

CONTENTS

List of Illustrations and Tables ix

1	Introduction	1
2	Brotherless Daughters and Sole Heiresses	19
3	From Empowerment Allies to Innocent Gaslighters	38
4	Meritocracy Stops at the Office Door	64
5	Love, Capital, and Competition	81
6	Off the Pill and Make More Babies!	105
7	Jiwa Motherhood	127
8	The Unmaking of Only Daughters, the Remaking of Women	151

Acknowledgements 167

Methodological Appendix 171

Notes 179

Bibliography 203

Index 233

1

Introduction

“WE ARE blessed, if only just for a moment”, said Pengzhen Qin, thirty-five-year-old head of human resources in a state-owned enterprise (SOE) and a mother of two, indicating the beautiful blue sky. It was early April in Beijing. Pengzhen explained how rare it was to see the uplifting, energising colour of blue in the sky in April, as it was usually grey or black, and sometimes, frighteningly, dark purple with smog. This was the second time we had met for an interview, and she had suggested I shadow her Saturday routine. We were walking along the pavement on the way to pick up her children from their Saturday classes. The flagstones’ mosaic patterns were stained from years of pollution. Pengzhen said: “I wonder if it’s like our lives. We only daughters were allowed a brief moment of blue sky to dream big, to do big. But then our lives still plunge into this long stretch of dark smog”. Under the “blue sky” of her early years, Pengzhen was a little princess with big ambitions, going to an elite university, studying abroad, and succeeding in a male-dominated financial sector. The rest of her life has been and is still clouded by the dark shadows of sexism, misogyny, and patriarchal culture. In Pengzhen’s case, these shadows destroyed her ambitions and pushed her into “a woman’s place” – in the home as a virtuous wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. While many others retained their professional ambitions in at least some form, all of them had to contend with those shadows.

Pengzhen was born in a small city in Jilin in 1982, three years after the one-child policy was introduced and widely implemented in urban areas like her home town. Her parents held secure jobs in the public sector, with her mother working as a primary school teacher and her father as a civil servant in the finance department of the local government. Their jobs were what are called “iron rice bowls”, and their lives had enormous security.¹ Security also meant unquestioning compliance with the Party’s one-child policy. Soon after Pengzhen was born, Pengzhen’s parents claimed their one-child certificate – a public declaration of such compliance, with the private benefit of an extra five yuan a month in her father’s salary. Self-proclaimed “modern citizens”,

Pengzhen's parents took pride in and recited the Party's propaganda line: "Whether it's a boy or a girl, my only child is a treasure" (生男生女都是宝). Pengzhen was always aware her parents might have preferred to have another child in the hope of producing a son, but that they had no choice because they would have lost their jobs if they had had another child.² But she recalled an empowered childhood as the only sun, the little princess with all her parents' undivided attention, investment, and support. "I should thank the Party for the one-child policy. If I had a brother, I could never have had a good education or money from my parents. We brotherless daughters were very lucky to be brought up like sons", she told me.

Pengzhen rewarded her parents' devotion. She was a star student, went to an elite university, obtained a postgraduate degree overseas, and made it in the metropolitan city of Beijing. She achieved every measure of upward social mobility. In her father's public speech to celebrate her stunning success in the *gaokao* and going to Renmin University, he praised her lavishly as an obedient girl with academic achievements outshining any sons. Pengzhen had believed she was invincible. She had achieved extravagantly throughout her education and at a cut-throat hedge fund company, and was married with two children.

Yet her life course changed when Pengzhen became a mother. Misogynist practices in the workplace labelled her as having "diminished capability". Her in-laws pressured her to prioritise having another child over her career, and she complied to preserve family harmony. Pengzhen realised that she could not pursue an ambitious career while caring for two children. Furthermore, as a mother she felt that she should be virtuous, rather than putting her talent first, as she was brought up to believe she should. Reflecting on the choice, Pengzhen spoke sorrowfully: "As a brotherless daughter, I had an empowering upbringing – a happy and liberating beginning. But my life was set on the irreversible journey to become a woman, a mother, and wife: an inferior being". Even though Pengzhen never read Simone de Beauvoir, she nearly quoted her thesis statement: that women are not born but "become" submissive and virtuous.³

Pengzhen's story is not exceptional but emblematic. Like millions of women born in the 1980s under China's one-child policy, she was the sole heiress of her family's resources, dreams, and ambitions. Her parents, bound by the state's draconian family-planning regulations and incentivised through economic rewards, raised her not as a daughter second to a son, but as their "only hope" for family continuity, legacy, and social ascent.⁴ The brotherless status of these women allowed their families to reconfigure traditional Confucian hierarchies, at least temporarily, redirecting investment to only daughters. These daughters were groomed to be exceptional, not just academically and professionally, but morally. They were taught to be talented, but also to be

filial; to lead, but also to serve. They were raised to succeed in a world they were never meant to fully inhabit.

And succeed they did – at least in part. As the Chinese state pursued economic liberalisation, expanded higher education, and fostered urban professional sectors, these women rode the crest of these structural shifts. They entered universities, excelled in the workplace, and often outperformed their male counterparts. Yet, as this book will show, their empowered girlhoods ran headlong into the enduring patriarchal expectations of adulthood. In marriage, they were expected to relinquish autonomy in favour of harmony. In motherhood, they were tasked with balancing relentless care responsibilities with professional ambition. In the workplace, they faced coded misogyny masked as meritocracy: their talent rewarded until it threatened male dominance, their productivity praised until it clashed with prescribed female virtue.

This book investigates the lives of these siblingless women who were never meant to be ordinary. It explores the contradictions they embody as both products and challengers of patriarchal tradition, as both privileged and profoundly constrained. Through their life-course transitions, from girlhood to adulthood, from education to work, from being single to marriage and motherhood, I examine how their siblingless status has shaped their gendered experiences. I argue that while the one-child policy unintentionally disrupted traditional scripts of gender and family, the structural and cultural resilience of patriarchy has ensured that these disruptions remain partial and precarious.

Locating the First Generation of Siblingless Children of the One-Child Policy

What do we truly know about the children of China's one-child policy? Their individual stories, rich with tension and transformation, are often buried beneath macro-level demographic statistics. They have been overshadowed by headlines announcing population “bombs” and “crises”, projections that have dominated narratives about China's economic trajectory for decades. In the late 1970s, as Deng Xiaoping's vision for modernisation gained momentum, overpopulation was framed by the Communist Party as a looming existential threat. It was seen as a spectre of the past – one synonymous with poverty, scarcity, and national “backwardness”.⁵ The one-child policy, first introduced in 1979 and widely implemented in the 1980s, was justified as essential to national rejuvenation. It was not only a demographic intervention but also a cornerstone of China's modernisation project.

