abandoned. As a generation who grew up during the socialist era, their attachment to such a good life is

no longer endorsed by *public* and *collective* recognition.

Further, I found that even though the recognition of bitterness has previously been a collective project of socialism, narratives around bitterness have nevertheless been evoked and mobilized via television dramas, providing important emotional resources for the rural elderly to strive for a 'good life'. However, the mobilization of bitterness as an emotional resource is neither context nor power free. Rather, it emerges in the context of the aggressive advance of the market economy and the systematic withdrawal of the state from welfare provision since the 1980s. Consequently, such a mediated sense of meaning organized around bitterness does not lead to a good life for the elderly, but in many cases, as Berlant says, to a bad one.

As many critical media scholars point out, China's media system since the 1980s has operated between the 'party line' and the 'bottom line', which applies neoliberal strategies on the one hand and rearticulates socialist ethos on the other (W. Sun & Zhao, 2009; Y. Zhao, 2008). Many studies have examined how various television lifestyle, reality shows, and shopping programmes underscore consumerism and configure neoliberal subjectivity (Bai & Song, 2015; Lewis et al., 2016; W. Sun & Yang, 2019; O. Wang, 2022; R. Wei, 2006). Through analysis of the cultural texts, others have also demonstrated how a socialist ethos have been codified within contemporary media culture (Keane, 1998; Kubat, 2018; Y. Zhao, 2011). Building on such critical scholarship, I found that the narrative of bitterness is precisely evoked and (re)articulated by mass media when the rural three-generational family are *forced* to become a crucial welfare provider.

As discussed in Chapter 1, since the economic reform, the market economy has developed rapidly. Together with selective retention of socialist institutions, including the hukou system, the rural population has been systematically disadvantaged. Under the rural-urban duality, rural families have gained much lower income but with extremely limited welfare provision (e.g., pension, education benefits, medical insurance). Moreover, with a series of laws and social policies advanced by the government, obligations between family members have been extended, encouraged, strengthened, and mandated. Under such circumstances, members with a three-generational rural household tend to be highly economically interdependent. That is to say, as precarious labour working in the city, the middle generation of the rural family is highly dependent on their aged parents for providing help in both production and social reproduction. For the rural elderly, without adequate social provision provided publicly, they are also forced to rely on the middle generation for old-age maintenance.

It is in this context that the mediated narrative of bitterness gained strength. In Chapter 4, I showed that most of the rural elderly practise an extremely diligent and frugal life. Moreover, many actively keep their distance from modern facilities (including media technology) and the modern residences they helped build. Despite old age and poor health conditions, many still preoccupy their life with endless chores, and uncomplainingly take care of their grandchildren. My study shows how the media, particularly television, provides emotional resources and space for the rural elderly to talk about, remember and acknowledge bitterness in their life and reconfirm their sacrifice as meaningful. The plots and scenes from television help to build, encourage and emphasise the connections between bitterness and virtue. In this sense, these mediated moments in the elderly's life provide a language for what might otherwise be silent, unacknowledged, or forgotten. In this regard, the emotional attachment for a meaningful good life has been politicized and sustained in a mediated fashion, which in turn motivates the rural elderly's uncomplaining sacrifice for their family.

However, my study further shows that such sacrifice is heavy with a sense of cruelty for the elderly which lies in the non-recognition and lack of appreciation by younger family members – people to whom the elderly devote their sacrifice. In line with many others, I found that the middle generation, including son(s) and daughter(s)-in-law, tended to take the elderly's contribution for granted to a large extent. In many cases, they *expect* and indeed ask for more than the elderly can give. Particularly in a typical patrilineal three-generational family (with at least one son), the elderly tend to experience tension, indifference, and ingratitude from the middle generation. According to the family politics literature, neglect and ingratitude are largely due to the "moral degradation" of the middle generation and the "power imbalance" within households (F. Chen, 2013; Y. Wei & Jiang, 2007; H. Yang & Ouyang, 2013). The family strategy literature, however, tends to regard the elderly's pain as mere collateral damage of modernisation and of the rural family's desire for urbanisation and social mobility.

My study argues otherwise. I submit that the middle generation's 'ingratitude' should, again, be understood against the backdrop of rapid marketisation and limited welfare provision for rural households. In line with the critical school (e.g., Gao, 2017; Qiu, 2009; W. Sun, 2014; Zhou, 2020), I found that the middle generation, who often work as *nongmingong* in the city, are under tremendous pressure and face great risks in current socio-economic structures. As discussed, they have *no choice* but to rely on their parents to achieve social reproduction and to survive the harsh structurally imposed conditions. My study further found that such pressure has been mediated and released affectively and manifests in the tension between the elderly and the daughter-

in-law – or more generally, between the bigger three-generational family and the small nuclear family.

Within the mainstream family studies, researchers found that the daughters-in-law, as the main co-habitants of the elderly, often treated the elderly badly (Y. Wei & Jiang, 2007; H. Yang & Ouyang, 2013; X. Zhang, 2015). Some studies, sometimes with a condemnatory tone, hold that this results from the growing status of women, which breaks the power balance within the family (D. Wang, 2014; J. Wang & Hai, 2019). However, as I demonstrated in Chapter 5, it is precisely because rural women are (still) shouldering the heavy responsibility of social reproduction that they have so much grievance and grudges. While problems concerning childrearing, education, domestic work, old-age support, and poverty of the rural household are rendered invisible as public issues, these concrete struggles are still being fought. Under such circumstances, media content that the daughters-in-law engage with tends to depict the elderly's help as a *natural* and *necessary* sign of love and care. When engaging with these tailored short videos, focusing on domestic tension, the pressure daughters-in-law experience in everyday life finds an outlet, and social problems find a scapegoat. Therefore, no matter how hard the elderly tries, their sacrifice tends to be *felt*, by the middle generation, as never being enough. The consequences of the releasing of the middle-generation's (daughters-in-law, in particular) pressure are grievance, coldness, resentment and even hostility directed at the elderly.

To conclude, the 'good life' and sense of meaning that the rural elderly has been emotionally attached to is organized around the notion of bitterness. Such attachment has been historically embedded in their lives and mediated contemporarily through cultural texts. Furthermore, my study shows that such mediated attachment emerges at a time when China has drastically transformed from a socialist to a largely capitalist economy, forcing the rural three-generational family to be a highly interdependent economic unit and a crucial welfare provider. In the end, with tenuous public (state and the society) and private (family members) recognition, the dream and pursuit of the 'good life' operates with double cruelty for the rural elderly.

7.1.2 The 'impasse' of intimacy

As discussed in Chapter 2, the reflexive modernity literature theorizes the transformation of the Chinese family from the lens of individualization and emotional intimacy (W. Liu, 2021; Shen Y., 2013; Y. Shen, 2009; Yan, 2011, 2021a; Zhong & He, 2014). With more focus on urban and young people, many found that the Chinese family is increasingly characterized by mutual understanding and respect, equality, and

intimacy, indicting an "emotional turn" in the Chinese family (J. Liu, 2017). Some studies found that the elderly also actively seek emotional closeness with younger generations. Through the emphasis on agency and changing cultural values, these studies refute the mainstream family studies' account of static Confucianist culture. With a particular focus on the rural elderly, a much under-investigated group, my research continues their focus on mediated intimacy. However, I found that with media playing a crucial part, intimacy the rural elderly desires has its own nuanced features. More crucially, I found that with long-lasting and newly intensified patriarchal order intersecting with other structural forces, the seeking of emotional intimacy of the rural elderly is largely trapped in a cruel 'impasse' (Berlant, 2011).

Firstly, I found that as people who spend much time living together, the daughters-in-law and the elderly tend to live out a tense, conflictual and distrustful relationship. The reason for this I partly reviewed in the last section: without adequate welfare provision and under tremendous life pressure, younger women tend to transfer their grievance and resentment to their intimate family members – their in-laws. However, I found that the elderly themselves also tend to feel distrust and distance from their daughters-in-law. Within the mainstream scholarship, some have argued that with an unbalanced sex ratio and opportunities to marry up with a higher-class man, rural women are at a greater advantage in the marriage market. This further allows them to raise marriage costs or threaten divorce, thereby adding to the elderly's misery.

However, my study shows that the *feeling* of high marriage cost and risks of divorce largely relate to mediated misogynistic narratives that are popular in rural China. In Chapter 5, I demonstrated that in the mediated community of rural villages, young women are often depicted as evil, covetous, materialistic and heartless in marriage and family life. In this case, media content the villagers consumed played a crucial role in stereotyping and normalising a particular version of women. It structures the ways in which high divorce rates or marriage costs could be understood, interpreted, and explained. Therefore, the elderly tend to constantly worry about the family's brokenness since they *feel* that young women today are materialistic and cold-hearted. In such circumstances, intimacy between the elderly and their daughters-in-law is by no means easy to achieve.

Moreover, I found that the ideal of intimacy and filial piety has been reconfigured by media into a form that emphasizes the expressive dimension. However, such intimacy is also largely unfulfilled in the elderly's relationship with their adult children. In Chapter 6, I discussed the emergence of the 'expressive filial sentiment' as an ideal form of intimacy for the rural elderly. Different from mainstream family studies, which

tend to assume a rigid persistence of orthodox Confucianist values, I found that the sentiments and aspirations of the rural elderly toward the family have been reconfigured by media culture. As discussed in Chapter 1, the meaning of filial piety and Confucian family values began to change as early as the revolutionary period (late Qing to the 1940s) among intellectual and urban elites. Even though changes did not happen in rural areas during the first few decades of the 1900s, such values and ideals nevertheless turned into mediated cultural scripts, circulating by numerous popular novels, operas, or folklore. Later, when mass media became popular in rural China, the filial sentiment that emphasises intimacy and closeness but not a rigid ethical code was reinterpreted by the media and gained potency.

Such sentiments have been codified by the media the rural elderly engage with today, including television, short videos, as well as traditional songs and folklore that are reinterpreted by modern media forms. With a linguistic, eloquent, and concrete form, such expressive filial sentiment creates a desirable intimacy. However, my study shows that the 'expressive filial sentiments' are different from the 'friend-like' intergenerational intimacy typical in the urban middle-class family, which tends to emphasize communication, self-exposure and mutual understanding. Rather, it expects the younger generations to express their love and gratitude, while positioning the love of the parents (or grandparents) as silent, self-evident, immanent, and unconditional. Under such beliefs, the elderly tends to sacrifice uncomplainingly and humbly, expecting that the adult children could express the love and gratefulness they feel.

Nevertheless, I further found that such longing for 'expressive filial sentiments' is not just a purely mediated phenomenon, it is so in the context of the constant physical separation of the rural households. That is to say, such expressive sentiments become desirable not only culturally, but also because there are very limited alternative options. The traditional action-based, inarticulate way of practising filial piety in the atmosphere of '*renao*' is much less possible today under the migrant working mode of the rural family.

