

3 | *Family and Household*



Ancient banyan trees shading the courtyard of Chaotian Elementary School. (April 1991)

In Chapters 3–5 we leave behind the larger context of the urban environment to focus on the family, school, and workplace, where individuals acquire the values, attitudes, and practices necessary for successful negotiation of adult life. Two central issues are the effects of the transition to a market economy on these institutions and the lessons they teach — to their offspring, students, and employees.

During and after the Second World War, scholars in the West were much taken by the concept of national character. During this period researchers frequently described populations in terms of their alleged contrasting value orientations.¹ Thus, for example, Chinese were said to be group oriented and to value dependence and obedience to authority in contrast to Americans, who were said to be individualistic, independent, and resistant to authority. Over time these characterizations have been toned down as scholars have acknowledged that reality is better captured by depicting populations along a continuum of values rather than at opposite poles. Thus, although Chinese can be as individualistic, independent, and rebellious as Americans are said to be, the traditional cultural preference has been to restrain these tendencies and to cultivate instead loyalty to the group, responsibility for others, and respect for superiors: parents, teachers, and employers. Far from destroying these traditional values, the Communist government harnessed them for its own ends, replacing loyalty to kin, for example, with loyalty to the party or Chairman Mao and expanding the concept of responsibility for others from intimates to the whole society (or at least to “the people”). The third value, respect for superiors, was made conditional on the superior’s correct political thinking.

The reforms and the transition to a market economy, however, have

raised the question whether these traditional values are still operative or even appropriate for China. Some argue that they are fetters, holding back adventurous souls on the economic frontier; others claim that the emergence of a private sector, new foreign investment, and an influx of foreign cultural artifacts (films, videotapes, and popular music) have already destroyed traditional values, with crime and corruption the predictable results. Such excessive rhetoric tells us little about the reality of contemporary urban life. Only if we go beyond it and examine concrete institutions and everyday life can we understand how the reforms have affected individuals and their values. This chapter, accordingly, looks at the urban Chinese family, first considering the historical legacy that confronted the Communist government when it came to power, then evaluating the success of the government's effort to bring about changes in the family, and finally examining family dynamics since the implementation of the economic reforms.

The contemporary urban Chinese family cannot be understood apart from its historical predecessors. Although social scientists acknowledge that no single family type can rightfully be characterized as “the traditional Chinese family,” it has nevertheless become customary in writing to accept as the basic model the family type that most closely approximated Confucian norms.² This is the same model Chinese Marxists refer to as the feudal family.

From a Confucian perspective the ideal family was a “well-regulated” one in which the whole was more important than any of the parts and in which each person's status was defined according to generation, relative age, and sex. Most important, the living members of a family were regarded as crucial links between its past and its future; and the failure to perpetuate these links (by failing to produce sons) was regarded as the “most unfilial act.” Descent was traced only through the male line. Men descended from a common male ancestor (even ten or more generations back) shared the same surname, were likely to live in the same village or cluster of villages, and participated in the annual rituals honoring the ancestors as members of the same lineage. Individuals certainly knew and had contact with their maternal kin but played no role in their ancestral rituals and were not considered members of their mother's lineage. In fact, women were marginal to the lineage system — necessary for its perpetuation but denied full membership. Whereas sons belonged to their father's lineage by birth, daughters were at best temporary members. A son's children were known simply as grandchildren, but a daughter's children were “outside” grandchildren, that is, outside the lineage (this distinction is still current). Unmarried women could not normally have their memorial tablet placed on their natal family's ancestral altar, nor could they be objects of “worship” by their nephews unless special arrangements had been made in advance. A woman's status in

her husband's lineage was entirely dependent on the durability of the marital bond.

The political and economic significance of lineages varied greatly across China. They were particularly strong and well organized in the southeast, including Guangdong, where the entire male membership of a given village might belong to a single large lineage. In everyday life they could be more politically significant than the imperial government, whose nearest official representative, the county magistrate, conducted affairs in the county capital. A lineage with a depth of more than a few generations was likely to be divided into segments, each marked off by its own ancestral hall and ancestral estate. Segmentation occurred when the descendants of a particular man decided to honor him (and bring reflected glory on themselves) by setting aside a portion of land and using the proceeds from it to fund ancestor rites exclusively for him. His descendants thus participated not only in lineage-wide rites for their common ancestor but also in rites for their segment founder. The land in an ancestral estate was either rented out to tenants or farmed in turn by the members of the segment. Such lineage land could not be sold unless members of the segment agreed. Most village land, however, was owned, not by lineages or lineage segments, but by individual households that could sell it or add to it.

Authority in the lineage and the family was determined by generational status. A man five generations removed from the founder was ritually superior to a man six generations removed. Although members of a lineage shared a surname, members of the same generation in a lineage customarily shared a common character as part of their personal names. When members of the same lineage from different localities met for the first time, they could easily establish relative seniority by comparing their generation names. This practice survives in an attenuated form when urban Chinese parents give their children (or at least their sons) a common character in their personal names because they think it “sounds nice.”

Within the family the generational principle meant that parents, as senior to children, had complete authority over them. Nowhere was this authority more explicit than in the case of a child's marriage. Parents had complete control over the choice of their child's spouse, and, indeed, thought less of choosing a spouse than of choosing a daughter-in-law, who would provide the means to extend the family another generation, bring in additional adult labor power, and serve the parents. With such aims in mind they wanted a girl who was likely to be fertile, in good health, and docile.

The initiative in marital arrangements was usually taken by the would-be groom's parents, who would contact a matchmaker, usually a middle-aged woman knowledgeable about the local availability of brides; she would contact the parents of the most suitable candidate. If interested, the girl's

parents would indicate what they required of the groom's side before they would agree to an engagement — engagement being more or less irrevocable. Requirements normally included a “bride price” as well as foodstuffs and cloth to be transferred to the bride's family. In addition, the groom's family provided and furnished the room the new couple would occupy after their wedding. On the wedding day the bride was preceded to her new home by her dowry, which included her own personal effects as well as some furnishings, such as bedding for the bridal chamber.

In the typical “blind” marriage, the young couple met for the first time on their wedding day, and many elderly people I spoke with (in both Hong Kong and Guangzhou) had met their spouses in just this way. Others indicated that though their marriages had been arranged, they either had known the person because he or she was a relative (usually on the maternal side) or from a relative's village or had been given a chance to veto a proposal in its early stages. For example, one elderly woman described how in a department store she and her mother happened to bump into a group of people her mother knew. When after the meeting her mother asked her what she thought of the young man in the group, she realized that the encounter had been designed to give her an opportunity to meet her suitor (and him, to meet her).³ Even prior to 1949 some couples had met and married without the benefit of parental introductions. A few modern university students had selected their own spouses, and many who had lost their first spouse in the tumult of the Japanese War or the civil wars married someone else whose circumstances were similar.

Although generational status was the prime determiner of authority in the family, relative age (or birth order) was the prime determiner of authority in a single generation. Thus the elder brother took precedence over the younger and stood in relation to him as a father. In the father's absence the elder brother was expected to protect, discipline, and support the younger brother, who in turn owed respect and obedience to the elder. The hierarchy of the sibling relationship was hard to ignore because it was incorporated into the very terms siblings used to address and refer to each other. In Chinese it is impossible simply to say “my brother” or “my sister.” The terms that must be used force the speaker to specify older or younger brother or sister. Moreover, older siblings address younger ones by their personal names, whereas younger siblings address older ones by their birth order. Thus the youngest child would call the oldest brother *da ge* (big older brother) and the oldest sister *da jie* (big older sister), the next *er ge* (second older brother), the next *san ge* (third older brother), and so on, similarly for sisters.

An incident that brought home the salience of sibling hierarchy to me occurred in 1973 when I was visiting a village in the interior of Taiwan.

Because I was traveling alone and spoke very little *putonghua* (and no Hokkien, the local dialect of *putonghua*), possibilities for interaction were pretty limited. Consequently, I busied myself with such activities as admiring the kittens a little boy was playing with in front of his home. Noting my interest, the boy quickly pointed out which kitten was the *gege* (older brother) and which was the *didi* (younger brother). I wonder how many American children would know the birth order of a litter of kittens, let alone think to mention it to a stranger.

This attention to relative age also occurs in the workplace and on the street. In the workplace individuals with a higher work status (i.e., supervisors) are addressed by surname and title (at least in an outsider's presence or on a formal occasion) — thus, Principal Dao or Responsible Person Yang. Among people of similar work status, however, relative age becomes a source of distinction. Where workmates' ages differ by roughly ten years or more, it is customary for the older to be addressed (and referred to) as Old X and the younger as Little Y, even when the younger person is approaching middle age. Workmates of similar status and approximately the same age are more likely to address and refer to each other by personal name (or nickname). When strangers meet on the street, they have the option of addressing each other by courtesy titles, such as Miss or Mister, or by kinship terms that take account of relative age. The appropriate term of address is one that shows respect by exaggerating the actual age difference. Someone who is judged a peer or slightly older is called Older Brother or Older Sister, whereas someone substantially older is called Uncle or Aunt.⁴

The final criterion for determining authority in the family was sex. In theory, females were subordinate to males, a concept summed up in the “three obediences,” according to which a woman was obedient first to her father, then to her husband, and finally, in widowed old age, to her son. The astute reader, however, will realize that in many circumstances the sex principle conflicted with the generation and age principles. There is no question that mothers had the right to tell their minor sons what to do, including, as we have seen, whom to marry. Furthermore, the realities of family dynamics suggest that a fourteen-year-old girl looking after her six-year-old brother was likely to have been the person in authority. When compared with their male peers, however, females were clearly inferior in both law and custom.

As daughters, females were disproportionately victims of infanticide and underinvestment; that is, they received no education or only a little. In hard times poor parents were far more likely to sell their daughters (to brothels as prostitutes, to rich men as concubines, or to rich families as bond servants) than their sons (to childless couples as heirs) because daughters were viewed as only temporary members of their natal families and because

parents expected only sons (and daughters-in-law) to be around to support them in old age,⁵ a consequence of marriage patterns whereby girls married into families living in villages other than their own. In the case of single-lineage villages, this pattern resulted inevitably from the requirement of surname exogamy, but even in multi-lineage villages, out-marriage was the norm, probably for two reasons. First, families considered it useful to develop affinal ties with people elsewhere as a personal safety net. If their village was flooded or overrun by bandits, they had a better chance to survive with a refuge 5 or 10 miles away. Links with other people meant potential allies to draw on for support in a dispute, investment in a rotating credit association, and so forth. Second, from the point of view of the groom's family, having affinal kin in the same village could seriously compromise their efforts to control their daughter-in-law. They feared that she might attempt to sneak resources from her husband's household to her parents', and in cases of family conflict she would try to recruit her natal family on her behalf.

As wives, females were disadvantaged in a number of ways. Unlike their husbands, they were entitled to only one spouse. If the bride selected by a man's parents did not please him, he could (if he could afford it) eventually acquire additional wives who did. Even when widowed, a wife was expected to remain faithful to her deceased husband and to continue to fulfill the role of daughter-in-law to his parents. But if her parents-in-law chose to marry her off, she had to leave her children behind, because they belonged to their father's lineage. A husband, moreover, could divorce his wife on various grounds, whereas she had no grounds to divorce him. Finally, a wife had no right to own property, other than what she had brought as a dowry, or to inherit, though she could be a custodian or trustee for her minor sons.