Fast-forward to 2015, and the narrative had flipped. What had once been overpopulation was now underpopulation. The demographic crisis had taken

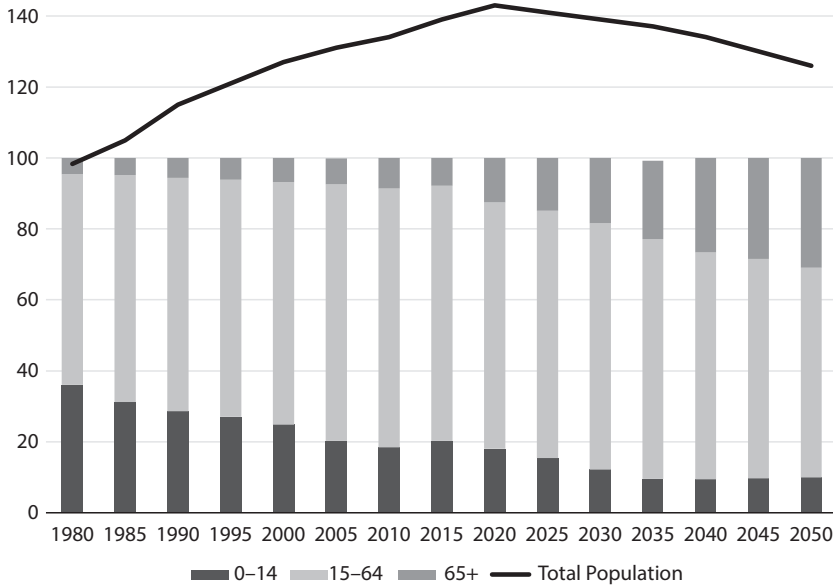


FIGURE 1. China's total (projected) population by age group, 1980 to 2050.

Note: For total population, the graph indicates tens of millions.

Source: United Nations *World Population Prospects* (United Nations 2024a).

on a new form: a shrinking labour force, a rapidly ageing society, and insufficient births to support the needs of future economic growth. The Party's new message was no longer “fewer births, better quality”, but rather an urgent call for more babies – delivered first through the two-child policy and then the three-child policy. Individuals like Pengzhen's in-laws, who once complied with the state by embracing one child, now mirrored the state's panic by pressuring daughters-in-law to bear more. In both moments, of restriction and of encouragement, the state's demographic directives extended into private lives.

The statistics in figure 1 are sobering. In 1980, one year after the policy's introduction, China's population stood at around 981 million. By 1985, when Pengzhen was three years old, it had passed the 1 billion mark. The population continued its steady rise until the early 2010s, reaching 1.35 billion by the time she turned twenty-eight. Since then, despite the policy shift, growth has stagnated. In 2020, the population stood at around 1.43 billion.⁶ The United Nations *World Population Prospects* report projects it will decline by approximately 11.64 per cent by 2050.⁷ While policymakers push for a baby boom, the social and economic realities that women like Pengzhen face, such as poor childcare provision, hostile work environments, and

patriarchal family expectations,⁸ make compliance both unlikely and undesirable.

Demographic data also tell us that China's age structure has changed dramatically. In 1980, fewer than 5 per cent of the population were aged sixty-five or older. By 2020, that figure had doubled and reached around 12 per cent. The proportion of children under fifteen has dropped from 36 per cent in 1980 to under 18 per cent in 2020. Meanwhile, the working-age population is beginning to shrink. Over the next thirty years, the working-age share is expected to fall from around 70 per cent in 2020 to under 60 per cent, while the population aged sixty-five and over is projected to more than double, reaching 30.9 per cent by 2050.⁹ These figures spell trouble not only for the economy but also for the women burdened by care responsibilities in both the public and private spheres.

Yet, behind these statistics are people, women like Pengzhen, whose life trajectories reflect both the promise and the peril of being the first generation of siblingless children born under the one-child policy.¹⁰ And yet, in most demographic discourse, their voices and agency are curiously absent. These demographic numbers often limit our imagination of discovery. We know little about the life journeys of the children of the one-child policy, today's prime labour force and taxpayers. How have the macro-level economic and social structural changes during China's great transformations affected their life-course transitions? How do we assess their life opportunities? What were their holistic experiences as children, as students, as workers, as wives, and as mothers? Are they a lucky generation or an unfortunate experiment of the state's draconian demographic policy?

This book seeks to answer these questions by aligning the life-course transitions of siblingless daughters with key phases of China's structural transformation. It charts their path from childhood through education into the labour market, marriage, and eventually motherhood, mapping these life stages onto China's political, economic, and ideological shifts. Figure 2 attempts to visualise this alignment between personal trajectories and structural forces.

Women like Pengzhen represent a pioneering generation. Born in the early 1980s, their childhoods unfolded in tandem with the launch of the reform and opening-up era and the institutionalisation of the one-child policy. They were the first generation to benefit fully from the nine-year compulsory education system introduced in 1986, which was implemented more consistently and rapidly in urban areas.¹¹ Their siblingless status meant they received concentrated parental attention and investment, often surpassing what previous generations of women could have imagined. They were, in many ways, the most educated daughters in Chinese history.

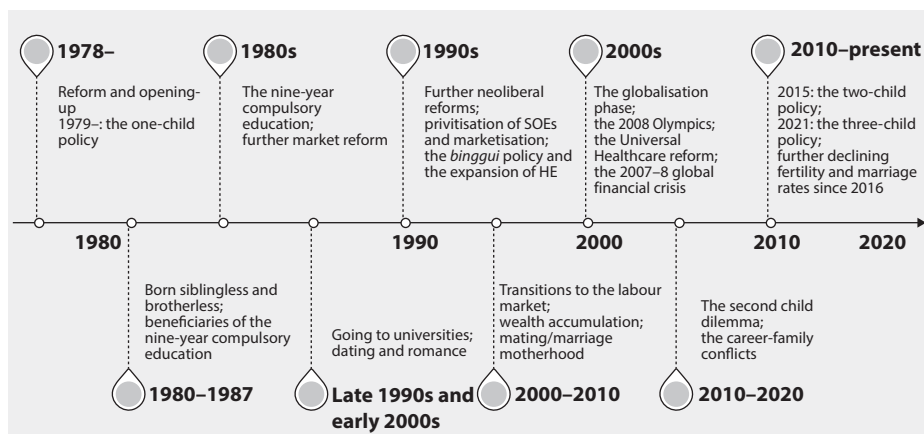


FIGURE 2. Individuals' life-course points against macro-level societal transformative events.

When they came of age, they encountered another major shift: the *binggui* (并轨) reform of 1997 – “merging the tracks” – which ended free higher education and introduced tuition fees.¹² While this marked a neoliberal turn, it also expanded access. Universities swelled with new recruits. The ivory tower, once a socialist preserve for the few, became a competitive arena for the many. These only daughters were uniquely positioned to thrive: equipped with years of uninterrupted schooling, free from competition from brothers, and buoyed by their parents' sole investment, they surfed the rising tide of educational expansion and meritocratic promise.¹³ They were the golden generation who captured the opportunities at the dawn of mass higher education.

