MOTHERHOOD IN CHINA: A STUDY FROM LATE IMPERIAL CHINA
TO THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Steven and Gretchen Schrell, and to my loving husband Gary Young, who have unconditionally supported me through all of my many scholastic and personal aspirations. Thank You!
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Motherhood in China: A Study from Late Imperial China to the People’s Republic of China
by
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Master of Arts in History
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This thesis examines the roles and expectations of Chinese mothers from the late imperial period (primarily from 1800) to the current People’s Republic of China, with a concluding emphasis on the One-Child Policy. It is an ethnographic study of change over time and seeks a better understanding of women as mothers and how their lives either changed or stayed the same over multiple periods of political and social upheaval: Late Imperial (1800-1911), Republican and Early Mao Years (1911-1956), Middle to Late Mao Years (1957-1976), and Post-Mao Years (1980’s to 2011). I have sought to recognize changes and continuities in the roles and expectations of mothers over these four periods of time, and thus filling several historical gaps in the existing scholarship. In filling these, this thesis aims to prove that between 1800 and 2011, China’s revolutionary quest for stabilization and modernization profoundly and continuously altered and redefined the roles and expectations of Chinese motherhood through Confucian ideology, revolutionary fervor, political persuasion, and nationalistic duty. More specifically, I have recognized three significant changes and continuities in the roles and expectations of Chinese motherhood over these periods: A move from the domestic to the non-domestic sphere, son preference, and child abandonment. In addition to, or within, the change in motherhood roles from domestic to public, the complexities brought forth by the preference for sons, and child abandonment, I also discuss changes and continuities in terms of Chinese mothers work, education, Confucian values, and relationships (with sons, daughters, and in-laws). From these changes and continuities, it becomes clear how the roles and expectations of motherhood in China have been directly affected by China’s shifting social and political climate. Furthermore, because the existing scholarship on women in China has been interdisciplinary, these discussions of motherhood have also been selected from a variety of academic fields. The sources I have used in this thesis include secondary source scholarship from various fields of scholarship (women’s studies, history, anthropology, demography), missionary sources (used with caution), letters, autobiographies, memoirs, poems, translated newspaper excerpts, blogs, medical journals, interviews, and Chinese posters.
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PREFACE

My journey towards the writing of this thesis actually began in 2006. I was an undergraduate student at California State University San Marcos, and in my last semester I was required to diversify my studies away from my usual pick of European history courses. I enrolled in two Chinese history courses: “Women in Chinese History” and “Chinese History Through Film.” With the help and inspiration of a wonderful professor, Dr. Zhiwei Xiao, I acquired a new and gripping interest in all things Chinese. Shortly after graduating, I traveled to China with my husband and some friends for the first time. I relished in every moment, and my interests did not disappoint me.

When I began graduate school at San Diego State University, I was lucky to have found a great community of faculty and students who were also passionate about China’s history as well as its future. It was here that I began to narrow my interests in Chinese history and found where I wanted to carve my niche. I found myself drawn to Chinese women in the post-Mao Reform-era (1976 – 2011), and more specifically, Chinese mothers and the One-Child Policy.

I was not yet born when China’s One-Child Policy was put into effect in 1979. However, as I grew into a teenager and a young woman, I remember the hype about China’s “radical” and “inhumane” population control policy. I remember discussions in class and with friends about whether or not this policy was “right.” I remember people talking about female infanticide and the Chinese preference for sons. I recall that when people adopted from China, they were often looked at like they were heroes for rescuing these baby girls from peril. Looking back, most of us had no idea what we were talking about, and the prevalence of “Orientalist” thought was striking. Thinking about my own naivety as a child, and of those around me, persuaded me to learn more. It made me question my own biases as well as everyone else’s. In the 1980s and 90s, did the Chinese think that the One-Child Policy was as inhumane as so many people in the West thought? How have the Chinese adapted to the policy after more than thirty years?

In 2008, a 7.9 magnitude earthquake hit Sichuan China killing thousands of people and leaving thousands more missing. Sadly, many of these thousands were children. In the
wake of devastation for thousands of families, this disaster rejuvenated the hype over China’s One-Child Policy and its implications on families who had lost their only-child. This, of course, became a perfect opportunity for humanitarian activists and journalists alike to sensationalize the tragedy in attempt to raise concern over China’s relief response. I was intrigued, to say the least. Having lost their only-child, I wanted to know how these mothers really felt about the One-Child Policy, and whether or not they were satisfied with their government’s response? It was after this great misfortune that I brought my specific interests to the attention of my professor and future thesis advisor, Dr. Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley. Although I was originally intrigued by the One-Child Policy’s affects on Chinese motherhood, I knew that I would not have enough English-language source material to work with in order to write a comprehensive masters thesis. Thus, I needed to expand my focus.

The first step towards the expansion of my research focus was to find out what else had been written about motherhood in Chinese history. While conducting my secondary source research, I found several gaps in the existing scholarship. These gaps, to be discussed in more detail in the introduction, can simply be identified by a general lack of specific scholarship on Chinese mothers in history. This is not to say that there is no scholarship available—several authors and scholars, such as Margery Wolf, Hsiung Ping-Chen, and Elisabeth Croll, have made sizable contributions, but most of the scholarship specific to Chinese motherhood must be read between the lines. This larger gap has certainly left room for many questions to be answered and details to be uncovered.

The second step towards expansion was to formulate my own questions about Chinese motherhood that both included and went beyond the scope of the One-Child Policy. While researching the One-Child Policy and Chinese mothers in the Reform era, I found that the different generations of mothers most often had very different motherhood experiences and viewpoints. I was struck with the complexities of these differences, and I wondered what specifically accounted for these differences. With the help of my advisor, I decided that in order to fully understand Chinese mothers in the Reform-era, I needed to better understand the mothers of previous generations as well. Thus, I expanded my scope of research to include Late Imperial China (1368-1911) (although most of my primary sources do not date back further than 1800, or late Qing China), Republican China (1911-1949), and Mao’s China (1949-1976) in addition to the Reform-era (1976-present). This span of about two
hundred years covers the uncertain and tumultuous years of China’s revolutionary history, and thus offers fascinating comparisons between time periods and generations of Chinese mothers.

By expanding my research scope and looking at my topic through comparative analysis, I was able to find reoccurring themes, and immerging patterns more easily. These reoccurring themes and patterns all significantly added to my ultimate understanding of Chinese mothers in the Reform era as well as how motherhood in China changed over time and why.

Although this journey has been enlightening and even fun at times, it has not gone without its speed bumps. The first challenge that I encountered was a lack of primary sources written in English—especially for the late imperial period. I do not speak, read, or write Chinese, and thus this was an immediate hurdle. I grappled with the difficulties of using missionary sources, as their abundance was most easily accessible to me and many of them have been written in English. Unfortunately, their credibility and natural biases created complications. This issue was especially challenging when writing Chapter one, “Confucianism and the Life Cycles of Motherhood in Late Imperial China,” where English-language sources were most scarce. By avoiding the use of missionary sources, I was afraid that my research for Chapter one would become too thin. However, in the end it was more important to be more selective and only include a few missionary sources for their particular viewpoint. To my delight though, this issue became less challenging with each succeeding chapter. Clearly, learning Chinese would be advantageous for further research.

The second challenge that I encountered was the discontinuity of my sources. I scoured through libraries, gazetteers, and online databases, but in the end, I had to use what was available to me. This presented itself as a challenge because each chapter relies on primary sources from China’s vast array of geographic regions, economic strata, and religious and political backgrounds. Thus, each chapter examines Chinese motherhood from different perspectives based on the sources available—whether rural, urban, peasant, elite, etc. For example, Chapter three, “Long Live Chairman Mao, Where is my Mother?,” begins by examining the Great Leap Forward mainly through the voices of rural peasants. The chapter then concludes by examining the Cultural Revolution mainly through the voices of the urban elite. This discontinuity can be viewed as problematic from a comparative
standpoint; and due to this predicament, I feel it is important to note that the examples of motherhood provided in each chapter do not represent China’s entire population, nor does this thesis claim to understand ALL facets of Chinese motherhood. Instead, each source provides a valuable glimpse of motherhood from a particular point of view. Importantly, each source also gives agency to a specific group of women in Chinese history and has allowed me to recognize important patterns and reoccurring themes between groups. Although this issue can be seen as an inconsistency, it has also provided a unique perspective through which we can examine the complexities and the many facets of motherhood in Chinese revolutionary history.
INTRODUCTION

In the past, an uneducated mother could raise a troop of children with almost no effort…This was because in traditional society, raising children was primarily a matter of feeding and clothing them. But in today’s society, that kind of mother would probably not be considered a good mother because she has not assumed the responsibility of educating her children.

--Chinese Mother in the 1980s

*Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980’s*

Over the past forty years, a surge in women’s studies has led many scholars to delve into the rich complexities of women in Chinese history. Since the field of Chinese gender studies is still comparatively new, its broad range of complexities has yet to be thoroughly explored. Women in Chinese history have been studied in terms of religious practice, education, work, liberation, and familial relations; however, while ethnographic studies of women in China have been popular since the birth of the field in the 1960s, there are several areas that have not yet been explored. This thesis focuses on one of these areas. It examines the roles and expectations of Chinese mothers from the late imperial period (primarily from 1800) to the current People’s Republic of China, with a concluding emphasis on the One-Child Policy. It is an ethnographic study of change over time and seeks a better understanding of women as mothers and how their lives either changed or stayed the same over multiple periods of political and social upheaval.

In this introduction, I first briefly map out the historiography of English-language gender studies in Chinese history in order to gain a baseline for the field. Next, since the existing scholarship on motherhood is still thin and has not yet evolved to a point where a traditional historiography is possible, I include a brief chapter outline instead. In the chapter outline I introduce the contributions of the scholars who have addressed this topic specifically, identify the gaps within the existing scholarship, and discuss how this thesis aims to fill those gaps. In filling these gaps and answering these questions, this thesis aims to prove that between 1800 and 2011, China’s revolutionary quest for stabilization and modernization profoundly and continuously altered and redefined the roles and expectations of Chinese motherhood through Confucian ideology, tradition, revolutionary fervor, political persuasion, and nationalistic duty.
HISTORIOGRAPHY OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE GENDER STUDIES IN CHINESE HISTORY

In the first phase of gender studies scholarship in China, beginning in the 19th and early 20th century, missionary writers from Europe and the United States began to publish books about Chinese family life. These writers mainly focused on China in comparison to the “West,” and specifically in comparison to Western Christian ideals. When discussing women specifically, they focused on the aspects of Chinese woman’s lives that directly stood apart from those of Western women: concubinage, widespread female infanticide, the selling of girls, foot binding, and large multi-generational families. These same issues were not focused on in official scholarly works until the 1960s and 70s with the growth of women’s movements in the United States and England.

The Chinese gender studies writers of the 1960s and 70s, the second phase, were a diverse group of anthropologists, social scientists, and historians. They were the first sinologists to conduct formal academic research on Chinese women and the family, and later expanded their work to include comparative frameworks, male views of women, biological perspectives on gender roles, the isolation of women in the patrilineal framework, and a woman’s dependence on birthing a son. Two important pioneers of this phase in Chinese gender studies are Margery Wolf and Elisabeth Croll, whose contributions are later to be discussed in this chapter.

Both the third phase of Chinese gender studies scholarship (1980s), and the fourth phase (1990s and early 21st century), brought about a re-evaluation of the field due to the

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opening of China to Western researchers and a new influx of previously inaccessible information.\(^3\) Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the field, writers looked at ethnographic representations of women through different scholarly lenses. These scholars looked at the “liberation” of Chinese women during the 1911 Revolution and the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949. They began to link Chinese gender studies to ideas of Chinese nationalism, and ethnic minorities in China. Finally, scholars also began to give more agency to women and began to examine the One-Child Policy through various scholarly fields such as demography, social science, anthropology, and history.

In terms of scholarship on Chinese mothers, scholars Margery Wolf, Elisabeth Croll, Hsiung Ping-Chen, Delia Davin, Susan Glosser, Harriet Evans, Emily Honig, Gail Hershatter, and Vanessa Fong are some of the major scholars who have laid the groundwork for further study. Due to the shortage of specific studies on motherhood in Chinese history, most explicit mentions of motherhood must be sought after in broader discussions of women and the family, marriage, widowhood, and childhood. Accordingly, these mentions of motherhood have mostly been defined within the confines of the mother-son relationship, mother-daughter relationship, mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship, and parenting in general. Although I still explore those relationship dichotomies in this thesis, I do so by comparing how they changed over time. Furthermore, because the existing scholarship on women in China has been interdisciplinary, these discussions of motherhood have also been selected from a variety of academic fields.

THESIS STATEMENT

In researching Chinese motherhood from 1800 to 2011, I have sought to recognize changes and continuities in the roles and expectations of mothers over four periods of time. Perhaps the most major change in motherhood roles over these four periods has been a move from the domestic to the non-domestic sphere. In Chapter One, I discuss the importance of motherhood roles within the domestic sphere as wives, mothers, educators, and caretakers. When a woman gave birth to a baby girl, her job as a mother was to prepare her daughter for life within the domestic sphere—where a woman most often belonged at this time. In Chapter Two, I discuss the fluctuating roles of Chinese mothers as China was in a transitional state. While some mother’s roles remained within the domestic sphere, other women began working outside the home, receiving outside educations, and even traveling abroad. These fluctuations depended on many factors from personal finances, to location (rural vs. urban), to political standpoint, but due to the transitional nature of the Republican period, there were no comprehensive of universal expectations for motherhood. In Chapter Three, I discuss how Chairman Mao redirected women’s / mother’s roles away from the domestic sphere and into the public sphere as workers for the State. In this period, a mother’s role was supposed to be focused on her work—as a farmer, factory worker, commune attendant, Party worker, etc. A woman’s role varied widely depending on her geographic location, Party affiliation, and social class, but nonetheless, a mother’s focus was not centered on the domestic sphere during this time. Finally, in Chapter Four I discuss how Chinese mothers have tried to balance their roles as mothers both inside and outside the domestic sphere as wives, educators, and workers for the State. The One Child Policy has altered how mothers see themselves and what they want to contribute to their homes, families, and society. The roles and expectations of mothers have indeed dramatically changed and fluctuated as the social and political environment changed over these four periods of time.

Another area showing both change and continuity that I have recognized through my research is a mother’s (parent’s) preference for sons. In Chapter One, I discuss the history behind the son preference and why it was so important to both the mother and extended family to produce healthy sons. In the Imperial period, the son preference was very prevalent. In Chapter Two, the son preference gets called into question along with everything else in Chinese society, however it does not necessarily show a major change in prevalence. In
Chapter Three, I discuss how Mao Zedong attempted to lift women to an equal status with men. He wanted to create a Communist population unmatched in size by any other country, and this meant that girls were important too. Yet, even with Mao’s fervor, a rural family with a farm to tend was most likely better off with male children. Not all Chinese felt compelled to stray from the son preference. In Chapter Four, I discuss how the Chinese government has continued to try to escape the son preference by promoting girls as the future of the nation. Although the government’s message is still taken differently, depending mainly on a family’s geographic location (rural vs. urban) and economic standing, the message that having girls is good and is promoted all over the country through propaganda such as posters and billboards. Overall the Chinese preference for sons seen through these four periods of time demonstrates both important changes and continuities. Culminating in Chapter Four, I discuss how the generational gap has not yet become wide enough to abolish the pressures from mostly elder generations to have a boy. Due to this continuity for son preference, China has reached a concerning point in its population due to a huge gender gap amongst its youth. Also, the areas of China where son preference is still most prevalent are mostly rural; again, this is a continuity whereby most rural families believe that a son is better for their livelihood or survival. However, I also give evidence in Chapter Four of significant change on this issue both in terms of government expectations as well as mother’s expectations. In addition to the government’s pro-girl propaganda, some mothers have claimed that they think having a girl is better because they will be closer to a mother’s heart than a boy. This is a major change in attitude from years past.

The third major change/continuity I have recognized is child abandonment. In Chapter One, I discuss sex selective abandonment or infanticide based on both economic and ecological hardships certain families faced. The reasoning behind the sex selection is discussed in correlation with family hierarchy and filial piety. In Chapter Two, I discuss child abandonment in terms of women in the workplace. When women went to work in the factories, in particular, many mothers were forced to leave their children for most of the day with family members. In cases where there was no one to look after these children, many mothers had to give up their children altogether. In Chapter Three, I discuss child abandonment in two ways. The first is through Chairman Mao’s Great Leap Forward campaign where millions of Chinese people (mostly people in rural areas) died of starvation.
During this time, mothers once again were forced to either abandon their children due to work, or due to severe economic hardship. Secondly, I discuss this issue in terms of Mao’s Cultural Revolution campaign. During this time, child abandonment occurred due to different factors. One, most urban parents worked full time jobs and could not be home very often to see their children; many children remember their nannies as more prominent mother figures than their biological mothers. Two, many parents (mostly urban) were sent away to re-education camps in the countryside for many years, leaving their children behind sometimes to fend for themselves. Three, many young teenagers became Red Guards and traveled all over the country, leaving their family behind (this was very different because it was the children abandoning the parents, not the other way around). In Chapter Four, I discuss child abandonment again in terms of sex selection, however, this time in relation to China’s One Child Policy. Although it is now illegal to perform sex selective abortions in China, and the government has tried to praise the virtues of female children, the preference for a son has still led to the infanticide or abandonment of many baby girls over the last thirty years. Although the recognition of this continuity is a somber one, the mothers who have made these decisions have not done so without reason, and it is a viable continuity nonetheless.

In addition to, or within, the change in motherhood roles from domestic to public, the complexities brought forth by the preference for sons, and child abandonment, I also discuss changes and continuities in terms of Chinese mothers work, education, Confucian values, and relationships (with sons, daughters, and in-laws) between 1800 and 2011. From these changes and continuities, it becomes clear how the roles and expectations of motherhood in China have been directly affected by China’s shifting social and political climate.

**CHAPTER ONE**

Chapter One, “Confucianism and the Life Cycles of Motherhood in Late Imperial China,” discusses the roles and expectations of motherhood in the late imperial period of Chinese history (1368-1911), primarily the period from 1800 to 1911. Scholars who have made mention of mothers in the late imperial period of Chinese history have generally limited their studies to a few themes. Most obvious is the focus on mothers in terms of their status within the family (“mother-in-law,” “daughter-in-law,”) or in terms of familial relationships (“mother-son,” “mother-daughter,” Mother-in-law – daughter-in-law”). In the
late imperial period, we see the importance of Confucian values such as filial piety in the formation of a Chinese family. This chapter demonstrates how filial piety influenced a woman’s role as daughter-in-law, mother, or mother-in-law and strongly contributed to a mother’s life cycle. A mother’s status socially, and within her family, depended on her position within the family—how old she was, whether or not she had birthed any sons, and whether or not her mother-in-law was still alive. Her relationships were subject to friction and insecurity. Defined by the morals of Chinese society, the role of a Chinese mother was one of duty—duty to her ancestors, her family, and to her community.