The ideal form of the Chinese family was "five generations under one roof," a goal seldom obtained because of high mortality rates and economic realities. More typically, at least in the rural areas, nuclear and stem forms of the family alternated, with perhaps a brief phase as a joint family. For example, a couple with four unmarried children (two sons and two daughters) would constitute a nuclear family. When the first son married and brought in a wife, the family became a stem family. When the second son married and brought in a wife, the family became a joint family.⁶ In the meantime the daughters married out, and grandchildren began to arrive. Ideally the two sons continued to farm the land or operate the family business with their father, who pooled the income so produced and redistributed it according to need. At a certain point, in theory not until the father's death but in practice often shortly after the marriage of the second son, the large household would "divide"; that is, the sons would take their

share of the property and form independent economic units, establishing two new nuclear families or a nuclear and a stem family. (Other outcomes were also possible.) The division process determined filial responsibilities for the surviving parent(s) because inheritance and the care of parents were inextricably linked. Normally sons were expected to share equally in the care of parents and would, therefore, inherit equal (or more or less equal) shares of the family's wealth. Daughters had no obligations to provide parental support and no rights to inherit.

Law and the Family in the PRC

Currently the two laws dealing most directly with the family in the PRC are the 1980 Marriage Law, which went into effect January 1, 1981, and the 1985 Inheritance Law, which went into effect October 1, 1985. The 1980 Marriage Law replaced the 1950 Marriage Law, which was the new government's first attempt to abolish the "feudal" family.⁷ The very first article of the 1950 law asserted:

The feudal marriage system which is based on arbitrary and compulsory arrangements and the superiority of man over woman and ignores the children's interests shall be abolished.

The New-Democratic marriage system, which is based on the free choice of partners, on monogamy, on equal rights for both sexes, and on the protection of the lawful interests of women and children, shall be put into effect.⁸

The new law declared that parents had the duty to rear and educate their children and that children had the duty to support and assist their parents. Furthermore, parents and children were to have the right to inherit one another's property. The 1950 law set the minimum age for marriage at 18 for women and 20 for men, required the registration of the marriage in person by both contracting parties, gave husband and wife the right to inherit each other's property, and allowed either party to apply for a divorce. Grounds for divorce were not specified, but in the event that both partners wanted one, the district government, after making certain that "appropriate measures have been taken for the care of children and property," was to "issue the divorce certificates without delay." In the event that only one party wanted a divorce, mediation aimed at reconciliation was required.

Passing, implementing, and enforcing of the marriage law were three separate issues. Nearly three years after the law's passage, Teng Ying-chao (Deng Yingchao), vice-chair of the Women's Federation (and wife of soon-to-be-premier Zhou Enlai), admitted that despite considerable progress, the law was not being fully enforced and consequently a major campaign was to be launched nationwide to "remould backward outlooks."⁹ After an

initial period of leniency toward divorce, presumably to allow for the dissolution of forced marriages, the state took a hard line, essentially requiring mediation to continue until the parties wanting a divorce simply abandoned their quest. In rural areas forced marriages and plural marriages remained problems for decades, and education on these matters was still under way in the mid-1980s.

Between February 1986 and March 1988 *Nanfang Ribao*, one of the three major daily newspapers in Guangzhou, ran a feature almost every week entitled "One Hundred Cases to Be Resolved." These cases, culled or synthesized from letters sent to the paper's advice columnist, Li Dongdong, served to educate the public on both ethics and the law. Though problems on a wide range of issues were discussed, all concerned courtship, marriage, or family relations. Two of the cases involving a violation of the right to marry freely are described in the paragraphs that follow.

In the first case a twenty-year-old village girl is on the brink of suicide. She has been brought to this situation because her father wants her to marry a man in his 30s; in exchange, her older brother will acquire a bride from the man's family. The girl is adamantly against her proposed marriage. As the day for the exchange draws near and she shows no willingness to comply despite beatings and scoldings, her father threatens to confine her in a pig cage (these are used to transport live pigs to market) and drown her. What should she do? Li Dongdong, noting that "exchange marriage" is a subtype of arranged marriage, says she has heard recently of such cases occurring in the mountain districts. The girl has a choice: to commit suicide or to struggle for her right to marry freely. The first alternative is unacceptable, so she must take the second. It would be best if she could persuade her father to change his mind, but if he will not, she should appeal to the law. Li Dongdong then describes a similar case from a newspaper account three years earlier. In that case a girl surnamed Zhou had an older brother aged 30 who still did not have a wife. Her father arranged an exchange marriage with another family whereby a son from each family would marry a daughter from the other. Miss Zhou objected, but her father forced her to comply by beating her. On the wedding day the girl, still resisting, was forcibly dressed in her wedding garments and transported by tractor to the groom's house. She spent her wedding night crying on the bed and then tried to hang herself from the window. She was stopped in the act and then appealed to the law. Eventually her father was sentenced to one year in jail, and Miss Zhou regained her freedom. The case demonstrates how the law protects freedom of marriage. Li Dongdong told the letter writer her father would be punished if he persisted in carrying out the exchange marriage, so the girl should abandon the idea of suicide and struggle for her own freedom.¹⁰

In the second case, recounted shortly after the one just described, the

consequences of accepting an unwanted match are spelled out. A youth referred to as Xiao Wang (Little Wang) and a neighbor girl had been in love for more than a year and were preparing to formally register their intended marriage when the girl's parents suddenly changed their minds about Xiao Wang and instead decided, for 1,500 yuan, to marry off their daughter to a middle-aged man living on a state farm. The girl complied with her parents' wishes and married him. But Xiao Wang and the girl still love each other. Although he wants to continue their relationship, he worries about the consequences of doing so. What should he do? Li Dongdong does not mince words. The girl's parents treated their daughter like property and broke up her intended marriage—that is illegal and immoral. Had the girl struggled for her own rights, she and Xiao Wang would face a different situation now. But she is a married woman; she and Xiao Wang no longer have the right to love each other. What they may have is friendship, and friendship does not mean love. Both of them should understand that. Though it is bitter and difficult to convert one's love into friendship, Xiao Wang must do so. It is dangerous for him to think, "She is mine, and we will love each other forever." To persist in such thinking would make him "a third party" (the official term in divorce cases for someone who alienates a spouse's affection) and cause trouble. People these days seem to believe that if the head of a family forces a couple not yet wed to break up, they may continue to love each other even after marrying someone else—and that in doing this they are breaking the bonds of feudal morality and practicing their right to freedom of marriage. They are wrong. If their current marriage is loveless, they may obtain a divorce. To continue to love another while married is to practice bourgeois freedom, which is not allowed in our country. Xiao Wang should restrain himself with Communist morality within the law and not cross the boundary between friendship and love.¹¹

Since the implementation of agricultural reforms and the freeing of much rural labor from farm work, many men have moved into towns to seek jobs, away from the supervision of their wives and kin; under these circumstances some have involved themselves in extramarital affairs. Although such affairs usually end in either divorce or the abandonment of the third party, sometimes the husband tries to have his cake and eat it too. A rural woman, married many years, who had already given birth to a daughter, wrote to Li Dongdong that she and her husband had had a good relationship. But after the husband found temporary work in the city, he became involved with an unmarried co-worker, who knew he had a wife. When the writer learned of the situation, she attempted to persuade her husband to give up his affair. Not only did he refuse, but he also told her he loved them both and wanted her assent to his taking the younger woman as a "little wife." He told her that he would wait for her response to this

proposal and then would send whatever money she and their daughter needed. What should she do? Not surprisingly, Li Dongdong reminded the writer that China has a “one-husband, one-wife system” and that she should not yield to his threat.¹²

According to Wu Xinyu, vice-chair of the Commission for Legal Affairs of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, changing circumstances in China, primarily the need to control population growth and to deal with the multitude of disputes arising from the reestablishment of the private sector, made a new marriage law essential.¹³ The changes included increasing the minimum age at marriage from 18 to 20 for women and from 20 to 22 for men. These ages are substantially lower than those the government was actually advocating at the time as appropriate for “late marriage”—one of the cornerstones of the family planning regulations.* For example, the 1980 Family Planning Regulations of Guangdong province state that the late marriage age for women should be 23 and that for men should be 25 in rural areas and 26 in urban areas. Article 4 of the regulations further stipulates that “those who do not meet the late marriage age criteria, but want to register, should be discouraged through education in order that they can voluntarily practice late marriage.”¹⁴ The 1980 Marriage Law’s minimum ages probably reflect the government’s understanding of what was likely to be enforceable nationally.

In addition to setting higher minimum ages, the Marriage Law includes three articles intended, directly or indirectly, to limit population growth. Article 12, for example, specifically requires family planning while articles 8 and 16 are clearly intended to reassure parents who have daughters but no sons that they have not thereby terminated the family line or forfeited their prospects for security in old age. (What the articles mean in practice will be explored later in this chapter.) According to article 8, following the registration of the marriage, “the woman may become a member of the man’s family, or the man may become a member of the woman’s family, according

* Begun in the 1950s, “late marriage” is an official policy of encouraging the delaying of marriage. Initially it was intended as an alternative to parentally arranged marriages of youngsters in their mid- to late teens. By delaying marriage till their later teens or—even better—their twenties, young people would benefit from investing more time in education and work and would approach marriage with greater emotional and physical maturity. By the 1970s, late marriage was also seen as a benefit for society as a whole because it resulted in delayed births and thus helped reduce overall population growth. By this time, “late marriage” generally meant marriage in the mid- to late twenties. But the state recognized that a national marriage law had to acknowledge actual social practice in setting minimum ages for marriage; otherwise large numbers of people would simply fail to register their de facto unions. Provinces and cities that believed they could enforce higher minimum ages for marriage were allowed to designate these ages as “late marriage” minimums and to offer various rewards and punishments to encourage compliance. Couples could still marry if they had reached the national minimum age, but they were required to practice contraception (Tien 1991).

to the agreed wishes of the two parties.” Under article 16 “children may adopt either their father’s or their mother’s family name.”

The parts of the Marriage Law that respond to changing economic circumstances deal primarily with property rights and support issues. With the shift from collective to household agriculture, the emergence of private business, and high rates of capital accumulation, the state felt the need to spell out the nature of the property in which husbands and wives hold equal rights. According to article 13, “the property acquired during the period in which husband and wife are under contract of marriage is in the joint possession of the two parties unless they have agreed otherwise.” Although Wu Xinyu made no mention of the special needs of the elderly in his remarks, the 1980 Marriage Law, unlike the 1950 law, includes two references to older people, suggesting that they are a population newly at risk. For example, whereas the first law emphasized the special protection of “women and children,” the later law protects the “rights and interests of women, children, and the aged.” Furthermore, in the absence of the middle generation, grandparents (including maternal grandparents) and grandchildren (including “maternal grandchildren,” i.e., the children of daughters) have the duty to support each other.

The 1985 Inheritance Law further clarifies the nature of community property (the joint property of a husband and wife) and details the allocation of property when there is no will (as in the vast majority of cases, at least in the urban areas) as well as the rights of a testator. When a husband or wife dies, only the half of the community property belonging to the deceased is subject to inheritance. The survivor retains all rights to his or her own half and, in addition, inherits, along with the deceased’s children and parents, a portion of the deceased’s half. Should the widowed survivor subsequently remarry, he or she may “dispose of the property that was inherited without interference from anyone.” Although males and females have equal inheritance rights, the law officially acknowledges the legitimacy of the tradition that makes inheritance conditional on support. For example, a widowed child-in-law who has “fulfilled the principal obligation to support” a parent-in-law is to be regarded as a first-sequence heir, that is, on a par with a spouse, child, or parent. Article 13 states in part:

When the estate is allocated, a larger share may be allocated to heirs who either have fulfilled the principal obligation to support the decedent or have lived with the decedent.