Yet, this expansion was only one part of the broader neoliberal storm sweeping China. While these girls studied, the economy underwent privatisation, marketisation, and the gradual dismantling of state welfare. The iron rice bowls their parents had once relied on were broken.¹⁴ Labour reforms led to mass layoffs, job insecurity, and the end of guaranteed employment.¹⁵ Such massive economic, political, and ideological transformations required cultural adaptations. As a result, there was a revival of the cultural ideal of meritocracy, which amplifies individuals' effort and self-regulation, encourages them to be more self-reliant and hard-working, and is most compatible with neoliberalism.¹⁶ Neoliberalism flipped the old ideology of collectivism and common goods to individualism – making citizens take responsibility for their own successes and/or failures. The dream was no longer of shared prosperity, but of private ascent.

For many of these women, this shift was invisible at first – an ideological backdrop that came into focus only when they left university and entered the

world of work. When they stepped into the labour market in the 2000s, the economy was booming, cities were expanding, and global trade beckoned.¹⁷ Growing up free of the ghost of collectivism and embracing neoliberal logic, they were the living proof of a meritocracy. They carved a new path through adulthood, one never available to previous generations and that future generations cannot expect to repeat. This track featured coherent, uninterrupted transitions from studying hard at school to going to university, earning money, getting on the property ladder, and joining the urban, professional middle classes. This solid track was bolstered by the structural opportunities available at each crucial life-course transition point. The subsequent cohorts of the one-child policy era did not enjoy such good timing. It is the dream of upward social mobility. And yet, that dream came with a heavy cost.

For many, the true price of neoliberalisation became visible only when they became mothers. The absence of affordable childcare, the persistence of gendered expectations at home, and the endurance of misogyny in the workplace made it clear that while they had been raised to be talented, they were still expected to be virtuous. The very reforms that had enabled their rise had also privatised care, intensified competition, and reinforced old gender norms in new forms. They had been raised to believe in meritocratic opportunity, but adulthood brought the slow realisation that patriarchal expectations had simply been repackaged, not dismantled.

This cohort, so often celebrated in state propaganda as the emblem of China's modern progress, found themselves balancing between inherited ideals of filial piety, state-directed visions of demographic duty, and their own aspirations for autonomy and success. The first cohort of the one-child generation may have been "lucky" in structural terms,¹⁸ but their lives reveal deep contradictions. They benefited from some of neoliberalism's opportunities while being shielded from its worst excesses; until, that is, they became wives and mothers. As they age into the role of caregivers and become mothers to children born under the new two- and three-child policies, their luck appears to have run out. Their stories challenge us to think beyond population curves and birth rates. They ask us to reckon with the human cost of demographic engineering, and the complex ways in which policy, ideology, and gender shape a generation.

The Contour of Siblingless Children

Popular media often caricatured the children of China's one-child policy as "spoiled" singletons – "Little Emperors", "Little Princesses", or "Little Suns" around whom everything revolved.¹⁹ As they grew up, they were said to lack resilience, to exhibit emotional dependency on parents, and to develop a pronounced self-focus. Labels like *mabao* (mummy's boys) and *kenlao* (eating the

old; 啃老) reflected broader anxieties about this generation's perpetrating a departure from the deeply rooted cultural value of filial piety, vital to China's future as an ageing society.²⁰ Scholarly work described how, in 4-2-1 families (with four grandparents, two parents, and only one child), the concentration of resources on one child encouraged the emergence of a highly self-oriented "singleton self".²¹

Yet prior scholarship has largely lacked a life-course lens. Studies have tended to focus on adolescent siblingless children, particularly their schooling and educational outcomes,²² offering only a narrow window into their broader life trajectories. In these accounts, the line between individual parental investment and structural educational reform remains blurred. Moreover, the analytical focus remains squarely on parent-child dynamics, exploring filial piety and gender attitudes, but tells us little about how siblingless individuals navigate adulthood, particularly in relation to work, marriage, and motherhood. These limitations obscure how gendered expectations have evolved over time, or how adult women from this cohort internalise, resist, or repurpose the cultural scripts imposed on them.

Compounding this issue is the treatment of the one-child cohort as a homogeneous block. Scholars often conflate the experiences of those born in the 1980s (*baling hou*), 1990s (*jiuling hou*), and 2000s (*lingling hou*), overlooking critical differences in their life-course opportunities. Yet these generational distinctions are vital. The siblingless daughters born in the 1980s were uniquely positioned to seize the structural openings presented by expanding access to education and growing urban labour markets. Their successors, however, entered adulthood in a different China, one marked by rising degree inflation and the steady erosion of the value of a university education, shrinking job prospects, and intensified social stratification.²³

Scholarship focused on gender has illuminated a more egalitarian pattern in educational experiences than existed in previous generations. The gender gap in educational attainment has narrowed.²⁴ Siblingless girls have excelled in male-dominated subjects like mathematics,²⁵ and studies suggest that women from one-child cohorts have proven more adaptable to rapid economic change than their male peers.²⁶ My own earlier work revealed that female university students from one-child families developed approaches to navigating gendered labour markets that were more strategic than those of their male classmates.²⁷ These findings offer a hopeful counter-narrative to stereotypes of spoiled or fragile only children. Yet significant questions remain. How do these educational advantages play out after university? How do these women experience workplace gender inequality, marriage, and motherhood?

Implicit in the characterisations of the siblingless generation are the disruptions of traditional patriarchal gender and age hierarchies, and challenges to

long-held cultural skills and practices informed by traditional values, yet the impacts of these disruptions and challenges are poorly understood. As Pengzhen's father's statement that she had outshone any son suggests, the traditional preference for male offspring and the descent of the male line could not remain intact in families where the only child was a girl. In families without sons, gendered lineage expectations had to be reconfigured. Some families resisted this reordering, through sex-selective abortion, abandonment, or international adoption;²⁸ but there were enough families like Pengzhen's that the traditional funnelling of resources to educate male offspring gave way to heavy investment in only children regardless of gender. Not only do urban families invest in their only daughters' education, they also are closely involved in their daughters' learning experiences and mindful of their emotional well-being.²⁹

This "disruptive" generation further challenged the long-standing cultural code, performance, and practices of filial piety (孝; *xiao*) based on strict gender and age hierarchies. Filial piety has been loosely conceptualised in terms of love, respect, and responsibility for one's parents. This cultural code historically demanded obedience, proximity, and lifelong responsibility to one's parents, duties once reserved for sons.³⁰ The arrival of the siblingless generation upset the gender hierarchies in performing filial piety. Only daughters stepped into these obligations, often assuming the full weight of emotional, financial, and practical care for their ageing parents, as "substitute sons".³¹ In this sense, they did not reject filial piety but reinterpreted it, subverting the idea that care and duty belonged to sons alone.

Yet, by framing these developments as generic disruptions to patriarchy or filial piety, much of the existing literature does not specifically identify the women who caused them. It is the only daughters and sole heiresses, raised without male competition, entrusted with high expectations, and propelled by a powerful mix of privilege and pressure, who have done the disrupting. But we still know little about how they transition into adult roles: whether they retain their early confidence and ambition, or conform to gender norms in the face of marriage and motherhood. Do these women become professional trailblazers, or are they absorbed into the traditional ideals of virtuous womanhood?