The mother-son bond was quite special—a powerful and symbiotic relationship that lasted a lifetime and beyond. The mother-daughter bond was often different. When circumstances allowed a baby girl to remain living with her parents into adulthood, mothers had the chance to bond with their daughters by preparing them to be filial daughter-in-laws. This most often included the ritualistic binding of a daughter’s feet, which could allow a special bond to form between mother and daughter. Unfortunately, not all circumstances allowed Chinese mothers to choose their daughter’s destiny, but this did not mean that they did not wish the best for all their children. Chapter One emphasizes the importance of life stages and how each stage impacted the lives of mothers. I argue that the roles of motherhood were not only strongly influenced by Confucian morals but by ecological and economic factors as well. I explore late imperial Chinese motherhood largely through the writings of Margery Wolf, Elisabeth Croll, Hsiung Ping-chen, Weijing Lu, Francesca Brey, Grace Fong, Charlotte Furth, and Dorothy Ko. From these scholars’ work, I was also able to access primary sources in translation. In particular, I use letters, autobiographies, memoirs, poems, and newspaper excerpts in translation. I also explored a few missionary sources in this chapter, although I used them cautiously and sparingly due to their inherent biases. As missionaries most often viewed China as a heathen society in desperate need of salvation, they tended to emphasize the negative aspects of Chinese society in order to justify their presence in China. Furthermore, because many missionaries worked primarily with the poorest classes of Chinese society, their observations of infanticide and abandonment are not representative of Chinese society as a whole.
CHAPTER TWO

Chapter Two, “The Republican Period: Chinese Mothers in Transition,” discusses the roles and expectations of motherhood during the Republican period of Chinese history (1911-1949), and to a lesser extent the early Mao years (1949-1956). The roles and expectations of mothers were less clearly defined and more contested in the Republican period than had been the case in late imperial China. Politically, the Republican period was fraught with disunity, war, power-struggles, and various new ideas on how to rebuild China after the fall of dynastic rule. This uncertainty meant that you could find Chinese people, including women and mothers, with a multitude of different values and expectations. Through the women’s stories I present in this chapter, we are able to see just how different the roles and expectations for mothers could be during this period. In Chapter Two, I assert that it was common for Chinese mothers in the Republican and early Mao years to feel caught between China’s past and future—that their roles as mothers were continually tested as China’s political and familial values shifted back and forth. While some women still felt that their primary role as wives and mothers were centered around the domestic sphere, other women chose, or were forced by economic circumstance, to venture outside the domestic sphere, thus expanding their roles.

Detailed memoirs and autobiographies written by Chinese women who grew up during the Republican era significantly aided in the writing of this chapter and led the direction of its argument. Moreover, I have drawn extensively on scholarship by Elisabeth Croll, Delia Davin, and Susan Glosser in order to get an even closer look at the complex experiences of Republican era mothers. I do not contest these three scholar’s work. Instead I seek to add to their work by filling in key gaps as well as by looking at change over time in terms of the roles of Chinese mothers. Where Croll, Davin, and Glosser look at Chinese women in general primarily in the Republican and early Mao periods, I seek to look at Chinese mothers in particular, and to compare their experiences over four time periods. Chapter Two emphasizes conflicting opinions about parenting and the various roles that Chinese mothers took on as agents of Chinese familial tradition, as soldiers, as students, as single parents, as political advocates, as agents for social change, as rebels, and above all as caring parents. It emphasizes a generation in transition and what that meant for mothers.
Discussion of all of these motherhood roles in comparison to one-another sets my research apart from other scholars.

**CHAPTER THREE**

Chapter Three, “Long Live Chairman Mao, Where is my Mother?” discusses the roles and expectations of motherhood during the radical years of Mao Zedong’s revolutionary movements (1957 – 1976). During the radical period under Mao Zedong we see how the roles and expectations of motherhood were almost completely altered through conformism, fear, desperation and forced abandonment. The effects of The Great Leap Forward (GLF) (1957-1962), a plan put into action by Mao Zedong to drive China into the future through rapid industrialization and collectivization, varied according to whether a family lived in rural or urban China. Particularly in rural communes, many women were forced to work in unfavorable conditions through their entire pregnancy. Many mothers were forced to leave their children in the care of inadequate nurseries, or worse, were left with no other choice than to bring their children to work. In this chapter we see how some families were able to survive the GLF due to their political and economic standing. Tragically, we also see how millions of families in rural China starved to death. The experience of mothers thus changed and varied dramatically.

After the failure of the Great Leap Forward, many Chinese people still had faith in their leader and in their nation. There was a revival of spirit in the years leading up to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), but unfortunately those sentiments did not last. The Cultural Revolution had a greater impact on urban Chinese, in particular, Chinese Communist Party members and intellectuals. Many mothers in the Chinese Communist Party showed fervor for working outside the home. Nannies, or “Aunties” were in higher demand, and many children remember their “Aunties” as closer mother figures than their actual mothers. For mothers who were also members of the Chinese Communist Party, being a good mother often meant doing whatever was best for the party. When Mao wanted children to go to school, to denounce their parents, or to move to the countryside, it was the expectation that Chinese mothers would support these wishes. We also see the humiliation that many mothers felt as they were denounced in front of their children and the whole neighborhood. In this chapter, I discuss how many mothers (as well as fathers) were sent away for extended periods
of time, leaving them full of shame and regret. Often, when children went to visit their mothers in the detention camps, they would report the sullen, depressed, and shameful manner of their parent. In these situations, the roles of parent and child were often reversed, leaving the child to care for the parent (unless a parent’s child had already been sent away to be reeducated, then it was every person for herself). The roles and expectations of motherhood during the Mao period were overwhelmingly defined by the politics of Mao’s radical campaigns. Chairman Mao was the ultimate parent. It was a time of excitement for many people as well as a time of confusion and fear. This chapter extensively draws on memoirs written by Chinese mothers and children who experienced these radical years as well as secondary source scholarship by Phyllis Andors, Frank Dikotter, and Jasper Becker.

CHAPTER FOUR

Chapter Four, “Chinese Mothers: Agents of National Responsibility,” discusses the roles and expectations of motherhood in China’s Reform era (1980s to the present) and focuses specifically on how the One-Child Policy has affected motherhood roles in China. In this chapter, I discuss how the decades following Chairman Mao’s death in 1976 ushered in new hope for the Chinese people. Stability was gradually reintroduced through new policies and leadership. Since the 1980s, the largest factor affecting the roles and expectations of motherhood has been China’s firm stance on family planning and its infamous One-Child Policy. While there is a good deal of scholarship on China’s One-Child Policy already, most of it has focused on political issues, humanitarian issues, social issues, demographic issues and only-children themselves. However, to every child belongs a mother, thus the policy has had important implications for mothers in Reform-era China.

In the decades since Mao’s death, Chinese motherhood once again evolved and adapted to the changing times and expectations of a modernizing country. Urban mothers continued to work more, attaining higher degrees of education, and striving for their one child to be the very best. I find that many mothers have become worriers, competitors, and over-achievers. Once they no longer had to worry about their basic needs such as the availability of food and shelter, Chinese mothers began to once again focus on their own lives and the lives of their children. Once again being present in their child’s life, mothers have continued to put their children first. Their personal achievements (work, school, and
hobbies) usually contribute to the greater well-being of their one child; and by striving for their child’s excellence, these mothers also see themselves as contributing to the well-being of China’s future. In Chapter Four, we finally see the culminating effects that approximately two centuries of revolution and dramatic change had on China’s mothers.

This chapter draws on statements from Chinese mother bloggers, medical and scientific journals, interviews from secondary sources, and Chinese posters as well as the research of Susan Greenhalgh, Thomas Scharping, Vanessa Fong, Harriet Evans, and Elisabeth Croll. Key areas of focus include mother-daughter relationships, the re-emergence of Confucian ideals, mothers as anxious worriers, mothers as modern and scientific agents, the re-occurring mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship, and the One-Child Policy.
CHAPTER ONE

CONFUCIANISM AND THE LIFE CYCLES OF MOTHERHOOD IN LATE IMPERIAL CHINA

What is a lady of perfect happiness? Well, both her parents are living, she has a husband and children. Isn’t that perfect happiness?

--Buwei Yang Chao

*Autobiography of a Chinese Woman*

The late imperial period of Chinese history (1368-1911) was one of general stability and prosperity, yet by the 1800s, China was embroiled in upheaval and revolution. Where rule by the Mandate of Heaven was once the accepted norm, and western influence was a rejected concept, the late imperial period ended with a clash of traditional Chinese Confucian ideas, and Post-Industrial Revolution Western (a.k.a modern) ideas. Although on the verge of considerable change, traditional Confucian familial and societal roles were still very important to most Chinese families. The Confucian concept of filial piety was crucially important. Looking at Chinese familial values in the late imperial period, this chapter will specifically explore the roles of motherhood in a society driven by tradition yet on the verge of considerable change. This chapter will argue that the roles and expectations of a Chinese mother in late imperial China were highly dependent on where she was in her life cycle, her age, family rank, her ability to produce a healthy son, as well as on the ecological and economic factors affecting her life.

The chapter will begin with a look at filial piety and the life cycles of motherhood based on a woman’s age and rank within the household. It will then turn to the mother-son bond and the preference for sons. Lastly, this chapter will delve into the Chinese mothers’ controversial role in sex-selective infanticide as well as the devoted mother-daughter relationship.

It is important to note the use of missionary sources in this chapter, and to discuss the significance of the missionary impact. In 1858, the Treaty of Tianjin granted the right to Western nations to openly practice and teach Christianity in China; they could purchase
property for schools and churches, and they could travel at will. A Hundreds of missionaries came to spread their word. According to historian Keith Schoppa, “each missionary naturally had personal motives; they came from a variety of countries, each with its own approaches to China and attitudes toward the mission effort. Yet missionaries shared one thing: their conviction that they possessed absolute Truth…in viewing the Chinese, the missionaries were convinced of their own superiority and the total Truth of their message.” In short, missionaries carried with them many religious, political, and cultural biases. In recognizing this, I have tried to limit the missionary sources to a minimum and make my selections with caution. Although missionary sources can be biased, I believe the passages that I have selected are helpful in understanding Chinese motherhood.

**FILIAL PIETY AND THE LIFE CYCLE FOR CHINESE MOTHERS**

Until the revolutionary spirit really broke out in the late 19th century, late imperial Chinese people were mostly guided by the ethics and morals of Confucius. Even after revolutionaries began to take cues from western ideologies and religions, the vast majority of China’s population held on to traditional Confucian family values. Very important was the idea of filial piety, which was used to enforce a hierarchy from the ruler of the state down to each individual person. Generally believed to be written in the early Han period, the *Classic of Filial Piety* stated, “filial piety begins with serving our parents, continues with serving the ruler, and is completed by establishing one’s character.” Traditionally, filial piety formed a way of life—a system of honor and respect by which to live and die. Within this system, all members of the family were taught to respect their elders and to honor their ancestors—the same concept thus transferred to the state and the imperial leaders. Hsiung Ping-Chen states:

> The accepted norm held that to give birth and raise a child meant pain and exhausting devotion, thus creating debt for the child to pay back; a son would take care of his parents, and a daughter would take care of her in-laws. By the late imperial period, printed texts and illustrations, paintings, folktales, and theatrical

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5 Ibid.

renditions of exemplary stories of filiality, as well as other didactic materials, continued to be poured into the market to be consumed by ordinary people. In fact, Social Anthropologist Francesca Bray states in her book *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (1997), “Chinese culture [was] not child-centered.” Rather, children (at least in late imperial China) provided solutions to adult problems—namely to carry on the family bloodline and to care for the elderly. This is not to say that children were not desired, but “like women, they were status symbols.” Bray said, “They were pieces in a complex power game in which each adult player had different stakes and each child a different value.”

Filial piety, for women, however, was a transferable concept. From the time they were born, girls knew that their lot in life was to get married, leave their natal families behind, join their husband’s family, and honor his parents. A girl could still honor her natal parents, but most often from a distance, and honoring her in-laws came first. Once in her husband’s family home, a woman had two main duties: serve and be filial to her in-laws and produce sons to carry on the family line. This was the first part of her life cycle as a wife and mother-to-be. In Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom’s book, *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities* (2002), historians Martin Yang and Margery Wolf both emphasize “Patrilineal exogamy served to isolate women once they moved into their husband’s families as virtual outsiders. Their new position was not secure until they had given birth to a son.”

While a daughter’s filiality was transferable, a son’s was permanent. A son would help take care of the family for his entire life, while a girl was only a temporary fixture.

As a young mother living with her mother-in-law, life was most often difficult and demanding. According to Francesca Bray, “The mother-in-law—the mistress of the house

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
and the person in charge of food and domestic finances—was a key figure in reproductive
decisions.” As a mother-in-law, having another woman come into the house could also be
intimidating because it symbolized the next chapter in her life where she would gradually (in
most cases) begin to lose power as her daughter-in-law gained it. Also, inviting a daughter-
in-law into the house also meant sharing her beloved son with another woman. This could
also create friction in the household. Harriet Evans explains that “the woman’s relationship
with her mother-in-law was traditionally one of the most important in her life…The
relationship was structurally as well as emotionally fraught with difficulties.” At times
partly or entirely cut off from her own natal family, and her husband having filial devotion to
his parents first, a young mother had little support on which to rely. A young mother’s
position as daughter-in-law and subservient wife made for unstable relationships—until she
gave birth to a son and secured him as an heir to the family line. Although the daughter-in-
law was needed to produce the heir, if her duties were not fulfilled, she could be replaced.

Regardless of how the mother-in-law felt about her daughter-in-law, the fact
remained that the elder of the two mothers held the highest honor and respect. If a mother-in-
law, father-in-law, or husband felt displeased with the younger mother, she could find herself
put out on the streets, sold, or sent back to her parents. The best chance a young mother had
to gain respect and climb the ladder was to produce a healthy son. Bray states, “A new bride
might be treated as a general servant by her in-laws, but once she had a son things would
improve: she had the recognized responsibility of caring for an infant within her own quarters
and the recognized capacity to carry on the family line.” However, even a son did not allow
a young mother to jump the rankings so quickly. As long as her elderly mother-in-law was
alive, the elder mother always held the highest rank and was given the most honorable
treatment. Elderly mothers were most often the powerbase of the household until they passed
away—thus passing on the powers of motherly dictation to the daughter-in-law. Producing a

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12 Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 338.
13 Harriet Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (Lanham: Rowman &
Littlefield, 2008), 18.
14 Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 339.
healthy son, becoming a mother, and securing herself within her new family encompassed the second part of her life-cycle.

Once a mother had produced a son, or multiple sons, and began to grow into old age, she and her husband would be responsible for finding young wives for their sons. Those wives would then be expected to honor and be filial to their new mother-in-law. Her rank within the family would change, and she would have climbed the ladder to a more powerful position within the family. Once a mother becomes a mother-in-law herself, and especially when she becomes a grandmother (having a grandson of course), this period in her life represents the third part of her life cycle as a mother. Although this system of hierarchy and motherhood life cycles was common, it is perhaps most evident in times of disaster when drastic situations forced people to prioritize their family member’s lives. Documenting just this sort of tragic decision-making in her book, *Tears From Iron*, historian Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley uses local-level famine morality stories recorded in local gazetteers from Shanxi Province, the epicenter of the North China Famine of 1876-1879, in a discussion of famine and gender. She states, “Confucian emphasis on filial piety meant that generation trumped gender during times of disaster, as in normal situations.”¹⁵ In times of natural disaster and famine, filial sons and daughter-in-laws were expected to take painstaking measures to save the elderly parents. Stories and paintings were often circulated in local gazetteers and famine songs to show families how to remain filial even under duress. Unfortunately, sometimes families felt it was their only choice to sell the daughter-in-law or female child to feed another member of the family—one that according to Confucian family values held a higher rank. Some Chinese morality plays introduced filial adult children characters who were willing to sacrifice their own children in order to feed their elderly mother. One filial son said, “If mother dies, we can never have another mother.”¹⁶ If the daughter-in-law starves, the son can find another wife; similarly, if a child starves for the sake of saving the grandmother, another child can be born. Elderly mothers are irreplaceable. Thus, examples of hardship help to further define the different degrees of power held by


¹⁶ Ibid., 167.
mothers at different stages of the life cycle. According to the traditional rhetoric of family values, young mothers were at the bottom of the ladder, while elderly mothers were respected to a point of unyielding sacrifice.

Although it appears that the younger mother - elder mother relationship was most often a demeaning and a painful journey, the stratification held a purpose. Every relationship dynamic was supposed to serve as a perfect example of filial piety. In her book, *Tears From Iron*, Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley cites a local gazetteer excerpt about an elderly mother, Zhang Shi, who insisted upon sacrificing herself to save the younger family members—a story exemplifying the extremes of filial piety.

According to the famine-era gazetteer, an elderly widow, Zhang Shi, had a son who married and gave her a grandson; but when her son suddenly died, she was left with only her daughter-in-law and grandson. Without the support of her son, Zhang Shi took on the responsibility of caregiver, and she worked very hard to provide for her young family. Unfortunately, in 1877, disaster struck, and famine was widespread; there was not enough food to feed all three family members. Zhang Shi told her daughter-in-law, “I’m old and decaying like wood. The only person who can continue the Zhang family line is this little child. You must do your best to protect him.” 17 The elderly mother then awaited her death, but her daughter-in-law considered her own fate as an unfilial daughter. She said, “If I let you die this way, my offense will be boundless—we should all die together.” 18 However, despite her daughter-in-law’s pleadings, the elderly mother remained firm in her decision. “You foolish woman,” she said, “you don’t understand the main point. If I let my grandson die, how can I face my ancestors?...If you don’t listen to my words, you are not filial!” 19 At this, the old woman lay down to die of starvation—fulfilling her filial duty and saving her grandson and daughter-in-law.

In this instance, where Zhang Shi had no surviving son to carry on the family name, she felt it was most important to sacrifice herself for her grandson. Although her rank was highest within the house, she would have faced eternal shame in the eyes of both Confucian

17 Ibid., 175.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
morality, and her ancestors had she not sacrificed herself for the sake of her grandson. The daughter-in-law, who also pleaded to act according to Confucian morality, argued for a group death, also based on her filial duty. Although the elderly mother would have normally outranked the young daughter-in-law, the elderly mother knew that her grandson’s life was most important; and the younger mother was more fit to raise the young boy into adulthood. In other words, having a baby boy may have saved this young mother’s life.

The most important things to take away from this section are these: (1) Filial piety was a major moral guideline which Chinese mothers and all other members of society alike were to follow. Filial piety affected Chinese mothers in the late imperial period through a hierarchy which changed depending on where they were in their life cycles. (2) There were three major periods during a woman’s life cycle as a mother. The first part of her cycle began when she entered her husband’s family home—honoring his family and trying to get pregnant. During this first period, a young wife and/or mother was subject to a lot of pressure and perhaps friction with her new mother-in-law. The second part of her life cycle began when she gave birth to a healthy son who could carry on the family line and perform the ancestral rights. During this period, a young mother could usually expect a slight increase in respect, yet the pressure to properly raise this boy remained high (and this pressure not only came from her husband’s family, but also from herself). The third part of her life cycle began when she found a wife for her son and she became a mother-in-law and grandmother herself. This last stage is when a mother reached the top of her ladder—she could expect to be respected and was now responsible for directing the actions of her own daughter-in-law. The process was cyclical. However, this life cycle only worked for mothers who bore sons. A childless woman or mothers who only bore daughters would not advance so much in power as they aged. The next two sections discuss sex selection as well as the mother-son relationship and the mother-daughter relationship.

**The Mother-Son Relationship and the Preference for Sons**

There were several reasons for the general favoritism of sons over daughters. “Boy preference was clearly expressed at every level. From medical advice on ‘planting sons’ to
popular imagery…””\textsuperscript{20} states Bray, “the gravest offense against filial piety that a man could commit, not only toward his parents but toward his ancestors in general, was to fail to continue the line.”\textsuperscript{21} As previously mentioned, Chinese marriage tradition suggests that boys stay with their natal families, while girls would be married or sold into another family. Boys were not only coveted to carry on the family bloodline and perform the ancestral rights, but they were also a sort of social security for the elderly, and thus the highly prized gender. Due to the fact that sons were so highly coveted, once born, Chinese mothers gave their everything towards the success of their male heirs. As much as each child needed his mother, she needed him as well and thus a powerful bond between mother and son was very common. According to historian Charlotte Furth, medical texts focused on childbirth education for women not only gave advice to women and their families on pregnancy health and birthing, but also on how to be a good mother as well.\textsuperscript{22} Heeded warnings both on what to do and what not to do as a new mother potentially added to the responsibilities of each mother, thus creating an even larger investment into a child’s life and deepening this special bond. Generalizations of this advice range from how to properly breastfeed and clothe your baby to educating your son in the classics, and teaching him how to be filial and obedient.