Moreover, I found that the expressive ideal of filial piety has been further intersected with the patriarchal gender order. As shown in Chapter 6, the elderly's expectations of such expressive filial piety are only partially satisfied by their daughters though communication technology (e.g., cell phones and social media platforms). In contrast, sons rarely express their gratitude and filial sentiments to their elderly parents, even when they have their smartphones readily to hand. This, I argue, is because they tend to regard emotional communication as a threat to their working-class masculinity. Worse still, since most of the younger men are out of home working, traditional non-

expressive filial piety is also not possible even they wanted to engage in it. Although most of the daughters provide comforts to the elderly, they are, if married out, members of their husband's family and outsiders to their own parents' family. Therefore, ironically, the daughter's filial practise seldomly goes beyond the practises of mediated communication (e.g., making phone calls or sending WeChat messages and digital red envelopes). This is because under a patriarchal family structure, it is not culturally legitimate for married-out daughters to provide too much support (especially materially) to their natal parents. In this case, the material and mental conditions of the rural elderly tend to be rather gloomy under a typical patrilineal three-generational family.

Therefore, in general, there is an impasse around intimacy for the rural elderly. On the one hand, with mediated narratives of expressive filial sentiment and physical separation, their longing and attachment grows. On the other hand, the fulfilment of their longing remains partial, unsatisfactory and bleak. Concerning their relationships with their daughters-in-law, who often keep the elderly company in practise, intimacy also remains an arduous and formidable task. Women often have a dual identity of both daughter and daughter-in-law. The daughters' awkward position in providing love and the daughter-in-law's conflictual relationship with the elderly are two sides of the patriarchal coin. Thus, it is not just women who pay an emotional price, but the elderly too.

Nevertheless, there is a silver lining. For families that only have a daughters, the non-patrilineal family arrangement is often practised, and the elderly tend to be more content. Many older people hold that 'daughters are the best'. This also refutes mainstream family studies which hold that 'carrying the family line' (through a son) is of paramount importance to the elderly. Moreover, in line with many others (Cong, Silverstein, Dong, Murphy), I found that grandchildren have provided important emotional comfort for the rural elderly. Nevertheless, we should not forget that this is also a result of structural inequality and parallels with children enduring separation from their parents. Moreover, such intimacy is also precarious for both the elderly and children – as many suffer greatly from separation (to coordinate with changes and arrangements of the family) after they have already formed strong emotional bonds.

To conclude, as a generation and as a social group, the rural elderly share a structure of feeling that could be understood as a form of cruel optimism. To a large extent, they suffer for their emotional attachment to and active pursuit of the 'good life', which constantly betrays them. They suffer for their craving for intimacy because it is largely at an impasse. For many of them, cruel optimism operates with hope, longing, and a sense of meaning but at once dooms them through hopelessness, disappointment, and

disillusion. Such cruel optimism has been profoundly mediated and operates within the intimate politics of the rural three-generational family. However, more crucially, it is situated at the conjuncture of deep-seated socioeconomic and power structures of China's modernity. Through the examination of the politics and formation of the rural elderly's emotional world, this study picks up what Berlant insists are the crucial but suspended questions: to ponder the "ordinariness of suffering", the "violence of normativity", the "technologies of patience" and the "cruelty of the now" (Berlant, 2011).

7.2 Implications for Chinese Family Studies and Beyond

The experience of developed European countries proves that you cannot do without the family. Families are good things… The nature of the welfare state will bring about social problems, including the problem of elderly support, which the family could have shouldered. In Europe, welfare societies are run by the state and society, but it is now impossible. As the elderly population grows older, the state can't afford it, and society can't afford it… We must maintain the family. Many elderly people in the country depend on their families for their livelihood. Since Confucius, Chinese culture has advocated family support for the elderly.

Deng Xiaoping, Southern Tour Talks[1], 1992[2]

In the above sections, I summarized the main findings of my empirical exploration. In this section, I turn to the policy and theoretical implications of my findings on the scholarship concerning the Chinese family and beyond. I proceed with my discussion based on the three strands of relevant scholarship mapped out in Chapter 2: mainstream family studies, reflexive modernity literature, and the critical school.

Faced with the rural elderly's highly problematic circumstances, one of the antidotes prescribed by mainstream family studies is to restore and rebuild the virtuous traditional (e.g., Confucianist) culture and family values (e.g., filial piety). For them, the elderly crisis is, at least in a certain sense, a moral crisis. They believe the rural elderly's pain

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[1] In 1992, the former Paramount Leader of the CCP, Deng Xiaoping went on an important tour of southern China, including Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Shanghai. During the tour, he made a series of significant talks and remarks which resumed and reinforced the implementation of the 'reform and opening-up' policy of China. The 1992 Southern Tour marks a critical turning point in China's economic and social reforms.

[2] Source: Central Literature Research Office of the Communist Party of China, 2004: 1,338 (cited in Chen, 2020: 76).

largely emerges when the younger generation refuses to shoulder their family responsibility since they no longer believe in traditional morality. On the other hand, for the elderly, such traditional family values and beliefs still function as their core source of meaning so they continue to sacrifice and endure neglect. In summary, they argue that the key is to *strengthen* the three-generational family.

My study argues otherwise and has implications for this school of thought in three aspects. Firstly, as I have demonstrated, the rural elderly's emotional motivation is far from mere nonreflexive compliance of traditional values. Rather, it is a process, a structure of feeling, that is intricately embedded in a specific historical and socioeconomic context. The account of the *inevitable continuity* of traditional family values not only mistakes emotions for a fixed entity and underplays agency, but is also largely an *apolitical* narrative – in the sense that it downplays how power has a role in the struggle of forming and unforming emotions. My study, however, demonstrates how multi-layered power structures, including the media system, have fundamentally reconfigured the shape and texture of emotions among the rural elderly. Secondly, the overlooking of media culture makes existing analyses largely problematic and fallacious. As demonstrated in this study, media culture, as a form of power, has played a crucial role in reconfiguring the rural elderly's emotions. If turning a blind eye, the results can be frustratingly and dangerously misrepresented. A clear example is that some studies tend to take at face value the mediated narratives (e.g., news reports, infotainment, short videos) that are popular in rural villages, including 'high bride prices' or 'casual divorce being initiated by women', thereby facilely concluding that it is *women* who tend to cause the misery of the rural elderly.

Finally, I disagree with the moral crisis narrative as it tends to obscure structural inequality and to directly blame people who are actually victims and the disadvantaged. Accordingly, suggested solutions to the reconstruction of family values also miss the point and are counterproductive. My study shows that the rural elderly's pain and suffering is never just about the politics within the household but is fundamentally interwoven with the aggressive advance of the market economy, the state's withdrawal from welfare provision, and long-lasting but renewed patriarchal order. In this regard, the so-called 'moral degradation' of the younger generation glosses over the fact that the rural households have been systematically disadvantaged in the process of China's modernization. Moreover, in line with many Chinese feminist scholars (Jin, 2015; S. Song, 2011; J. Wang, 2002; WU & Wang, 2007; WU & Yun, 2007; W. Zheng, 2017), I argue that uncritical advocation of traditional family values risks reinforcing the already powerful patriarchal order and perpetuating women's roles in social reproduction. My study shows that such hegemonical gender order is one of the causes

of the elderly's suffering as it tends to lead to tension and mistrust between family members. To summarise, far from solving the elderly crisis, the uncritical lament of traditional values and the policy of strengthening the family tend to secure the family as welfare provider, and risks effectively escalating the tensions within households.

As critical scholars rightly point out, such intellectual discourse is largely in line with the current state's policy of prioritizing economic growth and social stability (Lin, 2006; B. Meng, 2018; W. Sun, 2014; W. Sun & Guo, 2013; Y. Zhao, 2008). The advocation of traditional values is, in many cases, a strategy of turning the family into a governing tool (Y. Chen, 2020; X. Wu, 2012). As Deng's speech at the beginning of this section showed, the family has been considered a *solution* for elderly support since the economic reform. While advocating a more advanced socialist system that is different from the Western welfare nations, the Party-state has tended to evoke traditional Confucian values to solve problems that have occurred in the process of modernization. However, as I have argued through this study, such a 'solution' has largely been a failure as it has generally led to the rural elderly's inferiority, suffering, and unfulfilled intimacy. Moreover, these findings urge us to rethink whether the current 'solutions' do indeed serve the interests of the working class and peasants as stated in the socialist Constitution.

In this regard, I argue that as long as the family is treated as a means but not an end, and rural China is viewed as the 'stabilisers and reservoirs of China's modernisation', then the rural elderly's pain will only continue to be a cruel reality. Beyond the context of China, countries in East Asia largely share the strategy of solving social problems through strengthening the family and celebrating traditional family values (Y. Chen, 2020; Ikels, 2004; Ueno, 2021; Younghee Shim et al., 2014). Some celebrate such an approach as the "East Asian Model" in explaining these countries' stunning economic growth (Kuznets, 1988; Stiglitz & Yusuf, 2001). In line with many others (Y. Chen, 2020; Kwon, 2007; Ueno, 2021), my study adds to increasing concerns about such celebrations.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, my approach is more in line with the reflexive modernity literature and the critical school. However, by focusing on the largely neglected group of the rural elderly, I contribute to both strands. For reflexive modernity literature, which is largely based on investigations of urban and middle-class families, I highlight the different conditions of emotional intimacy for the rural population. My study points out the danger of celebrating intimacy based on a *universalized* family model without robust scrutiny of the power structures. Concerning the critical school, my contribution also lies in my particular focus on the rural elderly.

Labour studies, for example, have long been dedicated to explaining how the Chinese working class has been exploited and oppressed in current political-economic and cultural structures. However, their focus is primarily on the *production* sphere and their main concerns are the interests of peasant-workers, *nongmingong*, and the main locations of their investigations are factories. On top of their important endeavours, I argue that the domestic sphere of social reproduction and the personae associated with this domain urgently need to be studied. Although there are already many fruitful works focusing on the domestic (primarily women) within labour studies, the elderly's perils and contributions are still largely neglected. However, my study shows how the rural elderly's emotions have motivated their enormous sacrifice and contribution to the rural household's (including *nongmingong's*) social reproduction. Among others , I argue that the largely neglected and underlying 'care economy' is the backbone of the 'official economy'. As Nancy Fraser (2016) forcefully pointed out, the 'general crisis' of the neoliberal capitalist system is often understood and analysed from the economic and the political. However, she went on pointed out that such 'critical separatism' is problematic, because "the social strand is so central to the broader crisis that none of the others can be properly understood in abstraction from it" (2016, p. 99).

Patriarchal order and women's struggle have long been the central concerns of gender studies. They have revealed that in rural China, patriarchal family arrangements, including patrilocal residence and patrilineal inheritance, have stubbornly persisted for many centuries. Further, they forcefully argue that hegemonic patriarchal ideology has been significantly intensified in the context of the largely unchecked advance of the market and the state's prioritization of economic growth and social stability (Lin, 2006; B. Meng, 2018; W. Sun, 2014; W. Sun & Guo, 2013; Y. Zhao, 2008). Moreover, many have pointed out that although the *age-based* patriarchy has been eroded significantly in China's past century, patriarchy as a system is still powerful and has gained new momentum under a neoliberal economic order. Among many researchers, women are often the primary focus. My study, however, adds to this scholarship by pointing out how the patriarchal order, when interwoven with other structural forces, gradually turns the rural elderly's longing for intimacy into an impasse. "Who needs patriarchy in the process of modernization of China?" as gender scholar Song Shaopeng (2011) once asked, and this question remains crucial. However, my contribution is to ask, apart from women, who *suffers* under the patriarchy in the process of the modernization of China? This might also be a crucial question if we are to fully understand the complexity and cruelty of the contemporary patriarchal order.