This book centres that question. It tells the story of China's first generation of siblingless women, empowered by their brotherless childhoods, but still hemmed in by persistent patriarchal gender expectations as they transition into the roles of worker, wife, and mother. At the heart of this story lies the enduring binary of talent and virtue, a patriarchal ideal that endows men with talent and women with virtue. These siblingless women stand at the intersection of these two ideals, negotiating competing scripts of gendered success. Their journeys reveal not just whether they become egalitarians or conformists, but how gender is lived, challenged, and endured in contemporary China.

Talent Is Masculine and Virtue Is Feminine

The binary of talent and virtue is a foundational patriarchal gender ideal that offers a compelling lens through which to explore how gender norms, roles, and ideologies have been constructed and contested in contemporary society. Its origins can be traced to the sixteenth century's recalibration of the Confucian cultural partiality of virtue over talent, marking a new gendered development.³² This shift is captured in the dictum: "A man with virtue is a man of talent; a woman without talent is a woman of virtue".³³ This formulation worked to consolidate gendered boundaries between the public and private spheres at precisely the moment when more women from privileged families were becoming literate.³⁴ The notion of "talent" in this context, translated from *cai* (才), referred to a man's demonstrable abilities, skills, and intellect³⁵ – qualities validated through public achievements, especially in civil service examinations (*keju*; 科举) and other visible markers of scholarly distinction.³⁶

But if talent was coded as masculine and public, then what counted as female virtue? The ideological foundation for female virtue emerged from the discourse of the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues", famously codified in *Lessons for Women* (*Nüjie*; 女诫), authored by Ban Zhao (班昭) in 106 CE.³⁷ Ban Zhao's text articulated four pillars of female virtue: moral integrity, modest speech, physical grace, and domestic diligence.³⁸ These qualities were to be expressed through sequential subordination, first to one's father before marriage, then to one's husband, and finally to one's son if widowed.³⁹ Unsurprisingly, Ban Zhao has been criticised by historians for indoctrinating female subordination and submission through these systematic codes of conduct prescribed for women.⁴⁰ While some contemporary scholars have attempted to recover a subversive reading of Ban Zhao's work,⁴¹ the *Lessons for Women* has remained a shorthand for idealised female obedience and submission to patriarchal authority.⁴²

Ban Zhao's model of staged female subordination crystallised not only an ethical framework but also a territorial one, dividing male and female roles between public action and private service. And not only did she draw a line between the public and private spheres for men and women, but she also used virtues as a moral compass to contain women's roles, actions, and behaviours. This ideological division finds modern echoes in the gendered spatial and moral binaries popularised in global north contexts by John Gray's *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, and later critiqued by Deborah Cameron for essentialising gender differences.⁴³ Similarly, the virtue–talent binary functions as a cultural blueprint that justifies women's confinement to domesticity, while valorising men's engagement in public life.

To track resistance to this binary is to understand how patriarchy is both re-produced and disrupted. Joan Judge's historical research on Chinese women studying in Japan at the turn of the twentieth century provides a compelling example. These pioneering students rejected the virtue script that confined women to silence and domesticity.⁴⁴ In the tide of early modernisation, they sought to assert their public identities through writing, activism, and patriotic engagement, activities that had long been the preserve of male talent. Their conscious embrace of talent over virtue marked a fundamental challenge to patriarchal gender norms and laid claim to the moral and political authority of the public sphere.

The legal and institutional scaffolding that once rigidly upheld this virtue–talent binary through strict, three-stage patriarchal subordination that Joan Judge identified may no longer define gender roles in twenty-first-century China, yet the cultural logics it established persist. As prior scholarship has shown, the gender norm of “men in the public arena, women in the domestic” continues to shape contemporary gendered expectations.⁴⁵ In today's neoliberal China, masculine ideals of competitiveness, productivity, and rational efficiency are naturalised as universal human ideals.⁴⁶ In contrast, women who assert their ambitions by delaying marriage or rejecting traditional roles are often misrecognised or penalised.⁴⁷ Despite these findings, much of the existing literature pays limited attention to siblingless women's own voices, experiences, and perceptions of how patriarchy shapes their identities and choices.

This book takes seriously the need to ask: to what extent does the talent-and-virtue binary still structure the way women understand themselves and their roles? Are women today still bound by the legacy of female virtue and obedience? Or have they been empowered to claim their talents, and thus disrupt the cultural assumptions that continue to prescribe what women can and should be? By tracing the life-course transitions of only daughters from the one-child generation, this book reveals how the tension between talent and virtue continues to structure the choices, identities, and possibilities available to women in contemporary China. Whether as daughters, professionals, wives, or mothers, these women navigate, and sometimes resist, the inherited boundaries of patriarchal gender ideals. In doing so, they offer a vivid account of both the persistence and the transformation of gendered power.

Framing Only Daughters: Can They Have It All – Talent and Virtue?

The women of China's one-child generation offer a compelling case through which to interrogate the enduring relevance of the virtue-and-talent binary. These siblingless and, crucially, brotherless daughters, have been the

beneficiaries of unprecedented material investment and social opportunity. Without competition from male siblings, they received undivided parental attention. Many grew up in urban households where higher education was no longer a distant aspiration but a realisable goal, bolstered by structural changes that dramatically expanded access to university places.⁴⁸ By 2015, over half of all college-age women in China were enrolled in higher education, a figure that had surged to 83 per cent by 2024.⁴⁹ At the same time, China's transition into a high-tech, service-oriented economy has opened new professional spaces for women, especially those from the one-child generation.⁵⁰

These women, by all accounts, should have been ideally placed to disrupt patriarchal norms. As sole heiresses to family resources and recipients of higher education, they might have rewritten gender hierarchies. Yet the cultural imperative to perform “virtuous” womanhood, defined by obedience, sacrifice, and familial duty, has proved more resilient than expected. In this book, I use only daughters from the one-child generation as a lens through which to evaluate the ongoing power of the talent-and-virtue binary in twenty-first-century China. I focus particularly on their life-course transitions and their interactions with different forms of patriarchal authority, whether their parents, husbands, in-laws, workplaces, or the state.

Studying Only Daughters

A central aim of this book is to examine how life-course transitions, alongside the accumulation or erosion of socioeconomic and status advantage, shape gender roles and attitudes among this unique generation of only daughters. I pay close attention to how they navigate and negotiate with patriarchal power at different stages in life. Do they conform, resist, or fall somewhere in between? To explore these questions, I conducted eighty-two in-depth interviews with women born between 1980 and 1987, and shadowed twenty-nine of them during their weekend care-work routines. In total, the study draws on 358 hours of fieldwork. The research was conducted between 2017 and 2019, with in-person interviews and shadowing in Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing, and subsequent follow-up remote interviews. Further details on the research procedure, pilot study, sampling, recruitment, data coding, and analytical techniques, and reflections on my own positionality, are included in the methodological appendix.