Many late imperial sources exemplify this intense bond created between a mother and her sons. Hong Liangli, a Chinese scholar, official, and poet, wrote a memoir towards the end of his life in which he reflects on his relationship with his mother and her natal family. Grace Fong’s article, “Inscribing a Sense of Self in Mother’s Family: Hong Liangji’s (1746-1809) Memoir and Poetry of Remembrance,” discusses Hong Liangji’s memoir. Most remarkable in Hong’s case is his unyielding dedication to his maternal side of the family. His father passed away when he was only five years old, and due to poverty Hong’s mother moved her family (of five children) to her natal family home. Although he often cites himself as an orphan in his poetry, Hong never mentions anything else regarding his paternal family. Instead, Hong chose to write about the most influential members of his life: his maternal

\textsuperscript{20} Bray, \textit{Technology and Gender}, 287.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 283.
grandmother, his mother, his aunts, and his cousins. He often wrote about his grandmother in passages like the following:

My maternal grandmother, Madam Gong, showed me great favor. Every evening after I returned from school, she supervised my studies herself by lamplight, stopping only at midnight. She encouraged me to revive the ancestors’ brilliance and not fall into faint-heartedness. Her eyes would fill with tears as she spoke. When she became very ill, I stayed up ten nights without sleeping to take care of her medicine. I cried until my voice was hoarse when she passed away.\(^{23}\)

He often wrote about his love and respect for his grandmother through his poetry, commending her for her compassion and her filial commitment. He held her in high esteem, and praised her for instilling in him a strong self confidence, and a strong regard for filial responsibility. He said, “when I think about it, those who knew me best in my childhood were all from my mother’s family.”\(^{24}\)

In regards to his mother, Hong dedicated many of his poems to her remembrance. According to his poetry, she did everything in her power to send her son to school and to help him receive a proper Confucian education. He wrote the following poem in an effort to record his mother’s hard work for his education:

‘When I see you off to school
I still see the stars through the latticed window.’
Mother’s hard work—weaving for three years,
Just for the son to receive one year’s lessons in the classics.
A tiny shadow enters, hanging on the door curtains,
His sonorous voice can be heard in the next courtyard.
His tattered robe has been mended several times,
Don’t be astonished that it’s not solid blue.\(^{25}\)

Later in life, when he had reached the highest examination degree, and gained an official position, he twice requested the conferment of his titles to his mother.\(^{26}\)

In the above passage, Hong is clearly drawing parallels between his own mother and Confucian China’s most famous mother—Mother Meng. Mother Meng is the mother of famous Confucian philosopher, Mencius, who lived in the 300s B.C.E. While there are many


\(^{24}\) Ibid., 46.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 51.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 46.
stories about Mencius’ mother, she is most well known for being the quintessential Chinese mother. Like Hong’s father, Mencius’ father died when he was young, leaving his mother a widow and the sole provider for their child. Mencius’ mother lived in a house near a cemetery when her son was born; but when she saw Mencius playing amongst the tombs, she decided that this was no proper place to bring up her son and she decided they would move. Their next house was next to a marketplace; but when Mother Meng saw her son playing with the merchants, she again decided that this was no place to bring up her son. Thus, they moved again. This time they moved to a house next to a school. When this mother saw her son interested in scholarship and respectfully interacting with teachers and students, she knew she had found the proper place to raise her son. As Mencius grew up to be a scholar and a sage, it was not without the guidance of his mother. When he got married, and his wife came to live with him and her new mother-n-law, Mother Meng often gave her son advice on how to be a proper husband. She even defended her daughter-in-law when she felt her son was in the wrong. Mencius’s mother has been praised for being both the model mother and the model mother-in-law, and her words of wisdom have been passed down through hundreds of generations in both story-telling and the Confucian Classics. Both Mencius’s and Hong’s stories clearly exemplify the strong mother-son bond that was fostered in early and late imperial China.

Hsiung Ping-Chen, author of “Sons and Mothers: Demographic Realities and the Chinese Culture of Hsiao,” explained the mother-son relationship through a series of short relationship biographies of mothers and sons who lived between 1600 and 1911. She contests that the vast majority of mother-son relationships were cut short due to early female mortality rates in late imperial China; however, whether a mother lived to be thirty or ninety years old, the mother-son bond was bound by filial duty and was emotionally very strong. She describes the Chinese mothers in the biographies surveyed as attached and often expectant of unconditional care, and the sons as devoted to their mothers—both alive and deceased (as in Hong Liangji’s story). This relationship dichotomy was most often firmly rooted in the custom of filial piety and was tied to deep feelings of duty and even guilt. Hsiung gives the following example of Wei Hsiang-shu and his mother. “Wei Hsiang-shu’s (1617-87) mother

27 Ebrey, Chinese Civilization, 72.
was so attached to her boy that she delayed in sending him out to tutors. As she aged, he asked for early retirement in order to be by her side, administering medicines when she was ill and personally directing the construction of dainty pavilions for her amusement. Later he wrote that he had vowed never to venture more than 100 li (about thirty miles) from her when she was old as his filial tribute.”

Wei’s case was similar to many other relationships researched by Hsiung where attachment between mother and son was mutual.

Hsiung also emphasizes “extended families with adult sons and surviving parents, at some point, had to make the transition from ‘parent-in-command’ to ‘son-in-command.’” Thus, in contrast to some of the famine-morality plays discussed above, “obligations to support the parents by no means implied that elders continued to hold authority in the house.” Hsiung states, “there is little doubt as to who was really in charge: It was the elderly parent who became a dependent.” However, her narrative contradicts her contentions when she describes filial sons as subservient to their mothers and often leaving opportunities behind for the sake of their mothers. Huang P’eng-nien (1823-1890) and his mother had a very strong attachment to one-another. Hsiung states, “After marriage at eighteen and establishing himself beginning in his twenties as a scholar-lecturer and advisor, he declined invitations to travel or to serve in high offices because, he said, he did not want to leave his family behind, his mother in particular.” Although a son undoubtedly would have come to a point where he had more physical presence in the house (working and supporting the family), mentally, the elderly mother would have most likely controlled, to some degree, the actions of the filial son.

Hsiung Ping-Chen has also given accounts of elderly mothers who continued to take care of the family and household instead of being waited on all the time by their daughter-in-law(s). An elderly mother who asserted herself within the house was also quite possibly

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29 Ibid., 22-23.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 31.
33 Ibid., 24.
showing another way to assert her position within the family—to let her sons and daughter-in-laws (her children) know that she was still a viable presence within the family. This can be seen more seriously in the many accounts where mothers actively stayed on top of the ladder in their later years. These mothers “continued to hold the family’s purse and rice bucket; they quibbled; they acted mercilessly and ruthlessly; they sometimes even beat up their adult sons.” Furthermore, Hsiung concludes that most Chinese mothers did not live long enough to reap the financial benefits of their labor. Based on the fact that most women died in their thirties or forties, and most men did not gain financial security until their late twenties, the reality for most mothers would have been a financial struggle till the end. However assertive an elderly mother was though, the remaining constant, according to Hsiung, was the unyielding devotion a son had for his mother. Even devoted monks, who often left their natal families at a young age, rarely to return to care for their parents, often expressed great remorse for their lack of filial dedication—which brings up the question of whether this unyielding devotion was truly rooted in the mother-son bond, or if it was rooted in Confucian order and value systems. I contend that the answer lies somewhere in the middle. Where the mother-son bond failed, Confucian expectation took over. Where the mother-son bond prevailed, Confucian order reinforced filial devotion. When all else failed, social expectation found a way to intervene.

American writer, and Baptist missionary, Adele Fielde (1839-1916) lived in Guangdong Province for twenty years in the 1870s and 80s before she returned to the United States to write her memoirs. In her memoirs she wrote detailed reports on Chinese women and their customs. In 1894, Fielde recounted a Chinese moral lesson that she had read in a “popular [instructional] book” about a spiteful daughter-in-law and an unfilial son who learned his lesson. This story is an example of filial duty and Confucian values:

This man was an only child, and the pride and joy of his mother’s heart, yet he was never very filial in mind or action. He married a woman who despised his mother, yet he

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 27.
37 Ibid., 191.
loved her anyway. One day, the filial son’s wife declared that she would leave him for another man if he did not get rid of his mother. So he took his mother on his back into the country, and told her it was for her health. The son had every intention of leaving her to die until “the old woman told her son that he had gladdened her heart ten times.”38 She professed in great detail all the ways she loved him.

- First was when he was born, and when after much sorrow, she knew she had a living boy.
- Second was when she first saw him smile, and she knew that he was comfortable in her arms.
- Third was when he first held a thing in his hand, and she knew…that he was strong;
- Fourth was when he began to walk, and she knew that he would learn to take care of himself and to help her.
- Fifth was when he first went off with other boys to gather fuel, and she thought that…she could make a home.
- Sixth was when she first gave him money, and he started out without her to buy their food in the market.
- Seventh was she could afford to let him go to school, and he came back at nightfall, and told her what the teacher had taught him.
- Eighth was when he put on the garb of an adult, and she knew that she had a man to depend on at last.
- Ninth was when she got a wife for him, had paid all the wedding expenses, and made him able to establish a household of his own.
- Tenth was when he just now took her on his back, to carry her out to get sight of the sky and the fields, that she might be refreshed, and live the longer.39

After hearing of such love and devotion from his old mother, he could not bear to kill her. He turned around towards home and opted to leave her in a nearby shed, promising to bring her food. When he returned home, his wife was very pleased at the absence of her mother-in-law, and her mood softened towards her husband. Just when the son could not decide between his two loves, his wife caught sight of her mother-in-law outside the shed. She thought she saw a

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38 Ibid., 191-192.
39 Ibid., 192.
ghost. The daughter-in-law fainted and died upon hitting her head. The once unfilial son “brought his old mother back into the house and took good care of her.”

In this story, the power of a mother’s love was able to change an unfilial son into a filial son, but the meaning of this story can be two-fold. One: Although seemingly helpless in a house where she had no physical command, this elderly mother saw her fate and used her powers of motherly persuasion to turn her fate around. Two: The day her son was born, this mother was overjoyed with her elevation of status and guarantee for a better life. Her love for this boy went beyond instinct, and her infatuation saved her life. Either way, the mother-son relationship in late imperial China was, for many women with sons who lived to adulthood, a relationship of great power and happiness for the mother—regardless of status or location.

**THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP AND THE MEANING OF A DAUGHTER**

Although the preference for sons was prevalent throughout Chinese imperial history, one question has remained: Whose preference? The facts all present themselves clearly. A son helped to solidify a young mother’s position in any household, whether it was commoner or elite. A son would be raised to be filial and act as a source of social security for both parents in old age (if his parents grew old enough to see the benefits). A successful son would bring the entire family honor, carry on the family bloodline, and perform the ancestral rights. In most cases, a son would stay loyal to the natal family. All of these practical reasons indicate what reasonably would be a universal preference. However, practical preference did not necessarily overcome a mother’s (or father’s) nurturing instinct. Plenty of sources show both the hardships brought on by having girls and the fact that parents often loved them dearly even though they were not the preferred sex.

If a woman brought a baby girl into the family, both the mother and the young girl could face much animosity. According to Furth and her research on late imperial Chinese medical texts, “the social pressure for sons made medical experts worry that failure to bear a male child might be dangerously upsetting to a new mother. Handbooks warned parents-in-law and husbands against blaming the woman, and some even advised that she not be told the

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40 Ibid., 192.
sex of her child for a time, lest ‘fierce joy or sorrow’ wrack her weakened system. Joy in daughters was not expected of women, and female sex subordination was anticipated in medical expectations concerning the emotions surrounding a girl’s birth.”41 In 1904, female revolutionary Qiu Jin decided that traditional life was so unbearable for a woman that she fled from her husband and children to settle in Japan and start her campaign for women’s rights. In one of her essays, she wrote about growing up as a girl in a traditional Chinese family.

We, the two hundred million women of China, are the most unfairly treated objects on this earth. If we have a decent father, then we will be alright at the time of our birth; but if he is crude by nature, or an unreasonable man, he will immediately start spewing out phrases like, ‘Oh what an ill-omened day, here’s another useless one.’ If only he could, he would dash us to the ground. He keeps repeating, ‘She will be in someone else’s family later on,’ and looks at us with cold and disdainful eyes.42

In this passage, Qiu Jin recalled how her father’s disdain for a daughter was clearly evident to her (the daughter) as well—it was not just the mother who might be chastised for having a baby girl. Although Qiu Jin was clearly influenced by Western thought at the time she wrote this, her recollection of such phrases as something common is helpful in understanding her decision to leave both her family and country. Famous lines from the Chinese Classics were used to show both mothers and daughters alike their lot in life. As cited in Elisabeth Croll’s Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia (2000), the following poem from the Book of Odes (a Confucian Classic dating back to 1000 B.C.E.), shows how people were taught to think about boys and girls:

When a son is born  
Let him sleep on the bed,  
Clothe him with fine clothes  
And give him jades to play with  
How lovely his cry is!  
May he grow up to wear crimson  
And be the lord of the clan and the tribe.

When a daughter is born,  
Let her sleep on the ground.

Wrap her in common wrappings,
And giver her broken tiles for playthings.
May she have no faults, nor merit of her own
May she well attend to food and wine
And bring no discredit to her parents.43

These classic verses, while not followed directly in the late imperial era, were used to explain the different expectations for sons versus daughters.

A young mother would face many expectations and endure many pressures to favor her sons over her daughters. How this favoritism played out in practice varied in part due to her family’s economic situation. Showing preference for a daughter in front of a woman’s new family might decrease her own status within the family. Moreover, despite a mother’s natural instinct to nurture her baby, regardless of sex, sex selective infanticide was not uncommon in late imperial China. According to Bray, “Infanticide [was] the most effective way of controlling family size in response to sudden crisis. It [was] also a foolproof way of exercising sex selection if all other means fail[ed].”44 Demographers James Lee and Feng Wang, authors of One Quarter of Humanity: Malthusian Mythology and Chinese Realities (2001), agree that the Chinese used sex selective infanticide to regulate family size. According to Lee and Wang, “Chinese mortality patterns were highly differentiated not just by biology but also by choice…the son preference dates back to the origins of ancestral worship in the second and third millennia B.C. and was reinforced by a patrilineal and patrilocal familial system supported by the state.”45 Furthermore, Lee and Wang argue that because females were seen as economic burdens, rates of infanticide were higher among the poor, but even “members of the imperial lineage practiced female infanticide.”46

By the late 19th Century, a combination of foreign imperialism, demographic and ecological pressures, and political decline resulted in a greater number of large-scale droughts, floods, and famines that the Chinese government proved unable to handle. In times of hardship, baby girls, unmarried women, married women with no sons, and young married

43 Croll, Endangered Daughters, 75-76.
44 Bray, Technology and Gender, 289.
46 Ibid.
women with a low rank within the family would be the first to be sold as maids, concubines, wives, prostitutes, or slave girls. In times of desperation, sometimes the health and safety of daughters had to be sacrificed in order to allow the sons to survive and continue the custom of performing ancestral rights.

Sadly, famine, disaster, and hardship forced many families to make difficult choices for survival, and survival sometimes meant splitting up the family in non-traditional ways (i.e. not through marriage, education, or job related splits). Once a girl became a bit older, she could still be sold or used for money in other ways. Some families also sold young daughters into prostitution. A low-level scholar, Zou Zaiheng, wrote a description of the trafficking of young girls as prostitutes on the Huai River in the 1850’s:

Tie her up!
Tie her up!
People are haggling over the price of young girls;
These innocent young orioles, thirteen or fourteen sui.
The large boats sail in from Yancheng;
The Yancheng girls arrive at Qingjiangpu.
Changing their attire, learning to primp and prettify,
They perfect the art of selling themselves for money.
How they suffer in miserable houses of prostitution!
How their parents love cash more than their young ones!
With chilling calculation they cast delicate daughters into the mire.\(^\text{47}\)

In times of desperation, a mother (or father) might be subject to comply with the family hierarchy and sell a daughter short of a life with her family. However, it is possible that many parents sold their daughters to save their lives from starvation at home. If a family could not afford to feed every mouth, selling a female family member could potentially save other family members from starving to death. It is important to keep in mind that many of these examples of the mother-daughter relationship are being examined under circumstance of extreme hardship—thus highlighting the potential devastating strains of the relationship. Birthing a girl would also cost the family more money than a son due to her temporary status within the family and the hope that she would be married off into another family. The

prospect of marriage, however, traditionally brought on the potentially financially straining custom of dowries.

Dowries and bride gifts were a common practice in late imperial China: dowries were often a cause for financial anxiety for the natal family, and female infanticide or abandonment was “often explained by shocked observers as a wish to avoid the burden of dowries,” states Bray. Aside from the worst-case scenario, parents could try to save their female children by arranging a little-daughter-in-law marriage. A “little-daughter-in-law marriage” is when a daughter is either sold off or given away at infancy to be raised as the future bride to a little boy in the purchasing family. The two children are raised together and then married to each other without the cost of a dowry or the hassle of finding a suitable female.

The decision to practice sex selective infanticide may or may not have been within a young mother’s control since she held little power within her new family. Francesca Bray also suggests that infanticide was most likely a decision made by the husband or parent-in-law, not the mother. Bray doubts that a mother would go “through the burdens and anxieties of pregnancy and the agonies of childbirth only to suffer the further agony of the death of her infant…it can hardly be the fertility method of choice as far as the mother is concerned.” Similarly, the choice to let a young daughter leave her natal home was not an easy task. However, as previously mentioned, not all mothers had the choice to give away or sell their daughters. Additionally, regardless of who made the decision, each mother’s situation was different, and depending on her family’s economic circumstances, these decisions would no doubt be made on a case-by-case basis.

Should a family be fortunate enough to afford both male and female children, a mother could have a number of years before her daughter’s betrothal to create a special bond. These first real bonding moments (aside from nursing and caring for an infant) happened when a mother began to bind her daughter’s feet. Dorothy Ko wrote a book titled, *Every Step A Lotus: Shoes For Bound Feet* (2001), in which she takes an in-depth look at both the

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48 Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 288.
49 Lee and Wang, *One Quarter of Humanity*, 77.
50 Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 289.
material and kinship aspects of foot binding in China. As she traces the history of foot binding and all its ups and downs in popularity, she states, “In the nineteenth century, ironically on the eve of the practice’s decline, a pair of bound feet became an overriding factor among bride seekers in lower-class families.”

Binding a daughter’s feet was not about cruel and unusual punishment (as many outsiders might think), it signified much more. First, it was a ritual passed from mother to daughter that signified a mother’s first steps in preparing her daughter for marriage. Ko states:

The daughter’s first binding took place in the depths of the woman’s quarters under the direction of her mother, sometimes assisted by grandmothers and aunts; no men were privy to the ceremonial process. It was a solemn occasion marking the girl’s coming of age, the first step of her decade-long grooming to become a bride…A sense of anticipation stirred the women’s hearts, tinted with a bittersweet awareness that as women, they could gain power only by way of their bodies…the pain of foot binding anticipated the pain of childbirth, the blessing and curse for a Chinese woman.

This ritual usually began when the daughter reached about five or six years of age. In poor families, the binding of a daughter’s feet signified great sacrifice because with unbound feet, a daughter could add more to the labor force. Therefore, it could be seen that a poor mother who bound her daughter’s feet was putting the future of her daughter above the potential welfare of the family. This is a welcoming contrast to many of the famine stories discussed previously.

Also important to note is the time and preparation it took on a mother’s behalf to prepare for the first day of foot binding. Many mothers would prepare for the first day by sewing an array of tiny shoes for their daughters. Additionally, many mothers would pray for their daughters and for the success of a well-matched betrothal and marriage. Ko adds:

On the daughter’s foot binding day, she received her first gifts of lotus shoes from her mother. From then on, the mother would teach her on by one all the necessary skills to be a good woman, beginning with sewing and shoe-making…the first binding shoes are a mother’s labor of love.

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52 Ibid., 54.

53 Ibid., 58.

54 Ibid., 69.
A daughter then could begin making shoes for her future in-laws to put in her trousseau. She could tell stories with her shoes and use them as self-identification when entering a betrothal. Her shoes could help ensure a better match for betrothal and set her apart from other young women. Additionally, as Ko concludes, “the pain and tears on her first foot binding day—her ticket to motherhood—finally brought her power and authority within the family when she became a mother-in-law.”55 The bond that was created between mother and daughter eventually came full circle as it was passed on from generation to generation. Although the physical process itself was undoubtedly painful, the relationship between mother and daughter was elevated to a new level, as they spent time together in the women’s chambers and went through the experience together.