7.3 The Imagination of Modernity from Below

In my reading and reviewing of the literature along the way, a deep-seated metaphor about modernity kept reappearing: modernity often *arrives* like a ship from the outside but not something emerges from within. For example, China was awakened by Western civilizations and caught up through the holistic learning of economy, technology, democracy and modern values. Family structures and values are also moving towards the Western model of the modern family. Similarly, progressive elements of modernization (including modern media) spread, penetrate, and infiltrate from the urban to the rural and eventually reach a homogeneous condition. In this metaphor, rural China and its population are usually the last to be modernized, and the rural elderly is among the last of the last. Many tend to imply that these people will remain 'traditional' until the modern world finds them. By the same token, the rural elderly and the modern media seem to be awkwardly juxtaposed and not worthy of our attention – at least for now – since modern media does not yet seem to have arrived at the shores of the rural elderly.

However, I believe this study tells a different story – a story of modernity from below. Discomforted at the dichotomy between the 'traditional' and the 'modern', I forestall the temptation to fit the rich, heterogeneous, and sometimes contradictory local experiences into a linear, teleological imagination of history or modernity. Through a contextualised and historicised analysis of the rural elderly's emotional experiences in facing the radical transformation of family and society, this study significantly shifts the angle to examine modernity through perspectives of the social group that has been largely excluded from the so-called 'modern' world: the rural elderly. Instead of understanding the rural elderly as a *passive receiver* of modernity who involuntarily responds to it and is helplessly changed by it, my study highlights their *agency* in shaping this process. It is their mediated emotional attachment to the 'good life' and dedicated sacrifice for the family that actively play a crucial role in China's modern transformation and fundamentally reconfigures its contours.

Moreover, taking such a variegated and nonuniform form, the structure of feeling among the rural elderly hardly fits either of the binary categories of the modern or the traditional. Rather, such mediated structure of feeling is complicatedly connected to historical legacy on the one hand, and on the power-laden socio-economic structures of contemporary society on the other. Often starting from the more visible and advantaged groups and locations, the binary understanding of modernity tends to claim rigid and distinct differences and to-be-filled gaps between the urban and the rural, the old and

the young, the 'West' and the 'rest'. In contrast, this study starts from the local, grounded experiences, and at the same time takes an interconnected, systematic perspective and thus has wider theoretical implications for the theorization of late modernity from 'below'.

As discussed in Chapter 2, individualization is a key concept that has been proposed to theorize the modern transformation of selfhood, personal relationships, and the family. Drawing on realities of the industrial West, theorists of late modernity argue that individuals are increasingly less bonded by the traditional social institutions with the process of individualization, and the 'traditional' pre-established biography has been transformed into a 'choice biography'. Individuals are, voluntarily or not, becoming more reflexive in making choices in their personal and family lives. Concerning the family, intimacy and modern sensibility, Giddens (1992a), one of the main theorists of late modernity, argues that there has been a great "transformation of intimacy". That is, relationships are becoming increasingly equal and 'democratic', heading to a new and ideal condition of "pure relationship". This means relationships are said to be built on and sustained upon the 'relationship per se' but not for the sake of obligation, economic consideration, or the fulfilment of the 'life course' (Giddens, 1992b). There has been a 'democratisation of the family', and more egalitarian practises and imaginations have challenged the traditional authoritarian household. Such theorization has been widely used to explain the new reality of the family and personal relationships (e.g., cohabitation, divorce, remarriage, childbearing outside of wedlock, same-sex marriages, and even the 'collapse' of the family as an institution) in Western societies and beyond (Beck & Beck-Gernshim, 1995; Chambers, 2012; Morgan, 2011).

However, as many have pointed out, the main limitation of such theorizations is that they tend to assume globally and universally homogeneous experiences of modernity. Based on empirical works outside the geography of the West, many have found that experiences of being modern often come with features that are largely incompatible with Euro-American modernity. Therefore, many suggest that modernity should be conceptualized as plural (Abu-Lughod, 1989; Chakrabarty, 2009; Kraidy, 2008; Rofel, 1999; Shih, 2001; Wittrock, 2002). Notions of 'alternative modernity'(Nonini & Ong, 2003), 'multiple modernities'(Lewis et al., 2016), and 'other modernity' (Rofel, 1999) have been proposed to understand the variegated and nonuniform forms of modernity elsewhere.

For example, Yan Yunxiang (2010) argues that the Chinese path to individualisation has its unique aspects, even though it also shares many similarities with the Western model. He points out that China's path to individualisation emerged from a context without the

conditions of "cultural democracy, the welfare state, and classic individualism" (2010: 507) but with the forceful intervention of the state. Similarly, many found that in East Asian societies, the family still shows great resilience and supports individuals as a crucial safety net. In contrast to the Euro-American modernity that is "stretched out", some have proposed that East Asian modernity is "compressed" or "compounded" since it often comes with 'rush-to' development (S.-J. Han & Shim, 2010; Ochiai, 2011; Younghee Shim et al., 2014). These institutional elements can be understood as the objective-structural dimension or the 'push energy' of East Asian modernity, including globalisation, social policies, and the expansion of the market economy. However, another force of such modernity is the rich tradition of 'familism' and intergenerational reciprocity, which could be regarded as a crucial pull factor (Kulp, 1925; Shim & Han, 2010; Zhai, 2011). In this regard, many argued that such "partial return of familism" can best be understood as "family-oriented" individualisation (Shim & Han, 2010) or what Yan dubbed "neo-familism" (Yan, 2021a).

I consider my study largely joins these existing endeavours to go beyond the normative imagination of modernity. However, I further argue that acknowledging the multiplicity of modernity is not enough. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, despite its various forms, the thesis of (various) individualization still tends to homogenize the modern experiences of different groups by primarily drawing on experiences of the younger (and often urban middle-class) population. Individualization is thus not so much about 'the rise of individuals' as 'the rise of *young* individuals'. My study of the rural elderly shows very different experiences of being modern even *within* the modernity that has already been theorized as an 'exception'.

More fundamentally, my study points out the *interrelation* between the different experiences of being modern. With a rural household, the younger generations tend to enjoy relatively more emotional freedom and mobility in 'choosing' a life. As demonstrated by many scholars, younger generations tend to embrace the consumerist and neoliberal culture more openly. In contrast, my study shows that the rural elderly tend to live an ascetic life based on their emotional attachment to eating bitterness. In a sense, it is the rural elderly's sacrifices in everyday life that supports the emotional freedom and mobility of the younger generation when rural households have been systematically disadvantaged in the modernization process of China. In other words, it is impossible to think about thousands of rural households without also considering the elderly. It is also impossible to think about the population in urban China who tend to be privileged with a more 'modern' way of life without considering the rural elderly. In short, China's modernity does not take place *outside* the rural or the rural elderly and later *arrives* at them but is instead made possible by them in the first place.

Furthermore, when considering the world as an interconnected global system, the rural elderly also plays a crucial role in the "Global Care Chain" (Hochschild, 2000; Yeates, 2004) and the world economic system. Even though this study does not specifically focus on the analysis of such global interconnections, the linkage is *imaginable* if taking the rural elderly as a *starting point* for theorizing modernity. For example, rather than asking how the individualization process gradually reaches the rural population in China, the question should be: what role does the Chinese rural elderly play in the process of individualization in Euro-America societies?

A final contribution to the field concerns media studies. As I noted in Chapter 2, the theory of mediation does not analyse media culture in a simplistic and linear way, nor does it necessarily start with the media per se – instead, the analysis begins with the *mediated*. Thus, even if media is not immediately present, reality still might be mediated in some way as media culture is now more closely woven into the infrastructure of our lives. For example, my study shows the rural elderly tends to maintain a distance from modern media technology and self-reported their dislike of the media. However, with a grounded ethnographical method, I found this was a form of *emotional* denial, which was already mediated. Moreover, although the rural elderly used much less digital media than the younger members of the family, digital media still significantly reconfigured their emotions and intimacy. This is because their interactions with younger family members are mediated in various ways.

Since the 1990s, there has been increasing concern about the Eurocentricity of media and communication studies. Scholars have called for a 'de-Westernization' or an 'internationalization' of the field (Amin et al., 2000; Downing, 1996; Thussu, 2009; Waisbord & Mellado, 2014; G. Wang, 2013). However, even with these fruitful works, the Global South tends to continue to be theorized from the vantage point of the Global North (Willems, 2014). As Lewis and others (2016) have pointed out, media is still often considered to be a global distributor of the universal modernity of the Global North. However, as shown in this study, the rural elderly are never merely passive receivers of modern thoughts distributed by media. Rather, carrying dense history and situated within a specific localized, historical, socioeconomic, and power structure, the structure of feeling among the rural elderly is mediated in a complicated manner, with its own unique modality. Further, I suggest that such mediated structure of feeling plays an active role in shaping China's modernity. In line with what Willems argues, we should not treat the Global South as a place filled with "raw data" but "a part of the world that has agency, a place from which we can start theorizing the human condition" (Willems, 2014, p. 2).

In conclusion, from the vantage point of the rural elderly and building on the work of many others, this study advances the imagination of modernity from below. Such imagination has two fundamental aspects. Firstly, imagination from 'below' means to work from the concrete local through a grounded, bottom-up approach (methodologically connected to ethnography). It means to examine the complex *lived experiences* situated firmly within a specific context and forestall a particular imagination or prescription of selfhood, sociality, and society. Using Williams' (1978) term, discussed in Chapter 2, we should take seriously and securitize what has been truly *lived*, but not be misguided by or stop at what is often *said* to be (or should be) 'life'. The former is a process – the experiences *in solution*, involved at once with structure and agency in context. In contrast, the latter is the already 'precipitated' and 'fixed' part of society that could be a form of ideology, a set of established institutions, or a series of normative prescriptions on selfhood and social relations. Such a grounded approach allows us to see the complexity and variety of modernity beyond the often taken for granted universal models that arrived from the outside.

Secondly, imagination from 'below' means to work from a place that has often been marginalized, excluded, and subordinated. This is a crucial complement to the first point because I am not trying to describe another *uncontaminated* (Mignolo, 2011) culture with essentialist fantasies (Lewis et al., 2016). Rather, my argument is built upon a presupposition that today's world is interconnected and intertwined in profound and complex ways, and the local experiences are at once profoundly national and global. Based on such an interconnected perspective, to explore the presumably infinite forms of modernity is not enough because such an approach offers no rigorous sense of what, if anything, gives a *dominant* imagination of modernity its phenomenal power of replication and expansion. As Elisa Oreglia (2013, p. 32) remarked in her ethnography on rural Chinese's media engagement, "it is not only a matter of filling a research gap in order to provide a fuller picture; it is a matter of changing the whole picture by looking at it from a different perspective".