The multi-year and multi-site design of this study proved especially well suited to understanding these siblingless women's life-course transitions from adolescence to education, work, marriage, and motherhood. A critical methodological challenge in the early stages of the project was determining where best to recruit participants who reflected a range of geographical and socioeconomic backgrounds. From the outset, metropolitan cities like Beijing and

Shanghai stood out. Not only are they hubs for migration, opportunity, and cultural change, but they have also served as important sites in existing scholarship on gender and family in urban areas.⁵¹ Yuxin Pei's influential work on women born in the 1970s linked their personal sexual revolutions to Shanghai's broader economic and cultural transformation.⁵² Similarly, Xiying Wang used Beijing as a lens through which to explore shifting gender norms among dating youth, while Fengshu Liu highlighted the contradictions of modernisation and filial piety in Beijing families.⁵³

The popularity of Beijing and Shanghai in gender and family research is not merely a matter of convenience. These cities offer something specific: spatial and cultural distance from traditional patriarchal kinship networks. This detachment creates openings for new modes of gender performance and resistance, as seen in Pun Ngai's study of rural migrant women, whose financial autonomy was facilitated by distance from their natal families.⁵⁴ These cities attract migrants across all sectors of society, from low-skilled workers to gig economy couriers and white-collar professionals.⁵⁵ They offer access to quality education, health-care, and diverse social worlds, conditions rarely matched in provincial cities.⁵⁶ Yet, my research also diverges from the dominant scholarly focus on rural-to-urban migration, which is primarily driven by job opportunities unavailable in rural areas.⁵⁷ Rather, my study focuses on a distinct and under-researched pattern of urban-to-urban migration experienced by my research participants. This trajectory, especially from small counties and tier 4 or tier 3 cities to these metropolitan areas, is facilitated primarily by higher education opportunities and the subsequent professional job opportunities. This distinct pattern precisely mirrors the social mobility triangle: moving from a geographical origin, passing through higher education as the catalyst, and landing in a relatively superior geographical destination.⁵⁸ Therefore, this particular urban-to-urban migration is a distinct marker of upward social mobility in the Chinese context.

However, after two extensive rounds of fieldwork in Beijing and Shanghai, completed by mid-2018, I recognised a limitation. While these cities allowed for rich variation in individual stories, they were very homogeneous in their metropolitan character, which limited the potential to explore the variability of the "metropolitan effect". Preliminary findings revealed that social and geographical mobility often intersected in complex ways to shape women's accumulated socioeconomic (dis)advantages, wealth, work devotion, and parenting practices. Respondents spoke of "travelling upwards", geographically and socially, suggesting that mobility itself at the key early-adulthood life-course transitions affected their later roles as professionals, wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law. It became clear that to fully understand this process, I needed to consider how the type of urban destination and the characteristics of the migration might yield different metropolitan effects across key domains

like wealth, work opportunities, and parenting practices. This prompted me to introduce a third site: Nanjing.

As the capital of Jiangsu province and a historic centre of political and cultural life, Nanjing provided a valuable counterpoint. Unlike Beijing and Shanghai, it offered a different kind of mobility: intra-provincial and regional movement within the Yangtze River Delta. Nanjing benefited from reform-era economic liberalisation while developing its own innovation ecosystems, supported by a dense network of universities and small private enterprises.⁵⁹ It allowed me to recruit both Nanjing natives and siblingless women who had migrated there from within the province or nearby regions, offering a more nuanced view of how local structural and geographical conditions had shaped work, wealth opportunities, and family formation during their life-course transitions. The inclusion of Nanjing allows me to move beyond a simplistic social mobility triangle – from small counties directly to Beijing or Shanghai; indeed, it allows me not only to consider graded degrees of upward geographical mobility but also to assess different “metropolitan effects” on work, wealth, and parenting approaches.

Each city presented a different configuration of opportunity, kinship distance, and cultural change. As Xiying Wang observed in her study of gender identities among Beijing youth, globalised and marketised images such as the “sassy girl” have taken root in metropolitan China.⁶⁰ Yet these new identities often remain constrained by enduring expectations of female subordination. My own findings echo hers, but shift the focus from dating to broader life-course experiences in the workplace, wealth accumulation, and family formation. In this way, I explore how new cultural narratives of gender empowerment remain fragile, and often collapse under the weight of persistent patriarchal structures.

The three-city design also allowed me to recruit respondents with a wide range of geographical and social origins. Census data from the three sites indicate that those born outside but currently living in (常住外来人口) Beijing, Shanghai, and Nanjing accounted for 38 per cent, 40 per cent (both 2022), and 47 per cent (2021), respectively.⁶¹ My sample reflects this diversity: most participants were born outside of these cities, hailing from provinces as geographically dispersed as Jilin, Heilongjiang, Zhejiang, Yunnan, and Sichuan.⁶² Their family backgrounds were equally varied. Parents included laid-off workers from state-owned enterprises (SOEs), cleaners, security guards for private companies, nurses, senior civil servants, teachers, engineers, doctors, senior party cadres, and private entrepreneurs.

Table 1 summarises the key demographic characteristics of the eighty-two women who participated in this study. Most were in the prime of their working lives when I began the research in 2017. Over half came from professional

TABLE 1. Socioeconomic and Demographic Summary of the Sample ($N = 82$)

	N
Employment Status	
Full-time employed	73
Unemployed/full-time study	3
Unemployed/full-time mother	6
Nature of Employment	
Private	15*
Cooperative	28
Public	30
Marital Status	
Married	75
Divorced	3
Never married	4
Level of Education	
Postgraduate	27
Higher education	50
Less than higher education	5
Parental Socioeconomic Background	
Urban professional and managerial	53
Urban working class	29
Agricultural	0
Geographical Origin	
Metropolitan	17
Non-metropolitan (Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning, Hubei, Hebei, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Shandong, Anhui, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Sichuan, Guizhou, Fujian, Guangdong)	65

*Six homemakers and three full-time mature students were formerly employed in the private sector

families; the remainder from working-class backgrounds. None were from agricultural households, a reflection of the one-child policy's rural exemptions for families without sons. Instead of using regional specificity, I classified participants based on whether they came from metropolitan (Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing) or non-metropolitan (eastern, central, western provinces) regions.

By foregrounding the stories of siblingless women across these three distinct urban sites, this book captures a rich and complex picture of how talent, virtue, and gendered expectations are negotiated in contemporary China. It seeks to understand whether – and how – these only daughters can have it all.