When the estate is allocated, either no share or a smaller share should be allocated to heirs who had the ability and means to provide support [but] did not fulfill the obligation to provide support.

The above conditions for the disposition of property apply in the absence of a will. If the deceased left a will, however, the property must be

disposed of in accordance with the testator's wishes. The only condition imposed on the testator is that he or she "should reserve a requisite share of the estate for an heir who both lacks the ability to work and is without a source of income." Presumably such individuals would be primarily the elderly, disabled spouses, and dependent children. The need for an Inheritance Law was especially great in rural areas where, in addition to having acquired use rights in land, more and more families have been going into private business or purchasing shares in formerly collective enterprises. In the cities the major inheritable goods are likely to be housing and savings accounts.¹⁵

In several families of the Family Study inheritance disputes (including those arising from the division of families and property described earlier) had caused serious problems.¹⁶ For example, in 1987, when we visited the Zhangs for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Zhang, aged 72 and 62, were living in a spacious apartment provided by their unit, where Mr. Zhang had been a high-level cadre. Although their oldest son's son (aged ten) was living with them, their five adult children all lived elsewhere in Guangzhou. When asked to talk about his children, Mr. Zhang forgot to mention his youngest son (aged 28) until later in the interview. This son was the only one of the five children not yet married and, most unusual for an unmarried child, was not living with his parents. In fact, the Zhangs seldom saw him because he worked aboard a ship and during his brief periods of shore leave stayed with friends rather than his parents. These circumstances, together with his having received the lowest level of education among the children, made me wonder whether he was the family's "problem child." Shortly after Mr. Zhang's death from a stroke at the end of 1989, the youngest son pressured his widowed mother to request that his unit (the same unit for which both of his parents had worked) transfer him from ship duty to shore duty on the grounds that she needed a son around now that her husband was dead. Mrs. Zhang, who did not want to apply for his transfer, could not resist the pressure. Once he obtained the reassignment, he moved back into the parental apartment and began to badger her constantly about money or other valuables Mr. Zhang had left behind, because he wanted access to them. None of his four siblings ever raised this issue. Mrs. Zhang became so distressed that she eventually appealed to the residents committee, which instructed the son to drop the matter. A reasonable interpretation of his behavior is that he was angling to set himself up as the primary heir to whatever money and valuables his father had left behind as well as to tenancy rights in the apartment. He might have felt the need for quick action, for at the end of 1990 Mrs. Zhang underwent surgery for lung cancer and in 1991, except for weekends, was spending most of her time in a hospital run by their unit.

In early 1991 the Guangdong provincial government announced a new set of regulations to protect the lawful rights of the elderly. All work units were instructed to enforce these rights, which included, as we have already seen in the Marriage Law, the right to a broad range of support from adult children. In the provincial regulations, immediately following an article emphasizing the freedom of the elderly to remarry and warning against any interference in their family life after remarriage,¹⁷ is a set of articles emphasizing the rights of the elderly (remarried or otherwise) to control their incomes, administer their property, and occupy their dwellings. Adult sons and daughters are warned against forcible attempts to occupy their parents' residence.¹⁸ Though Guangdong was neither the first nor the last of China's provinces to enact such a declaration of rights for the elderly, these regulations seem nearly tailor-made for Mrs. Zhang.

It is difficult to measure the impact of the 1980 Marriage Law and the 1985 Inheritance Law on family formation and family organization. Certainly official norms roundly condemn such traditional practices as discrimination against females, arranged marriage, polygyny, authoritarianism, and loveless marriage and promote equality, affection, and mutual support as the legitimate bases of contemporary family life. Yet judging from the letters sent to Li Dongdong, many people either are unsure of their rights or face opposition in exercising them. Even though the 1980 Marriage Law attempts to ground the right to divorce in the "complete alienation of mutual affection," petitioners for divorce are still subject to mediation by people prepared to argue that a husband and wife who raise a child together and cooperate in managing a household thereby demonstrate the presence of mutual affection.¹⁹

Although nationally the divorce rate doubled between 1980 and 1990, the actual increase, from 0.7 percent to 1.4 percent, meant that even in 1990, in a population of 1.1 billion, there were only 800,000 divorces.²⁰ Judging from the figures for Guangzhou, however, the national figure masks great differences between urban and rural areas. In 1992 in Guangzhou municipality, for example, there were 4,990 divorces and 61,201 marriages for an overall ratio of one divorce per 12.8 newly contracted marriages. In the eight urban districts the ratio was one to 9.3, whereas in the four rural counties it was one to 23.6, with extremes ranging from one to 6.2 in Dongshan district to one in 33.9 in Zengcheng county.²¹

Contemporary Urban Family Life

Any discussion of contemporary family life in China must begin with three caveats. First, urban family life is generally recognized as different from rural family life. In the countryside many of the distinctive characteristics of

the traditional Chinese family still persist or have reemerged. For example, females still usually marry out of their home communities, villages still consist predominantly of closely related males and their married-in wives, the family is (again) a unit of production. Because urban residence, in contrast, is determined primarily by workplace, there is no concept of “neighborhood exogamy.” Although there is a tendency for multiple members of a family to be employed by the same unit, it cannot be said that this phenomenon makes the family a unit of production.²²

Second, urban and rural family life, even before the establishment of the PRC, were diverging as in other countries, and for the same reasons: migration, leading to smaller kin networks in cities; labor mobility; and greater access to education and new ideas.²³ Finally, the changes that have occurred in urban family life since the establishment of the PRC have not necessarily resulted from the efforts of the Chinese government. Even such a controversial change as the drop in fertility could, as comparisons with other urban Chinese populations suggest, result from a complex of factors.²⁴

The sections that follow investigate courtship, marriage, and relations between adult children and elderly parents. The main data sources include the published results of the Five City Family Study carried out (in eight neighborhoods) by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in 1982; accounts in the local media, including letters to the columnist Li Dongdong as well as local television programs; the Guangzhou Family Study; interviews with other residents or former residents of Guangzhou; and the published works of other writers. The sample of 4,385 households in the CASS study was drawn from Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Chengdu and consisted entirely of married women (a total sample of 5,057 since some households included more than one married woman). Although the study is dated and does not include Guangzhou, it is nevertheless the only large national data base on the urban family currently available and provides an overall introduction to the topic.

Courtship

Perhaps no aspect of family (or “prefamily”) life is believed to have changed so radically as courtship. Visitors to Guangzhou, including former residents returning after an absence of as little as four years, express shock and dismay at the apparent loss of traditional virtue. One 1984 graduate of Zhongshan University reported that today’s middle school students are very different from the middle school students of her day. When she was in middle school, even dating was unthinkable, but now, according to her friends and classmates who are teaching in middle schools, “60 percent of the girls are no longer virgins!” In her day there was so much pressure

during the school year that it was impossible even to think of anything other than schoolwork (she had attended an elite prep school), but during the summer there were opportunities for recreation. A group of boys and girls who could talk easily together would arrange to meet at a park; they would chat together and get something to eat. There was no pairing off. Even when she attended the university, she knew her husband as a friend for the first three years, paired off with him only in the fourth year, and did not marry until three years after graduation. Now pairing off is common, and even though ten students might share a dormitory room, roommates arrange to be out so that a couple can get together privately.²⁵

Miss Mao, a 1991 graduate of Zhongshan, reported that although intense relationships between male and female students are officially frowned upon, dating and even having a special friend of the opposite sex are allowed. If students are suspected of engaging in sexual intimacies, however, they are likely to be dismissed from the school. Surely a good deal of discretion is involved here on the part of both the students and the authorities. According to a friend of Miss Mao’s who was attending a university in Shanghai, the authorities had no choice but to take action against seven female students who occupied a room on the floor above her. These young women disappeared one by one in the course of the year—all allegedly expelled for prostitution.

Miss Mao proposed several explanations for the apparent increase in sexual activity among students. First, students identify sexual activity with modernity. They assume that the physical intimacy they see in Hong Kong—and Western-made movies is usual among “modern” people. Second, to behave otherwise may be to stigmatize themselves as tradition bound. Third, some students, mostly males, with little to do at the university expend their excess energy playing games with the opposite sex. Fourth, because playing around is less likely to affect one’s marriage prospects if no one knows about it, some students develop casual sexual relationships with people from other parts of the country. After graduation, students from outside Guangdong are expected to return to their home areas. An affair in Guangdong between a student from Hunan and a student from Guangxi is unlikely to become public knowledge in either home community.

A young male faculty member at another university in Guangzhou stated that most students no longer take education seriously but instead spend their time fooling around. He opined that virginity is rare these days and estimated that 30 percent of the female students at his institution will have an abortion sometime or other during their university careers. The consensus is that unmarried women readily obtain abortions in ordinary health care facilities without the news getting back to their work units. As one woman explained, someone who is worried about her abortion becoming

public knowledge simply goes to a facility where she is not known and pays for the procedure herself. Even someone who chooses to have an abortion covered by her work unit's insurance plan can save her reputation if the doctor is willing to write that the charge is for unspecified "treatment."²⁶

Other sources of data, however, suggest that perceptions of rampant premarital sexual activity among young people in Guangzhou might not be entirely accurate. For example, one day I asked an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old service worker I knew, who called herself Laura, whether I could talk with her sometime about the life of young people in Guangzhou. She agreed, but before we turned to this topic, she asked whether I knew much about psychology. She then explained that she thought that she was abnormal (*biantai*) because when she did not know someone, she would like him, but after she knew him for a while, she would want nothing more to do with him. She meant that as soon as a boy suggested getting physical (for Laura this meant no more than kissing), she would be repulsed and refuse to go out with him again. Her friends often commented on seeing her with different boys but never with the same one more than a few times. Laura said that normally she is very outgoing — when the workers have a complaint, she is the one bold enough to bring it up — but on this matter of boys, she could not figure out what was the matter with her.

Judging from letters to Li Dongdong, others are similarly confused about relations with the opposite sex. These letters, mostly from people in their twenties, reveal a shyness, uncertainty, and immaturity characteristic of a much younger age group in the United States. For example, in one of them a young factory worker, Xiao Li, fell in love with a female co-worker and, for lack of a go-between, expressed his admiration in a letter. To his horror she read the letter aloud in public and ridiculed him as "a frog wanting to eat swan meat." Now he wants revenge. What should he do? Li Dongdong advises him not to retaliate. Everyone knows what the girl did was wrong and sympathizes with Xiao Li. He should learn from this so that next time he will be less rash and will wait until he knows more about the other person before expressing his feelings.²⁷

Another letter, from Xiao Zhou, told how his girlfriend of six months has invited him several times to her home to meet her parents. He has always declined. He is shy and fears he will make a bad impression on her parents, but he realizes he cannot put off the meeting forever. What can he do? Li Dongdong advises him that as a future son-in-law Xiao Zhou certainly cannot avoid this meeting. Parents are influential in their children's marriages, so he must treat this occasion as very important. She offers some guidelines: Be polite and bring gifts on the first visit; be clean and neat in dress; if other relatives are there besides the parents and they ask you about your income or your family, answer honestly and avoid getting angry; make

sure the host sits before you do; eat in a civilized manner and do not get drunk; when you leave, express your thanks.²⁸

Finally, there is the letter of 26-year-old Miss Ping, who through an introduction met a man who had courtship in mind. After their initial meeting, they decided they liked each other and wanted to become friends. But every time they scheduled a meeting, Miss Ping deliberately came late to test her suitor, little realizing that he disliked being tested. Soon he stopped asking to see her. Now Miss Ping is beside herself. What should she do? Li Dongdong tells her that being on time shows respect. Her lateness will make him think she is too proud or uninterested. It is not a useful tactic to test another's interest by deliberately arguing or getting angry. Miss Ping should write the young man or get a go-between to explain the situation.²⁹