7.4 Limitations and Future Studies

As noted in the methodology chapter, an ethnographer is not an objective and omnipotent observer of social and cultural phenomena, but an author who looks through a particular (theoretical and political) lens with best possible rigorousness. This means that an ethnography, like any other social science work, is a product that *depends upon* but is also *limited by* the researcher's identity, knowledge, social position, and resources. Moreover, even though this thesis addresses some of the most urgent issues concerning

the rural elderly and their mediated emotional experiences, there are many more important questions to be answered to present a more comprehensive and nuanced picture. In what follows, I discuss some of the main limitations of this project and also some possible directions for future studies.

Firstly, as discussed in Chapter 3, my identity as a young female university student has had an impact on the research process. It was difficult for me to build very close relationships with rural young people around my age as my 'good student identity' got in the way. Moreover, since the tension and conflicts already existed between generations, my focus on the elderly somehow alienated me from the younger generation. Also, as some of the younger people were not home during my fieldwork, not all younger family members were equally studied. Therefore, my discussion on the younger people's experiences and feelings is relatively limited. Additionally, because of my gender, the investigation as it relates to men is arguably insufficient, including both elderly and younger men.

As shown by the empirical chapters, the analysis of the elderly's mediated emotional experiences in family life heavily focused on their relationship with the middle generation, especially sons, daughters, and daughter-in-law. As intergenerational dynamics formed my initial interest, other types of relationships were relatively neglected in this thesis. For example, the conjugal relationship between elderly couples is, by itself, an important and largely understudied research topic. Starting from my findings on the changing nature of filial piety under modern media culture, it is worth asking whether and how media culture might also reconfigure the conjugal intimacy of the rural elderly. Similarly, although I discussed the media and the intimacy between the elderly and their grandchildren, the analysis could be advanced by future studies that pay specific attention to this matter.

Moreover, as show in the empirical chapters, the patriarchal three-generational family arrangement is still the mainstream family mode in rural China. However, as I mentioned in Chapter 6, the bilateral three-generational family has been increasingly popular in rural China as more families only have daughters. As I selected family cases based on representativeness, the bilateral family cases are few in number. Therefore, future studies could focus especially on this family model. Questions worth considering include: in what sense and to what extent can such a bilateral family challenge patriarchal structures, what is the relationship mode of sons-in-law and the elderly, and how does media culture relate to such a family mode?

Lastly, this thesis only discussed the elderly's mediated emotional experiences within

the family realm. However, as I found in my fieldwork, the elderly's everyday lives and individual families are closely connected to their neighbourhood, village, and local community. I noticed that even with convenient digital and social media platforms, families and individuals in the villages were not necessarily more connected or intimate. Some older people told me they were not willing to visit other people's homes even when the felt lonely, and the neighbourhood or village WeChat groups were sometimes filled with relatively hostile and distrustful talks. However, these are just some tentative observations that future studies could explore further.

7.5 Final Remarks

It is not easy to end this thesis with a full stop. I constantly fear this work might, in any way, simplify, misunderstand, or homogenise the rural elderly's lives since vivid and utterly rich *lived* lives are much more complicated than this limited text could possibly present. Like any other social analysis, this text is inevitably a deduction based on a certain degree of generalization. I am not against generalization itself, epistemologically, because it could help us to better grasp the chaotic and to shed light on other possible alternative ways to understand and narrativize our society. However, fundamentally in line with the theoretical framework I discussed in Chapter 2, I am conscious about the pitfall pointed by Raymond Williams, of treating the extremely complex and variegated social world in precipitated and fixed forms.

As highlighted by some scholars (X. He, 2017), rural China is far from a monolithic entity and the elderly's experiences of different parts of China are likely to be significantly different. Moreover, as a project of 'speaking about' and 'speaking for' (Alcoff, 1991), this work cannot easily be exempted from possible ethical and epistemological dangers. After all, most of my informants will probably never read it and provide their criticism in return. In facing such problems, I invite my readers to be aware of the potential danger I mentioned above and not to readily stereotype the rural elderly's lives and experiences based on my effort to contest other existing stereotypes through analytical generalisation (Banaji, 2017).

It was equally difficult for me to leave the villages and the real flesh and blood people with feelings and hopes. One older man said to me after I showed deep empathy for their hard life: "you will eventually leave and we will go on living our lives, better or worse". His word stuck with me and constantly reminded me of the limits and missions of intellectual works. Throughout my fieldwork, these elders offered me tremendous trust and generosity and I fear I cannot give anything back in return. However, I believe this work is in some way an effort toward a more collaborative dialogue through

'speaking for' them under the structures that have largely diminished their voices. I also humbly hope this project could serve as an invitation for greater attention and dialogue with the rural elderly in future studies. Quoting Gail Hershatter, from her pathbreaking work *Gender of Memory* which has profoundly inspired me, I believe that the rural elderly's stories and feelings should be "central to the ethics and politics of fashioning a liveable present" (2011, p. 288).

Appendices

Appendix I Glossary

ai	爱，love
aiqing de luoji	爱情的逻辑，the logic of love
bangong bangeng	半工半耕，half-worker half-cultivator
buguanxiaode	不管小的，does not help the young
caoxin	操心，caring
chiren	吃人，cannibalistic
chuanzong jiedai	传宗接代，carry the ancestor's line and reproduce the next generation
danwei	单位，work units
dagong	打工，work for a boss
daijifengong weijichu de bangongbangeng	代际分工为基础的半工半耕，half-worker half-cultivator mode based on the intergenerational division of labour
dawangka	大王卡，King card
daxuesheng	大学生, college student
De xiansheng	德先生，Mr. Democracy

dianxin cuncuntong	电信村村通，Telecommunication in Every Village
dongshi	懂事，sensible and considerate
Douyin	抖音，short videos app
enqing	恩情，love with unconditional giving
e'popo	恶婆婆，evil mother-in-law
facai	发财，make a fortune
fangyingdui	放映队，film projection group
fangzi chezi piaozi	房子车子票子，a house and a car and a fortune
fenshuizhi gaige	分税制改革，Reform of Adjusting the Division of Revenue Between the Central and Local Governments
funvhuijia	妇女回家，women going home
funv jiefang	妇女解放，Women's emancipation
fushi	服侍，serve
gandaosi	干到死，work until they drop
gedaihu	隔代户，skip-generation households
goutong	沟通，communication
guanggun	光棍，bachelor

guishu de luoji   归属的逻辑，the logic of belonging

haokan   好看，enjoyable

haoren you haobao   好人有好报，good people have good karma

hexieshehui   和谐社会，harmonious society

hongge   红歌，red songs, socialist revolution-related songs

huayan huayu   话言话语，words or expressions

Huanzhu Gege   还珠格格，Return of Princess Pearl

jiachang liduan   家长里短，family trifles

jiaren   家人，family members

jiatinghua   家庭化，familialisation

jianjinshi chengshihua   渐进式城市化，gradual urbanisation

jieqi   解气，vent anger

jinghua yingping   净化荧屏，clean up the screen

Jingzhun fupin   精准扶贫，Targeted Poverty Alleviation

jiuguo   救国，save the nation

jiushi jiating   旧式家庭，old family

kenlao   啃老，eating the elderly

Kewang   渴望，Yearnings

kongchaohu   空巢户，"empty-nest" households

Kuaishou   快手 short video app

kuming   苦命，a bitter fate

kuqingxi   苦情戏，bitter emotion drama

li   礼，propriety

liangge erzi kuyichang   两个儿子哭一场，cry if you have two sons

liangtouzou   两头走，dual-local post-marital residence

liangxin   良心，noble conscience

meiwenhua   没文化，uncultured

minzhu hemu   民主和睦，democratic and harmonious

nongmingong   农民工，peasant-workers

nvde   女德，women's virtues

po-xi problems   婆媳问题，mother-in-law/daughter-in-law problems

qing   情，love

qinggan programs	情感节目，programs that feature people's family and private emotional lives
qinggan shijie, xinfu zhongguo	情感世界，幸福中国；intimate world, happy China
qinggan zhuanjia	情感专家，emotion experts
qingqing aiai	情情爱爱，romantic love
quzhengzhihua	去政治化，depoliticisation
ren	仁，benevolence
renao	热闹，boisterous
renlaole jiugaisi	人老了就该死，people should just die when they are old
Renmin wang	人民网，People.com
Rensheng renwu	人生任务，life mission
renzhi changqing	人之常情，natural feelings of ordinary people
rotated maintenance	轮养，lunyang
Sai xiansheng	赛先生, Mr. Science
Sangang Wuchang	三纲五常，Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues
shehui zhishi	社会知识，knowledge of the society
shehuizhuyi xinnongcun	社会主义新农村，New Socialist Countryside

sheng yang si zang 生养死葬，provide when alive and host funeral when dead

shuben zhishi 书本知识，bookish knowledge

siji ban dianshi 四级办电视，four-tier policy

song-bang 松绑，to untie

suzhi 素质，quality

tianjingdiyi 天经地义，natural and right

tuwei qinghua 土味情话，tawdry romantic prattle

tuotai huangu 脱胎换骨，a complete and total overhaul of the body and soul

wanzi qianhong yipianlv 万紫千红一片绿，ten thousands of the purple, thousands of the red and the green

weiguopojia 为国破家，break the family to unite the nation

wenhua tizhi gaige 文化体制改革，cultural system reform

weiwen 维稳，sustain stability

xiachen shichang 下沉市场，sinking market

xiangtongle 想通了，come to terms with

xiaobaicai 小白菜，Cabbage

xiaolingtong 小灵通，little smart

xin 信，fidelity

xingshi 形势，situation

xinlihua 心里话，words from the heart

xiqi 稀奇，rare and interesting

Xin Nongbao 新农保，New Rural Pension Scheme (NRPS)

Xinqingnian 新青年，New Youth

yaosiyaohuo 要死要活，literally death and living, meaning dramatic

yi 义，righteousness

yikou caibingzi 一口菜饼子，A Bite of Vegetable Pancake

yiku sitian 忆苦思甜，recalling the bitterness and thinking about the sweetness

yule 娱乐，entertainment

Yunnan shangeju 云南山歌剧，Yunnan folk song/drama

zhaijidi 宅基地，collective household plot

zhengchanghua 正常化，normalisation

zhi 智，wisdom

zhong xiao 忠孝，loyal and filial

zubei   祖辈, grandparent-generation

Appendix II Family Cases

Family members listed below are people I lived with or interviewed. I did not list the family members I did not encounter or interview in any way. For example, in family 1, as I did not have the chance to meet or chat with daughter Jin Jian's husband or her children who lived in another place, this list does not include them. The order of the elderly's adult children is based on their age – from eldest to youngest. The small family's members are listed together in a cluster.

Eleven families were from Golden Arch and seven were from Pear Tree.
The 11 families that I lived with are marked with an aserisk (*).

Golden Arch Village

Family 1 *

Grandfather: Jin Shan, 66
Grandmother: Zhou Biyang, 62

Son: Jin Hui
Daughter-in-law: Jiang Ju
Grandson: Jin Peng
Granddaughter: Jin Ya

Daughter: Jin Jian

Zhou Biyang and Jin Shan were both in their 60s when I met them in Golden Arch. They had three children, two daughters and a son but their first daughter died at birth. Now they lived together with their 36-year-old son's nuclear family in a newly built four-storey house. The house, which they borrowed a great amount of money to build, was not quite finished – only the first and the second floor was furnished. The old couple had an old wooden house in a nearby village with their land close-by. They grew tea and corn there like other people in Golden Arch. Grandfather Jin Shan sometimes did short-term construction work in nearby towns during the slack farming seasons.