Once a daughter was old enough for betrothal, a mother’s duty was to prepare her daughter for life as a daughter-in-law and what should be expected of her. In her book, *True To Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China* (2008), Weijing Lu uses faithful maiden biographies to examine the lives of young women, generally from elite families, who chose to live out their lives as widows or commit suicide upon the death of a fiancé.56 These young women who chose fidelity over filiality are referred to as Faithful Maidens. In this book, Lu contends that while many parents wanted their daughters to marry someone else after the death of a fiancé, many daughters felt responsible for staying faithful to their deceased fiancé and his family. She explains this struggle through an old Chinese proverb that says, “Loyalty and filial piety cannot be fulfilled simultaneously.”57 In essence, Chinese daughters were taught to be filial to their parents until they got married, at which time their filiality was to be redirected towards their in-laws. However, in the case of widowed brides, these customs became conflicting and thus became a source of tension between daughter and parents. Where many parents wished their daughters to marry and live out their lives according to plan with someone else, many daughters preferred to have a ghost marriage to their deceased fiancé and live out their lives as chaste widows, or commit suicide.

55 Ibid., 75.


57 Ibid., 112.
as a sign of respect for their deceased fiancés. In explaining this phenomenon, Lu gives rich examples from these faithful maiden biographies and simultaneously gives wonderful examples of motherly love and devotion towards daughters.

Lu tells the following story about an unfortunate young woman, Wang Yuan, who became a widow before her wedding day:

When Wang Yuan’s fiancé died, her father concealed the news from her. She only learned about it accidentally when her fiancé’s funeral procession passed through her village. Despite her plea, her father would not let her marry into her deceased fiancé’s family. ‘Retiring [to her own room], Yuan wanted to kill herself. Her mother, who loved her dearly, took precautions day and night. Yet [Yuan] still almost succeeded in committing suicide several times.’

Lu further explains, “the mother in these narratives is understanding, sensitive, and sympathetic, steadfastly standing by the emotionally distraught daughter even though the mother did not approve of her daughter’s choice.” These mothers did not want an ill fate for their daughters; they wanted what was best for them. In another similar story, a young woman, Wu Gu, was also suicidal after the death of her fiancé. In this case, Wu’s mother mobilized the whole family to help protect her daughter from herself—hiding all knives, locking all doors, filled up the well, and had her daughter on twenty-four hour watch. Lu describes these mother’s anxiety and frustration as “profound,” and states that as a last resort these mothers would “appeal to the daughter’s emotional attachment to her.” This attachment, like the attachment between mother and son, was again tied to filial duty. A mother desperate to save her daughter’s life might remind her daughter of her filial duties to her natal family by painting a stark picture of life without the help of her daughter. Through both Dorothy Ko’s stories of foot binding and Weijing Lu’s stories of faithful maidens, we can see how some Chinese mothers were able to create affectionate and devoted bonds with their daughters.

58 Ibid., 108
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 109.
61 Ibid.
CONCLUSION

A common theme throughout this chapter has been the importance of Confucian values and particularly the importance of filial piety in the formation of a Chinese family. These values strongly shaped a mother’s life cycle. A young woman was brought into her husband’s family, where she was expected to switch her loyalties away from her natal family. Her role as a young wife and a young mother was to serve her in-laws, act in a subservient manner, and most importantly, produce sons to carry on the family line. Her position was not stable, and she was replaceable as long as she was without a healthy son. Her relationships were subject to friction and insecurity. Her status would first begin to change upon having a son and securing him as a viable heir to the family. If she had a son, as soon as her in-laws passed away, she quickly climbed the ladder to her higher status—a status of respect, power, and reverence. As an elderly mother, she controlled the roost, so-to-speak, and her role changed. She was now responsible for raising her family according to Confucian morality and for teaching her family how to respect their elders and how to perform the ancestral rites. Her life became meaningful and worthy of preservation. Women who did not bear sons, on the other hand, did not enjoy this relative security and rise in status.

Defined by Confucian expectations, the role of a Chinese mother was one of duty—duty to her husband’s ancestors, her husband’s family, and to her community. According to Francesca Bray’s research, a good Chinese mother instructed her children regardless of sex, “how to behave properly and perform rituals correctly; she not only taught them to read the classics at home before they went to school but also expounded the moral messages the texts contained, and most important of all, she instilled them with a sense of moral purpose and determination and encouraged them to pursue honorable ambitions.”62 Good motherhood was practiced out of moral discipline, emotional and sexual restraint, and responsibility for her child’s development.63

The mother-son bond was quite special—a powerful and symbiotic relationship that lasted a lifetime. The mother-daughter bond was different; it was usually only temporary. Having a daughter meant something different for a mother. When circumstances allowed a

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62 Bray, Technology and Gender, 347.
baby girl to live into adulthood, mothers had the chance to bond with their daughters through filial attachment and by preparing them to be filial daughter-in-laws. Unfortunately, not all family circumstances allowed mothers to choose their daughter’s destiny. Reverend Ernst Faber wrote a book entitled *The Famous Women of China* in 1890—a sort of dedication to incredible women he came across in his missionary travels in China. He included the following newspaper excerpt in his writing:

Li Hung-chang requests that some monument may be erected to the memory of a girl whose filial piety was the admiration of her native district. When her mother, who was a great invalid, was still alive, she spent her whole day in nursing her, and frequently passed nights without sleep. Being the only child she refused to marry, but decided to remain at home to wait on her parents. When her mother lost all her teeth from age, the daughter masticated the food and so kept her alive…On the death of the mother, the girl performed the necessary rites and displayed her grief as fully as a son would have done.64

This dying mother was mostly likely seen as having been unfortunate not to have a son. Fortunately, she was able to bond with her only daughter. Clearly having learned the ways of filial piety, her daughter sacrificed her life as a wife and a mother so that she could take care of her own mother; and her filial efforts did not go unnoticed by her community. Girls were not always seen as burdens, rather each family situation dictated the future of a baby girl, and thus the future of a mother.

Although this chapter does reinforce the notion that Chinese women faced many hardships as both young girls and as mothers, I also wish to highlight the fact that not all mothers were miserable. Many of these hardships that mothers faced were due to social norms or extreme crisis, and most women accepted their lot in life as a normal part of Confucian Chinese culture. Many Chinese families enjoyed the experience of having many daughters and sons, watching them grow into adulthood, and marrying them off to specially chosen families. Let it be expressed again that many difficult decisions placed on Chinese mothers, regarding sex selective infanticide and family planning, were most prevalent during times of financial and ecological hardship.

Not until the Qing Dynasty began to crumble in the late 19th century did many women begin to see other options—regarding education, foot binding, marriage, and liberation.

64 Faber, *Famous Women in China*, 6. (Faber did not give the name of the newspaper or its date).
Chinese women such as Qiu Jin wrote about their experiences as women, and as mothers, during a period of chaos and upheaval. China was on the verge of immense social, political, economic, and religious change, and this opened many women’s eyes to new possibilities in life. The next chapter will trace the changing roles of motherhood in Republican China—where the clash between old and new China took a toll on Chinese mothers to a degree unlike any other period in history.
CHAPTER TWO

THE REPUBLICAN PERIOD: CHINESE MOTHERS IN TRANSITION

A girl is controlled by her mother, and you are going to start embroidering next year—not to mention that your feet are still not bound small, and when you are married off and go to your mother-in-law’s house they will surely say your mother never trained you…you are a girl. You can only be a virtuous wife and a good mother who waits on her in-laws and takes care of the family property. Think again—of what use would study be to you?

--Chinese Mother in the early Republican years

_A Woman Soldier’s Own Story_

When my daughter Rulan sighed the other day over the perennial dilemma of marriage versus career, I scolded her roundly, because she only repeated old phrases, and old phrases could lead to nothing new.

--Buwei Yang Chao, Chinese mother in the later Republican years

_Autobiography of a Chinese Woman_

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years of Manchu Imperial rule, many attempts at reform were made in desperation to save China. Political, military, religious, and social reforms were most popular; however disunity and unrest plagued the country, and most attempts failed miserably. In 1912 the Qing dynasty collapsed and was replaced by a new Republican government and China’s future was more uncertain than ever. Foreign powers had been a major threat since the Opium Wars in the 1800’s, and now that China was facing such fragmentation, imperialist powers were even more aggressive. Without a stable governing power to exert control, regional warlords became more powerful and proved to be a legitimate threat to China’s unity. The Nationalist Party, or Kuomintang, led by Sun Yat-Sen and later by Chiang Kai Shek, proved unable to wholly overcome political fragmentation and increasing rural poverty. By the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s and 40s, the nationalists were challenged by the Chinese Communists, who had a very different vision of what modern China should look like. From 1937-45, the country suffered under Japanese invasion/occupation. After Japan’s defeat, the Chinese Communists Party (CCP) fought a bitter civil war with the Nationalists that ultimately ended with the CCP victory in 1949.
In China’s struggle to find itself again, the Republican period proved to be one of confusion and struggle. Despite the fear of imperialism, many Chinese (especially the younger generations) were compelled to make changes in their lives—to break free from Confucian tradition and look towards other countries for modernizing ideas (mainly the West and Japan). Education and women’s rights were some forerunners in this race and were often sought after in displays of rebellion. Female rebellion in revolutionary China is a theme which historian Elisabeth Croll has focused on in her book, *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience and Self-perception in Twentieth-century China* (1995). Croll writes, “It is above all the notion of rebellion or rejection of perspective norms that is both the theme common to the published narratives of female lives during the first decades of the twentieth century and the predominant thread running through each individual life story.”

Young girls and women also began to attend private schools and universities more frequently—education was not just for boys anymore. On May 4, 1919, thousands of students, both male and female, protested in massive demonstrations that spread to many cities in China. Initially protesting the World War I Treaty of Versailles and the threat of imperial rule, the opening demonstrations sparked a democratic fever in the Chinese youth and led to an era of rebellious change. Author Pang-Mei Natasha Chang wrote in her book, *Bound Feet and Western Dress* (1996), that the May 4th Era “witnessed tremendous upheaval of traditional Confucian culture as Western ideals pushed to the fore. Named after the nation’s first pre-democracy demonstration, which took place in Tiananmen Square on May 4, 1919, the May 4th era produced, among other contributions, a new style of written language and progressive literature.” This movement allowed both women and men to write more freely and in turn helped to produce many of the sources used in this chapter.

While many men, women, and children were taking the path of rebellion and crossing into unknown territory, many other Chinese were not so quick to change their ways—unwilling to abandon the values they had been taught as children. As will be discussed in more depth, these clashing viewpoints became the frustration of many families and the focus of many autobiographies and memoirs. Meanwhile, people’s inner struggles were mirrored

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by the struggles of the country. While some people’s lives remained largely unaltered by these events, most Chinese were affected greatly. Thus, with the enormous changes in China during the Republican period (1911-1949), what did this all mean for Chinese mothers?

In this chapter I suggest we look at this transitional generation through human experience and response. Using these women’s stories as windows into the experience of motherhood in Republican China, I have tried to let their voices speak for themselves. If a woman thought of herself as being traditional, modern, or revolutionary then I do not think it would be appropriate to take away her experiences/responses. Additionally, I have also considered that these women’s experiences and responses were likely to have been at least partially constructed through Western influence, and this construction was inherently part of this transitional generation. It is what makes this generation so unique.

Additionally, by no means do I intend to suggest that this transitionary period brought about a progression from old and bad to new and good, or better. Similarly, my hope in sharing these women’s stories is never to suggest that one parenting model was better than another. I have great respect for all of the women whose stories I share in this thesis, and my intention is to comparatively shed light on their varied experiences as mothers. This chapter will focus on the multiple and dynamic roles and expectations of Chinese mothers in the Republican period. As Republican China was politically divided and ridden with confusion and uncertainly, the roles of motherhood also varied widely. These variations stemmed from factors such as geographic location, social class, generational differences, and individual family values. According to my research, the greatest factor that separated perspectives on the proper role of mothers in Republican China, however, was a mother’s attitude towards cultural change during this transitional period. Some of the mothers in my research displayed a resistance to cultural change—a resistance to change their values and feelings towards gender norms, female education, arranged marriage, and foot binding to name the basics. Why reinvent the wheel when it has worked well for so many years? Other mothers in my research actively sought change during this unpredictable period. Some women advocated education for themselves as well as their children (both for boys and girls). Some women used rebellion as a tool to separate themselves from the values of previous generations. Other women used the revolutionary spirit as a means to justify and advocate change. Furthermore, just as China itself was in a state of perplexity, several women in my research felt pulled in
many directions. Some women, although wanting to change certain things about their lives, still harbored feelings of obligation to continue parenting as their past generations had done and as they were taught as young girls and teenagers. Other women did not necessarily see reason to change their parenting values until they were forced to make difficult decisions by outside forces (during times of war for example). These attitudes towards cultural change usually also went hand in hand with a mother’s feelings towards her responsibilities both in and outside of the domestic sphere.

Some women felt that to be a good wife and mother, their role was to be centered inside the domestic sphere. Mothers could pass on the importance and value of the domestic sphere to their children by leading by example for both sons and daughters so that they would learn their roles in respect to their gender. For daughters in particular, this might mean that her feet would be bound, her marriage would be arranged, and/or her education would be limited; she would learn the ways of being a good wife and mother from inside the home. Other mothers began to expand their roles outside the domestic sphere through education, politics, work, and/or travel. The extent to which mothers expanded their roles outside the domestic sphere in the Republican period, however, varied widely and occurred with various reasons. Some mothers were forced by economic circumstance to begin working outside the home. Some mothers who were wealthier, or from a higher social class, had more opportunities to venture outside the domestic sphere. Therefore, Chinese mother’s reasons for remaining in, or expanding outside the domestic sphere were unique to each family. Wherever a woman stood with her feelings towards being a mother during this time of ambiguity, mothers during the Republican period were faced with new child-rearing challenges as well as personal, political, and social challenges.

To help illustrate the roles and expectations of mothers in Republican China, there are several types of sources used in this chapter. The majority of sources used here are Chinese memoirs in translation. Rich and colorful, these sources give vivid personal accounts of the joys and struggles of motherhood and were most helpful in constructing a theme for the chapter. Other important sources used in this chapter include fiction and interviews performed by other scholars. It is important to note that several of the memoirs used in this chapter have been written by daughters remembering their childhood and their mothers. Although the mother’s own voice would have been preferred, these memoirs do provide
wonderfully insightful, intimate, and rich details of family life during the Republican period. As always it is also important to point out the potential Western influence placed upon these authors and how this influence may have affected their views, opinions, and experiences.

**CHINESE MOTHERS INSIDE THE DOMESTIC SPHERE**

This section focuses on the stories of four incredible women and their families. These women came from all different backgrounds: wealthy, poor, rural, urban, or several combinations there-of. The one main commonality that they held was their similar beliefs in the importance of motherhood roles in the domestic sphere. These cultural values and feelings of domestic responsibility are reflected in these mother’s parenting choices and are exemplified through the continuation of customs such as foot binding, arranged marriage, and education. Despite the wars, the political uncertainty, and the rising social changes, these mothers did not find national upheaval a good reason to change their views and values towards family life and their roles as mothers. Again, why re-invent the wheel?

Jung Chang, author of *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, wrote a generational story of her family in China, beginning with her grandmother, Yu-fang. Yu-fang was born in 1909 in Manchuria, and some of her earliest memories were of her mother binding her feet. In 1911, the culminating year of revolution, Yu-fang’s mother began the process of crushing her daughter’s bones and binding them tightly to form small lotus petals. Jung Chang described these first memories in the following passage:

> My grandmother screamed in agony and begged her to stop. Her mother had to stick a cloth into her mouth to gag her. My grandmother passed out repeatedly from the pain… When she pleaded with her mother to untie the bindings, her mother would weep and tell her that unbound feet would ruin her entire life, and that she was doing it for her own future happiness.67

As seen in Chapter One, binding a daughter’s feet not only created a special bond between mother and daughter, it was also thought to be in the daughter’s best interest for a better future. Mothers who felt that their role was best served inside the home often instilled these same values in their daughters by binder their feet and ensuring their future roles as a women inside the domestic sphere. Although many Chinese revolutionaries had made attempts to

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stop the practice of foot binding in the years leading up to the Republican period, many families remained faithful to their beliefs—that a girl with big feet was not marriageable and therefore she might become a burden on the family. In other words, like Yu-fang’s mother said, it was thought to be for a girl’s own good for a more prosperous future.

Xie Bingying, author of *A Woman Soldier’s Own Story*, was born in 1906 in a rural village in Hunan Province. Whilst telling her own story of becoming a scholar and a soldier in the Northern Expedition, Bingying vividly describes her relationship with her strict and strong-willed mother. Being a mother in the early Republican period with strong feelings of domestic responsibility, she still felt obligated to bind her daughter’s feet—just as her own feet had been bound as a young girl. However, remembering the pain she felt when she was young, and watching her eldest daughter totter along in constant pain, she tried to delay the binding of Bingying’s feet for as long as possible. When Bingying cried and pleaded with her mother to stop, her mother replied, “It is because I love you that I bind your feet. Not binding them would truly hurt you. How do you think a young girl with large feet would ever be married off?”68 Despite the attempted social change by many, arranged marriages were still very common in the Republican years, and in accordance to long-standing custom, three-inch lotus petals were most often a requirement for marriage.

Chow Ching-li, author of *Journey in Tears: Memory of a Girlhood in China*, was born in China in 1936. Her parents, who were engaged at the ages of four and six, were married at the ages of sixteen and eighteen in 1923; and in continuing the values they were brought up with, even as late as the late 1940’s, Ching-li’s parents forced an arranged marriage on her whilst she kicked and screamed through the whole process. Simply because a girl was resistant did not mean that the customs would be altered or forgotten; after all, a transitional period implies gradual change.

When Jung Chang’s grandmother, Yu-fang, was informed of her impending marriage and future as a concubine to a wealthy general, she wept at the thought of her fate. However, her parents had already made the decision, and she was brought up to obey her parents through filial piety. Her mother, though, not wanting her child to be unhappy, tried to consol

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her by telling her that this arrangement was the “best possible match.” Similarly, Bingying was prepared for an arranged marriage at a young age. One morning Bingying awoke to her mother piercing her ears. It was that day that she learned the three duties that a mother was supposed to perform for her daughter: bind her feet, pierce her ears, and betroth her for marriage. Bingying’s mother said, “Good. I have accomplished two of the three most important things in your life.” In order for such customs to be carried out, some mothers, including Bingying’s mother, went through painstaking efforts.

Author Pang-Mei Natasha Chang wrote the biography *Bound Feet and Western Dress* about her great aunt, Chang Yu-I (born at the beginning of the century), who had become famous for becoming the first Chinese woman in the Republican period to have a Western-style divorce. Yu-i’s mother felt anxious about marrying off her daughters. She first took her elder daughter to a fortuneteller to help arrange a marriage for her, but the fortuneteller told her that this daughter was not suited to be married for a long time. Not wanting to wait, she then took Yu-i to the fortuneteller with a specific match in mind. This time the fortuneteller told her that her daughter was not suited for her chosen match due to her birth date. Desperate for one of her daughters to marry in the very near future, she had the matchmaker change her daughter’s birth year. Her daughter, Yu-i, was engaged that following week. As the divorce shows, the change of birth date made no difference in fortune; this marriage truly was a poor match, and as it will be discussed later, her poorly arranged marriage affected the role that Yu-i played as a mother in the later Republican years. Perhaps even more dramatic were Bingying’s fights with her mother over the prospect of an arranged marriage.