How does one account for these disparate images of young people: on the one hand sexually experienced, and on the other timid and foolish? Both pictures are correct, though they represent extremes; the behavior of many young couples falls on a continuum between them. The more modern image, however, is more readily noticeable and remarked upon. One couple rolling on the grass in Yuexiu Park makes a much bigger impression than 100 couples chastely sitting on benches eating popsicles. The findings of a national survey of a random sample of 1,642 married males and 1,467 married females carried out from late 1988 to early 1990 offer a less impressionistic picture of urban sexuality.³⁰

According to this study both attitudes and behavior are (and have been) more accepting of premarital sex than either Confucian or Communist values would lead one to expect. Although they preferred that their spouse be a virgin, 41 percent of the males and 30 percent of the females "thought that pre-marital intercourse was not wrong and was entirely a private affair. When pre-marital intercourse occurs between fiancés, few think it immoral or unchaste."³¹ A more informal survey in Huhhot revealed that 64 percent (23 of 36) of "younger" male informants believed that if a couple is planning to marry, premarital sex is perfectly proper.³² As for behavior, the national study found that 19 percent of the males and 15 percent of the females who responded to the question (2.5 percent failed to respond) reported engaging in premarital intercourse. Among those aged 20–35 the incidence of premarital intercourse had risen to 25 percent for males and 18 percent for females.³³

Another factor contributing to the belief that improper sexual activity in China's cities is on the increase is the reappearance of prostitution. In Guangzhou (unless a crackdown is in progress) both foreign and domestic occupants of almost any hotel receive many anonymous phone calls asking if they want company for the evening. Even an unlikely prospect, such as the author herself, can be the subject of these phone calls. On my first day in

a domestic hotel in 1991, I received ten calls in a matter of hours. Most of the callers were women, who hung up immediately, but the occasional man who called attempted to start a conversation. A colleague at my unit (the provincial academy of social sciences), a woman in her 50s, reported that when she had received similar calls from males while she was organizing surveys in county towns, she had told them she was “too old” for such activity. These calls are made from rooms in the hotel or from the in-house phones in the lobby. Because hotels are officially supposed to protect their guests from harassment, legitimate callers from outside the hotel can have a hard time getting through unless they know the room number of the person they are trying to reach. Most of the time in Guangzhou I stayed in a guesthouse belonging to another unit. When I announced that my husband would be coming for a visit, the management immediately contacted my unit, demanding to know how they could be sure he was really my husband.

Some aggressive prostitutes bypass the phone. One long-term foreign resident of a first-class hotel reported that once, responding to a knock at his door, he was nearly knocked over by two young women who charged inside and began to disrobe before he could say a word. Public security officials reportedly flushed 120 prostitutes out of another first-class hotel on a night raid. The short skirts and high heels that some of these young women wear constitute (as elsewhere) an advertisement of their availability. But young women who aim at nothing more than making a fashion statement also wear short skirts and thereby attract the wrong kind of attention.

The inclination to believe the worst about a “modern” young woman was the subject of a March 1991 episode of “One Hundred Life Events,” a popular locally produced evening television program. This episode focused on the consequences of rumormongering—how rumors come back to harm those who spread them (a Buddhist notion of retribution). The opening scene shows a woman in her twenties dressed in a miniskirt. She is walking with her mother, who is trying to persuade her to go abroad for more study. The daughter, annoyed at the constant pressure to go abroad, assures her mother that she can get an adequate education in Guangzhou. As mother and daughter go their separate ways, the mother collides with a foreign male. The daughter apologizes to him in English on her mother’s behalf, but he responds in unaccented Cantonese that he is a student of Chinese history and culture, that one of his ancestors was Chinese, and so he speaks Cantonese. The young woman then offers to show him the local historical sites. They conclude the day with a snack and beer at a small outdoor restaurant.

At the restaurant another customer—a neighbor of the young woman who with his wife operates a refreshment stall in the neighborhood—takes

notice of them. When his tablemate sees him staring intently at the young woman, he at first assumes that he has an eye for the ladies, but the stall operator explains that this is not the case; rather, he is surprised to see this particular person with a Westerner. The tablemate responds knowledgeably that the girl is obviously a “chicken” (prostitute). The stall operator goes home drunk and reports this interpretation to his wife as a fact. She is scandalized that someone in their own building would do such a thing. The next morning while she and a shop assistant are opening up the stall, the young woman, dressed in a jogging suit, runs by and says good morning to them in English. After the young woman has passed by, the wife mimics her “good morning” and comments that she has a lot of nerve acting as she does. The shop assistant is puzzled. In confidence, the wife tells him that the girl is a prostitute and that last night she had gone to a big hotel with a foreigner. The shop assistant is scandalized.

Later, while he is alone at the stall, the woman returns from her jog and wants to buy an ice-cream cone. She presents a large-denomination bill in payment. The shop assistant is nearly overcome. Such a large bill, he thinks, could only have come from her work; thus it is tainted money. He declines to accept it, saying he has no change, but she insists, telling him she trusts him to give her change later in the day. He counters with the assurance that he trusts her to pay him later in the day. They are thus engaged when a woman in her 60s from the residents committee happens by. She proposes that the young woman accept the offer of credit. Immediately after she leaves, the shop assistant grabs a cloth and vigorously wipes off the counter where the suspect bill had lain. The older woman is puzzled, so he explains in confidence how the stall operator had discovered that the jogger is a prostitute who had been with three foreigners the previous night in a big hotel. The older woman goes home to repeat this to her husband and is overheard by a neighbor in the bathroom next door.

The scene then shifts to a lane adjacent to the refreshment stall. The wife is enraged to discover that the residents committee has posted the latest notice on rat extermination on the bulletin board near her stall. Afraid it will affect business, she attempts to remove it. The older woman from the residents committee advises her not to, and as the neighbors gather, the wife flounces off to a beauty shop, letting it be known that her husband was away last night, but that when he returns, he will have something to say about the notice. At this point the neighbor who overheard the conversation between the older woman and her husband announces that the stall operator did not come home the previous night because he was arrested by public security for trafficking in prostitutes and spent the night in jail. The shop assistant runs off to the beauty parlor to inform the wife.

In the next scene the unsuspecting stall operator returns home. His wife

immediately assaults him, giving him no time to explain the reason for his absence. The ruckus draws the attention of the neighbors; a young man forces open the door, the neighbors rush in to separate the couple, and mediation begins. We learn that the stall operator had only gone to Shunde county on business — he had not been arrested for trafficking in prostitutes. (Because of the continued shortage of private phones, it is not always easy for people to notify family members of changes in plans or schedules.) He demands to know how she ever got such an absurd idea. She had heard it from the shop assistant, who had heard it from the neighbor, who had overheard it from the woman from the residents committee, who had heard it from the shop assistant, who had heard it from the wife, who had heard it from her husband — the accused himself! Such are the consequences of recklessly embellishing a rumor. We see that merely wearing a short skirt and being seen with a foreign male should not be enough to ruin a young woman's reputation.

The Five City Family Study found that only 33 percent of the most recent cohort of young couples (those married from 1977 to 1982) had initiated their courtship — not surprising, given the shyness of many young people. The others had relied on friends to introduce them (50 percent) or on parents and relatives (16 percent). One percent claimed to have had arranged marriages. Still, these figures represent a major change from the experience of the cohort married prior to 1938, when 55 percent had arranged marriages and only 5 percent found spouses on their own.³⁴

According to the authors of the Five City report, young people fail to play the major role in their own courtship because they lack opportunities to meet; feudal thinking (the belief that males and females should have no contact) makes them shy; they have no confidence in their own decision making; and the person who introduces them, who serves as somewhat of a guarantor, makes the marriage more than simply a private matter and enhances its stability.³⁵ To provide more opportunities for young people to meet and especially to help “over-aged youths” (women 27 or older and men 29 or older) find spouses, the authors recommend that adults provide introductions as part of their personal and social responsibility. They also suggest that introduction bureaus be opened and given serious support. Individuals should be encouraged to place personal advertisements in newspapers and magazines and even on the airwaves.³⁶ Finally, work units should help their own unmarried young people find a mate by organizing social activities. Those with a heavily female labor force, for example, should organize activities with those whose labor force is heavily male.³⁷

Young people in Guangzhou and much of Guangdong have an option not widely available elsewhere in China: they can marry someone living abroad. Commonly an older overseas Chinese male returns to his native

area briefly to find a bride to take back with him. A young woman who marries abroad is believed to be marrying a rich man and providing an emigration route for other members of her family. In February 1991 another episode of “One Hundred Life Events” presented a filial young woman's efforts to please her mother yet avoid such a marriage.

In this episode a rich Chinese from America comes to Guangzhou looking for a wife to take back with him. He is in his 50s but wants a younger woman. A daughter of one of the families regularly featured in this program is tapped by her mother to meet him. Initially the daughter refuses, but the mother becomes so upset (she is only thinking of what is good for her daughter, of what this man can provide for her) that the daughter finally consents to the meeting. She is determined, however, to make sure the man does not find her a desirable candidate. She dresses saucily and shortly after meeting him in a restaurant asks him to light her cigarette. She says she hopes he is not upset that she smokes. On the contrary, he is impressed and assures her that in America many women smoke. Indeed, he even pulls out an enormous cigar for her to smoke. She says she smokes *many* cigarettes a day, drinks, plays mah-jongg, and so forth. She then suggests they order drinks. Again he is impressed and suggests they down their full glasses. In the next scene we find her with a terrible hangover, being ministered to by her younger sister. Furthermore, the man wants to meet her again!

In a second effort to deter this man from finding her a desirable mate, the young woman enlists the help of her brother. She arranges that the next meeting take place in a public park but steers him to a bench in a rather isolated section. As they sit there, he moving a little closer to her, a young man (her brother) suddenly bursts out of the bushes and accosts her, demanding that she make good on the debt she owes (presumably as a result of losses at mah-jongg). When the young woman tells the suitor not to become involved, the suitor says he has dealt with many such men in America and knows how to handle them. The suitor comes forward, asks the amount of the debt, and offers to write a check then and there to cover it. The brother and sister had not anticipated this response, but the young man quickly recovers and demands payment in cash. The suitor gives him his hotel address and says to come for the money the next day. The young man, in an effort to frighten him, seizes the suitor's lapel and insists he make good on the payment. The older man, however, is not the least bit frightened. Instead, he asks the young man to remove his hand. The young man refuses, saying, “If you don't like it there, why don't you remove it yourself?” The older man says, “That would not be polite,” waits a few seconds, and then belts the young man so hard he is knocked to the ground.

The young woman does not know what to do next, but suddenly hits on an idea that is certain to work. Another family member's sterilization certifi-

cate is stored at their house. All she has to do is change the character of the personal name on the certificate, and the suitor will think she herself has been sterilized. Since it is assumed that having children is one of his goals, the sterilization certificate should remove her from consideration. The next scene finds the suitor coming for dinner, at which the mother expects the terms of the marriage to be discussed. The young woman puts the altered certificate in a magazine and contrives so that the suitor reads it while she is ostensibly in the kitchen helping her mother. Sure enough, while leafing through the pages he stumbles upon the certificate. A look of consternation crosses his face. When the young woman comes back into the room, he apologizes, saying something urgent has just come up and he cannot stay for dinner. He rushes out, and the young woman is saved. She has shown her filiality by agreeing to meet this man but has been saved by her wits from marrying him. This story also suggests how difficult it can be to determine whether a particular marriage is truly the result of free choice.