Their son Jin Hui and daughter-in-law Jiang Ju were both migrant workers and normally only returned during the Spring Festival. Therefore, their two children were taken care of by the old couple from birth. The little boy, Jin Peng, was 10 years old and the little

girl, Jin Ya, was 13. The little girl had dyslexia and was frequently sick. The two children had a strong bond with their grandmother. The old couple's daughter Jin Jian was 40 and married, living in a nearby village. She visited her parents very often.

Biyang was probably the most skilled user of smartphones I met in my fieldwork among people people in their 60s. She only had a middle school education but often taught Jin Ya to calculate on her phone. Jin Shan, however, showed very little interest in smartphones but was a lover of television and cigarettes.

In May 2019, daughter-in-law Jiang Ju's father (see family 9) in the same village was seriously sick. Therefore, when I was in Golden Arch from July, Jin Hui and Jiang Ju were back from work and stayed at home until September 2019.

Family 2 *

Great-grandfather: Zhen Fu,89
Grandfather: Zhen Yu, 58
Grandmother: Guo Hua, 53

Son: Zhen Song
Daughter-in-law: Jin Jing
Granddaughter: Zhen Xiaolin

Daughter: Zhen Lan

This was a family of four generations. Zhen Yu was the second son of Zhen Fu. Zhen Fu was a respected doctor when he was young. He had three sons and two daughters but two of the sons died of cancer in their 30s. The eldest son's wife remarried only eight years ago and lives next door to Zhen Yu. Now they support Zhen Fu in turn – Zhen Fu lives with each of them for 10 days.

Zhen Yu and Guo Hua married in 1990 and Hua is seven years younger than Yu. Initially, they only planned to have one child because of their problematic health and poor family situation. However, later they found their life can be fulfilled with another child. Therefore, 14 years after their first son Zhen Song was born, their little girl Zhen Lan came into the world and was 13 years old when I lived with them.

Their son Zhen Song married his high school alumni Jin Jing in 2017 and soon they had a baby girl named Xiaolin. Zhen Song worked in Hangzhou city as an insurance

salesman and his wife stayed at home with the old couple Zhen Fu and Guo Hua after Xiaolin was born. However, Jin Jing found it hard to live so far away from her husband and planned to move with her husband together with her baby during my stay. She did so after the Spring Festival of 2019.

Zhen Yu used to be a stone engraver in a nearby town but was forced to change his job to a construction worker because he could no longer make money as an engraver. He worked in nearby towns and returned home from time to time. Guo Hua, however, stayed at Golden Arch as a housewife and a farmer. She told me that they struggled to make ends meet because they had both older and younger ones to support.

Family 3 *

Grandfather: Qian Sheng, 56
Grandmother: Ji Chunxia, 55

Daughter: Qian Yuqing
Son-in-law: Hu Gang
Granddaughter: Hu Xuanya
Son-in-law's parents: Hu Quan & Zou Aiyun

Daughter: Qian Yumei

Qian Sheng and Ji Chunxia became grandparents right before I started my fieldwork. They had two daughters, Yuqing (age 29) and Yumei (age 14). Yuqing and her husband Hu Gang married in 2017 and had a baby girl Hu Xuanya in July 2019. The family was delighted by this new life. When I visited the family in August 2019, everyone was there – Sheng and Chunxia, new mother Yuqing, her husband and her husband's parents, as well as Yumei who was on summer vacation, and of course, everyone's focus – the new baby Xuanya.

Because Sheng and Chunxia had no son, Yuqing practised a rather new marriage arrangement called 'live-by-two-sides'. Yuqing and her husband were both programmers in Shenzhen city and they returned once a year. They spend the Spring Festival in turn in their original family's places to make it fair to both of their parents. Yuqing cared about her younger sister Yumei very much. She voluntarily paid the high expense of Yumei's private middle school in Enshi city for one year (Yumei dropped out because she was homesick and felt it was too hard to catch up).

Qian Sheng was a migrant construction worker in Beijing. He was lean and not in very good health. He was back because of Xuanya's birth in June. Mother Ji Chunxia was a housewife and tea farmer. She took care of the land and the younger daughter Yumei, was in middle school in a nearby town after dropping out of an expensive private school in the city.

During my stay, Hu Gang's parents were also there to help take care of Yuqing and the new-born. They were from a different region of Hubei Province and I could not understand their dialect, although they are very quiet anyway. They were both in their 50s and construction workers back in their hometown. Most of the time, Hu Gang's mother Zou Aiyun held the baby quietly and was always the last to eat. She complained about nothing. Hu Gang only had a two-week maternity leave so he went back to Shenzhen soon after Xuanya was born.

Family 4 *

Great-grandmother: Song Meifang, 87
Grandfather: Zhen Wanmin, 57
Grandmother: Yang Xiuju, 58

Son: Zhen Songyi
Daughter-in-law 1: Pan Zi
Grandson: Zhen Yanyan

Son: Zhen Hangyi
Daughter-in-law 2: Peng Xing

Zhen Wanmin was an unauthorized village bus driver who got up very early every day to shuttle the villagers from Golden Arch to nearby towns. He was a very quiet and loving grandfather who always smiled at his grandson Zhen Yanyan. Yang Xiuju, like many other elderly women in the village, was the main caretaker: of grandson Yanyan and her aging mother-in-law Song Meifang. She impressed me as a very sanguine and talkative woman. She spent most of her time with Yanyan as long as he was at home.

Yanyan was 10 years old now. He was a big fan of digital games and at the same time a top student in his class. He went to a very expensive private primary school in Enshi city and came back to Golden Arch every weekend – picked up by his bus driver grandfather. Yanyan was also very talkative, especially with his grandmother – he had been taken care of by his grandparents since he was born.

Yanyan's parents, Zhen Songyi and Pan Zi, were ambitious young entrepreneurs – umping from a small restaurant to a beauty shop. Notably, they had recently dropped out of a Douyin business – they had invested a lot of money but it failed in the end. They were trying to find another opportunity in Enshi city. Similarly, Songyi's younger brother Hangyi and his new wife were not in any 'stable' job but constantly hunting for a better one. This worried Xiuju and Wanmin but they were still very supportive.

Song Meifang, the great-grandmother, might have been the quietest, sometimes most 'invisible' member of the family. She always sat by the corner of the old sofa and smiled at others without a word. She was 87 years old but with sharp eyes and a clear head.

Family 5

Grandfather: Zhen Deng,77
Grandmother: Yang Chunmei, 76

Son : Zhen Pinsong
Daughter-in-law : Yang Jinling
Granddaughter: Zhen Dahua
Granddaughter: Zhen Xiaohua

Son: Zhen Pinhong
Daughter-in-law: Deng Zezheng
Granddaughter: Zhen Huihui
Grandson: Zhen Zuhui

Zhen Deng and Yang Chunmei were an old couple who spent most of their time alone in Golden Arch. All their sons and daughters-in-law were migrant workers and only came back during the Spring Festival. The old couple lived on the first floor of their second son Zhen Pinhong's three-storey house. They had a poor relationship with their older son Pinsong's family whose house was 50 meters away from Pinhong's house, even though they helped raise Pinsong's two daughters until they went to high school. The old couple raised all four grandchildren – with all granddaughters married and the youngest grandson Zuhui still in high school.

I never got a chance to meet Pinsong and his small family since they were never there. Pinhong was doing construction work in Zhejiang Province while his wife Zezheng was a waitress in Enshi city. They went back two days before the lunar new year of 2019

and treated me warmly. Their son Zuhui was with us for a short period since he needed to go back to school to prepare for his college entrance exam. On the third day of the lunar new year, their daughter Zhen Huihui came back home, together with her husband and a new-born baby.

The old couple together with their second son's small family was relatively poor and lived under the government's Targeted Poverty Alleviation Scheme. That meant they received a small amount of regular subsidy and other preferential policies around education and medical care.

Family 6 *

Grandfather: Zhen Zuwang, 59
Grandmother: Wu Qi, 58

Daughter: Zhen Yuya

Daughter: Zhen Xiao
Son-in-law: Hu Gang
Granddaughter: Zhen Yuan

Zhen Zuwang and Wu Qi were both in their late 50s and not in very good health. Because of Wu Qi's disease, they were also under the Targeted Poverty Alleviation Scheme until 2018 when she got better and began to farm tea.

Their elder daughter married out 10 years ago and lived in a nearby village. Because they had no son, they kept second daughter Zhen Xiao with them and had a 'live-by-two-sides' marriage – more on the wife's side in practise. Zhen Xiao's husband Hu Gang was from another region and had an older brother, so he stayed a lot more with his wife's side (other villagers told me that Xiao's marriage can also be treated as a matrilocal marriage but it would be nicer to call it 'live-by-two-sides').

The old couple invested a lot in building their new three-storey house and they lived together with Xiao's small family in it.

Zhen Xiao and Hu Gang married three years earlier and had a two year old girl, Yuanyuan. Xiao was pregnant with their second child during my fieldwork while her husband worked in the neighbourhood as a construction worker – he told me that he and Xiao agreed that he should not work too far away from home since Xiao and their

babies needed him. Before they married, Xiao was a waitress in WuHan city and Gang was a Foxconn worker in Shenzhen.

Family 7

Grandmother: Ran Miao, 79

Grandfather-to-be: Qian Chenqi, 56
Grandmother-to-be: Wu Cui, 56

Daughter: Qian Qiu
Son-in-law: Liu Shen

Daughter: Qian Chun

Qian Chenqi was a local cadre of Golden Arch and had a small tea factory with his wife in the village. Their economic condition was relatively high in Golden Arch. Wu Cui worked very hard at the factory since Chenqi had limited time at it because of his job. They hired three relatives and could be very busy during the harvest season.

Qian Chenqi and Wu Cui were not elderly according to my definition but they expected to soon become grandparents as their older daughter Qian Qiu got married in 2018 and planned to have a child. They constantly urged Qiu to have children so they could take care of their grandchildren while they were still in good health.

Qiu's marriage was also a 'live-by-two-sides' one. Her husband Liu Shen was from a middle-class family in Enshi city and he was the only son. Qiu studied fine art in college and started a small studio in Chengdu City. But she came back after she got married and worked with Shen in Enshi. Their parents jointly funded the new couple with a big apartment in Enshi.

The old couple's second daughter Qian Chun was an 18-year-old college student in Enshi. Surprisingly, she told me she preferred to be 'married out' because she wanted to leave the backward village and her 'controlling parents'.

Wu Cui's mother Ran Miao did not technically belong to Wu Cui's family because Wu Cui was a 'married out' daughter, but Miao lived just two minutes' walk from Cui's house with her youngest son's small family. Cui and Miao visited each other frequently.

Family 8 *

Grandfather: Jiang Shou, 87
Grandmother: (Deceased)

Son: Jiang Yinhe
Daughter-in-law: Wu Xiang
Grandson: Jiang Dong
Granddaughter: Jiang Lili

Son: Jiang Yinfu

Son: Jiang Yinyi

Jiang Shou's livings conditions were gossiped about in the village – he was already 87 years old and still could not find a satisfying living arrangement. He had three sons, all of whom felt reluctant to support Shou.