While Bingying managed to gain her mother’s consent to go to school as a child (which incidentally gave her the freedom to join the army and fight in the Northern Expedition), her mother had no plans to relent on the idea of arranged marriage. When Bingying returned home from the Northern Expedition, her mother expressed her surmounting worry over the past months—but her mother’s initial worry was not due to the

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[70] Bingying, *A Woman Soldier’s Own Story*, 17.
war in particular. Instead, her anxiety came from Bingying’s upcoming marriage and her dowry preparations. Her mother, in a single breath, said:

Daughter, you see how careworn your mother is because of you? For more than two months I have not been able to sleep because I have been worrying over having these wooden household articles painted, and then when the wind blew I feared that dust would land on the gilt-paper, so I often got up in the middle of the night to cover everything with oil paper, and during the day I feared that the children would dirty them, or that sparrows would fly in and scatter droppings on the top of them, so every day I must have looked at them at least dozens of times—and each day I had to oversee the workers since otherwise they’d likely have taken two years to finish—but now more than thirty pieces of wooden household articles are completed, and also the bedcovers and the nets are all prepared, and we have only been waiting for you to sew your clothes.\(^{72}\)

These sorts of guilt trips were frequent and yet did not work on Bingying’s revolutionary mind. Bingying fought hard to dissolve her marriage contract. She threatened suicide, she ran away, and she argued day and night. Interestingly, Bingying’s threat of suicide marks a dramatic change from the Imperial period to the Republican period. While the faithful maidens of Lu’s stories threatened their lives to stay faithful to their betrothed’s family Bingying threatened suicide to get away from her betrothed. However strong, all of her efforts were of no avail. According to her mother, filial piety and hierarchy were above all other sentiments, and defiance was not to be tolerated. Amongst many other outbursts, Bingying’s mother had the following to say in response to her daughter’s threats:

This thing is inhuman! Parents are as big as the sky! How dare you contradict us? We sent you to study because we hoped you would understand duty, courtesy, devotion, trust, politeness, righteousness, modesty, and shame. Who could have guessed that you would turn into a brute? You do not even want your own parents. The marriage contract was arranged by your parents when you were being nursed. To oppose the marriage contract is to oppose your parents. If you go forward with this shabby, shameful annulment, ruining your parents’ reputation and shaming your ancestors, then I must…how can you oppose it?\(^{73}\)

The case of Bingying and her mother exemplifies both the tensions between China’s past and future and the challenges of parenting that came along with this transitional period. In the wake of family turmoil over this arranged marriage, Bingying’s aunt (her mother’s sister) tried to reason with her mother on the basis of changing times. Bingying’s aunt said to her

\(^{72}\) Bingying, *A Woman Soldier’s Own Story*, 93.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., 96.
sister, “Now the world has changed—don’t treat your children too harshly. They are educated people. They want to have important careers. Don’t hold them back.”74 In response, Bingying’s mother accused her sister of being a bad parent, and said, “No matter how the world has changed, parents are still parents. If children born to me do not obey me, how can I rule other people?”75 This part of the story is interesting because it illustrates not only how two women from the same town, but two sisters, could feel so differently about the changes taking place in China. Thus, even though many mothers saw their most important role taking place inside the domestic sphere, and their duty as mothers was to teach these values to their children, the world was changing around them, and they faced the pressures to change and concede to new parenting styles and values.

Mothers who wished to instill the importance of female domestic responsibility in their families also faced the difficulties of what historian Elisabeth Croll called “daughter rebels” or girls as boys.76 Many autobiographies of women in the Republican period demonstrate how young girls rebelled against their parents, most often by trying to go to school, have unbound feet, choose their own love interests, and roam around outdoors like the boys. In a changing world, children became more aware of the blurred boundaries of society and social norms. Like Bingying and her mother, these rebel daughters exemplified a detachment from the importance of domesticity for women/mothers. Not wanting their children to alter their values, many parents (particularly mothers, as the primary caregivers), argued with their children about what was proper for their gender and therefore their future.

Besides her arranged marriage, Bingying fought with her mother from a very young age about her lack of schooling. She saw her brothers going to school and playing outside—she wanted the same for herself. When Bingying told her mother that she only wanted to study and go to school, her mother said, “What! A girl thinking about study? Really, then heaven and earth are turning topsy-turvy. Studying is your brothers’ business. You should have been shut away in the maiden’s chamber after you were born. Think: what use is it for a

74 Ibid., 101.
75 Ibid.
woman to study? There is no rank for ‘female scholar’ that can be attained.”\textsuperscript{77} Bingying was eventually allowed to go to school, yet her mother was not fond of her daughter acting like she was a boy. Similarly, Pang-Mei Natasha Chang’s great aunt, Yu-i, also begged her parents to allow her to attend school. However, once she became engaged, her parents did not want her to return to school. Her mother said, “A girl’s schooling does not matter. The purpose of a girl’s life is to marry. You must remain at home and prepare yourself for your destiny.” Whether or not these girls rebelled at a young age, many of their parents remained set on their futures—determined by their sex.

Chow Ching-li’, raised in Shanghai, was also quite rebellious as a child and she kept her mother, Chung-ai, very busy. While Chung-ai was a devout Buddhist, her daughter wanted to attend a Christian school and become baptized—which she did in secret behind her mother’s back. Her daughter also yearned to run around outdoors, where she learned how to fight from her brothers and subsequently got in trouble for knocking out a classmate one time. Ching-li wanted to play the piano, and go to a university; and she certainly did not want to go through with her arranged marriage. After Ching-li and her sister told their mother that they wanted to become Christians, Ching-li’s mother warned them about the misfortunes they would bring to the family if they abandoned Buddhism, and then she threatened them saying, “You will no longer be my daughters.”\textsuperscript{78} When Ching-li ran around and got into fights, Chung-ai said, “What will become of you? A girl who spends her time playing in the streets, a girl who fights! You run around like a boy! You laugh like a boy! You’ll never, never get married.”\textsuperscript{79} In scolding her children, Chung-ai expressed the values that were important to her both personally, and as a parent. Chung-ai raised her family with her unfaithful husband in the French and English concessions in Shanghai during the Republican period. Her husband was a wealthy businessman who worked closely with many Westerners. However, at home, both he and his wife supported Chinese tradition. Although she was very much surrounded by Western culture, custom, and values, Chung-ai chose to keep her role as a mother as similar as possible to the Chinese cultural values she was raised with.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 39.
MOTHERS OUTSIDE THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

This section will cover a different side of motherhood in Republican China. It examines the views of mothers who had experiences such as working in factories, attending school, or traveling abroad, that made their experiences quite different from those of most mothers in Imperial China. Mothers who chose to, or were given the opportunity to change their roles as women and as mothers potentially lived very different lives than many of their contemporaries. Whether working in a factory, going to school, or traveling, life as a revolutionary mother was a new variation of Chinese motherhood. With a variety of sources ranging from autobiography to fiction, this section will discuss the changing roles of motherhood as many women walked through uncharted territory outside the domestic sphere.

MOTHERS IN THE WORKPLACE

A mother’s decision to work outside the home was undoubtedly affected by various circumstances—whether she needed to seek work outside the home for financial reasons or for personal reasons. In her book, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919-1949* (1986), Honig describes the life of women who began working twelve-hours days outside the home, for wages, in the Republican period. Woven through her narrative, are the stories of working mothers and the new challenges that faced women outside the home. In essence, there were two types of working mothers: those who were allowed to bring their babies to work, and those who had to leave their babies at home. According to Honig, “Until 1946, when as a result of a series of strikes women were guaranteed 56 days of maternity leave for each birth, pregnant women were often fired.”\(^8^0\) It was typical for a cotton manager to have a list of three “don’t wants”: old women, bound feet, and pregnant women.\(^8^1\) However, getting pregnant was almost inevitable for married women workers. Therefore, women sometimes went through great lengths to hide their state of being from their managers. Many women wore baggy clothing or tied bandages around their stomachs. Since many women were not seeking prenatal medical advice or treatment

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\(^8^1\) Ibid.
during their pregnancies, the workplace was often a dismal place filled with miscarriages in
the bathroom.\textsuperscript{82} One woman recounted a story of a co-worker who gave birth at work:

When I was working in the San Xin Cotton Mill there was a woman from
Jiangbei who worked in the roving room. She was healthy and strong, and had
already been pregnant for the full ten [lunar] months. But because she needed to
make a living, she continued to work in the factory as before. One day she felt a
pain in her abdomen and thought that the baby would soon be born. She thought
of asking for time off to go home, but she also thought that it was already three
o’clock. If she didn’t finish her shift, there would be a deduction from her wages.
So it would be better to finish the shift and go home when work let out. Therefore
she continued working as before, until the quitting whistle blew, and went out
holding her belly in both hands. But she hadn’t even made it to the door when the
baby was born, so in great difficulty she lay on the stone steps, and many men and
women workers crowded around to see her.\textsuperscript{83}

It was not until the 1950’s that Chinese women were guaranteed more rights in the
workplace. Until then, a mother’s choices were limited. For those factories or mills who
allowed mothers to bring their children to work, it was both common to see rows of babies in
baskets and women with babies on their backs in the midst of loud and dangerous machinery;
some women even nursed their babies while continuing to work.\textsuperscript{84} Still, many working
mothers had to either quit their jobs, find a relative or nanny to care for their children, or
worst-case scenario, give their children away. Like their late-Qing counterparts, some women
felt they did not have a choice to give up their children when financial circumstances were
grim. One woman had to give up her first two babies to an orphanage because of her family’s
grim financial situation:

When I got pregnant I was dismissed from the factory. After my baby was born
my husband was unemployed, and our life was hard. So I had to put my child in
an orphanage. I waited for three weeks after I gave birth, then spent five dollars to
go to a foreman… to get a number to enter the factory. My husband went to
peddle goods. But one time when he was selling rice he was seen by a Japanese
person, who took it all from him and beat him up. At that time I had already given
birth to a second child. We had no choice but to send the second child away
too…then I resumed work.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 192.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 147.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 192.
For the women fortunate to have family support, or enough money for a nanny, their roles as mothers were restricted to short nursing visits (usually through the front gate of the factory), and whatever time they could spend with their children on their twelve hours off the clock. Very few factories or mills had functioning nurseries or nursing rooms. The cost of women’s rights also affected the roles and expectations of mothers in the Republican period.

**A Mother’s Own Education**

The Republican period was also a whole new world for those women who decided to be mothers and scholars. One woman in particular, Ding Ling, has become famous for her literary fiction on Chinese women. Ding Ling was born in 1904 in Hunan province and was raised by her widowed mother. Her mother had worked hard to become an educated woman and acted as a role model for her daughter. Ding Ling, possibly most famous for her novel, *Miss Sophia’s Diary*, became a political activist as a young woman and was chastised by both the KMT and CCP. Ding Ling belonged to the first major group of writers to come out of the May Fourth generation. According to historian Tani Barlow, this group of writers produced “Western-style literature for a restricted middle-class audience in a special language, a mixture of colloquial Chinese and more classical syntax...preoccupied with China’s national politics.”

Ding Ling’s novel, *Mother*, was written between 1932 and 1933 and is a tribute to her own mother. *Mother* portrays a revolutionary woman, Manzhen, who has been widowed and tries to change her life through school and politics. She moves her family closer to the city so that she can begin taking classes without the permission of her in-laws. She learns how to juggle motherhood with a budding political life and her dedication to study. Although this piece is fictional, the storyline was written deliberately as commentary on reality (at least reality for those women who could afford to change their lives in this way).

Manzhen made the necessary preparations for attending school. She studied very hard and hired a wet nurse to help take care of the baby while her daughter, Xiao Han, went to kindergarten. Every morning she would rise early to practice her characters while the wet

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nurse prepared the children for the day. Manzhen wished to unbind her feet in fear that she would have to walk to school and would not be able to keep up. She began to loosen the bindings a little more each day while forcing herself to stand just a little bit longer to hasten the process. When other women scolded her for wanting big feet, she replied, “Big feet are better no matter what the fashion is. I saw country women who could go up mountains and through water, almost the same as men. How I envied them. As to whether they’re nice looking or not, I don’t care. I’ll be satisfied as long as I can walk on them a little and get some use out of them.”

While other students at Manzhen’s school had little worries besides their studies, being a mother, Manzhen’s life was different. Ding Ling described Manzhen’s life as a mother and devoted student in the following passage:

Right after class she went directly to the kindergarten to see the children, who’d finished for the day. The naughty little brats would already have gotten ink and mud all over themselves. She’d have to wash them up…sometimes the girls had gotten into a fight and were crying…Sometimes [the other children] would already have been picked up, leaving Xiao Han to sit by herself on the sandy ground or beneath the trees, her little cloth pomegranate-flower bookbag beside her for company. Then Manzhen felt such a wave of sympathy for this daughter of hers that she couldn’t help rushing over to giver her a hug. Several times she came late to find the kindergarten empty and deserted. Not finding Xiao Han anywhere, Manzhen assumed she’d gone home…then not finding her at home either, she’d have to race back to the school. There she would finally find Xiao Han either sleeping comfortably in [her teacher’s] room or else at the normal school students’ dorm being fed cakes by everyone and singing ‘The Little Rooster.’

At night, Manzhen would spend a little quality time with her baby before she would resume her studies and start the whole process over again the next day. In order to be able to pay for her schooling, her wet nurse, and nanny, Manzhen had to sell her family country house. When she was asked to join social or political groups, Manzhen always thought about her roles as a mother and student first. When Manzhen was being pressured to join women’s political groups, some women told her that she would be better off without her children—they were holding her back. She responded with the following: “In the past, I was so fortunate because my father and mother loved me so much. And now I am still fortunate

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87 Ibid., 226.
88 Ibid., 237-238.
because my children are so good. You say I would be better off without the children. I don’t understand. I really have the courage to live only because of the children.”

As did many other revolutionary Chinese mothers, Manzhen figured out how to initiate social change, complete her studies, and be a mother in her own way.

**MOTHERHOOD REDEFINED: TRAVEL, NANNIES, AND ABSENTEEISM**

Like Manzhen, Buwei Yang Chao expanded her roles as a wife and mother outside the domestic sphere; but she saw her role as a mother to mean something very different. Author of *Autobiography of a Chinese Woman*, Buwei Yang Chao was born in 1889 and grew up under the Chinese Confucian expectations of her mother. Her father was a bit more relaxed. However, as a grown woman in the Republican period, Buwei’s life was anything but domestic or typical for a Chinese woman in the Republican Era.

Both Buwei and her husband had broken free of their marriage contracts in order to be with each other. They had both gone to school and were a highly educated couple. Buwei was a doctor before having children, and she even opened her own hospital, delivered babies, and helped war-stricken soldiers. Her husband had many offers to work abroad though, and thus they began to travel as a couple. Buwei and her husband were clearly social elites and Buwei’s situation was certainly not the norm for Republican Chinese mothers.

Buwei had her first two daughters between 1921 and 1924 in America while her husband was working at Cambridge University. Buwei often felt that she needed more out of life—motherhood was not enough. She said, “The heavy housekeeping of a two-baby household was getting to be a great burden. As I was sure that I could not resume any medical activity under the circumstances, I became more and more restless.” Therefore, Buwei and her husband decided to travel around for enjoyment—most often leaving their two daughters in strange countries with strange people for months at a time. Again, this mother’s role as an educated, working, and traveling woman outside the domestic sphere could only be possible as a social elite. “I felt guilty about leaving Iris and Nova with a stranger in a strange

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89 Ibid., 244-245.

country just for our own freedom for sightseeing,” Buwei said, “When we went to St. Aubin to see what is was like, we found that is was a healthy little place for young children to be in. It was a crude rural house, but they had good food there and the children took well to ‘Maman de St. Aubin.’”91 After traveling around Europe for several years, the family moved back to China. There, the family grew from four to six; Buwei gave birth to four daughters.

Moving around so much caused the children to become sick a lot, and it was difficult for them to constantly switch environments, schools, friends, and languages. Still, Buwei and her husband continued to drop off and pick up their children in various parts of the world for many years. When an opportunity arose, whether it was for work, education, or simply for pleasure, they did not fear leaving one or more children with an amah for extended periods of time. They even left their fourth daughter as a newborn for several years. When Bella (Daughter #4) was reunited with the family again, there were difficulties with her readjustment. After all, the family left her as an infant. Buwei recalled, “I was awfully disappointed that Bella looked at us with a blank stare—though that was to be expected…her homecoming was also made easier by her nurse coming over with her. But it gave us a new problem. She lived her world through her nurse’s world…and it took a lot of tact and love to make her discover a world for herself at first hand.”92 Additionally, since Buwei’s third daughter, Lensey, had gotten used to being the baby of the family, she also had to make major adjustments once her baby sister was back in the picture.

Once back in China, Buwei was able to hire amahs to help out with the children. These nannies were just as big a part in these children’s lives as their parents were—if perhaps not more. Having nannies around to help created extra time for Buwei to concentrate on her own pleasures and goals. Buwei recalled her dissatisfaction with being a housewife. “As housekeeping with a baby was less of a job for me in Peiping than in Cambridge, I started soon to look for outside activities. Not that I wasn’t going out every day, but I wanted to do something not connected with the household.”93 Buwei’s feelings on domesticity were starkly different from most of the other mothers discussed in this chapter. To escape the

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91 Ibid., 216.
92 Ibid., 257.
93 Ibid., 245.
domestic sphere, Buwei joined a theater group and helped with directing, make-up, and scene-setting.

Buwei Yang Chao definitely viewed her role as a mother in a very different way than had her own mother in the late imperial period. Her priorities for herself were different, as were her hopes for her daughters. Her advice to her daughters was as follows:

Get as much education and training as you can find opportunities for. Try to find work in your line for a while before getting married. Marriage and family will make serious inroads or interruptions in your work, and that cuts down on the chance of a woman’s getting to the highest degree of eminence in the professions, but that is not the same thing as saying that no married woman can attain eminence or that a married woman has to give up all her work for all time. No woman need be ashamed to have acquired a major interest in the development of the family. But in proportion to the largeness of interest and outlook she has acquired in her formative years, she will be able to make the growth of the family a help, instead of a hindrance, to her own growth. By the time the children are off her hands, she will find herself, not a back number in the larger society, but a prouder member of it.94

This advice is certainly in stark contrast to some of her contemporaries who still wished for their children to partake in arranged marriages, abide by the customs of filial piety, and live out their lives as they were planned by their parents. Where most of the other mothers discussed in this chapter put their children first no matter what, Buwei seemingly put herself first, not her children. Unlike Manzhen, who wanted to educate herself and involve herself in politics, but saw her children as most important, Buwei clearly saw her children as deterrents to her work and traveling lifestyle. Buwei’s role as a mother was very different to most Imperial period mothers where children were a mother’s main focus. Where Chinese mothers in the Imperial period had few opportunities to travel and needed their children (especially sons), Buwei’s role as a mother in the Republican period marks a striking change in Chinese cultural values as well as women’s roles outside the domestic sphere.

**MOTHERS IN TRANSITION**

With such a stark contrast between parenting roles and decisions, it is not surprising to think that there were many women (parents) who felt caught between the values of the past, and the changing values of the future.

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94 Ibid., 183.
Yu-fang, previously discussed in the section on mothers in the domestic sphere, was one of these women caught in between traditional and revolutionary values. The first sign of her rebellious nature was when she—not wanting to be a concubine anymore—ran away with her baby girl and hid her from her husband and his other wives. She even went so far as to proclaim her daughter dead so that she would not be sought after and taken away. For Yu-fang, this was a matter of survival, but it also signified her defiance against her family hierarchy to do what she thought was best for her and her child. Yu-fang’s second act of rebellion was when she remarried as a primary wife. Furthermore, she was faced with difficult decisions as her daughter grew up, wanted to go to school, marry for love, and join political parties.

Like many other families, Yu-fang’s family was forced to move several times during the Japanese occupations and the World Wars. The family was harassed by both Japanese and Kuomintang soldiers. Yu-fang protected her daughter many times when she was accused of political faults or thrown into jail. When her daughter was accused of being a Communist by the Kuomintang, she was taken to a torture center. When Yu-fang found out about her daughter’s ill fate, she traveled to the martial law headquarters every day to plead for her daughter’s safety. Yu-fang consistently re-evaluated her situation and did whatever was best for her child regardless of social custom, cultural attitudes, or personal values. Furthermore, despite any importance Yu-fang place on the domestic sphere, she clearly felt that her daughter’s safety was always more important.