Telling the Stories of Only Daughters from a Life-Course Perspective

The stories of only daughters will be told from their earliest formative years in the next chapter, “Brotherless Daughters and Sole Heiresses”, girls whose births fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of family, gender, and inheritance. In the absence of male heirs, only daughters were thrust into roles once reserved exclusively for sons, becoming sole heiresses of familial ambition, capital, and duty. From naming practices to girlhood experiences, some daughters were encouraged to seize ambition while others were subtly channelled back into gendered scripts, their empowerment always conditional on natal families’ socioeconomic origin, interests, and harmony. At the material level, only daughters became active agents of wealth accumulation, aided by parents who invested strategically in their futures. Yet beneath these gains lies a cultural recalibration: natal families, once subordinate in the kinship hierarchy, rose in importance, forging enduring economic partnerships with their daughters. While these developments challenged older traditions, they also deepened new contradictions – meritocracy narratives that obscure privilege, and familial empowerment that still binds daughters tightly to expectations of loyalty and sacrifice. These only daughters are thus both the architects and the inheritors of a new social order, rewriting what it means to be a daughter, an heir, and a woman in contemporary China.

Chapter 3, “From Empowerment Allies to Innocent Gaslighters”, takes us to explore the complex and shifting roles of parents of only daughters, tracing a narrative of transformation from fierce allies who invested their dreams and resources into their daughters’ empowerment to “innocent gaslighters” who, often unwittingly, eroded their daughters’ autonomy and dignity. This chapter also exposes the darker underside of this intergenerational dynamic, where support turned to surveillance, and love morphed into moral correction. Some stories illustrate the violence, rather than love, embedded in this familial contract.

Chapter 4, “Meritocracy Stops at the Office Door”, lays bare the dissonance between the promise and the reality of the belief in meritocracy for only daughters. Raised to believe in meritocracy and armed with higher education degrees, these women find themselves thwarted by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms in the workforce. Their talents, nurtured through years of familial

investment and social ambition, collide with a labour market that privileges male mediocrity and punishes female ambition. These women's stories capture this generational betrayal: despite academic excellence, they face blatant gender discrimination and systemic exclusion in the workplace. Their experiences are not anomalies, but symptoms of a broader institutional bias that equates leadership with masculinity and relegates women to supporting roles regardless of their qualifications. These stories underscore a painful paradox: the very upbringing that positioned them as high achievers now demands that they contort themselves to fit into systems designed to exclude them. And in a world that continues to equate talent with men and virtue with women, even the most gifted among them are forced to compromise who they are to survive.

After navigating the gendered labyrinth of the workplace, chapter 5, "Love, Capital, and Competition", pivots to the private and intimate sphere, where these only daughters seek to define love. This chapter documents how only daughters navigate the complex interplay between romantic ideals and socio-economic, cultural, and geographical realities. For only daughters, marriage becomes a site of both love and strategic competition for wealth, status, and cultural capital, where women's natal and marital families jostle for influence over the couple's life trajectory. Cultural expectations of continuing the bloodline collide with modern aspirations, creating tensions that hinge on intergenerational wealth transfers. These stories expose the paradox of the realities of marriage for this unique generation, where romantic partnerships function as vectors for emotional connection, family reproduction, and wealth accumulation.

Beyond the challenges of love and competition, chapter 6, "Off the Pill and Make More Babies!", reveals the profound contradictions facing only daughters as they navigate the state's demographic pivot from population control to pronatalism. Once raised as paragons of individual potential, highly educated, career-focused, and singularly cherished, they are now recast as reproductive agents expected to remedy the nation's fertility crisis. But the transition from being the pride of the one-child policy to the burden-bearers of the two-child era has proven anything but seamless. Instead, these women find themselves caught in an impossible bind: workplace structures remain hostile to motherhood, state childcare has eroded, and familial support systems, mostly reliant on ageing grandmothers, are neither sustainable nor equitable. The tension between professional merit and maternal virtue has triggered not just logistical challenges but a deeper emotional crisis, encapsulated by a shared sense of *jiaolv* (焦虑), the anxiety of having to choose between two irreconcilable futures. These women's choices, though vastly different, reflect a common reality: the state's attempts to reverse its demographic mistakes have placed the burden squarely on women's shoulders, without offering the structural or

cultural reforms necessary to support them. The only daughters of the one-child era were once the embodiment of national modernity; now, they are the frontline casualties of a nation unwilling to reconcile its past policies with present realities.

Chapter 7, “*Jiwa* Motherhood”, unpacks the rise of this form of motherhood among only daughters, revealing it as a distinctly Chinese parenting culture shaped by intersecting forces of neoliberal ambition, Confucian virtue, and structural abandonment. These women, once the sole beneficiaries of their families’ investment and dreams, now channel those same energies into their own children through intense, competitive, and performative parenting. But unlike the Western model of “intensive mothering”, *jiwa* is as much about public display as private care, where maternal virtue is measured not only in love or attentiveness but also in strategic sacrifice and relentless pursuit of measurable success. The siblingless status of these women intensifies this dynamic: their children are not just offspring but the singular vessels through which family legacy, honour, and ambition must be carried forward. These women, across different spectrums of class and geography, are united by the shared compulsion to prove their maternal virtue and personal worth through the academic and cultural success of their children. In doing so, they not only internalise but reproduce the state’s retreat from collective responsibility, absorbing into their own bodies and minds the burden of national development, one child at a time.

The concluding chapter reflects on the life-course journeys of only daughters born under China’s one-child policy, revealing how their unique demographic position intersected with the country’s post-reform transformations to produce a fleeting and deeply contradictory empowerment. Their status granted them unparalleled access to education, employment, and parental investment at a critical moment in China’s social and economic development. Yet the very structures that enabled their rise – familial investment, state policies, and market-driven reforms – also reinforced traditional gender hierarchies, ultimately reinscribing rather than dismantling patriarchal norms. These women did not claim their gender egalitarianism through collective mobilisation, but through individualised, strategic negotiation, often at the cost of their own autonomy, health, or long-term aspirations. To fully comprehend only daughters’ life trajectories in becoming women, let’s put the clock back to the start, charting their births and the early, formative years of girlhood.