The youngest son Yinyi was 43 and unmarried. He was a gambler (according to Yinhe and other villagers) and lived in Enshi city. The second son Yufu's ex-wife had mental health problems and died in 2017. He remarried a local woman in a nearby village, but this new daughter-in-law treated Shou badly. The oldest son Yinhe was a hardworking migrant construction worker and supported their mother until she died in 2016. His wife Wu Xiang felt that she and Yinhe had done their part and it was time Yinyi and Yinfu took some responsibility.

During my fieldwork, Jiang Shou lived in turn in Yufu and Yuhe's house (Golden Arch and a nearby village) and with two daughters-in-law (Yinfu and Yinhe all worked far away as migrant workers). I lived with Yinhe's family in Golden Arch for two weeks while Shou was with them. When I was with Shou, he always talked about death and how he wanted to go back to his old wooden house in the deep mountains alone.

Family 9

Grandfather: Jiang Li, 72
Grandmother: Xie Guixiang, 68

Son: Jiang Yougang
Daughter-in-law: Guo Zhen

Grandson: Jiang Hao

Daughter: Jiang Ju
Son-in-law: Jin Hui
Granddaughter: Jin Ya
Grandson: Jin Peng

Daughter: Jiang Guihua

Jiang Li and Xie Guixiang were in their early 70s and they had a son after two daughters. The second daughter Jiang Ju was the daughter-in-law of Jin Shan and Zhou Biyang (from family 1). Li and Guiiang lived with their youngest son in their newly built (but unfinished) four-storey house, which was just 20 meters away from Jiang Ju's house. The older daughter Jiang Guihua married out but also lived in Golden Arch.

Jiang Li had a very problematic health condition. He was in ICU before my fieldwork and had been sick for more than five years. His wife Guixiang took care of him. He was in pain and could not talk much when I visited them.

Their two daughters were very filial persons – visiting and caring for Jiang Li as much as they could. Jiang Ju loved to call her mother Guixiang for recipes even they though she was just 20 meters away. They ate together often. Jiang Ju and Jiang Guihua's small families also had a good relationship with their younger brother's family. They helped each other find jobs and build their house.

The son Jiang Yonggang was a migrant welder worker in Zhejiang province and was divorced in 2015. In 2018, he married a local woman named Guo Zhen, who also divorced two years ago. He had a 15-year-old son Jing Hao with his ex-wife and was expecting a new baby with Guo Zhen. Guo Zhen treated her stepson Jing Hao with love and care – nothing like the vicious stepmother on television. Guo Zhen and Yonggang planned to go to Zhejiang together after Jiang Li got better, but Li died in the summer of 2020.

Family 10

Grandfather: Zhen Gong, 76
Grandmother: (Deceased)

Daughter: Zhen Juqin

Son-in-law: Pan Cai
Step-Grandson: Pan Guang
Granddaughter: Pan Duoduo

Son: Zhen Deguo (Deceased)
Ex-daughter-in-law: Xiong Yanxun
Grandson: Zhen Xu

Zhen Gong was one of the earliest migrant workers in the village. He had been to Beijing, Zhejiang, Gansu and many other places since 2000. Sometimes he even did double work just to have more income.

Tragically, he lost his wife in 2006 and his only son Zhen Deguo a year after. His wife died of cancer and his son fell from scaffolding at work.

His ex-daughter-in-law remarried a few years after the accident and took grandson Zhen Xu with her to another region. Zheng Gong loved his grandson Xu very much though he could not see him regularly. After his son's death, he kept working for 10 more years, hoping to make more money to support his grandson.

He was 76 and his only daughter Zhen Juqin decided to support her father together with her second husband. Initially, Zhen Juqin married out and had a boy. But she told me that her ex-husband was a gambler and an alcoholic, so she decided to leave him. Her ex-husband took their boy with him. In 2017 she met her current husband Pan Cai who was also a divorcee and had a boy named Pan Guang. They married in 2018 and had a baby girl Duoduo a year later.

Juqin's father only has her to count on, so she practised a 'live-by-two-sides' marriage with Pan Cai. They built a house in Golden Arch and asked Zhen Gong to live with them – although Pan and Juqing normally lived in Zhejiang Province because of work and only come back during the Spring Festival.

Family 11

Grandfather: (Deceased)
Grandmother: Hu Zhulian, 68

Daughter: Wang Yin

Son-in-law: Zhen Hong
Grandson: Zhen Zhe
Granddaughter: Zhen Qian

Daughter: Wang Fang
Son-in-law: Li Hui
Grandson: Li Baoni
Granddaughter: Li Manni

Daughter: Wang Qiao

Hu Zhulian's husband was the village head of Golden Arch before his sudden death in 2004. Hu Zhulian lived by herself after that in their old wooden house in Golden Arch. Their three daughters were all in their 40s, with Wang Yin and Wang Fang both living in Golden Arch and Wang Qiao in another region. All three daughters' small families' economic conditions were relatively high.

Technically, only Wang Qiao's marriage was a matrilocal one, but they moved to another region because of work. They came back to visit Hu Zhulin occasionally. In practise, it was Wang Fang and Wang Yin who took care of Zhulin in everyday life even though their marriages were patrilocal ones.

Zhulin was a little stubborn in other people's eyes – she insisted on living by herself and worked very hard on her tea land but did not live with Fang and Yin's families, even though the two daughters urged Zhulin to do so and prepared her a cosy room to live in. "My mother is very competitive and independent", Fang told me.

Pear Tree Village

Family 12 *

Grandfather: Zhou Wan (Deceased)
Grandmother: Li Yue, 72

Daughter: Zhou Mei

Son: Zhou Kui
Daughter-in-law: Yang Minmei
Grandson: Zhou Zonghao

Son: Zhou Bo
Daughter-in-law: Gao Qinqin
Grandson: Zhou Shuo

Son: Zhou Tao
Daughter-in-law: He Xiao
Granddaughter: Zhou Hen

Li Yue's husband and mother passed away on the same day right before my fieldwork. When I visited Yue, she was still enduring great grief after the two funerals.

Li Yue's husband was a veteran and a government official. He held an 'Urban Hukou' while Li Yue held a 'Rural Hukou' (rural-urban registration system of China). She missed her husband very much although he had once cheated on her when she was in her 40s.

Li Yue and Zhou Wan had a daughter and three sons. Their daughter Zhou Mei was the oldest and she married out to another region while the three sons stayed in Pear Tree – although they only came back during the Spring Festival since they were all migrant workers.

Zhou Kui was the eldest and worked in Zhejiang province while his wife worked in Guangzhou. Their son Zhou Hen was 24 and was brought up by Li Yue. Zhou Bo and Zhou Tao were twins born in 1979, one year before the One-Child Policy. Their wives both stayed at Pear Tree because their children Zhou Shuo and Zhou Hen were still in primary school and they both believed it was necessary to be there with their children.

After the youngest son Zhou Tao married He Xiao and had their girl Zhou Hen, they went to Wuhan for work and Li Yue went with them to take care of little Hen. Meanwhile, Zhou Wan stayed with Gao Qinqin and Zhou Shou in Golden Arch. Li Yue came back to Pear Tree in 2015 because her husband Zhou Wan's health started to deteriorate.

Then Li Yue lived with Wan in their old house by themselves and she started to take care of him every day – for five years until his death. Then He Xiao also moved back and brought an apartment in a nearby town because Hen could only attend primary school in the local region according to policy.

During my visit, Li Yue lived in Zhou Bo's house with daughter-in-law Guo Qinqin and grandson Zhou Shou in Pear Tree. However, she was thinking of living alone to make her children's family life easier.

Family 13 *

Grandfather: Hu Guo, 68
Grandmother: Jin Yun, 67

Daughter: Hu Yizhen

Daughter: Hu Yiqun

Son: Hu Yishan
Daughter-in-law: Rao Jiao
Granddaughter: Hu Chang
Granddaughter: Hu Xing

After two daughters, Hu Guo and Jin Yun had a son Hu Yishan. They lived in Pear Tree with their son and two granddaughters – Hu Chang was in middle school and Hu Xing was in primary school.

Hu Guo was a skilled stonemason in Pear Tree and his skills brought him respect and income when he was young. However, his profession was no longer in great demand because of industrialization. He picked up his father's old profession in the 1980s – as a personal serving the funeral – a job that might bring misfortune in their culture (all Guo's five brothers and sisters died before adulthood – they thought it was because the

father's job was profane). He did some construction work in nearby villages and came back to Pear Tree occasionally. Jin Yun, however, spent most of her life in Pear Tree – taking care of the children and grandchildren, farming their land and cooking for the family.

Hu Yishan was a small building contractor who also did construction work himself. He built a house together with his eldest sister Yiqun in a nearby town two years ago but does not live there. He worked in the neighbourhood together with his wife Rao Jiao and came back every night. Rao Jiao was from another province and Yishan met her when they both worked in Zhejiang Province – they came back to Pear Tree after their second child was born. Before that, the first child Hu Chang was taken care of by Hu Guo and Jin Yun back in the village. Their two daughters Hu Yizhen and Hu Yiqun married out to nearby villages.

Family 14 *

Great-grandmother: Yang Shi, 90 (Deceased in 2020)

Grandfather: Hu Shao, 68
Grandmother: Liu Xuan, 67

Daughter: Hu Hongzi

Daughter: Hu Fangzi
Grandson: Hu Chenxu

Son: Hu Qinhua
Daughter-in-law: Yang Qinqi
Grandson: Hu Yiyang
Granddaughter: Hu Yidan

Hu Shao was a carpenter when he was young; he was one of the earliest migrant workers in Pear Tree. He came back after he passed age 55 – it was no longer easy for people his age to find a job in the big cities. Liu Xuan, like many other women in rural villages at her age, was a farmer and housewife. However, she had been to Shanghai and many far away places to take care of her grandchildren and work at the same time in her 40s and 50s.

This old couple was often mentioned when I chatted with other villagers – they not only

took care of their sons' children but also their daughters' – five in total – which was considered to be remarkable.

Their eldest daughter Hu Hongzi married out and had two daughters. She lived in another province with her husband, father-in-law and two children. She told me that the son-in-law's mother died and 'no one' took care of the grandchildren (grandmother was often considered to be the caretaker but not grandfather). Therefore, Liu Xuan came to the places where the eldest daughter and son-in-law worked and took care of the children for more than eight years while Hu Shao stayed at home and farmed the land.

The second daughter Hu Fangzi's married life was a little mysterious in Pear Tree – no one knew what was going on exactly and the old couple also spoke evasively to me. The villagers said that she was divorced many times because she could not have a baby. Now she had a two-year-old boy who had her surname and the villagers said that no one ever saw her husband. Liu Xuan revealed to me only towards the end of my visit that he was a test-tube baby and the husband was no longer with Fangzi (it was unclear whether or not they were divorced). Liu Xuan loved this baby dearly – she took care of him while Fangzi worked as a migrant worker in another province.