Marriage

The natural outcome of a successful courtship is marriage, and with marriage, in China at least, comes the rearing of children, or rather, in Guangzhou, the single child. Before the child arrives, however, the couple must have a stable living arrangement in which to raise it. According to the Five City Family Study, 47 percent of couples in the most recent cohort to marry (between 1977 and 1982) lived with the husband's family after the wedding, 18 percent with the wife's. Only 32 percent established an independent residence, and just under 3 percent had to make other arrangements—for example, opting to live separately because of work assignments or overcrowding in their natal households that made the addition of even one more adult impossible. The figures for postwedding living arrangements of the oldest cohort (those marrying before 1938) show a higher proportion (60 percent) living with the husband's family and a lower proportion (9 percent) with the wife's but the same proportion (31 percent) living independently.³⁸ What these figures conceal, however, is that from 1950 to 1965 more than half of all newly married couples lived independently. Even among those couples marrying between 1966 and 1976, 48 percent established their own household, whereas only 35 percent lived with the husband's family and 14 percent with the wife's.³⁹

The decline in independent living among newlyweds can be traced to two primary factors: changes in the rates of rural-to-urban migration and changes in the availability of housing. During most of the 1950s enormous numbers of rural laborers came into the cities to participate in China's reconstruction. They came as unmarried young people whose parents by

and large remained in the countryside, and they met and married young people in similar circumstances. Thousands of dormitories were erected to house these workers. The cohort marrying 25 or more years later was much more likely to have urban parents with whom they were living prior to marriage. Furthermore, as we have already seen, there was a terrible shortage of housing space that was only beginning to be corrected at the time of the CASS study. Couples were unlikely to be assigned to housing unless they were already married.

During the three-and-a-half-year interval between the first and second interviews in the Guangzhou Family Study (late 1987 through spring 1991) 39 household members, 24 males and 15 females, married for the first time (and one 37-year-old widower remarried).⁴⁰ The average age of the men at first marriage was 30 (with a range of 26–36), that of the women, 27.3 (with a range of 21–33). Only two women were under 25 at the time of their marriage; one was originally from a rural area, and the other married a Hong Kong Chinese. These averages are well above the legal minimum age of marriage and also substantially above the provincial minimums recommended for late marriage (see p. 106), but they are not unheard of. Shanghai, for example, has even more stringent criteria for late marriage than Guangdong—27 for men and 25 for women. A study of the 189,000 marriages registered in central Shanghai between 1977 and mid-July 1980 found that more than 90 percent of marriages met these age criteria.⁴¹

Apparently pressure from urban work units and a continued housing shortage have resulted in high rates of deferred marriage. Moreover, the factors that have raised the age of first marriage in other urban Chinese communities may be at work in Guangzhou: the increases in education and employment opportunities that lead young people spontaneously to delay marriage. These factors are believed to be primarily responsible for the late mean ages at which Chinese women marry in Hong Kong (25.9 in 1986), Singapore (25.8 in 1987), Malaysia (25.8 in 1984–85), and Taiwan (25.1 in 1987).⁴²

Following marriage 63 percent of the newly married men in the Guangzhou Family Study lived patrilocally; that is, they brought in daughters-in-law (64 percent if the remarried widower is included); 33 percent left or separated (“divided”) from the parental household; and 4 percent (one individual) remained in the natal household apart from his spouse. By contrast only one woman (6 percent of cases) brought a son-in-law into her natal household,* whereas 67 percent followed their husbands elsewhere.

* The woman in this case is an only child. From the time she began going out with her future husband, she made it clear that their marriage was contingent on his moving into her parents' household. Since her father is a high cadre with the provincial government, he was

(Presumably, if symmetry can be relied upon here, most moved in with in-laws.) Another four women (27 percent) stayed with their natal families while their husbands lived elsewhere because of their work. Although the Guangzhou data are not longitudinal, these recent figures do support the CASS study's findings of low rates of independent residence and of residence with the wife's family and high rates of coresidence with the husband's family. A similar shift (declines in coresidence with the wife's family) is documented by Davis for families in Wuhan and Shanghai during the 1980s. Davis attributes these changes to increased control at the family level. In the 1960s and 1970s family strategies were hampered by government policies of job assignment and rustication. Families could not easily determine which children would remain nearby and which disperse. Since the reforms in job allocation and the return of children from the countryside, parents are better able to decide which sex to invest in, and the choice is increasingly to invest in sons, whose economic potential is perceived as greater than that of daughters.⁴³

It is critical to note, however, that the immediate postwedding residence is unlikely to be the new couple's long-term residence. Most couples are simply waiting for their housing assignment to be made. For example, a 1985 study of residence patterns in Tianjin revealed that 65 percent of young couples in stem families left the parental household in the first five years of their marriage; another 17 percent left within the next five years.⁴⁴ Furthermore, according to a number of studies, most parents and adult children prefer living separately but, if at all possible, in the same vicinity so that they can continue to interact frequently.⁴⁵ In fact the nuclear family is the most common family type in China's cities. According to the Five City Family Study 66.4 percent of urban families are nuclear, 24.3 percent stem, and 2.3 percent joint. An additional 2.4 percent are single-person households; 4.6 percent fall into the category of other.⁴⁶

These data reveal that although stem family living is a common experience in contemporary urban China, it is most characteristic of certain age groups: obviously those in their 20s and 30s (the newly married) but also those over 60 (the elderly). In the Guangzhou Family Study, in which all the elderly are at least 70 years old, 60 percent live in stem and joint families and 15.5 percent in nuclear families; only 8 percent live alone. Another 16.5 percent live in other arrangements, such as with an unmarried grandchild or with their long-term employer.⁴⁷ A national study of the elderly carried out in 1987 presents the living arrangements of the elderly in a slightly different way, but the message (high rates of coresidence of the

slated for reassignment to a new three-bedroom apartment, into which the whole family expected to move in July 1991. Even in their current residence the young couple have a fancily furnished bedroom of their own. The son-in-law's natal family lives in Shanghai.

elderly and their children) is the same. Of the nearly 14,000 elderly living in cities (not including those living in rural townships) 61.8 percent lived in households made up of three or more generations, 26.9 percent in two-generation households, 7.5 percent as couples, 1.9 percent alone, and 2 percent in other arrangements.⁴⁸

Although the contemporary patrilocal stem family shares a common form with the ideal traditional family, its dynamics differ. The senior female of the household (the mother-in-law) generally controls the household budget, but this post is less powerful than is sometimes assumed. Both the Five City Family Study and the Guangzhou Family Study make the same observations on the significance of the household budget. Although others usually contribute a share of their income to a particular person in the household, this share represents the smaller part of their income. Furthermore, the household manager is not free to redistribute this money as she sees fit—for example, to those members in greatest need—but is expected to spend it on food. The junior couple retain the bulk of their income to pay children's educational and clothing expenses as well as their own transport, clothing, meals outside the home, and entertainment. Costly items such as electrical appliances or a new set of furniture are usually purchased by the younger generation, who take them along when they move to new housing.

The strict correlation between seniority and authority characteristic of the ideal traditional family is conspicuous by its absence. In the Guangzhou Family Study elders made it clear that by and large their adult children (even when still unmarried) make their own decisions about where to work, whom to marry, and whether their children (the elder's grandchildren) continue in school. Most of these elders have far less education than their children, are unfamiliar with the job market and the new strategy of locating work on one's own, and are intimidated by their own dependence (financial or physical) on the younger generation. Most freely admit they do not know how to advise on these issues and do not attempt to do so. Though they are happy to be asked their opinions, they usually concur with what the younger generation has already indicated it wishes to do. For its part the younger generation has already factored the elder's likely response into its own game plan. Families that are unable to develop a smooth working relationship usually divide the household if at all possible.

What do families quarrel about? According to a 1987 survey carried out in metropolitan Shanghai that included both urban and rural dwellers, the number one problem is the relation between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (54.4 percent of respondents selected this from among nine possible subjects of dispute).⁴⁹ Other problems include housing (53.4 percent), children's education (49.1 percent), incompatibility (40.8 percent), daily expenses (34.9 percent), caring for aged parents (33.0 percent), life-style

issues (23.5 percent), property disputes (20.0 percent) and entertainment (10.7 percent). Rural dwellers are substantially more likely to report family disputes, reflecting their higher rate of intergenerational living and greater stake in controlling family property.

In the Guangzhou Family Study housing disputes loom large. The reallocation of already crowded space or a realignment of social relationships required when a household member, especially a male, marries can make living in a stem family trying for all concerned. For example, when I asked 82-year-old Mr. Lai when he had last seen his son who lives next door, Mr. Lai declined to answer, saying, "I don't consider him my son." Although several years have elapsed since this son's marriage, just the mention of him is enough to raise Mr. Lai's blood pressure. According to his daughters, Mr. Lai has never recovered from having to vacate his own room for the new couple, who quickly divided from the family.

Similarly, when I made my second visit to 80-year-old Mrs. Liao, I found the entire family quarreling about the use of living space. In the three months prior to my visit, both of Mrs. Liao's coresident married sons had moved into housing allocated by their units. By 1987 her older son and his family, though sharing the family dwelling, had already divided out,* and Mrs. Liao was eating with the younger son's family and looking after his two children. By 1991 this arrangement had been terminated, and Mrs. Liao was distressed about the prospects for her future. The building in which she lived was slated to be torn down, and it was clear that members of the younger generation were angling to maintain or establish a claim to live in the residence to be built on the site. Thus, even though the younger son's family had moved, it was attempting to maintain residence at its previous address.

When the younger son left, Mrs. Liao had erroneously assumed that she would be able to move out of the cubicle she occupied in the living room and into the bedroom previously occupied by the couple, which she had vacated for them when they married. Her daughter-in-law, who continues to work in the neighborhood, quickly set her straight, ordering her not to reoccupy the room and not to touch anything in it. To make sure her orders are not violated, she comes back daily to take her lunchtime nap in the room. Furthermore, the daughter-in-law claims she has alerted the police that she has things in the room; if they are disturbed, she will take her mother-in-law to court! Mrs. Liao's two daughters argued their mother's case, demanding to know whether any of this was "right" or "reasonable." Meanwhile her younger daughter, whose husband and older child have

* "Dividing out" is an economic issue. To divide means to eat and budget separately. Divided households might continue to occupy the same space, or one household might move to a new location. Both arrangements occurred in the Guangzhou Family Study.

remained at their own residence, has moved in with her younger child to look after Mrs. Liao.

Some arguments seem to be entirely idiosyncratic. A block away from Mr. Lai, 79-year-old Mr. Du was forced to end his relationship with his next-door neighbors, the parents of his deceased daughter-in-law, when his widowed younger son remarried. Mr. Du's younger daughter-in-law died in 1988 of a form of blood cancer. Her parents were Mr. Du's long-term mah-jongg partners and the godparents of Mr. Du's older son's child. In short, the two families were inextricably intertwined. The problems began when Mr. Du's younger son, the neighbors' son-in-law, decided to marry a workmate of his deceased wife. Mr. Du felt that the couple were planning to marry too quickly after the death of his daughter-in-law. He urged them to show some respect by waiting. The parents of the deceased daughter-in-law then indicated that as part of the wedding procedures, they wanted the new bride to knock on their door and offer them tea (a way of formally acknowledging them as relatives of the groom). The bride, however, did not want to do so, and Mr. Du's son supported her in her refusal. Mr. Du's son no longer wants to have anything to do with his deceased wife's parents and has also discouraged Mr. Du from having anything to do with them. Mr. Du sighed, saying that though the couple continue to live next door and remain godparents of his grandchild, the three elders are essentially invisible to each other. When they happen on the street at the same time, they must avert eyes and avoid greetings — a frequent occurrence since they live in adjacent ground-floor apartments.