Although Jung Chang’s grandmother, Yu-fang, had been opposed to concubinage and only wanted the best for her daughter, she still found herself caught between the values she was raised with and the changing values of society—and thus the changing values of her daughter. Yu-fang’s daughter not only wanted to go to school in a dorm so that she could become a teacher, she also wanted to be active in politics (to participate in China’s process of change), and she wanted to marry for love. Although Yu-fang supported her daughter, it was no less difficult for her to watch her daughter make drastically different decisions for herself than what was traditionally expected. Jung Chang wrote the following passage about her mother’s marriage as a communist in the early 1940s:

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On her wedding day at the age of 18, “my mother wrapped up her bedroll and her clothes and got ready to move into my father’s quarters. She wore her favorite pale-blue gown and a pale-blue silk scarf. My grandmother was appalled. It was unheard of for a bride to walk to the bridegroom’s house. The man had to get a sedan chair to carry her over. For a woman to walk was a sign that she was worthless and that the man did not really want her. ‘Who cares about that stuff now?’ said my mother as she tied up her bedroll. But my grandmother was more dismayed at the thought that her daughter was not going to have a magnificent traditional wedding. From the moment a baby girl was born, her mother would start putting things aside for her dowry. Following the custom, my mother’s trousseau contained a dozen satin-covered quilts and pillows with embroidered mandarin ducks, as well as curtains and a decorated pelmet for a four-poster bed. But my mother regarded traditional ceremony as old-fashioned and redundant. Both she and my father wanted to get rid of rituals like that, which they felt had nothing to do with their feelings. Love was the only thing that mattered to these two revolutionaries.”

Yu-fang attended her daughter’s non-traditional wedding with a confused heart that day. For the wedding date was not planned and she only knew that she was attending her daughter’s wedding when she arrived at the site by sedan chair. She was living in a different and surprising world, and although some families were not dramatically altered by war and disunity, many other families were greatly affected. Although she continued to teach her daughter about what she felt was important, and she may not have agreed with many things her daughter wanted, she tried to change her thinking for the sake of her daughter. For Yu-fang, the revolutionary spirit and its changes were undoubtedly confusing, but she changed her attitude accordingly always to protect her child—that was her role as a mother.

Yu-i, also previously discussed, was also a woman caught between her personal values and the changing values of society. Although as a young girl, Yu-i wished to study and become a modern woman, she followed her parent’s decisions for her to become a traditional woman. She was married as a young teenager and had her first child, a boy, at her in-laws home. Her husband never loved her, and escaped his fate by studying abroad in England for most of the year. As Yu-i had always wanted to study abroad, she went to meet up with her husband while leaving her son with her in-laws.

Unfortunately, Yu-i’s time abroad was very unlucky. She wanted so badly to be a modern woman, yet she did not know how. Her Confucian values were deeply ingrained and

96 Ibid., 129.
she did not know how to combine the two feelings. She became pregnant for a second time, and when she told her inattentive husband, he promptly told her to get an abortion and that he wanted a divorce. Yu-i was confused. She knew that her family in China would be so happy about the impending birth, yet her husband felt differently. With a lot of time alone to think, Yu-i decided the following:

I made the decision to disobey Hsu Chih-mo for the first time in my life, and to keep my child. During the past year in Swaston, when Hsu Chih-mo treated me coldly, ignored me, even told me to get an abortion, I chose to respect and obey him as my husband. But when he left me behind in Swaston without settling either household of family situation—neglecting his duty to me and to his unborn child—I stopped thinking that he was a good husband…I would not abandon my child in the same abrupt way Hsu Chih-mo had deserted me in Sawston.97

Treading in uncharted waters, and not knowing what to say to her family, Yu-i decided to stay in Europe and have her second child on her own. She gave birth to a second baby boy in Germany in 1922—the same year she signed the divorce papers. Again, she had wanted to be so modern, yet she did not really know what it meant to be modern, nor could she ignore all of the ways she had been taught to be a good Chinese mother and wife from her family. When it came time for her and her baby to be released from the hospital, Yu-i became frightened, and she begged the German doctor to keep her baby at the hospital for a while. She said, “I suddenly felt too scared to take the baby home with me. I did not know the first thing about taking care of an infant in Berlin. Where would I buy the blankets, the bottles, the crib? I had not prepared any of these things beforehand; I guess I thought I could ignore the child until he came. I was overwhelmed with the idea of raising him on my own.”98 In China, her in-laws had helped her prepare for motherhood and they guided her once her son was born. Now in Germany, she was alone and without the constant guidance of her family. Whether her instincts and knowledge of childcare were impeded by her fears, or she really did not know that much about childcare is quite interesting, however. For a woman who thought her role was destined to be inside the domestic sphere, her fear of raising a child on her own is intriguing. Perhaps her mother-in-law did most of the work without teaching Yu-i? Regardless, when she finally calmed down, she started a life as a single-mother in

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97 Chang, *Bound Feet and Western Dress*, 130.
98 Ibid., 139.
Germany and she went back to school. Unfortunately, her second son died at the early age of three, and unable to cope, Yu-i returned to China.

Back in China, Yu-i lived out the rest of her life in revolutionary limbo. During the 1930s, Yu-i was a very busy single mother. She worked at a bank, was general manager of the family clothing store, had a private tutor, helped her son with his homework, and still found time for mah-jongg and entertainment. She spent the majority of her time outside the domestic sphere. In 1934, she also became the Treasurer of the Nationalist Socialist Party (her brother’s political party). Additionally, despite her bitter divorce, Yu-i remained loyal and filial to her in-laws. Since they did not approve of their son’s new way of life, they moved in with Yu-i and A-huan, and continued to support them as their own. She said, “You ask me how I could run a bank, a dress shop, and still be so obedient to the Hsus and Hsu Chih-mo. I thought that I had a duty to the Hsus because they were my son’s grandparents, and therefore my elders. I grew up with these traditional values; I could not discard them, no matter how Western I became.”

Thus, despite the several hardships she faced in life, and the confusion she felt, Yu-i made it work. She remained true to the values that she felt were important, and she adapted to the changing ways of her world around her.

Other mothers were forced, not necessarily to change their views or values, but to accept the changing ways of their country by way of the politics, wars, or battles of the Republican period. Although Bingying’s mother wished her daughter to stay home and lead an identical life to her own, Bingying insisted on joining the Nationalist army in the fight against the warlords in the Northern Expedition. Bingying recalled a group of mothers saying goodbye to their children as they were leaving for war. “My child cannot go to fight the war—she’s the only one I have,” one mother said. Another woman shouted, “My daughter cannot go. What if something happens to her? I would not be able to live!” Although wars had been fought many times in Chinese history, it had been very unusual for mothers to say goodbye to their daughters before a fight, because most women had not fought as soldiers. In these situations, it did not matter what type of values a woman chose to parent by; they were

99 Ibid., 201.
100 Bingying, A Woman Soldier’s Own Story, 74.
101 Ibid.
all in the same position of sending off a daughter to war (not that it was any less difficult to send a son off to war). In this way, these mothers were all revolutionary.

In 1946, when the Communists were actively using guerilla tactics against the KMT, Jung Chang’s father was leading Communist troops into enemy territory. She wrote the following about her father’s experience:

There were a number of women in the unit, and my father decided to move them and the wounded and unfit to a more secure area to the south, near the Great Wall. This involved a long and hazardous journey through Kuomintang-held areas. Any noise might be fatal, so my father ordered all babies to be left behind with local peasants. One woman could not bring herself to abandon her child, and in the end my father told her she would have to choose between leaving her baby behind or being court-martialed. She left the baby.\textsuperscript{102}

Again, we see this reoccurring theme of mothers forced to abandon their children for various reasons. This story, although different in circumstance, is similar to those mothers in the Imperial period who had to abandon their children during times of famine or extreme poverty. To reiterate, Republican China was a period of change, uncertainty, and unfortunately, bloodshed; and the lives of many Chinese mothers were thus shaped by the political and social upheaval. With no cohesion, many mothers were faced to change their roles as parents and adapt to whatever change was thrown at them.

Despite the hardship that many families faced, or the struggles with familial values that mother and child argued about, these mothers felt that they were doing the best they could for their children. Even when Bingying got into trouble while playing outdoors, her mother still soothed her when she got hurt. One of the reasons that Chung-ai kept such a short leash on Ching-li was so that she could try and help her avoid suffering. All the times that Yu-fang disagreed with her daughter’s political and social wishes never took away the fact that she would do anything to protect her daughter. China as they knew it was changing all around them at a fast and confusing pace, and these mothers adapted to the circumstances around them or chose to alter their future as women, wives, and/or mothers.

\textsuperscript{102} Chang, \textit{Wild Swans}, 123.
CONCLUSION

In the case of any rapidly changing society, it is inevitable that people will respond to change in multiple ways. When reading about Republican China in history textbooks, one is bound to read about the warring political parties, the governmental reforms, the warlords, the Generals, and social reform. However, to look into the lives of mothers specifically during this period, and to compare their fates, gives us a more in-depth understanding of the complexities the time period brought about. The Republican period for women did not just symbolize rebellion, a change in workplace rights, or more opportunities for education. The women in this chapter have shown that the Republican period symbolized something different for everyone. The role of a mother did not define every woman. These mothers were activists, pacifists, rebels, fighters, educators, workers, writers, travelers, and so much more. There was no right or wrong way to parent and the women discussed in this chapter prove how varied women’s responses were and how conflicted many of them felt.

Expectations placed upon mothers varied from city to city, town to town, and even between sister to sister: the expectation to be a working mother, to arrange your daughter’s marriage, to be a political activist, to bind your daughter’s feet, to become an educated woman, to defy gender roles, to respect one’s in-laws, and the list is endless. Changing cultural attitudes and feelings of domestic responsibility also greatly shaped the diversified roles of mothers in the Republican period. The resulting feeling of conflict or confusion in the home was indicative of what was happening politically outside the home. In fact, the changes that occurred during the Republican period were just the tip of the iceberg.
CHAPTER THREE

LONG LIVE CHAIRMAN MAO; WHERE IS MY MOTHER?

“The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution must be carried on to the end,”
Chairman Mao said, and
“The class struggle shall never be forgotten.”
After the political meetings and teaching during the day,
every night Mama had to go back to work.
The party wanted her to study
Mao’s Little Red Book.
When night fell, all of the children were locked up at home.
To save energy.
No lights were left on for us.
Mama would get Gege and me to bed;
We heard her walking to the door,
Pulling the string attached to the light bulb;
Then in darkness, we could hear
The sound of her putting the lock on the door.
It was too early to fall asleep,
So we would call to each other,
Checking if the other was asleep.
Our friend Maomao was four years old
And lived right next door.
Being left alone all by herself,
She cried loud every night,
with such a bright voice,
angry, stubborn, and sad.
The whole building of locked-up children
Listened to Maomao’s cries night after night.
Sometimes in the middle of the night
I woke up to the sound
Of Mama unlocking the door.
I heard her come inside,
Sit down on a wooden bench in the kitchen,
And sigh alone in the quietness of the night.

--Chun Yu

When Night Fell
INTRODUCTION

For almost a full decade after the Chinese Communist Party took over in 1949, the future looked bright in China. The 1950 Marriage Law had promised more equal rights for women and men, with its main benefits being free choice in marriage and divorce. The government was keen on education for both sexes and more women were encouraged to join the labor force. Towards the end of the 1950s, however, Chairman Mao decided to try something more radical. Between the years of 1957 and 1962, The Great Leap Forward (GLF) was set into action as a means to rapidly transform China into a modern socialist country. Incredibly unsuccessful, this campaign ended in tragedy with the starvation and death of millions.

During the GLF, however, millions of women were mobilized into the labor force in order to maximize production. Women’s traditional roles were questioned and collectivization meant that traditional tasks such as childcare and cooking were taken over by the community. According to Phyllis Andors, “politically and socially, Great Leap policies were to foster female participation and struggle, allowing women to contribute to China’s rapid modernization while moving toward equality—two oft repeated goals by the CCP regarding women. But the goal of equality was more often emphasized in women’s magazines and Women’s Federation directives than in labor mobilization directives issued by the Party or government.” Unfortunately, collectivization efforts to help women with their traditional roles were often inadequate; thus, many women became victims of what Andors termed the “double burden.” In this double burden, millions of women worked doubly to be both producers and reproducers. While there were big differences between life in urban areas and rural areas during the GLF, the failure of the campaign and the famine that affected millions left the CCP in need of a different approach.

In 1966 Mao Zedong launched a new campaign called the Great Proletarian Revolution, or the Cultural Revolution. Chairman Mao felt that the reason that China was not moving forward fast enough was due to the infiltration of capitalist and bourgeois attitudes. Thus the Cultural Revolution was born under the idea of class struggle and the elimination of

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104 Ibid., 84.
revisionists. Mao built up support through the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), his wife, disillusioned workers, and the country’s youth—mostly city kids and college students. Millions of students and youths gathered as Red Guards to carry out Mao’s order to destroy the four olds: old ideas, habits, customs, and culture. Many people volunteered or were sent involuntarily to the countryside in order to be reeducated by peasants; and many people (parents too) were involuntarily sent to reeducation camps, sometimes for many years. For the first time, millions of Chinese youth had the freedom to travel and do whatever they wanted, all in the name of their leader. Many children denounced their parents and other family members, accusing them of bourgeois attitudes. Parents who were not taken away to reeducation camps were often absent from the homes anyways due to their jobs and their duties to the Party. In effect, the Cultural Revolution finally turned traditional China upside down.

When the dust settled, after Mao’s death in 1976, mass numbers of people had been moved about, beaten, starved, detained, murdered, and taken from their families, and what remained was confusion, suspicion, distrust, and fear. For women, the Cultural Revolution can be seen in many different lights. In some respects, women gained more freedom and equality. Many young women were given the opportunities to travel and to be leaders. Conversely, in the name of class struggle, women were expected to dress and act like men; individuality and femininity were considered bourgeois. Women’s traditional roles of parenting were often stripped away as women were encouraged to work long hours. Rural mothers often worked longer hours in the fields and acted as host families to city children who came for reeducation. Essentially, people never knew what to expect, so walking on eggshells became a way of life. Chairman Mao continued to dramatically alter the way of life for millions of Chinese until his death in 1976.

This period in Chinese history has left lasting impressions on many Chinese people, and thus a wealth of information has been published through case studies, memoirs, autobiographies, and even artwork and photographs. This chapter will focus on the lives of mothers during the years of Mao’s two radical reform movements. Through the voices of children and mothers alike, it becomes clear how drastically different this period of time was

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105 Schoppa, Revolution and its Past, 351.
for everyone, including parents. The roles and expectations of mothers continued to change during these decades to include more work outside the home and less time spent with family. Many mothers simply became absentee parents—some with enthusiasm for the Party’s cause and others because they had no choice. During the Great Leap Forward, millions of starving (mostly rural) mothers were forced to make the most difficult of decisions, and during the Cultural Revolution, many mothers (mostly urban) were demoted to ranks well below their children. Overall, the roles and expectations of mothers under Mao were constrained under unprecedented levels of devotion to the state, to the Party, and to Mao Zedong—the most respected parent of all.

**Chinese Mothers and the Great Leap Forward**

The effects of the Great Leap Forward varied between urban and rural households, and the degrees of devastation have been recorded differently over time, but what is important here is how this campaign affected the lives of Chinese mothers. We already know that many women’s lives were changed with their “liberation,” their participation in the labor force, collectivization efforts, and party participation in the 1950s. We know that traditional conceptions of motherhood were challenged with these new “liberations,” and that millions of people died from starvation during the Great Leap Forward Famine. Through women’s personal stories, this section will focus on the extent and ways in which the roles of mothers were affected by the Great Leap Forward.

Chow Ching-li, introduced in the previous chapter, was married at thirteen and became a mother at the tender age of fourteen (1950). By 1958, she had two children, and worked as a state pianist in Shanghai, where both her in-laws and her natal family lived. At eight years old, her son was already being taught in school the value of work and how to be a good party member. Although, “at the start, the Great Leap Forward was welcomed with frenzied enthusiasm by the people,” Chow said, “China was not ready for industrialization…and soon we found ourselves short on supplies of all kinds.” 106

It was not long before the family was rationing small amounts of food to try and save each other, and Chow wound up with two sick children, a sick husband, and a sick father. Spending day and

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night caring for her malnourished family, this city mother had to resign from her job while she turned to the black market for food and supplies. It took her three months of hard work and depression to get her family well again so that she could return to work. Although she never worked in a factory, she was not keen on the idea of going to work in one. Chow Ching-li was pleased to have her job back as a pianist. Although this made her happy, she still saw the effects of the GLF on many other family members and friends who were not as fortunate. Unfortunately, Chow Ching-li’s husband died in 1962, leaving her a widow at the age of twenty-six. She had obeyed her parents, entered a traditional arranged marriage, lived with her in-laws, and now her future was uncertain. Chow said, “I realized that only these two children were giving me the strength to go on.” Her family was torn apart in different directions by Mao’s campaigns, and thus, during the Great Leap Forward, Chow Ching-li had to figure out her own way as a single mother for the first time.

Jung Chang, also introduced in the previous chapter, was a young girl who, like Chow, lived in urban China during the Great Leap Forward. She remembers her life and her family during that period in her book, *Wild Swans*. Since her parents were high-level party officials, Jung Chang’s family was awarded larger rations. Still, in contrast to the filial piety famine stories discussed in chapter one, she recalls the adults in her family were very skinny because they always gave their portions to the children, and some of her elders suffered from edema. Many of her family members who lived outside her compound died of starvation. Jung Chang’s mother even managed to become pregnant once in 1959 and again in 1961; she opted for abortion, however, in 1959 because she did not think she could feed another child.\(^\text{107}\) While Chow Ching-li was mostly around for her children, and Jung Chang remembers the years of the GLF spent with both parents, many other people tell stories of absentee parents.

Rae Yang, author of *Spider Eaters*, was born in 1950 and also grew up in urban China. She recalls seeing her parents the least out of all her family members.\(^\text{108}\) In fact, after the CCP seriously began encouraging women to join the labor force in the early 1950s, it was not uncommon for children to be raised almost entirely by nannies, or “Aunts” as they were...

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affectionately called. Many of these nannies were usually from rural China, and although many had children of their own somewhere else, in effect became mothers to other’s children for pay. There is a certain irony here in these cases where nannies, who were absentee mothers themselves, turned around to act as mother figures for other children with absent parents. As Rae recalls the love and warmth she felt from her Aunty, she wonders why she never felt that affection from her own mother. Rae Yang states in her memoir, “Sometimes I wonder why my mother never held me in her arms or called me by those funny ‘little names,’ as Aunty and other people’s mothers did. And she never kissed me or Lian or said, ‘I love you.’ Maybe she was ashamed of doing so because she was a professional woman and a cadre?”

Throughout her memoir, Rae contemplates her mother’s love for her and the different ways she did or did not show her compassionate side.

In good favor with the Party, Rae’s parents were still entitled to a bit of money during the beginning of the GLF. She recalls going around the city with her “Aunty” to find the best deals on food for the family. Again, in contrast to the 1870’s famine morality plays, when rations became tighter, her mother voluntarily went hungry in order to feed her children healthier portions. Her health was seriously compromised for the rest of her life due to her malnutrition during the Great Leap. Oddly enough, like Jung Chang’s mother, Rae’s mother also managed to become pregnant in her state of malnutrition. According to Rae, “the baby…Mother and Father named Yue, which means Leap, to commemorate the Great Leap Forward. This name seems really ironic today. But back in 1960, most people who lived in cities were unaware of the link between the Great Leap Forward and the famine.”

However, despite the official news coming from Mao and the Party (which did not admit the existence of famine, only of “natural disasters”), urban and party-cadre families during this time still felt some of the effects of the Great Leap’s failures.