INDEX

- abortion, 9, 106–7, 109, 194n18
 Abramson, Kate, 81
 academic-attainment-oriented activities,
 131, 133–34, 138
Against Meritocracy (Littler), 183n21
 age structure, 5, 107–8. *See also* population
 data
 alcohol, 74–75, 80
All About Love (hooks), 82
 Allouch, Annabelle, 26, 183n19
Analects, 67, 180n33
 anxious mums, 137–44, 149
 assortative mating, 50–51, 185n43, 187n49.
 See also marriage (discussion of)
 Austen, Jane, 47–48
 Ayawawa, 62, 108, 189n98
- balinghou*, 8, 175
 Ballakrishnen, Swethaa, 128, 163
 Ban, Zhao, 10, 67
baoma, 47, 120, 145
binggui reform, 6. *See also* gaokao; higher
 education
Book of Documents, 26, 183n23
 Broström, Anders, 30
 Brown, Melissa J., 45, 187n28
- Cameron, Deborah, 10, 88
 Cao, Yuping, 55
Career and Family (Goldin), 182n5, 193nn 6
 and 11
 cash gifts, 31–33, 36, 118–19. *See also* wealth
 accumulation
 Chan, Anita, 182n14
- Chen, Tianhong, 115
 Cheng, Cheng, 99–100
 Chiang, Yi-Lin, 183n27, 185n1
 childcare, 7, 17, 72–74, 80, 109–14, 118, 125, 137,
 142, 163. *See also* grandparents (discus-
 sion of); motherhood (discussion of)
 Chinese Communist Party (CCP), 45–46,
 59, 160. *See also* Cultural Revolution
 Clarke, Jean, 30
 conceptualisation (approaches of), 26–27,
 183n22
 Confucianism, 2, 10, 30, 66–67, 72, 80, 129,
 156–57, 180n33, 184n34
 contraception, 106–7, 109, 117, 193nn9 and
 10. *See also* population data; women's
 bodies (male control of)
cuihun, 61
 Cultural Revolution, 41, 58–60, 114, 116.
 See also Chinese Communist Party
 (CCP); “Up to the Mountains and Down
 to the Villages”
 “Culture in Action” (Swidler), 24, 182n9
- Dasgupta, Sukti, 65
 Davis, Deborah, 93
 de Beauvoir, Simone, 2, 46–47, 82, 103, 139,
 179n3
 demographics. *See* age structure; popula-
 tion data
 Deng, Xiaoping, 3, 106, 116
 Derrida, Jacques, 40, 185n7
dingti, 41, 60, 186n13, 189n93
 divorce, 96–97, 104. *See also* marriage
 (discussion of)

- domestic violence, 44, 47, 54–57, 93, 188n67.
See also marital rape
- Dong, Yige, 108
- dowry, 33–34, 98
- dundian, 41–42, 186n14
- dushengnvs*, 29
- education. *See* *binggui* reform; gaokao;
 higher education; hukou; nine-year
 compulsory education policy;
 teaching (as a profession); Two Basics
 policy
- Einstein, Albert, 184n28
- Elman, Benjamin, 181n36, 183n24
- experience-oriented care work, 131,
 134–35
- extending the family line, 93; and bloodline
 (“continue the bloodline”), 17, 23, 28, 31,
 113, 118–19; 197n68
- extramarital affairs, 84–85
- family pressure, 2, 4–5, 39, 103, 121.
See also *cuihun*; gaslighting; obedience;
 relational dignity; voluntary
 singlehood
- female subordination, 14, 46–47, 51, 56, 67,
 179n3. *See also* “turning her kitchen into
 her kingdom”
- femininity (discussion of), 61–63, 68–70,
 72, 77, 157–58
- feminism, 157–61, 163–64. *See also*
 traditionalism
- Feminist Five, 157
- filial piety, 8–9, 25, 39–40, 44, 54, 62, 64, 91,
 123–24, 152, 163–64
- Fong, Mei, 179n2
- Fong, Vanessa L., 22, 59–60, 179n4, 182n6,
 185nn2 and 3
- Friedman, Sara, 93
- Gammeltoft, Tine, 40, 186n8
- Gao, Ge, 182n4
- gaokao, 2, 21, 25–29, 64–65, 130, 184n40.
See also cash gifts; higher education
- Garcia, Manon, 179n3
- gaslighting, 51–57, 60–63, 79. *See also*
cuihun; family pressure
- gatekeeping, 146–47
- geju, 134–35, 138
- gender (discussion of), 8–9, 21, 28–30,
 65–71, 123, 151–52, 156–65, 184n31.
See also female subordination;
 feminism; labour discrimination;
 life-course transitions (discussion of);
 manning it up; naming practices;
 relational positionality; stop dreaming;
 talent-virtue binary (discussion of);
 traditionalism
- gender neutrality, 30
- getihu*, 20
- ghost brother, 40, 62, 64, 177, 185n6
- Goldin, Claudia, 106, 182n5, 193nn6
 and 11
- Goodman, David, 60
- “good mothers work”, 44–46
- grandparents (discussion of), 113–16, 122,
 125, 133
- Gray, John, 10
- Gul, Pelin, 84
- Hanser, Amy, 128
- happy mums, 138–44, 149
- Haslanger, Sally, 26, 69, 183n22
- Haunting Images* (Gammeltoft), 186n8
- hauntology, 40, 185n6n7
- healthcare reform, 180n18
- higher education, 12, 26–31. *See also* cash
 gifts; gaokao
- Hong Fincher, Leta, 99
- hooks, bell, 81–82, 85–86
- hot-potato jobs, 77–78
- household registration system, 90. *See also*
 hukou
- Hu, Yang, 50
- hukou, 51, 64–65, 88–92, 103, 158, 160,
 182n61, 184n40. *See also* household
 registration system
- hypergamy, 50

- imperial civil service examinations, 26, 30.
See also keju system
- iron girl, 45–46
- iron rice bowls, 1, 6, 32, 72, 179n1
- jiaolv, 17–18, 112–13, 125
- Jin, Qiu, 157, 199n11
- Jintao, Hu, 180n18
- jiuling hou*, 8
- jiwa, 18, 128–50, 160–61, 165, 197n9. *See also*
 academic-attainment-oriented activities;
 experience-oriented care work; gate-
 keeping; milestone-oriented care work;
 skill cultivation
- job-hopping, 73
- Judge, Joan, 11, 180n33
- Kandiyoti, Deniz, 23, 117
- keju system, 10, 26–27, 181n36
- kenlao*, 7–8, 180n20
- Knight, John, 182n14
- knowledge (discussion of), 27
- Kohn, Margaret, 183n18
- Kuan, Teresa, 181n51
- Kung, James Kai-sing, 45, 186n26
- Kuo, Lily, 184n28
- labour discrimination, 65–66
- labour force participation, 46
- Lareau, Annette, 57–58, 197n4
- Lau, D. C., 180n33
- Lean In* (Sandberg), 122
- Lee, Daniel Yiu-fai, 45, 186n26
- Lee, Lin-Lee, 181n38
- leftover women phenomenon, 43, 186n17
- Legge, James, 183n23
- Leite, Adam, 81
- Lessons for Women* (Ban Zhao), 10, 67
- Li, Jialin, 128
- Liang, Baowen, 30, 184nn33 and 34
- life-course transitions (discussion of),
 12–13, 18, 31, 33, 45, 92, 104, 151, 153–56, 162,
 172–73, 176
- Lin, Kai, 55
- Ling, Yantao, 195n42
- lingling hou*, 8
- literacy, 10
- Little, Jo, 26, 183n21
- Liu, Fengshu, 13
- Liu, Qian, 43
- Lizardo, Omar, 182n13
- love. *See* mysticism (romantic love); realism
 (romantic love); romantic love
- Love's Uncertainty* (Kuan), 181n51
- Luo, Weixiang, 85
- lying flat, 27, 180n23
- mabao*, 7–8
- MacKinnon, Catharine, 105, 193n4
- Mandler, Peter, 26, 183n21
- Manne, Kate, 71
- manning it up, 73–75, 80
- Mao, Zedong, 45
- marital rape, 83–84, 103. *See also* domestic
 violence
- market reform, 6, 40–41, 44, 60, 116, 162,
 182n14, 183n15
- marriage (discussion of), 48–51, 87–99,
 103–4, 123, 152, 160, 186n18. *See also*
 assortative mating; divorce; domestic
 violence; extending the family line;
 marital rape; motherhood (discussion
 of); romantic love; wedding ceremonies;
xiangqin
- May Fourth Movement, 157
- Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*
 (Gray), 10
- Mérite* (Allouch), 183n19
- meritocracy, 6–7, 16–17, 26–34, 123, 163,
 183nn17, 19, and 21, 184n28. *See also* labour
 discrimination; misogyny; talent-virtue
 binary (discussion of)
- Merton, Robert, 163
- Meteor Garden* (Chai), 87
- migration, 13–14, 90–91, 107, 163, 184n40
- milestone-oriented care work, 131–34, 138
- Mills, C. Wright, 56
- misogyny, 1–3, 7, 65, 69–80, 103, 152