I provide these examples, not to argue that disharmony is more the rule than the exception in stem families, but to illustrate the tensions that sharing limited space can generate. I also want to point out that in none of these cases does the senior generation feel powerful enough to dictate a resolution. All three of these distressed parents feel they have no choice but to accommodate themselves to decisions made by the younger generation. In stem families where the parents are younger, for example, in their 50s or 60s, or are politically well connected, the junior generation might feel itself disadvantaged in decision-making power. In either case it should not be surprising to learn that nuclear family living has its attractions for both generations.⁵⁰

The primary reason behind the space reallocation following the marriage of a household member is the belief that newly married couples are entitled to a bedroom of their own. Without this minimal requirement for privacy the arrival of the next generation would be delayed indefinitely. China, of course, is world famous (or infamous, depending on one's point of view) for the strictness of its population policy.⁵¹ During most of the 1950s the government's position on population growth was essentially "the more the

better"; each additional person was seen, not as a mouth to feed, but as a pair of hands to build the new China. Though there was dissent from this position all along, until the early 1970s dissenters had too little power in the central government to reverse the pronatalist policies. Prior to this time the desirability of reduced fertility had been discussed primarily as a health benefit to mothers and infants, but thereafter the focus shifted to the need to keep down population growth to achieve economic growth. The state began in 1973 to promote the "*wan, xi, shao*" policy: delayed childbirth (*wan*), longer birth intervals (*xi*), and fewer births (*shao*). In the cities this policy was interpreted to mean intervals of at least four years between births and no more than two children per couple. Implementation relied primarily on persuasion, though more forceful measures were available to deal with the recalcitrant.⁵² Under this policy the Chinese birthrate dropped from 33.6 per thousand in 1970 to 18.3 in 1978.⁵³

This rapid drop, achieved even before any material incentives were explicitly made available, suggests that there was already substantial interest on the part of at least the urban population in reducing family size, probably for many of the same reasons as elsewhere: higher survival rates of children, higher costs in rearing them, more education and increased employment opportunities for women, and so forth.⁵⁴ Again, comparisons with Chinese populations elsewhere in Asia are instructive. By 1987 the total fertility rates (average number of children born to women who had completed their childbearing) were 1.3 for Hong Kong, 1.5 for Singapore, 1.7 for Taiwan, and 2.3 for Malaysia.⁵⁵ In none of these sites was the pressure to reduce fertility anything near what it was in China.

The pressure increased greatly with the introduction of the one-child family policy in 1979. When it was first announced, there was no consensus whether the policy positively limited couples to one child or set the one-child family as a goal. No national law was passed. Instead, individual provinces were left to formulate their own family planning regulations, and implementation methods (subject to provincial guidelines) were developed at the local level. Each administrative jurisdiction, such as a commune or a work unit, was assigned a quota of births by higher administrative authorities. Jurisdictions or units (or the cadres in charge) that kept births at or below the quota were to be rewarded; those exceeding it were subject to penalties. Given the government's traditional mobilization style, the "bold assault," it should not be surprising that coercion and other abuses accompanied the implementation of the one-child policy, particularly in rural areas, where resistance was greatest.⁵⁶

By 1990 the one-child family policy was understood to mean one child for urban families and up to two for rural families, particularly if a rural couple's first child was a girl. A rural couple may have a second child if one

of them (1) is the single transmitter of the line for at least two generations (i.e., the only child of an only child), (2) is the only one in a set of brothers with the ability to procreate, (3) is a male who moves into the household of a woman who is an only child, (4) is an only child married to an only child, (5) is a disabled veteran, (6) is a woman married to a returned overseas Chinese, or (7) belongs to an exceptional hardship household in a remote mountain or fishing district. These exemptions directly address the concerns of rural families who view sons as critical for the continuation of the line and for their own physical survival.⁵⁷ Even in the cities a couple may petition to have a second child under certain circumstances, such as having a child who will be unable to earn a living. In such a case a doctor has to certify that the child is disabled and that the disability was not caused by the parents. Some units require that the certifying doctor be from a level higher than a public health station.

Although there was some slippage in enforcement during the 1980s, by 1992, in the wake of tightening restrictions, the birth rate in Guangzhou had dropped to 13.1 per thousand overall and to only 10.9 in the city proper, indicating that compliance with the (modified) one-child policy is high but uneven.⁵⁸ For example, although almost 96 percent of births were first births in two of the four core urban districts, in Haizhu district, the most rural of the four, the figure was only 87.8 percent. By contrast, in Guangzhou's four counties, 53–57 percent of births were first births.⁵⁹ Such a narrow spread in the rural areas suggests both acceptance and vigorous enforcement of a two-child standard.

Authorities, attributing the excess births to the mobile population, by 1990 had targeted them for special attention. In 1991 the provincial government was requiring all people seeking employment to have a document specifying either that they were single or that, if married, they were in compliance with the one-child policy. Being in compliance means having no child or having one and practicing contraception. In China the officially preferred mode of contraception is the sterilization of one partner or the outfitting of the woman with an IUD before she returns to work. In the event that she is one of those few people who cannot tolerate an IUD and takes the pill instead, this must be stated on the document. Every year work units require a physical exam, to make sure that the IUD is still in place, as well as a urine test, to make sure that the woman is not pregnant. Should she be found pregnant, an abortion is about the only alternative. A woman accidentally pregnant (i.e., with an IUD in place) is not considered blameworthy; her abortion is covered by insurance, and she receives full time off (normally fifteen rest days). An employer hiring people without the certificates takes a big risk because the state conducts periodic inspections. Anyone found to have violated the regulations by hiring someone without

evidence of marital and parental status faces punishment. Furthermore, the self-employed must themselves be certified as in compliance before they can obtain a license to set up a business.

Giving birth to a child in Guangzhou requires official authorization. After registering one's marriage, one goes to the local street committee office, which provides newly married couples with a document known as a planned birth certificate, stating that the female applicant is permitted to bear a child in the current year. By tradition, immediate childbearing is the rule, and surveys indicate that 65 percent of Chinese women still conceive within three months of marriage and that more than 85 percent conceive by the time of their first wedding anniversary.⁶⁰ Should a woman experience a delay in getting pregnant, there is usually no problem extending the permit to the following year. When a woman goes to a hospital for a prenatal exam (or for any exam at which it is likely to be noticed that she is pregnant), she must present her pregnancy permit. If she does not have the permit, she is immediately called to account and pressured to have an abortion. For this reason women with unauthorized pregnancies frequently do not seek treatment for any health problems until after their baby arrives. If they are employed, however, their co-workers will notice their condition and press for an abortion. If they are not employed, they must stay in seclusion, for should they go out, the neighbors would notice the pregnancy and report it to the residents committee or the street committee. A couple's only hope is for the woman to flee the locality before her pregnancy is obvious. Even so, if her unit or the local government office suspects that she has fled because of a pregnancy, it will be certain to visit both her parents and her parents-in-law to see whether she is hiding out with them. Officials might even chase her to the countryside if they know where she is likely to be. When she finally agrees to an abortion, the unit or government sends someone to escort her to the hospital — to make certain she actually has the abortion.

Every April each residents committee carries out an annual inspection of women of childbearing age in the neighborhood. A representative visits every household in which there is a married woman of childbearing age who has not been sterilized. According to one such representative, who "caught" a rural woman hiding out in her jurisdiction in the 1991 sweep, the inspection is nothing more than eyeballing the woman's abdomen to see if she looks pregnant. If she does, the residents committee pressures her and her family members to agree to an abortion. The residents committee also distributes contraceptives to the few couples with a child who have not been sterilized if the wife cannot tolerate an IUD.

When it comes time to deliver her baby, no hospital receives a woman, even if she is in labor, without the pregnancy permit. A woman under these circumstances either calls in a midwife for a home delivery or attempts to deliver at a public health station. Some such stations will accept her, but

others will not, and in any event this delivery is not covered by her medical insurance. Furthermore, the hospital is the only legitimate source of a birth certificate for the baby, and without that the child cannot be officially registered as a resident of Guangzhou (or anywhere else, for that matter). Without registration as a city resident, the child (and thus the whole family) faces educational and employment disadvantages, though these are becoming increasingly less significant. Because these deterrents are well known, it takes a motivated person to buck public opinion and endure the penalties, which include fines and possibly dismissal from one's work unit.

Maternity leave policies vary by unit. State regulations require that a mother be given three months' leave at full pay, but if the mother meets the requirements for a "late birth," that is, is at least 24, she automatically receives an additional month. In the early years of the one-child policy, families that promised to have just one child were given all kinds of incentives, including lengthy maternity leaves. Some units gave one or even two years with full pay, but now that everyone is required to have only one child, this generosity is no longer necessary. Nevertheless, depending on its own financial circumstances, a unit might extend maternity leave to six months or more at 70 percent of pay.

With both spouses in the labor force, young urban couples living in independent households are hard-pressed to care for their child once maternity leave is up, sometimes having to board it during the week with one of its grandparents. Having more than one child, of course, presents even greater difficulties. One day, when I encountered an acquaintance who, I discovered, was the father of young twins (a boy and a girl), I congratulated him on his presumed good fortune (getting around the one-child policy). He shook his head and exclaimed, "It's awful!" Even though his mother-in-law helps them out, "They're always sick. If it isn't this one, it's the other one."

Most parents (whether they live in stem or nuclear families) send their child to day care, because a grandparent might not be available or because the parents worry that the grandparent will spoil the child. The CASS study found that 44 percent of the children under the age of one were already in day care.⁶¹ Though parents are disturbed that children in these group settings get sick frequently, day care is viewed with much less ambivalence in China than in the United States. Freeing women from child rearing to allow them to participate in the labor force is viewed as a necessary step in achieving equality of the sexes. But day care is also viewed as good for children because it exposes them very early to "scientific" methods of rearing. Furthermore, now that nearly all urban children are from single-child families, increased contact with peers and slightly older children is deemed essential for normal social development.

The success of the one-child policy in the urban areas is probably due to a

coincidence of personal and official interests. Because pensions are available for most urban workers and those with no pensions and no descendants have a welfare safety net, people no longer perceive children as critical for survival in old age. This attitudinal change is reflected in a survey carried out in Shanghai that asked women why they wanted to have children. Urban women answered that they want children to achieve joy in life, avoid loneliness, have someone who will carry out their ideals, and enhance ties between them and their husbands. These sentimental reasons contrast with the more practical responses of rural women, who want to continue the line, gain security in old age, and increase labor power.⁶²

Chinese psychologists and educators worry endlessly about the upbringing of the only child. There is enormous concern that parents will make the child the center of their lives, with dire consequences for the child's development. Some fear the child will become a "little emperor," indulged, doted on, and lacking in self-discipline; others fear the parents will be overprotective, stifling the child; still others fear that the parents, having unrealistic expectations, will burden the child with unreachable goals. The CASS study found, for example, that 87 percent of parents hoped that their child would eventually attend a university.⁶³

Adult Children and Elderly Parents

Parents who raise self-centered children may have no one to look after them in old age. The current cohort of elderly raised children for many reasons but certainly expected that their children would care for them when they could no longer care for themselves. When families talk about care of the aged, three words crop up: *yang* (support, provide for), *fushi* (wait upon, attend), and *zhaogu* (attend to, look after), each reflecting a slightly different aspect of care. *Yang* represents the absolute minimum—meeting the material needs of one's parents by making certain they have food, clothing, and shelter. While *fushi* and *zhaogu* are often used interchangeably, some of those I spoke to felt that the terms applied to different situations. *Fushi* implies looking after ("serving") someone of slightly higher status who is probably capable of serving himself. Actions demonstrating *fushi* are carried out respectfully and courteously. *Zhaogu* eliminates the status distinction and assumes a lack of capability on the part of the person being looked after. People in need of *zhaogu* care are children, the sick, and the disabled.