In the countryside, millions of women were mobilized to work—in the fields, in the communes, in the streets. Some cadre leaders were sympathetic to a pregnant woman’s condition or to a mother with small children, but mostly, women were made to work

109 Ibid., 61.
110 Ibid., 60.
111 Ibid., 61.
regardless of their condition. Frank Dikotter vividly describes the poor conditions of most nurseries and kindergartens (both rural and urban). Through his research, he suggests that thousands of children were neglected, abused, and starved in these facilities, leaving parents no choice but to risk their child’s life in the communes or risk both of their lives by bringing them to work.\textsuperscript{112} Furthermore, Dikotter discusses the effects of child labor on parents—that many parents no longer held authority over their own children, and instead their children were bossed around by cadre leaders.\textsuperscript{113} Losing control over her own family, a mother was expected to act as if the entire population was her family, her children; and her first duty was to the population. Even more contradictory were the many instances where the roles of mother and child were reversed. In traditional Chinese culture, children were expected to care for their elderly parents through filial piety. During the Great Leap, many young children (even as young as four years old) were forced to care for their sickly parents by working in the fields, fighting off hungry adults in the communes for food to bring back to the parents, and answering the demands of daily life.\textsuperscript{114}

Unfortunately, the GLF had even bigger consequences on many rural families and millions of mothers (and fathers) were forced to make difficult life-altering decisions. The devastating famine that has so famously characterized the Great Leap Forward dramatically distorted any sense of traditional motherhood roles. When there was nothing left to eat, and women’s breast milk had long dried up due to malnutrition, desperate mothers like their late-Qing and Rebublican counterparts, resorted to child abandonment and even cannibalism. Jasper Becker has given several accounts in his book, \textit{Hungry Ghosts: Mao’s Secret Famine}, of parents who sold their children in the cities, or left their children in dug-out holes on the side of the road, in mine shafts, at railway stations, or hospitals.\textsuperscript{115} Although Becker is a journalist, and a journalist’s job is usually to sensationalize, his research includes many eye witness accounts, and their voices should not be ignored. The following story is told by a


\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 247.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 249.

During that winter of 1959, there was an event which occurred in my hospital. The nurse of the night shift went upstairs to go to bed. She stumbled over something and screamed in panic. People came running, thinking she had been attacked. After a while when she could speak, she said she had found a strange object on the stairs leading to the third floor. Others followed her there and found a small cardboard box in which a baby lay wrapped in cotton rags. On a scrap of old newspaper were written the words: ‘To kind-hearted people, please look after her. From a mother who regrets her faults.’ At the beginning, only female babies were abandoned but later on boys were left behind by those who hoped the hospital would feed them.\(^{116}\)

Even more saddening were those parents who felt so helpless due to starvation that they decided to eat their own children (both boys and girls) for survival. Consider the following statement by a woman who lived near Fengyang during the winter of 1959-1960:

> In one of our neighbors’ houses, three boys and a girl starved. In one brother’s family two children died. Another family of sixteen died. Many families disappeared completely with no survivors at all. The production team chief’s daughter-in-law and his grandson starved to death. He then boiled and ate the corpse of the child but he also died. When the village teacher was on the verge of death, he said to his wife, ‘Why should we keep our child? If we eat him then I can survive and later we can produce another child.’ His wife refused to do this and her husband died.\(^ {117}\)

In another account, a mother and father strangled their eight-year-old son, boiled, and ate him.\(^ {118}\) Jung Chang also recalled some stories about a man who had eaten his own son and about a couple who kidnapped other people’s children, killed them, and sold their flesh as rabbit meat on the streets.\(^ {119}\) Another survivor claimed that “the worst thing that happened during the famine was this: parents would decide to let the old and the young to die first.”\(^ {120}\)

Allowing the elderly to starve first was a strikingly different view of morality than what was described in Chapter One. No longer was it most important to save the elderly above all costs; it seems as though decisions were made more haphazardly, and personal survival was

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 153.

\(^{117}\) Ibid., 136.

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 137.

\(^{119}\) Chang, *Wild Swans*, 234.

\(^{120}\) Becker, *Hungry Ghosts*, 138.
most important. As a mother in particular, deciding to starve yourself, your child, or your husband for survival is unthinkable; then deciding whether or not to consume your own child’s flesh adds a whole new dimension to the role of motherhood. What would Mao and the Party have preferred? Would it have been preferable for mothers to save themselves as producers and reproducers of the state? Or would it have been more preferable to save the future generation of China? Either way, Mao was in denial about the extent of the famine, so such questions probably did not enter into Party discussion.

The roles and expectations of motherhood during the late 1950s and early 1960s were definitely defined largely by the government, Mao Zedong’s radical campaigns, a woman’s geographic location, socioeconomic status, and social status. During the more profitable years before and after the Great Leap Famine, many Chinese mothers were learning to balance home life, work life, and life as Communists. Some mothers were still living in a more traditional situation with in-laws, some mothers hired nannies, worked countless hours, and hardly saw their children, and some mothers just tried their best to balance Party demands with the demands of being a mother and a housewife. Most urban children attended school, and education was thought to be important at this time. Unlike during the Republican period, many mothers encouraged both their sons and daughters to be high achievers in school and wanted their children to go to college. The mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship dichotomy was also often changed due to women’s roles in the work force. However, in the crucial years of the GL famine, many mothers and fathers alike were forced to make difficult decisions in order to comply with Party rules and, unfortunately, to avoid starvation and death. The roles and expectations of mothers in China were greatly altered with Mao’s arrival; and his next phase of campaigns would prove no different.

**Chinese Mothers and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution**

The years of the Cultural Revolution were arguably even more confusing than any years prior. While millions of people, especially women, were thinking that they were gaining liberation, Mao’s Cultural Revolution in fact severely restricted most urban people’s freedom (with the exception of the Red Guards). Mao’s policies changed rapidly in the 1960s and early 70s. One day intellectuals were on top, and the next day they were on bottom. One day people were migrating to the cities, and the next day mass amounts of people were sent
to the countryside. Parents were often taken away from their families in this same fashion. Many children watched their Communist Party member parents as they were dragged away by Red Guards only to be publicly humiliated and attacked as “Capitalist Roaders” or “Bourgeois” or “Counter-revolutionary.” Everyone’s backgrounds were checked. If someone’s family member had been a Nationalist, or had money, or were intellectuals, they were automatically suspected as counter-revolutionaries. Red Guards ransacked houses and if they found any item—a love letter, a painting, potted plants, a wedding dress—they could drag the parents into the streets and beat them. Many parents were taken away from their families, leaving their children orphans, for months or even years at a time—some went to reeducation labor camps, some were detained in schools or in their place of work. Ultimately, the Cultural Revolution signified yet another major change in the roles and expectations of Chinese mothers—a change that often times took that primary role of parenthood away.

The poem at the beginning of this chapter was written by Chun Yu, author of *Little Green: Growing Up During the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Born in 1966 at the start of the revolution, her memories are from a young child’s point of view, yet she distinctly remembers the lonely nights without her mother and the sad fact that she did not know her father until she was eleven years old. The family home was in a small city (the author does not specify which city), but she and her siblings lived with their mother in the country where her mother was a teacher. Her father was sent away for reeducation at the May Seventh Cadre School.121 With her father away and her mother busy at work, Chun Yu spent a lot of time with her grandmother and occasional nannies. Her mother worked all day long, came home for dinner, and then had to return to work and her duties to the Party.122 When she gave birth to her third child (her mother was allowed occasional visitations to her father), she did so without her husband’s presence, and she was forced to return to work very shortly after birth. Chun Yu watched her mother be criticized in public, although her mother was able to defend herself before getting into worse trouble.123 In 1973, Chun Yu took two of her three

122 Ibid., 17.
123 Ibid., 35.
children and moved back to the city in hopes that her husband would return soon. Her youngest child remained in the country with grandma until she was old enough to go to school and join the rest of the family (Chun’s mother did not have time to care for a baby full time). 124 This mother had to do what she could in order to raise her children without her husband’s help in addition to avoiding any trouble with the Party or Red Guards. In her case, this often meant leaving her children to be raised by family and hired help.

Zhu Xiao Di, author of Thirty Years in a Red House: A Memoir of Childhood and Youth in Communist China, also remembers the absence of his parents during the Cultural Revolution. Born in 1958 in Nanjing, Xiao Di’s parents were both very involved in the Party (they were another CCP elite family) and in their jobs, thus he did not see them very much. He recalled:

As a young child, I did not have much chance to be with my parents or sister. The one I saw least was my mother. When I was three years old she began to manage a local opera group. The group gave performances almost every night, and Mother always stayed at the theater until the performance was over. By the time she came home, I was asleep. There was a black-and-white photo of her on the desk in her bedroom. I remembered her face by looking at that picture more often than her.

Much like Rae Yang, Xiao Di had fond memories of his “Aunt” and considered her to be family and the closest person to him. 125 Xiao Di’s love for his parents was indirect; he learned to admire them from observing how other people respected them. Since his mother was always at work, and she took her work very seriously, she often missed out on her children’s accomplishments and their stories at the dinner table. 127 However, while one night she was revered in her position, the next night a rebel Red Guard group came to her home to denounce her. Both of Xiao Di’s parents were denounced and criticized in front of him and taken away to be detained. 128

124 Ibid., 62.
125 Xiao Di Zhu, Thirty Years in a Red House: A Memoir of Childhood and Youth in Communist China (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 15.
126 Ibid., 12.
127 Ibid., 27.
128 Ibid., 68.
When Xiao Di’s older sister was sent to the countryside as part of Mao’s reeducation campaign, their mother was still in detention. She wanted to come home to make sure that her daughter was sent some place safe, perhaps near distant relatives even. Xiao Di recalled, “Although my mother was detained at the time, her maternal concern made her brave enough to confront the rebels, asking for a days leave to go home and handle the issue. Because she had been a beloved leader, many rebels were sympathetic and they issued a special permit.” Xiao Di’s mother and father were detained on and off again for many years. Sometimes they were allowed to come home on Sundays and sometimes they were not allowed visitors at all. Xiao Di spent these years taking turns, visiting his father one weekend and his mother the next. When eventually they were allowed home in the mid-1970s, Xiao Di’s parents were thin, gaunt, and worn down. He could tell that his mother, especially had suffered a lot and was severely depressed upon her final freedom—she had been on suicide watch for quite some time.

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, Xiao Di’s mother was a devoted Party member and she worked hard at her job; she worked so hard that her own child regularly remembered her face by a photograph. When she was locked up in a detention camp, her busy and free life came to a halt, and she was still unable to get to know her children, since she was forced to live away from them. Her role as a mother bore no resemblance to the experience of mothers in imperial China. She was a mother under Mao.

Nanchu, author of *Red Sorrow*, was a young teenager at the start of the Cultural Revolution and also grew up in an urban elite family in Shanghai. Her mother was a school administrator, her father was a university school official, and both parents were veteran Party members. Her story is one that represents the many parents who were publicly humiliated and tortured during the CR. The first time it happened, Nacnhu’s family was sitting down to dinner when a group of Red Guards came to ransack their house. She recalls this frightful moment in the following passage:

> When angry voices threatened to break down the door, Father’s trembling hand finally managed to turn the handle. Suddenly our home was filled with young Red Guards. They grabbed my parents and shoved them into the living room, forcing them down on their knees to face the east and repent to Chairman Mao. An

129 Ibid., 70.
enormous brush moved back and forth, painting their horrified faces with dripping black ink. Tall paper hats were set on their heads, sinking almost to their noses. These Red Guards belonged to Shanghai Hudong University, where Father was the rector.130

The Red Guards found a love letter written by Nanchu’s father; he was having an affair, and her father’s secret was now exposed to the world. Her mother attended his beatings with her head down as people accused her family of being counterrevolutionaries. However, this mother could only comfort her children for a short time before she too was publicly denounced and taken into detention. Nanchu came home one day to find her mother missing. When she looked out the window, she was horrified. She recalls this incident in the following passage:

I saw Mother, secured to the ladder rungs [of a fire truck] with several leather belts. She clenched her teeth as if enduring great pain. Her lips were dark purple, and the corners trembled. Disgrace made her face miserable, and her dishelved hair blew in the bitter wind…A group of Red Guards who had been deposited by the fire engine were now painting a slogan on the sidewalk: ‘Down with An Hong, the Evil Hand behind the antirevolutionary current in our school!’… The Red Guards intended for thousands of passing pedestrians to trample her name each day.131

An Hong, Nanchu’s mother, came from the family of a Kuomintang officer, so upon her arrest, she questioned herself, “Am I the Evil Hand? Am I a counterrevolutionary?”132 An Hong was detained in solitary confinement for six months. In the mean time, her children were orphans. With her parent’s salaries taken away, Nanchu, at the age of thirteen, was forced to look after herself and younger brother with no money. People teased them in the streets, beat them up, and called them names. Gangs of children camped outside their house and tormented Nanchu and her brother at all times. Unfortunately, An Hong and her husband were helpless to stop any of the torment; they could not assume their roles as parents. As far as Chairman Mao and the Red Guards were concerned, these two parents were fulfilling their expectations, to pay for their counterrevolutionary backgrounds.

131 Ibid., 30-31.
132 Ibid., 32.
Almost as soon as An Hong was released from detention, Nanchu was sent to the countryside for her reeducation, and An Hong had to part from her daughter again. Then the unexpected happened again. While in the countryside, Nanchu was badly injured in a fire and had to be hospitalized for a long time. As an exception to the rule, An Hong received permission to visit her daughter. As Nanchu had been badly burned, An Hong had been preparing her own skin to be donated for a transplant. She began messaging her belly many times a day with alcohol to keep it elastic.\footnote{Ibid., 133.} She said, “I was so embarrassed. Imagine a woman opening her shirt from time to time to caress her belly. People thought I was crazy. Men cast sidelong glances at me. Some even turned their backs. Women stared at me critically. I thought they would report me. But I didn’t care too much. You are my priority.”\footnote{Ibid.} An Hong stayed with her daughter long enough to see her heal and to hear all about her life at the camp. Other teenagers confided in An Hong as well, feeling some sort of maternal comfort in her while away from their own families. Before she left however, her advice to both her children (as both Nanchu and her older brother were stationed at the same camp) was to stay away from the opposite sex. Although this advice does not seem very different from the advice that would have been given from mother to child in previous decades (to stay away from the opposite sex before marriage), this mother’s advice was different. This advice had to do with following Party rules and about her children going to college. When her son, Ming, told her that he had met a girl in his unit, she said, “Observe the rules. Don’t see girls—better not to look at them at all…you must have hope. If you marry a local leader, then you will never go to college.”\footnote{Ibid., 137-38.} Similarly, she told her daughter, “Don’t see any young men! Don’t fall in love with any of them! Like girls to Ming, boys to you are the root of all trouble.”\footnote{Ibid., 139.} Not only did this mother want to make sure her children followed Party rules (for young people not to date and to focus on their revolution), but first and foremost she wanted to protect her children even when she could not be physically present. Times had really changed, and China had really changed, and motherhood had changed.
according to political and social reform. However, the instinctive role of a mother to protect her children (when she could) had not changed.

**CONCLUSION**

Motherhood during the Cultural Revolution, particularly for educated Party members, was a far reach from decades before. Mothers were working more than ever, both in urban areas and in rural areas. Women had once been encouraged (only a few years prior) to liberate themselves, to attend school, to find work in the cities, and above all to trust Chairman Mao. The 1960s and 70s instead were riddled with confusion. Party members, intellectuals, and teachers got in trouble for almost everything imaginable. There was no telling what was right or wrong anymore. Everything turned upside down. As Nanchu put it, “From the start of the Cultural Revolution, the state-run propaganda machine had never ceased proclaiming that ‘the ignorant are the greatest’ and ‘the more knowledge one has, the more counterrevolutionary one becomes.’ Lies told a thousand times became irrefutable truth.”  

Just like the state, motherhood was also turned upside-down. Everything that a mother’s instinct might tell her is right, was in fact wrong in Mao’s China. Consequently, millions of children of the CR generation grew up practically motherless. Author Irving Epstein said:

> As a result of the Cultural Revolution, youth born during that time failed to obtain a clear understanding of right and wrong, as authority relationships between children and parents, as well as between citizens and government officials, were easily and regularly compromised. A significant number of youth who later got into trouble had parents who themselves were incarcerated or detained during the Cultural Revolution; certainly the political factionalism that encouraged relatives to inform on one another weakened traditional family ties.  

Perhaps Mao did not think through his campaigns completely. Perhaps he was just stubborn. There is much scholarship and many theories on Chairman Mao which will not be addressed here. What is important here is how millions of Chinese mothers were affected by his decisions.

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137 Ibid., 45.

Chairman Mao died in 1976. Although the whole country mourned his death, and many people still revere him today, the government knew that things had to change in order for China to bounce back and flourish once again. Despite Mao’s ability to arouse the people in an unprecedented way, the fact remains that millions of people were brought misfortune though his extremism. In terms of motherhood, the major themes to be taken out of Mao’s radical campaigns during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s are the following: absent mothers, desperate mothers, tortured mothers, dedicated mothers (sometimes to the Party and sometimes to their family), sacrificing mothers, and loving mothers. The Great Leap Forward put millions of rural mothers into despicable situations of extreme sacrifice and later the Cultural Revolution took millions of educated urban mothers away from their families. The experiences of the women in this chapter certainly do not speak for all Chinese mother during this time. Specifically, it is important to understand how social class, economics, and geographic location all played important roles on the effects of Mao’s campaigns. The Great Leap Forward and its tragedies mostly affected rural and poor families. While the Cultural Revolution certainly affected everyone in the country variably, the women’s stories presented in this chapter mostly represent the more urban elite (Party members, middle to upper social class, and the educated). Thus, while this chapter does not represent all Chinese mothers during Chairman Mao’s rule, it gives us an idea of how drastically life changed for some mothers once again. The next chapter will focus on what happened after Mao’s death and how Chinese mothers of the 1980s, 90s, and twenty-first century have dealt with China’s modernization efforts and the One-Child-Policy.
CHAPTER FOUR

CHINESE MOTHERS: AGENTS OF NATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Life is full of conflicts, gains, and losses. Which one of them should I put first: my career, my personal life, or my baby? Without much hesitation, I choose the little life that I care for almost every minute. I gave up the chance to be promoted because it may come again. However, if I missed the wonderful moments of my baby’s growth, they would be lost forever. I will treasure these moments and enjoy both the hardships and joy of motherhood to my heart’s content.

--Yahui Zhang


The concept of balancing a woman’s many roles as career woman, wife, daughter, friend, and mother is not just unique to China. The quote above could have easily been written by a mother anywhere else in the world. What is unique about this quote is the fact that the author is Chinese, and this mother has had her reproductive rights restricted. The implementation of the One-Child Policy in China has not only had an effect on the Chinese family structure, but also the expectations of mothers. Within the past 90-100 years, Chinese motherhood has been transformed drastically right alongside Chinese politics, economics, and culture. With the advent of the One-Child Policy in 1979, most Chinese mothers have had no choice but to adapt to the life of a smaller, more nuclear, family structure.

In 1949 Mao Zedong made the following statement on the subjects of birth control and family planning:

It is a very good thing that China has a big population. Even if China’s population multiplies many times, she is fully capable of finding a solution; the solution is production. The absurd argument of Western bourgeois economists like Malthus that increases in food cannot keep pace with the increases in population was not only thoroughly refuted in theory by Marxists long ago but has also been exploded by the realities in the Soviet Union and the Liberated Areas of China.
...Revolution plus production can solve the problem of feeding the population.\textsuperscript{139}

Although there were several influential supporters of birth control and family planning in the government such as Vice-Chairman Liu Shaoqi, Premier Zhou Enlai, and Deng Xiaoping, in the 1950s-70s Chairman Mao managed to squelch every idea of population control with his radical convictions. The topic of birth control was put on the table repeatedly throughout his time in power, usually in between Mao’s most radical campaigns (i.e. The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution). Following the GLF in 1963, Premier Zhou Enlai said, “a large population is a good thing, but as we are the most populous country in the world, we already have plenty of this good thing, and if we let the population grow rapidly in an unplanned manner, it won’t be a good thing anymore.”\textsuperscript{140} Unfortunately, the Cultural Revolution soon took precedence over any thoughts of birth control, and Mao was once again able to silence the issue. This struggle continued until Mao’s death in 1976 when the nation was suddenly faced with the facts—that millions of Chinese people were still without adequate nutrition and changes needed to be made.