Hu Qinhua was the youngest child and the only son. He and his wife Yang Qinqi both worked in Shanghai and only came back once a year during the Spring Festival. Their children Hu Yiyang and Hu Yidan were born in 2006 and 2012, respectively. Yiyang and Yidan were brought up by the old couple. Yiyang went to school in Pear Tree while Yidan went to kindergarten in Shanghai and came back to Pear Tree when she reached primary school age – she was the only one I met in the village who spoke mandarin. Two years ago, Hu Qinhua and his wife purchased an apartment in the town for their children to live in. Therefore, Liu Xuan commuted between Pear Tree and the town to take care of the children during the weekdays and farm the land at the weekend. Hu Shao spent most of his time in Pear Tree – farming the land and taking care of his aging mother Yangshi with his brothers in turn.

Family 15 *

Grandfather: Yao Xinhai, 73
Grandmother: Wu Ping, 67

Son: Yao Weihong
Grandson: Yao Yinqi

Son: Yao Haihong
Granddaughter: Yao Ting

Son: Yao Xiaohong

'Grandfather' (relative): Yao Xinli, 70

Yao Xinhai and Wu Ping had three sons Weihong, Haihong and Xiaohong and all their lives were considered miserable by other villagers – Weihong and Haihong both divorced shortly after their marriages and Xiaohong was still unmarried in his 40s. They all worked as migrant workers in different places and came back for only a few days during the Spring Festival.

Yao Xinhai and Wu Pin were farmers their whole lives. They took care of Weihong and Haihong's children Yao Yinqi and Yao Ting when they were born in 2006 and 2008, respectively. They helped their three sons build three houses next to their old house (unfinished) while they spent most of their time in their old wooden house. The old couple was in a relatively poor economic condition and they were very sparing with money.

Yao Xinli wes three years younger than Xinhai and their fathers were brothers. Xinli's parents died at a very young age, and he became an orphan aged eight. Xinhai's parents helped him to a large extent. Xinli was not married and he lived next to Xinhai's house – they often ate together. The two grandchildren called him 'Xiaoyeye' (literally 'little grandfather'). Xinli treated the two kids with a lot of love, especially grandson Yao Yinqi. Villagers told me that Xinli was counting on Yinqi's father supporting him when he gets old. Xinli was under the Targeted Poverty Alleviation Scheme since he had no offspring and was in poor health.

Family 16 *

Grandfather: Ran Minyi, 69
Grandmother: Jiang Qinyi, 59

Daughter: Ran Ziyan,
Son-in-law: Gao Minhu

Daughter: Ran Zimei

Son: Ran Zikun

Daughter-in-law: Zhen Qing

Granddaughter: Ran Yajie

Grandson: Ran Borui

Jiang Qinyi married Ran Minyi when she was seventeen with Ran Minyi and was 10 years his junior. They were also under the Targeted Poverty Alleviation Scheme and their bungalow was built by the government in 2017. They were both farmers while Minyi worked in Gansu for a couple of years.

Their two daughters were born in the 1970s and both married out and had children. Eldest daughter Ran Ziyan lived in Sichuan province with her mother-in-law, her husband and two children, though her husband Guo Minhu normally worked in Wuhan and did not come back very often. The second daughter married out to a nearby town.

Their son Zikun was born in 1980 when the One Child Policy was the strictest – the couple was levied with a great fine because of this. Zikun, his wife and some friends ran a small stand selling lunch for migrant workers in a small town in Fujian Province. Zikun's wife gave birth to their second child in 2019 and was taking care of the baby in Fujian during my visit. Their first child Ran Yajie was 10 years old. She spent her first few years in Fujian with their parents and came back to attend primary school in Pear Tree. Qinyi was with her throughout since her parents had no time to take care of her.

Qinyi said she was not in good health and her husband was very patient and did all the farming and housework – although she sometimes yelled at Minyi for trivial things. The gossip in the village said that while Minyi worked away from home some 10 years ago, Qinyi had a widower from another village in their home and lived with him for one year before Minyi came back.

Family 17

Grandfather: Ran Minyao, 70

Grandmother: Zhang Lihua, 65

Daughter: Ran Xiaoli

Son-in-law: Shen Rui

Daughter: Ran Xiaoqin

Ran Minyao and Ran Minyi (family 16) were brothers and lived next door to each other. However, they were not in a very good relationship and barely spoke to each other.

Minyao and Zhang Lihua had two daughters and both treatrf them very well. Elder daughter Ran Xiaoqin married out and had children in another province. Second daughter Ran Xiaoli had a 'live-by-two-sides' marriage with a local husband; they were migrant workers. During my visit, Minyao had just had surgery and Xiaoli came back from where she worked and spent a month taking care of her father.

Family 18

Grandfather: Yin Qiang, 72
Grandmother: Zhou Miao, 68

Daughter: Yin Huilan
Daughter: Yin Huizi

Yin Qiang's was a respected family in the village. Yin Qiang and all his brothers and sisters were educated – remarkable in their time. All Yinqiang's brothers and sisters moved to towns and cities while Yin Qiang stayed in Pear Tree with his wife Zhou Miao.

They had two daughters both in their 40s and each had a son. They were all 'live-by-two-sides' marriage. Yin Qiang and Zhou Miao helped to take care of the grandsons when they were small along with their sons-in-laws' parents. The grandsons were in high school and the old couple spent most of their time alone in Pear Tree.

Appendix III A Fieldnote Example

10th October 2019
Pear Tree
Live-in study, Family 12

Today is the second day I live in grandmother Li Yue's family and it is a relatively relaxed day. It is still raining and that means the daughter-in-law Qinqin does not need to do any farm work outside. I got up at 7:30 in the morning and the kid Zhou Shuo had already left for school (he needs to get up at 6 and take the village bus to school. His mother gets up even earlier to cook for him). When I went downstairs, Qinqin was alone in the living room watching TV. She was watching CCTV-13 (music channel of China Central Television – she did mention before she liked to listen to music when she has the remote control). I asked where the grandmother was and she did not seem sure.

Then I found Li Yue in the bathroom washing her face. She told me today she got up a little later than usual. I sat beside the warm stove in the living room; Qinqin started to cook for us. The television was still on with the music playing (with patriotic lyrics). Li Yue started to clean the house and put the hot water in the kettle into the thermos bottle – I could see that she was trying her best to be helpful.

While we were eating around eight o'clock, the television was still on but Li Yue changed it into Channel 18 (drama channel of China Central Television). She did not ask anyone's permission – Qinqin seemed not to care. Channel 18 was running advertisements at that time, so she changed it to Channel 11 (a local channel for the rural audience). Advertisements again. She changed it back to Channel 18.

After a while, a TV drama was on, titled *Brave Troops*. It was a story about a heroic troop during the Anti-Japanese War. I asked Li Yue if she watched it regularly. She told me just occasionally. I found that she was not sure about the relationships of the characters. When an episode was over, she then changed to Channel 16 (movie channel of China Central Television), then to Channel 11 (main channel of China Central Television), then to Channel 6 (common news channel of Hubei Television). Obviously, she was very familiar with the channels and changed the channels with purpose. But it seemed that there was nothing that interested her in the morning.

When Li Yue was changing the channels, Qinqin was checking her WeChat messages on her smartphone. After a while, Qinqin told us she needed to feed the chickens and left. Li Yue and I watched the TV for a little while longer and Li Yue said it was time to

feed the cat (I mentioned in earlier fieldwork notes about this cat: it is 11 years old now and lives in Li Yue's oldest son's house). "It is dying and I just cannot abandon it', said Li Yue. I proposed to go with her again, just like yesterday.

After she fed the cat, she showed me about the house some more. Yesterday she showed me the basement and the living room, while today she gave me the chance to see all the bedrooms and the living room upstairs. When she gave me the keys and asked me to have a tour while she was cleaning the kitchen, I felt her trust in me was much deeper. There are five bedrooms. Three are upstairs and two are downstairs. Two of the bedrooms upstairs belong to her eldest son and their child (22 years old). Their rooms are very spacious but are simply decorated with a bed in the middle. The quilt has been removed since her eldest son, his wife and their child all work far away in different provinces (Jiangsu, Guangdong and Shenzhen, respectively). The other two are guest rooms and are smaller.

One of the bedrooms downstairs was also a guest room and the other was the one she and her husband once lived in. While I was in that one, she joined me and told me many details about her life with her late husband in that room. She talked about him a lot – how he was sick and lying on that bed; how he was frugal and hardworking (needs to be transcribed). She invited me to sit on that bed and started to tell me things she considered secrets – the fact that the government will give her 40 months more of her husband's salary.[1] She repeatedly told me that she has absolute control over this money and all her children know about this (actually she means her three sons but not her two daughters – her daughters might not need to know since they were 'married out'), but she did not tell anyone other than her children, not even her own brothers. She also emphasised that she only shares this with me because I am 'with high education', and she trusted me.

In fact, I was very confused at that time about why she held this as top secret – is it an honourable and good thing to share? So, I asked further. She told me stories about a recent burglary and stories about how terrible other people's jealousy can be. "No one

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[1] Her husband worked as a driver for a department of the local government after the 1990s. His job meant a lot to her since it was extremely difficult for their generation to have a job in the office and she was "just a peasant without culture", in her own words. Her husband was once a soldier and then a worker in the collective times (the 1960s-1970s). She called their type of family "*banbianhu*" (半边户, literally 'half household') which means that one person of the couple is a peasant and the other is a worker. This kind of household is not considered to be 'stable' because the social status of the couple is not 'equal'. She used this narrative to explain the heart-breaking experience of her husbands' cheating in her 40s (she told me this story a day before this fieldnote).

wants to see your family is good, except your own family members. People do things to destroy your happiness". Then she told me another story about how the younger brother of her husband sabotaged her family when she was alone with her young children (her husband worked in other places) in the village in the 1980s (needs to be transcribed).

We talked and talked until 1 pm (all recorded), mainly about her tough experience after her marriage in this village. Then we decided to go back. The rooms were rather chilly without fire in the stove – in fact, there was no one living here now – not until the Spring Festival.

When we got back, Qinqin was cooking. We had lunch and then I took a nap. During the lunch, Qinqin and Li Yue had another interesting conversation about that old cat (recorded). Li Yue was trying her best to admit that that cat was dirty and annoying, because Qinqin did not like the cat inside the living room. Qinqin mentioned she attempted several times this morning to chase it back to Li Yue's eldest son's house (I felt she was saying this to imply that Li Yue should go back to the old house as well). Li Yue kept saying that she only fed it because it is a life, and it is old now – she was explaining herself to Qinqin and to me (I am not sure why she felt that she needed to explain to me since I did not judge her for anything – why did she feel that I stand with Qinqin?). She did not mention much (at least not explicitly) about her attachment to this cat, despite it having been her pet for more than 10 years and she fed her every day.

When Qinqin was back in the kitchen and there was only me and Li Yue, she explained to me she cannot be inside the living room and stay beside the warm stove because "there is no other way". However, when Qinqin was present, her explanation was "it is too dirty". I felt that the relationship between Qinqin and Li Yue was clearly not equal, not in this house, at least (the TV was not on during the lunch).