Meeting the material needs (*yang*) of the elderly is not difficult for most urban families, because 58 percent of urban elders receive pensions, which, they indicate, are by far their most important source of income. More men than women, however, receive pensions—according to the 1987 national

survey, 84 percent of urban men but only 35 percent of urban women.⁶⁴ Men's pensions, moreover, are generally larger than those of women. Those who lack a pension have never been in the labor force, were employed too briefly to qualify, or were employed in the collective sector when only onetime termination payments were made. Retirees continue to receive the same health insurance benefits as current employees, but elderly who have not been employed have either half coverage (as dependents of eligible adult children) or little or no coverage. As with pensions, there are substantial age and sex differences in health coverage. For example, the 1987 survey found that only 20 percent of those aged 60–64 have no coverage, compared with 44 percent of those aged 80–84. Among elderly urban men 79 percent receive full coverage, 12 percent half coverage, and 9 percent no coverage. The comparable figures for women are 26, 31, and 43 percent.⁶⁵

These statistics seem to suggest that medical expenses are not a serious problem for the urban elderly, but the actual situation is more mixed. Paying for ordinary outpatient care is seldom a burden, even for those without insurance, because fees are very low, but the cost of an inpatient's personal, as opposed to medical, needs can strain the budget of even a family with full insurance coverage. For example, one elderly couple in the Guangzhou Family Study, the Jeungs, had combined pensions of about 230 yuan, and as retirees from a state unit, their medical costs (excluding hospital meals) were completely covered. Despite their apparently secure position the Jeungs' monthly health care expenses were more than double their monthly income. In 1987, three months before the first interview, 81-year-old Mr. Jeung suffered a stroke that left him bedridden and in need of 24-hour care in the local district hospital. Feeding, toileting, repositioning, and so forth (all aspects of *zhaogu*) are considered responsibilities of the family, not the nursing staff. Mrs. Jeung, 79, suffering herself from arthritis in her knees and shoulders, could not easily provide this care, nor could her son and daughter-in-law since both are employed. Consequently, she paid a 67-year-old woman (a *baomu*, or nursemaid) over 17 yuan a day to stay at the hospital 24 hours a day looking after Mr. Jeung. She gave 15 yuan directly to the woman and a little over 2 yuan to the hospital to cover the costs of the caretaker's meals. The Jeungs were able to meet these expenses only through the generosity of "friends," that is, contributions from fellow members of their Christian church.

Special medical needs and at-home care can also generate large uncovered expenses. When Mrs. Gunn, a widow in her early 80s, returned from a visit with her daughters in Beijing, her two Guangzhou daughters felt she had deteriorated physically. They worried that she had circulatory problems, so in the spring of 1991 they sent her to the hospital for a general work-up. While in the hospital, Mrs. Gunn had a serious attack of herpes

TABLE 3.1
Living Arrangement of Elderly by Sex, in Percentage, in Guangzhou, 1987

	Males (N = 77)	Females (N = 123)	Total (N = 200)
Living with spouse	76%	15%	38.5%
With spouse only	14	3	7.5
And unmarried child(ren)	12	1	5.0
And married child(ren) and unmarried child(ren)	17	3	8.5
And married child(ren)	21	7	12.5
And married child(ren) but eat/budget separately	5	0	2.0
And other	7	1	3.0
Living without spouse	24	83	61.5
With unmarried child(ren)	3	3	3.0
With married child(ren) and unmarried child(ren)	5	7	6.5
With married child(ren)	6	42	28.5
With married child(ren) but eat/budget separately	1	2	2.0
With other	0	22	13.5
Alone	9	7	8.0
TOTAL	100	98 ^a	100.0

SOURCE: C. Ikels, "Settling Accounts: The Intergenerational Contract in an Age of Reform," in D. Davis and S. Harrell, eds., *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*, pp. 307-33 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

^a Total is less than 100 because of rounding.

zoster that initially threatened her eyesight and required a great deal of attention. Although a *baomu* was hired to look after her, at least two or three children or children-in-law were usually present also. As a retired kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Gunn receives a monthly pension of 180 yuan and 100 percent medical coverage. Nevertheless, her hospitalization and subsequent care at home cost the family on the order of 4,000 yuan. Part of this sum went for the *baomu*, part of it for an intravenous medication available only from Hong Kong, and part of it for gifts to doctors who came from specialty clinics to treat Mrs. Gunn at home. Fortunately Mrs. Gunn is able to count on her children. When all the children assembled in Guangzhou during the 1991 Spring Festival (Lunar New Year), they decided to formalize their obligations to their mother. The three children in Guangzhou (the two oldest daughters and younger son) are expected to provide housing and the bulk of care. The older son living in Hong Kong and the youngest daughter living in Australia each agreed to contribute H.K. \$500 (a total of approximately U.S. \$125 at the time) a month to Mrs. Gunn's expenses. The two daughters in Beijing and one in Hunan are expected to be available for emergency assistance, such as looking after her in the hos-

pital or occasionally providing housing. With eight children Mrs. Gunn is in a more comfortable situation than the Jeungs, who have only two (one son in Guangzhou and another in a distant province).⁶⁶

The provision of care is greatly facilitated by coresidence or, at a minimum, nearby residence of the children. As can be seen from Table 3.1, although only 8 percent of the elderly in the Guangzhou Family Study live alone, there are major differences by sex in the actual composition and organization of these households. The typical male over 70 lives with a spouse and is almost as likely to have unmarried children as married ones in the home. The typical female, however, is likely to be widowed and living with a married child (or children) or someone other than a child. These differences occur because the men in the study are generally younger than the women (age-specific mortality rates are higher for men), have spouses younger than themselves, and, if widowed, more likely to have remarried. Women widowed at an early age were less likely to remarry and instead sought security by entering domestic service. Thus several of the women classified as "living with other" are living with the children they brought up in their employer's household. Because they have been such long-term quasi-family members, it is unthinkable for them to live elsewhere in old age. Almost all the other women living with an "other" are living with grandchildren whom they raised for sons or daughters. Table 3.2 reveals that the obligation to look after parents, at least insofar as sharing accommodations is concerned, is still very much that of sons. Of the 117 parents having both sons and daughters, 56 percent live exclusively with sons and only 7 percent exclusively with daughters (an 8 to 1 ratio in favor of the traditional arrangement).

TABLE 3.2
Living Arrangement of Elderly by Sex of Child, in Percentage, in Guangzhou, 1987

	Has sons only (N = 39)	Has both (N = 117)	Has daughters only (N = 28)	Has none (N = 16)	Total (N = 200)
With son	56.4%	56.4%	0%	0%	44%
With both	0	18.8	0	0	11
With daughter	0	6.8	64.3	0	13
With spouse only	10.3	4.3	10.7	18.75	7.5
With other	25.6	8.5	17.9	50.0	16.5
Alone	7.7	5.1	7.1	31.25	8
TOTAL	100.0	99.9 ^a	100.0	100.00	100.0

SOURCE: C. Ikels, "Settling Accounts: The Intergenerational Contract in an Age of Reform," in D. Davis and S. Harrell, eds., *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era*, pp. 307-33 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

^a Total is less than 100 because of rounding.

Caring for parents does not terminate with their deaths. Children—again particularly sons—continue to have special obligations to their deceased parents. At a minimum, even in the cities, these include arranging a proper funeral and visiting the grave or ash depository annually on Qingming, the spring grave-sweeping festival. Most families also carry out some form of domestic ancestor worship. The Chinese government's official position on these practices has fluctuated since 1949.⁶⁷ Objections to the traditional funeral include its expense to the family; its waste of resources (consuming scarce wood and removing land from cultivation); its concern with ghosts, *fengshui*,* and life after death (viewed as superstitious beliefs incompatible with a scientific viewpoint); and its focus on the lineage as an important social group.

Funeral reform has included both recommendations and laws. Thus families have been advised to keep their funeral expenses down and have been offered alternative, inexpensive funerals. Cremation rather than confined burial has been urged in the cities. The burning of paper goods and setting off of firecrackers in certain public areas have been forbidden. Clan burial grounds have been moved or ploughed under. Initially the state did little in the way of funeral reform, but starting in 1958 at both the national and local levels it began to promote (though not require) cremation rather than burial. In 1958 Guangzhou built its first crematorium, but people were slow to accept the idea, regarding it as too cruel.⁶⁸ In the first few years only 8.5 percent of deaths were followed by cremation. In 1962 the Guangzhou Civil Affairs Bureau made cremation mandatory for people in the urban areas. In 1966, with the start of the Cultural Revolution, everyone was too frightened to do anything that might be considered conservative, and the cremation rate shot up to 90 percent. Furthermore, all four of Guangzhou's traditional funeral facilities were closed in 1966, and all subsequent funeral services had to be carried out at the modern facility, which opened that year. In 1973 another law was passed forbidding feudal practices, such as burning things, at funerals.

In 1975 the ratio of cremations in the city began to drop as a result of renewed contact with the outside. In 1985 the national government, concerned about the resurgence of feudal practices nationwide, passed a detailed law requiring that everyone, including rural dwellers, undergo cremation following death. In practice, however, the law is implemented only if there is a crematorium within a reasonable distance; the many places that have none remain unofficially exempt. The law also spelled out exactly what

* *Fengshui*, literally "wind and water," is usually translated "geomancy," that is, a system of beliefs about the influence of topography on a family's or community's fate. There has long been a belief that the correct siting of an ancestor's grave can bring luck and prosperity to his or her descendants.

was and was not allowed at cadre funerals and developed a system of fines to keep cadre funerals in line with policy. The government accommodated certain exceptions to these laws by allowing some of the distinctive minority practices that had been forbidden during the Cultural Revolution, so long as the minorities accept cremation.

In 1986 Guangzhou passed its own regulation following the guidelines spelled out in the national law but specifying even more details. For example, to show respect, exceptions to the cremation requirements were allowed for the families of overseas Chinese and compatriots from Hong Kong, Macao, and (eventually) Taiwan, and land for their burial or that of their kin was made available in a joint venture between the funeral parlor and Hong Kong investors. Under no circumstances, however, may national cadres or members of the Communist Party evade cremation. These 1986 guidelines were to be applied not only to the urban districts of Guangzhou but also to the counties.