- mood economy, 143–44, 198n27
- Moore, Barrington, Jr., 23, 182n7
- motherhood (discussion of), 95–96,
111–12, 117–28, 137–38, 164–65. *See also*
anxious mums; childcare; happy
mums; jiwa; three-child policy;
two-child policy
- mysticism (romantic love), 86–87, 92
- naming practices, 19–21, 23–24, 35–36,
182nn3 and 4
- neoliberalism (discussion of), 6–7, 129–30.
See also mood economy
- Ngai, Pun, 13
- nine-year compulsory education policy,
5–6, 27
- niuwa*, 128
- Nothing but Thirty* (Zhang), 46
- obedience, 22–23, 67
- One Child* (Mei Fong), 179n2
- one-child certificate, 1
- one-child policy, 1–3, 5–8, 11–12, 15, 17–18,
23, 29, 38, 40, 66, 68–70, 79, 84, 105–7,
111, 113, 116–17, 124–26, 129, 148–49, 151,
153, 163, 173, 175, 177, 179n2, 180n18, 182n6,
184n31, 185n2, 193nn7, 8, and 10, 194n12,
196n66, 200n6
- only hope, 2, 179n4
- Only Hope* (Vanessa L. Fong), 182n6
- Outline for Women's Development* (2021),
108–9
- parental investment, 38–39, 72, 75, 162
- parenting styles, 57–61
- Pei, Yuxin, 13
- Peng, Minggang, 115
- pensions, 114–15
- Pepper, Suzanne, 59
- population data, 3–4, 14–15, 105, 107–12,
185n4, 188n50, 192nn1 and 3, 194n17.
See also contraception; women's bodies
(male control of)
- propaganda, 2, 7, 106, 108, 193n8
- property ownership, 34–36, 98–102, 156
- Qian, Yue, 50–51, 90
- Qian, Zhenchao, 51, 90
- qingwa*, 128
- realism (romantic love), 86–89, 92
- relational dignity, 43–44. *See also* transac-
tional dignity
- relational positionality, 153–54
- repaying favours, 127, 132, 140
- Rich, Lynne, 29, 184n31
- risk aversion, 21
- Roe v. Wade*, 105
- romantic love, 46, 81–92, 103–4, 190n11.
See also assortative mating; extramarital
affairs; marital rape; marriage (discussion
of); mysticism (romantic love); realism
(romantic love); stereotyping
- A Room of One's Own* (Woolf), 139, 198n23
- Roos, Hannelore, 30
- Sandberg, Sheryl, 122
- Sandel, Michael, 26, 183n17
- sanshierli*, 92
- Satterthwaite-Phillips, Damian, 45, 187n28
- Schuster, Isabell, 84
- Second Marriage Law (1980), 90
- The Second Sex* (de Beauvoir), 82, 198n23
- sexism, 1. *See also* misogyny
- Shen, Yang, 107
- singlehood, 47–51. *See also* voluntary
singlehood
- singleton self, 7–8
- skill cultivation, 131, 133–34, 138
- Small, Mario, 142
- social justice, 26
- Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*
(Moore Jr.), 182n7
- sole heiresses. *See* wealth accumulation
- Song, Lina, 182n14
- squatting on the point, 41–42. *See also* dundian
- stalled revolution, 76, 78
- state-owned enterprise (SOE), 1, 6, 24,
38–39, 41–44, 60, 63, 66, 79
- stereotyping, 88–90, 103, 119
- stop dreaming, 75–76

- Strand, Michael, 182n13
- study-abroad programmes, 38–39
- “Study Gods” (Chiang), 183n27
- suji*, 128
- Sweet, Paige, 51–52, 93
- Swidler, Ann, 24, 86, 92–93, 163, 182nn9 and 13
- talent-virtue binary (discussion of), 9–12,
17, 66–72, 80, 122, 144–49, 152, 161.
See also gender (discussion of)
- teaching (as a profession), 21–22
- theory of culture in action, 24
- three-child policy, 4, 6–7, 105, 116, 124,
192n3. *See also* two-child policy
- “Three Obediences and Four Virtues”, 10,
67, 181n38
- Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*
(MacKinnon), 193n4
- traditionalism, 159–61, 165. *See also*
feminism
- transactional dignity, 44, 63. *See also*
relational dignity
- Tsui, Ming, 29, 184n31
- Turner, John, 115
- “turning her kitchen into her kingdom”, 46–47
- Two Basics policy, 27. *See also* nine-year
compulsory education policy
- two-child policy, 4, 6–7, 17, 105, 108, 116–26,
195n42. *See also* three-child policy
- The Tyranny of Merit* (Sandel), 183n17
- underestimation, 21
- “Up to the Mountains and Down to the
Villages”, 116, 196n65
- virtue-talent binary. *See* talent-virtue binary
(discussion of)
- voluntary singlehood, 42–44. *See also*
singlehood
- Wan, Yifeng, 185n42
- Wang, Shun, 100
- Wang, Xiangxian, 84
- Wang, Xiyi, 13–14
- wealth accumulation, 16–17, 31–36, 100,
118–19, 154–56. *See also* cash gifts; dowry;
property ownership
- wedding ceremonies, 31, 33–36, 97–98,
104, 185n42. *See also* marriage
(discussion of)
- wenjing*, 21
- West, Candace, 82
- Wilson, Suzanne, 58
- women’s bodies (male control of),
105–11, 116–17, 124, 152–53, 156. *See also*
abortion; contraception; population
data; three-child policy; two-child
policy
- women’s space, 139–40
- Woodham, Carol, 66
- Woolf, Virginia, 139
- Worsley, Aidan, 58
- Wu, Angela Xiao, 108
- xiangqin*, 90
- Xie, Kailing, 107
- Xue, Jia, 84
- Yan, Yunxiang, 90
- Yu, Jia, 85, 99–100
- Zang, Emma, 99
- Zhang, Hong, 107, 194n12
- Zhong, Xiaohui, 115
- Zhou, Weina, 100
- Zhou, Xiangyi, 66
- Zhou, Xueguang, 59–60
- Zhou, Yun, 44–45
- Zimmerman, Don H., 82