After my nap, I went back to the living room and looked for Qinqin and Li Yue. It was still raining, and they were both on the sofa beside the stove. It seemed that no one was talking when I came in. Qinqin was using her smartphone; Li Yue just sat there. They said hi to me and Qinqin asked me if I knew how to limit the gaming time of her son Zhou Shuo – she was trying to do this before I came in. Yesterday, Zhou Shuo voluntarily proposed that he could limit his gaming time to 30 mins to get the chance to play it in the first place. Zhou Shuo's method was to set a timer, but Qinqin did not trust him. Qinqin told me that Zhou Shuo reminded her that there might be a way to

limit the gaming time mandatorily, so she asked me for help.[1]

She handed her phone to me. The game had already been launched. I never played mobile games before – the game was new to me. It was a sniper game and the interface was quite glitzy. The characters were extremely small, and it was very difficult for me to navigate – I can imagine how lost Qinqin was. She kept saying that she had no idea how to do this. I searched on my phone about where I could find something like a 'supervision model' of this game. It turned out to be a small button hidden deep inside the game. It said I needed to scan the code and follow the official account of this game on WeChat, and then connect the game account with the WeChat account and then open the supervision model – it was a really complicated and exhausting process.

Finally, I did it. Qinqin thought the length of the gaming time should be set at a maximum of 25 mins – she remembered that her son used around 25 mins for one round of the game, and the period of time should be '6pm-8pm' on a weekday and no time at all on the weekend (since "he was even more reluctant to get his homework done on the weekend"). Qinqin was very happy and could not wait to see how it worked tonight. During this time, Li Yue quietly listened and watched, saying basically nothing. But she did not leave or turn on the television.

After a while, around 5:15pm, Zhou Shuo came home. He bashfully ignored our greeting and went straight to the sofa and opened his homework. Then Li Yue started to praise Zhou Shuo about his self-determination – he always finished his homework first and never quit school. She told me a story about Zhou Shuo insisting on finishing his homework one time, even though it was almost 10pm – she actually told me this story the day before. Qinqin asked Zhou Shuo if he was hungry. Zhou Shuo nodded, so Qinqin started to cook. Li Yue sat beside me and watched Zhou Shuo doing his homework with soft eyes.

It seemed that today's homework (a few math quizzes and copying English words) was brief – Zhou Shuo finished it around 5:45pm. As soon as he finished it, he rushed to the kitchen to find his mother for the smartphone – it was clear that he was waiting for this moment. Qinqin was reluctant to give it to him but still, she did. Zhou Shuo was so satisfied holding the phone and immediately launched the game. However, because of our earlier settings, he could not open launch the game since it was not yet 6pm.

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[1] Zhou Shuo's favourite game is called *Game for Peace*, one of the most popular game in China, developed by Tencent. Zhou Shuo does not have his own smartphone – he uses his mother's.

Zhou Shuo looked confused, but he did not ask anyone for help or even tell anyone about this. I watched him relaunch the game several times. I kept asking him "what's wrong?" He did not answer me directly but mumbled "this is odd".[1] Qinqin came outside and approached Zhou Shuo to find out what was wrong and gave me a long meaningful look – I thought she meant that she did not want me to explain to Zhou Shuo what we did. She pretended nothing had happened and said to Zhou Shuo that she had no idea why the game was being like this.

As Qinqin went back to the kitchen and told Zhou Shuo to give it up and practise English with me instead, Zhou Shuo decided to solve the issue himself. I watched closely and found out that his way of solving this problem was quite interesting – he opened his mother's Douyin account and changed the profile photo from a scenic image to his mother's close-up photo. I asked why he did this, but he seemed unsure (or he just did not want to tell me). I guess it was because he saw the pop-up window in the game say: "hi, kid, you cannot play the game right now. Please have a conversation with your parents or read books instead!" He thought it was because the app knew he was a child – so he changed the photo to an adult, although in the 'wrong' app.

Of course, this did not work. I comforted him that the game might think he was still at school and maybe he should wait a little while. He agreed and turned on the television. He proficiently changed to Channel 7 (cartoon channel of China Central Television). However, he launched the game again a moment later. It was successful this time since it was almost 6:05pm. He was thrilled and screamed with excitement and forgot the television completely. Qinqin heard and went outside, saying to Zhou Shuo: "do not play too long!" Zhou Shuo came over to his mother and clung to her, with a mischievous smile and said: "I promise!" Then, the phone was his and he was completely into the game.

Li Yue smiled and watched all this. I do not know if she envied a little bit of the intimate relationship between Qinqin and Zhou Shuo – since Zhou Shuo seemed rarely to show that kind of face to Li Yue or cling to her. I remembered when Li Yue proudly told me alone that she and Enya (her eldest's son's daughter, whom she looked after for five years) enjoyed a much more intimate relationship.[2]

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[1] It seems that Zhou Shuo and I had not built that kind of rapport yet.

[2] She did not look after Zhou Shuo. Zhou Shuo was raised by his mother Qinqin – which is why Qinqin disgruntled and was not 'very happy with' Li Yue. Li Yue told me this the day before this fieldnote – she needed to choose to look after her eldest's son's child because her eldest son's marriage was not stable at that time. She had no choice but to help them out.

Since Zhou Shuo did not watch the television, Li Yue changed it to Channel 11 (a local channel for the rural audience) again, without hesitation. It was a spy drama called *Red Sword* about the spies of the CCP (China's Communist Party) and KMT (Kuo Min Tang, the opposition party against CCP from the 1910s to 1940s). It seemed that recently Li Yue usually watched this TV series during this time if Zhou Shuo chose not to watch. Qinqin was still cooking.

Li Yue told me that this TV series was also a "good one". When I asked further about why she thought so, she was silent for a moment and then repeated her last sentence again – "it is a good one". So I started to ask who people were. She did not seem very sure. But she was sure about the main roles – who was on the CCP's side (the good side) and who was on KMT's side.

It seemed that there were two heroines who loved the same hero, and the two heroines were in a good relationship. I asked Li Yue if this was true. She was silent again, looked away and the atmosphere was very awkward. She did not answer me at all, like she did not hear me. I soon realised that she was not comfortable talking about this kind of relationship. She could never approve of it – not when 'that shameless women' caused her so much pain in her real life.

So stopped asking questions and watched with her quietly. I noticed one of the characteristics of this show: there was constant explanatory narrative voiceover. It was a man's voice, explaining the plotlines, and most frequently, people's inner feelings and thoughts. It reminded me of another show my informants watched on the same channel. It did the same thing – explaining the characters' emotion and inner thoughts. I wonder if it is somehow connected to the fact that this is a channel for the rural audience.

This episode ended very quickly, since we started it halfway through. Li Yue did not change the channel after it ended. The next programme was called *Searching for doctors and medication*. Li Yue told me this is also a good one. Zhou Shuo finished his game as well. His attention was on the television again. Actually, he finished the game a little earlier and waited for his grandma to finished *Red Sword*.

When Li Yue started to watch the programme, Zhou Shuo asked Li Yue: "Grandma, is this really interesting?", and then he changed it to the movie channel before Li Yue gave any answer. Li Yue smiled and allowed it. A movie called *An old Man* was on, but Zhou Shuo seemed bored. He did something that surprised me. He asked me in a low voice: "Sister, would you play cards with me?" (he played cards with Qinqin yesterday but

did not invite me). I happily agreed.

After a while, the dinner was ready. It was almost 8pm. Li Yue's favourite TV series *Years of Burning Passion*[1] would be on very soon. She changed to Channel 11 (main channel of China Central Television) around 8:05. She was clearly much more interested in this show than anything else. She moved her chair a lot closer to the television and stared at the screen with an expectant face. She told me she watched it every day.

Around 8:30, Qinqin urged Zhou Shuo to bed and went to bed herself as well. Qinqin and Zhou Shuo needed to get up early. Li Yue and I stayed for the show, just as yesterday. Li Yue was quiet and concentrated most of the time when she watched. She used the time to talk with me when the plots were very 'scientific' or 'official'. For example, when a scientist was explaining the theory of the bomb or when the government was having a meeting. She talked about her husband's work. Clearly, she was proud that her husband used to work in a national oil field in the 1960s. I felt that to some degree that she felt her husband's work was as noble as what these scientists did in the show – she told me her husband once went to Wuhan to learn a kind of advanced technology.

She rarely voluntarily explained the show to me, except for one relationship: Dahai and his wife Lixia. She told me that Dahai is a young scientist, while Lixia is a peasant. He looked down on her for who she was at the beginning. But Lixia walked hundreds of miles just to find Dahai when she completed the duty of taking care of Dahai's mother (who had died) in their hometown. Lixia ended up as a chef in the kitchen for this group of scientists. "She is so competent – she made the food so delicious when the raw material was that limited. You know, at that time. Everyone speaks highly of her. But he still…", Li Yue said. It was clear that she felt sympathy for Lixia, who shared a similar experience and identity with her. She continued: "but he will understand one day. He will".

There was a plot tonight that made her laugh. A young female scientist called her father, a commander in the army, 'comrade Old Zhong', just like anyone else. When she called her father that with a naughty voice, Li Yue laughed: "Haha, Comrade Old Zhong!" It was clearly a very equal father-daughter relationship. In Chinese culture, it is extremely offensive to call ones' father directly by his name. I did observe such a thing once in

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[1] *Years of Burning Passion* is a historical series focused on a group of scientists in China who shouldered the honourable mission of building China's first atomic bomb in extremely difficult circumstances in the 1960s. It is a historical story but also full of romantic relationships and family stories.

real life in a middle-class family in Wuhan city, but definitely not in the rural area.

Li Yue seemed touched by this kind of relationship. I asked if she could do the same thing to her father in the past. She shook her head. I asked: "what do you think about this kind of relationship? Is it good?" She answered: "this girl is interesting!" I do not know if she was answering my question or not, or if I asked the wrong question again. I have to say that on many occasions, she answered my questions this way. Either not really answering it or directing it to other subjects.

Li Yue and I went to bed at around 10 pm, when we finished the show.

Appendix IV Information Sheet (Translated)

(As discussed in the method Chapter, I did not offer them a formal consent form to sign. This information letter is also only shown to literate people. Most of the information about this study and myself was provided by oral explanation.)

Hello,

My name is Hao Wu, currently pursuing a PhD degree at a British University. I warmly invite you to participate in my research project. My project is concerned with rural people's emotions and everyday life, family relationships and media (e.g., phone, computer or television) usage. Your participation will be of great value to me; Please take some time read the following details about my project.

You will be welcome to further contact me anytime if you have any problems.

What will happen if I take part?

1.   Hao Wu will participate in my everyday family life. I have the right to refuse her to observe or participate in any part of my family life that I feel is not appropriate or uncomfortable.
2.   Hao Wu might need to see my phone (e.g., WeChat groups, WeChat Moments, etc) or computer. I have the right to decide which part can be shown to her and which cannot, especially when it involves other people.
3.   Hao Wu will interview me or talk with me. The interview will also be taped for future transcription. If I have any concerns with recording, I shall tell Hao Wu at the beginning. If you agree, Hao Wu will keep the recorder on.
4.   My real name, address and other sensitive information will not appear in Hao Wu's thesis or any other publication. In addition, Hao Wu will make sure that the relevant description of my information won't have any impact on my confidentiality. The thesis will be published in English.
5.   I have the right to withdraw from the project at any point. I also have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview. There will be no adverse consequences if make this kind of decision.

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