In 1990 Guangzhou investigated the "practical consequences" of implementing the 1986 rules, to see how well the new guidelines were working and to plug loopholes people had found to evade them. On November 18, 1990, as a result of this investigation, a whole new set of stricter rules came into effect: (1) The funeral parlor became the only authorized transporter of corpses from the place of death. No one else under any circumstances is allowed to transport the body. Officials knew that families sometimes moved their dead under cover of darkness to evade cremation. (2) The funeral parlor must be notified of a death within 24 hours. (3) If mountain-side graves (and their contents) have to be removed because the state is taking over the land for another use, the remains of the individuals concerned may not be reburied. They too must be cremated. (4) Clan burial grounds along roads and highways must be removed, though those not easily reached need not be disturbed. (5) The definition of "overseas Chinese family member" was restricted to those no more than three generations apart. Thus a grandfather in Canada means that two generations of descendants in China qualify for burial or, in the case of a young overseas Chinese, that two generations above qualify. Siblings also qualify. Some people had been claiming overseas Chinese status on the basis of an ancestor who had gone abroad during the Qing or even the Ming dynasty— as early as the seventeenth century! (6) Burial is allowed in mountain villages that cannot be reached by a funeral vehicle. This is being realistic about local conditions. (7) Rural dwellers allowed to have burials may not bury their dead just anywhere. Each community must set aside an area specifically for burials. (8) No feudal practices (e.g., burning of things) may be carried out at or in the general vicinity of the funeral parlor.⁶⁹

Fifty elderly in the Guangzhou Family Study died from December 1987

through May 1991, 24 men and 26 women. Twenty-six died in the hospital (many in the observation room attached to the outpatient clinic or the emergency room), 23 at home, and 1 on the street en route to see a doctor. One family successfully smuggled the body out of the house for burial, and one elderly man returned to his home village, where he died and was buried. Just about every family held one or another version of the standard approved funeral. In the approved version the family rents a room for about an hour at the funeral parlor, during which time the body of the deceased is displayed in the center of the room, surrounded or flanked by wreaths. If the deceased had belonged to a work unit, an administrator or representative from the labor union of the unit makes a brief speech. If the person formerly occupied a high position, several representatives from the workplace might give speeches about his or her contributions. Usually but not necessarily the eldest son then makes a few comments about his deceased parent. Finally, everyone bows to the deceased, walks around the coffin, pauses to console the family members who led the walk, and exits. For Christians a minister makes appropriate remarks. One family even held a regular Christian funeral service at the deceased's church, though only after the body had been cremated. (The ashes were brought to the church.)⁷⁰

The standard funeral service is followed immediately by cremation. Ashes are kept in small containers the size and shape of jewelry boxes or, much less frequently, in small ceramic urns. The containers are stored for a small fee for varying periods in the ash depository at one of Guangzhou's two main cemeteries. These are located on opposite sides of the street; one serves cadres, the other, the masses. At Qingming families go to the cemetery and, instead of sweeping the tombs and cutting back the year's growth of vegetation, dust the box and replace the miniature plastic flowers that share its tiny cubicle. These actions constitute the acceptable maximum for the government and the acceptable minimum for the public, but most families in the Guangzhou Family Study carry out more than the minimum funeral and display more than the minimum filial piety at Qingming.

Many people offered foods and burned paper clothes and paper money for the deceased at home either immediately before or after the official funeral. In addition, most conducted some ceremony, including the offering of foods and the burning of paper goods on the 7th day following the death. A substantial minority conducted the same ritual on the 14th and the 21st days after the death, and at least one family conducted the "seventh seven" on the 49th day following the death—according to traditional beliefs the day the soul is reborn. Seventy-two percent of the deceased, moreover, are memorialized in some form at home, almost always in a small picture. The picture stands on a god shelf (*C. sabntoih*), traditionally reserved for ancestral tablets or statuettes of gods, high on the wall, though

sometimes it stands on a secular shelf, and in one case (that of a Christian) simply on a dresser. Besides the deceased's picture, the god shelf normally holds two red electric candles, incense sticks (usually real but sometimes electric), some artificial flowers, and an offering of fruit. Sometimes the picture is accompanied by a conventional ancestral tablet inscribed with the deceased's name. Most of the families burn incense twice a day, though some do so only on the first and fifteenth of the month, when they also offer food and drink.

In six cases (12 percent) the deceased had no domestic memorial. In two of them the deceased left no descendants. In the remaining four (including one party member and one Christian) family members nevertheless regularly visit the ash depository on Qingming. Data are insufficient to account for the remaining 16 percent of the dead. The remains of some were transported back to the village, so it is possible that a descendant in the village has erected a god shelf. Every family in which there are descendants and on which I have information (40 of 48) celebrates Qingming (see Chapter 6).

I found it particularly interesting that not just ordinary families but even high-cadre families performed the "excess" ritual. For example, one 52-year-old man, the party secretary of a large institution in Guangzhou and the sole descendant of his recently deceased mother, carried out elements of the traditional funeral; has the conventional god shelf, complete with electric candles, incense, and offerings of oranges and cakes; and lights real incense daily. He wanted us to understand that none of his actions should be interpreted as expressions of either superstition or feudal belief. His mother had been a party member, a production team leader, and the head of the brigade's branch of the Women's Federation. During the Cultural Revolution she herself had thrown out the family's ancestral tablets. "But," her son said, "she remembered them in her heart." She did not leave her husband's village in Kaiping until she was already 62 years old, when she joined her son in a county town and helped raise her grandchildren; she followed him to Guangzhou when he was reassigned in 1983.

Even though the rituals this son carried out are remarkably similar to the traditional ones, I was assured that other, practical considerations lay behind them. On the evening of the sixth day after his mother's death, the son invited the relatives over to "raise her picture" on the wall, an activity usually carried out on the seventh day. He insisted, however, that the timing was unrelated to the seventh-day ritual and had been chosen solely because it was convenient for the relatives (but it was a Monday—a workday for most people). He also pointed out that the electric candles and incense provide a nice light for people coming home from work ("a custom from the village") and that burning incense is good from a hygienic point of view. (It keeps down the number of mosquitoes.) Finally he leaned over

and said that frankly it was important for him to maintain good relationships with his relatives, who are rural people and have certain expectations of what sons are supposed to do for their deceased parents. By doing these things he shows respect for their concerns. No, he did not expect any criticism from the party for doing any of these things.

As the death-related activities demonstrate, although most families have been forced to acquiesce to some of the demands of the state, by replacing burial with cremation and omitting any traditional burning of paper goods and money in the vicinity of the funeral parlor, they have maintained or revived a number of other traditional practices. Some, such as erecting a god shelf and lighting incense, are carried out privately; others, such as “grave” rituals at Qingming, are carried out in public view. The state clearly has chosen to take the hardest line against activities carried out in public, particularly when allowing them might seem to indicate official approval. Because the state participates directly in funerals—it is represented at the funeral parlor by work unit personnel and offers official financial support in the form of labor insurance death benefits to defray some of the costs—its enforcement has been most rigorous at the funeral parlor. Since the beginning of the reforms, however, the state has been much more permissive when activities take place in the private domain, not only ignoring the erection of god shelves and the burning of paper offerings and incense, but also allowing the necessary paraphernalia to be purchased openly from licensed stalls and shops. The party has recognized that filial sons must be allowed to give parents their due.

Conclusions

This chapter has assessed the impact of the economic transition on the family as an institution and on individual family members. It has examined both the “traditional” Chinese family and the prereform efforts of the Communist government to destroy it. When the Communists came to power in 1949, they were determined to abolish the old family system, with its hierarchy based on generation, relative age, and sex, and to replace it with a new family system based on equality, affection, and mutual support. The 1950 and 1980 marriage laws and the 1985 Inheritance Law were intended as instruments for individuals whose new rights were being ignored or violated by family members who clung to the old ways. In addition, the government has engaged in continuing efforts to inform the populace as a whole of its rights and to “persuade” it to comply voluntarily with the government’s vision. How successful has it been in reshaping the urban family?

Two problems stand in the way of a complete answer to this question. First, we are not certain of the extent to which either relatively benign Confucian norms or their feudal travesty truly characterized the pre-Communist urban family. Maybe patriarchs were neither so powerful nor so unfeeling as we have been led to believe. Maybe brothers did not take birth order so seriously as linguistic data suggest. Maybe some intrepid middle-aged women ignored the “three obediences” and dominated both their sons and their husbands. Uncertainty about the characteristics of the earlier urban family makes the discussion of change rather difficult. Second, although measurable changes have occurred (e.g., the increased age at marriage and the drop in fertility), it would be foolhardy to attribute these changes solely to governmental efforts, for these same phenomena have been observed in countries whose governments have done little to bring them about.

Perhaps it is wisest to say that the structure and organization of urban family life in contemporary Guangzhou show continuities with the past: in the predominance of patrilocal residence patterns, high rates of stem family living, reliance on sons for support in old age, and the tradition of regularly honoring one’s immediate ancestors both privately at home and publicly on Qingming. In some respects, however, these continuities are superficial. For example, although the rates of patrilocal residence are high, few married brothers are actually members of joint families, and almost none pool their income for redistribution by the budgetary manager of the household. Similarly, ancestor “worship” in the city is not focused on a line of ancestors but only on deceased members of the immediate household, whose remains are stored in individual cubicles in a public, rather than a lineage or clan, depository.

Despite the continuities, the contemporary urban family differs in many ways from that of the past. Perhaps most important—because it is causally linked with other changes—is the higher age at marriage. Young people now can play an active role in selecting a spouse and can choose from among a network of acquaintances—neighbors, schoolmates, and workmates. And, generally more mature at 23 than at 17, they may have greater confidence in their own judgment, though as the letters to Li Dongdong and conversations with Laura suggest, not everyone does. Moreover, having chosen one another, the young couple are in a better position to present a united front and defend their interests in the face of opposition from the parental generation. Finally, a higher age at marriage is associated with reduced fertility.

Reduced fertility—more specifically, the one-child policy—represents the greatest break with the past. Although in rural areas the government has had to yield to the need of farmers for sons, it has successfully held the line

in the cities. Urban families will have no choice in the near future but to accept daughters as functionally equivalent to sons: in carrying on the family name, remaining in their natal home, and fulfilling traditional obligations to parents. The law, if not actual practice, treats men and women as equals, and the emphasis on female participation in the labor force, facilitated by the relatively positive view of day care for children, offers women the economic means to challenge male authority in the home. A key question raised by the post-1978 economic reforms is whether renewed discrimination against women in hiring will undermine their position in the family.

To learn what specialists in the field think is happening to the Chinese family as a result of the reforms, I interviewed the editors of *Jiating* (Family) magazine in 1987 and again in 1992. This popular magazine, based in Guangzhou, is loosely affiliated with the Women's Federation, though it is responsible for its own budget. It was founded in 1982 as *Guangdong Funu* (Guangdong women) but changed its name to reflect the broader range of topics it deals with and to attract a wider readership. In 1987 it had a national circulation of 2.6 million. The editors see their mission as helping families understand and deal with the new phenomena that emerge as the economic system changes. The problems they saw as meriting special attention in 1987 were the low rates of marriage (for very different reasons) among "intellectual" women and soldiers, objections to the remarriage of the middle-aged and of the elderly, the new mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship (with daughters-in-law now having the upper hand), premarital sexual activity, and marital instability. In 1992 marital instability continued to be a major concern, but so too was the growing resistance among women to the idea of marrying at all.

How have the economic reforms affected the marital considerations of "intellectual" women? Quite simply, their enhanced earning capabilities have made them very choosy while at the same time intimidating men used to dominating their wives. Although discrimination against women in the job market continues, highly educated women, particularly in business, have a greater earning potential than other women. That earning potential matters in mate selection becomes clearer when we realize that soldiers cannot find mates because of their low income and their poor job prospects following demobilization. But money has affected family life in other ways as well. Here is the frank assessment a 60-year-old woman gave when I raised this topic at a dinner:

There have been many changes in the family due to the shift to a market economy. Everything has been commercialized. Before, when wages were low and opportunities few, a person's children were likely to have quite similar economic circumstances, but now there can be enormous variation within the family. The one who

makes the most money *and* uses it to advance family (parental) comforts is considered the best child.

How to spend surplus funds has become a major source of dissension between husbands and wives and between the older and the younger generations in a family. Such disputes were impossible in the old days when there were neither surplus funds nor consumer goods to spend them on.