Susan Greenhalgh, author of \textit{Just One Child: Science and Policy in Deng’s China} has done a one-of-a-kind study on the origins of the One Child Policy. In her research, she found that while most sciences were abolished during the Mao years, due to continuing external threats, Mao made one exception in the field of military science. Greenhalgh states, “In the Mao era scientists and engineers working on strategic weapons were a privileged and powerful group. They had access to foreign literature, to data and to computers with which to analyze them.”\textsuperscript{141} Song Jian was one of Mao’s most prized missile scientists. By 1965 Song had become “the nation’s leading control theorist and a foremost expert on missile guidance and control systems,” claims Greenhalgh, and it was Song who mysteriously authored the One Child Policy.\textsuperscript{142}


\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 32.


\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
Upon Chairman Mao’s death in 1976, the only science that had been fostered was military science; thus, when China’s leaders faced the daunting task of modernization, they only had a small group of intellectuals to turn to. According to Greenhalgh’s thesis, “Song’s background in the defense science establishment and his status as an elite scientist gave him the scientific, political, and cultural resources and the self-confidence to redefine the nation’s population problem, create a radically new ‘scientific’ solution to it, and persuade China’s leaders that his policy of one child for all was the only way out of China’s demographic impasse.” Therefore, according to Greenhalgh’s extensive research, China’s One Child Policy was not born out of population science per se, but instead it was built upon the limited scientific resources China was left with in the wake of Mao.

In the years following the policy’s implementation in 1979, the study of demographics and population control grew tremendously in China as the nation opened itself back up to the sciences. Many concessions, sanctions, and incentives were stopped and started based upon what worked and what did not work. Various methods of birth control and sterilization were introduced and enforced with varying success. Leniencies were accepted for some rural people and ethnic minorities, and the limit was changed from one to two children under extenuating circumstances. Sanctions were enforced in some areas, while incentives became more popular in other areas. As the first decade of the policy passed, the Chinese government tried to work out the kinks while simultaneously attempting to jump into the modern age (in competition with the West). Today, the policy is still enforced to ranging degrees in different parts of China, and has become a part of everyday life. Rural Chinese, the majority of the population, as well as ethnic minorities are allowed to have two children. Exceptions also are made for couples who have lost their only child—they may try for another. Birth control options are also more widely available, and maternal healthcare has come a long way since the Mao years.

While the One-Child Policy has met some of its demographic goals, it has had many implications for the population, and in particular, for China’s mothers in urban areas. Although many societal and traditional pressures weigh on Chinese mothers, with only one child to dote on, the biggest pressure seems to be internal. This chapter not only discusses the

143 Ibid., 255.
many roles and expectations of Chinese mothers since the implementation of the One-Child Policy in 1979; this chapter discusses how and why Chinese mothers put so much pressure on themselves to be, and to do, the very best for their one and only child. The sources I have used in this chapter vary between rich secondary sources such as Vanessa Fong’s *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China’s One-Child Policy*, medical and scientific studies on motherhood in China, and Internet blogs. All three types of sources have provided fruitful primary source material from various perspectives. Fong interviewed both mothers and children in Dalian, a large coastal city in northeastern China, about their experiences with the One Child Policy. The medical and scientific journals provided unique perspectives from researchers and Chinese mothers alike on issues such as breastfeeding and parenting anxieties. Lastly, since I cannot read the Chinese Internet blogs, I used a dissertation, *Layered Motherhood for Chinese Mother Bloggers: A Feminist Foucauldian Analysis* (2008) by Zhang Yahui in which the author translated a plethora of blog excerpts. Using the Internet blogs provided by Zhang proved very helpful in finding contemporary, mainly urban, women’s voices. In these blogs, such as www.sina.com.cn, Chinese mothers have used these forums to connect with other mothers around the world and share their stories.

**Societal Pressures on Chinese Mothers**

Article six of The People’s Republic of China’s marriage Law states, “No marriage may be contracted before the man has reached 22 years of age and the woman 20 years of age. Late marriage and late childbirth shall be encouraged.”

Furthermore, in regards to having children, article twenty-one states:

Parents shall have the duty to bring up and educate their children; children shall have the duty to support and assist their parents. If parents fail to perform their duty, children who are minors or who are incapable of living on their own shall have the right to demand the cost of upbringing from their parents. If children fail to perform their duty, parents who are unable to work or have difficulties in providing for themselves shall have the right to demand support payments from their children. Infant drowning, deserting and any other acts causing serious harm to infants and infanticide shall be prohibited.

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145 Ibid.
With such late marriage provisions in place, the encouragement for advanced education, and the pressure for families to provide the best for their singletons, many young people are choosing to postpone their family lives for careers and social freedom. However, when couples do decide to have a child, societal pressures are fierce. With state regulations prohibiting early marriage and encouraging postponed pregnancies, the pressure to financially plan your family life has been substantial on both mothers and fathers to be. One young mother stressed her financial anxieties when planning for her child: “When you have a baby, you have to save a lot of money. But for us, it is such a great burden. When I think about it, I am so worried that I cannot sleep.”\textsuperscript{146}

Another mother of a teenage daughter spoke to Vanessa Fong about the monetary constraints on parents of singletons in the 1990s. She explained to Fong that although she has provided more material goods to her daughter than she had when she was a child, she still felt that she had never been more poor.\textsuperscript{147} Li Na’s mother grew up in a larger family with several siblings. Only her father worked, and her mother took care of the family. They did not have fancy electronics, “no one else did either,” she said, “so we didn’t even think about them.”\textsuperscript{148} As a mother, her and her husband have both had to work full time just to get by in today’s competitive market. When she was a child, her education was free. Even with only one child, she and her husband have had to worry constantly about how to pay for their daughter’s education:

Li Na comes home asking for more money for school fees every few weeks. She sees a friend with name brand clothing and wants it too. Our neighbors have home theater systems, and it’s embarrassing that we don’t. I never felt this poor when I was small.\textsuperscript{149}

With China’s modernization efforts in full effect, the societal pressures of an up-and-coming first world country have created new anxieties for parents. Understanding these pressures has also created a different need for family planning. With only one child to raise, the pressure to


\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.
raise the best, the smartest, and the most successful son or daughter is immense—and these pressures start with prenatal care and the first days of infant life.

Quickly improving medical technologies in China have allowed women to access prenatal care more easily. One study conducted by *The Journal of Social Science and Medicine* (2001) found that women’s access to prenatal care was encouraged most times, however, if a mother was facing an unapproved pregnancy, most likely of a second child, her likelihood to receive prenatal care diminished. If a mother was on an approved pregnancy plan, then her obstetric services are most often paid for as incentive. Mothers who faced unapproved pregnancies were subject to pay higher prices for prenatal care services. Furthermore, unapproved pregnancies have been subject to fines in certain regions; “these fines for unapproved births were substantial and typically were ten to twenty percent of a families annual income.”\(^\text{150}\) However, prenatal exams are just the beginning of the pressure to have a healthy and smart baby.

Encouraged by both traditional Chinese medicine and contemporary Western medicine, breastfeeding has been an important part of motherhood in China. Many mothers, whether they received professional prenatal care, or read instructional books on their own, have had severe anxiety about breastfeeding. The following quotes demonstrate three different mother’s anxieties about breastfeeding and childcare and were obtained through a study conducted by *The Journal of Advanced Nursing* in 2010 on the “Experiences of Postpartum Depression Among First-Time Mothers in Mainland China.” Although mothers with Postpartum Depression represent only a fraction of China’s motherhood population, their hopes, fears, and preparation techniques are relative to study none-the-less:

- When I was pregnant, I learned from the antenatal education class that breastfeeding is the best way to feed the baby. The nurse encouraged us to breastfeed. When I could not breastfeed the baby because of a mammary gland infection, I was so disappointed and thought that I was such a failure. I was not a good mother.\(^\text{151}\)

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• I hoped to be a perfect mother. I hoped that my baby would be breastfed. Then my breast milk dried up, and I was so disappointed and felt like a shriveled tree.\textsuperscript{152}

• I have read a lot of books on how to take care of babies. However, it makes me even more anxious. When my baby cries more at night I worry whether she is sick, because the books say that babies cry because they might be sick. I am not a doctor. I know very little about the illness of babies, and feel anxious and useless.\textsuperscript{153}

In contemporary China, the pressure to raise a successful child starts prior to even being pregnant, and grows heavier after the baby’s birth. Besides worrying about prenatal care, and money, Chinese mothers have been told that breastfeeding is best for the baby for their long-term health and brain development (which is true for the United States as well). Thus, when asked how they felt about breastfeeding, those mothers who did not have a good experience felt surmounting anxieties about their failure as mothers. These anxieties might be shared in many other countries around the world, as breastfeeding is seen by many societies as a natural part of motherhood. The difference in urban China has been the added pressure of only getting one chance at the perfect baby (to grow into the outstanding Chinese citizen). Thus, it only seems natural for mothers who have had poor experiences in breastfeeding to feel a sense of failure—to their child, to their families, and to the country. In addition to healthcare concerns, some mothers have also struggled with their shared roles as mothers, wives, daughters (in-laws), and working women.

In 1958, Chairman Mao’s Great Leap Forward campaign encouraged Chinese women to enter the workforce. Since Chairman Mao began to encourage women to step up as equals in the workforce in the 1950s, the role of a mother significantly changed. While Mao encouraged women to work as equals amongst men, to “hold up half the sky,” he denied the encouragement of women to think of themselves as their own gender, or as mothers. For “all subjects of Mao’s revolutionary discourse, sex did not feature in the mental topography of their self-identification as revolutionary subjects,” writes Harriet Evans.\textsuperscript{154} It was not until after the Cultural Revolution, and after the introduction of the One-Child Policy, that the PRC really began to encourage women to pursue education and careers first and family

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\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 307.
\item \textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{154} Evans, \textit{The Subject of Gender}, 145.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
later—as a way to discourage larger families and a larger population, as well as to help launch China into the twenty-first century in line with other highly developed countries. Wang Honglin, a career planner at a Shanghai–based career consultation agency said, “The conflict between career and family becomes more intense for the 1980s generation as they are more motivated by self-actualization than older generations.”155 Thus, in the thirty years since the advent of the One-Child Policy, many mothers have had to learn to multi-task while having a family and a career simultaneously. Of course, some women in higher social classes could (can) afford to make a choice between career and child. Other women in lower social classes have not had that same privilege of choice. In a study conducted by The Journal of Holistic Nursing in 2003, one new mother voiced her concerns over her career and family decisions:

I felt very regretful for my daughter because I had to leave her all day and I missed her. Because I was very busy at work I had no time to think of her; but when I did have a rest, I felt of her at once, immediately. And I felt very sorry. It is the same situation for all the working women… On the one hand you have the good working experience and on the other one you have the good family. Both aspects are important to you: work and family.156

Already seen in the opening of this chapter, one mother wrote to her blog audience about being a working mother:

Life is full of conflicts, gains, and losses. Which one of them should I put first: my career, my personal life, or my baby? Without much hesitation, I choose the little life that I care for almost every minute. I gave up the chance to be promoted because it may come again. However, if I missed the wonderful moments of my baby’s growth, they would be lost forever. I will treasure these moments and enjoy both the hardships and joy of motherhood to my heart’s content.157

Other blogging women expressed their anxieties over deciding between careers and motherhood. Many of these mothers had university degrees and were working professionals prior to becoming mothers. After their maternity leave time was up, many women faced the decision whether to go back to work or to officially become stay-at-home moms (This


decision, is also one made by mothers around the world). One mother, in her blog, entitled, “Am I Willing to Fall Behind?,” wrote about her insecurities upon returning to work. Prior to having her son, she was interested in computer programming, and she knew all the latest lingo and programming methods; after she returned to work, she felt embarrassed that she could no longer keep up with the new technology and lingo associated with her scholastic passion.¹⁵⁸

In another blog, a mother wrote about her decision to not to return to work. Based on this mother’s blog entries, Yahui Zhang, author of *Layered Motherhood*, spoke in length about this mother’s decisions:

Orange’s mother was an executive manager…When her maternity leave was almost over, she didn’t feel like going back to work at all. Ideally she wanted to be a full-time mother for three years because so many sources told her that these are the crucial years for early childhood development. But at the same time she did not want to stay at home forever. The contradictory feelings she experienced were resolved temporarily by her determination to be a good stay-at-home mother… [But] when the head of the branch company asked her to come back to work, she took the offer…On her first day of work, she was tortured by the thought that her mother-in-law would not be able to keep an eye on her daughter all the time because of her age…There were countless worries and concerns. To her great relief, everything turned out fine and now she is learning to balance work and family life.¹⁵⁹

Many middle to upper class women in developed countries also face these types of anxieties when planning out their roles as mothers, wives, and career women. However, these decisions and anxieties are still very new concepts to China’s women. Within the past thirty years, parents have been increasingly strict when it comes to their children’s—both male and female—success in the world. Without multiple children to ensure financial and emotional support during their elderly years, Chinese mothers have needed to face the fact that their only-child’s success is not only important for the future of the county, but their success is important for the future of the family. Each only child is a sort of social security. Chinese society, with its drive towards modernity and international superiority, makes the role of motherhood one of complexity and accomplishment—raising the nation’s future population

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 92.
¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 93-94.
to be competitive citizens and filial individuals. Additionally, this goal to put the success of your child first seems to be a common goal despite social class. Some families simply face even more economic pressures than others.

The pressures of complying with the One-Child Policy imply much more than family planning. There is an immense pressure on parents to responsibly raise their single children as bright and successful citizens of the future.\textsuperscript{160} To be a good mother in China now implies that a woman must be financially prepared to give her child the best that she can arrange: the best education, the best healthcare, the best training, and the best parents. The high value placed on education, dating back to the civil examinations, has not changed in contemporary society. Additionally, in a study that observed online Chinese blogs for women, an increasing number of mothers felt it was important to include their children in a vast array of extra-curricular activities. One mother offered a list of extra-curricular activities that her daughter had received, including: English, mental addition and subtraction, the use of an abacus, drawing, dancing, chess, and violin.\textsuperscript{161} This mother had her daughter learning English at age three, mental mathematics, drawing, and dance at age four, and chess and violin were introduced at age five.\textsuperscript{162} The study estimated that this mother spent an average of eight to ten percent of her income on the child’s extra-curricular activities alone. Furthermore, the mother of this child explained that she hoped that these extra-curricular activities would serve to “improve her daughter’s intellect, [help her to be more] physically fit, to cultivate her tastes, and to help her get a head start on those subjects that she has to learn when she starts her formal education.”\textsuperscript{163} The mother also emphasized that despite all her efforts, her biggest hope was that her daughter would become a useful citizen of the country.\textsuperscript{164}

One family that Vanessa Fong encountered during her research in Dalian exemplified the lengths to which a mother would go for her daughter’s education and success. Sun Wei, was an academically low-achieving girl in a relatively poor family in the late 1990s. When it

\textsuperscript{160} Evans, \textit{The Subject of Gender}, 21.
\textsuperscript{161} Zhang, \textit{Layered Motherhood}, 62.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.
came time for her to take her high school entrance exams (predetermining what type of college she would get into), the anxiety took its toll on Sun Wei’s mother. A few weeks prior to the exam, Sun Wei’s mother was hospitalized due to high blood pressure and kidney problems—made worse due to stress. Even though the doctor recommended more expensive western medicines, she refused to take them in fear that she would not have enough money to pay for her daughter’s education. When the exam week arrived, Sun Wei’s mother checked herself out of the hospital to show her support for her daughter. She said, “If I stay in the hospital, Sun Wei will be anxious, and she won’t be able to concentrate on her studies. She might get upset, she might become malnourished because her Pa is such a bad cook, she might waste time on chores...I can’t abandon my daughter at the most critical time of her life. I have just one child, and I love her more than I love my own life.” Sun Wei’s mother spoke of other numerous fears that her daughter might encounter while preparing for this exam. She was re-hospitalized after her daughter’s exam day.

Countless other stories written and told by Chinese mothers emphasize the same focus on their children’s education and well being and signify the self-disciplinary weight that mothers put upon their own shoulders in order to be good mothers. However, in addition to the pressure put on Chinese parents, the children also receive the same pressure to become the best. The following poster is entitled, “The Future Summons,” and it represents some of the pressures put upon Chinese children (see Figure 1).

Firstly, the child representing China’s future in this poster is a female. This is a statement all on its own—that girls are valuable in Chinese society and to the success of its future. Secondly, the girl in this poster is literally represented with the weight of the world on her mind. However, she does not look stressed or anxious; she looks optimistic and pleased. She represents China’s hope for the future.

One of the most frequent requirements that mother bloggers placed on their children was the need to learn English. Due to the One Child Policy’s implications for families,

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165 Fong, *Only Hope*, 40.

166 Ibid.
keeping your child competitive has become an important part of life. In one blog (2007), a mother wrote about her emphasis on teaching her twins English. She wrote:

I set an English corner in the living room, there are a series of ‘You and Me’ English textbooks, many bilingual storybooks and original English movies, most of them are cartoons. Around the corner, Jack and Lily can contact English anytime, watching movies, listening songs, reading books, playing games etc., very natural, English has become one of their languages, they don’t feel any pressure to learn English.\(^{167}\)

Furthermore, these blogs have not only revealed mother’s desire for their children to learn English, but many mother bloggers emphasized their own will to learn English—to keep up with the velocity of Chinese modernization. Another blogger wrote frequently, onwww.sina.com.cn, about her experiences as a mother, a wife, and a daughter-in-law. This mother was working as a software engineer while her husband pursued his PhD overseas. She used her blog as a way to communicate with her husband as well as a way to communicate with other parents. She wrote the following:

\(^{167}\) Zhang, *Layered Motherhood*, 68.
English is important to my daughter and me. I wish that you could join us in this Flyingseagull (her blog name) mother and daughter bilingual IT communication circle to discuss technical and business issues in IT. I also wish that we can use English to broaden our world of communication and make new friends…No matter how busy and tired I am, I will try my best to be a qualified mother for my child, a good wife in my husband’s eye, and a good daughter-in-law in my mother-in-law’s eye. I will learn from different daddies and mommies. 

Flyingseagull, along with all of the many other mother bloggers, have all had the weight of the country put upon their minds and shoulders. Most urban Chinese women under the One-Child Policy have been given one chance (one child) each to make their contribution on the future. Therefore, the pressures to raise that one child successfully have not only proven to be hefty, but they have created a special privilege for these mothers as well. This mother also proves that not all in-law relationships were strained. She not only wanted what was best for her child, but she wanted to be a good wife and daughter-in-law as well. Although living in a much different world than her ancestors, this mother’s familial values remained similar to those of the past. Other parents and children struggled more with the changing times.

In addition to the external economically-based pressures that affected Chinese parents in the reform-era, fast-paced social, political, and economic changes have created considerable generational gaps between mothers and children. Traditions and values changed quickly with political movements, and interview studies have shown that many mothers have felt disconnected from both their parents / in-laws, and their own children. Therefore, these generational and traditional differences have often proved to be stressful for a mother living under the rules of the One-Child-Policy.

These gaps have often caused either separation issues or stronger attachment bonds. One daughter, a singleton born in the 1980s, spoke about her mother’s inability to understand the demands of a working girl in the twenty-first century: “There is no way that she could understand; she doesn’t have the experience to understand…My mother and her generation just can’t understand that separating from a boyfriend is painful. She got married and that was it, she has never been through such a separation, she just thinks that I have separated and should just get on with life.” Conversely, many older mothers with teenage children in the

168 Ibid., 69.
169 Evans, _The Subject of Gender_, 8.
twenty-first century have had a difficult time adjusting to the times and changes in tradition which their children portray. One mother expressed concern about her daughter’s materialistic desires and felt that “although she accepted that her daughter lived in a cultural environment that was very different to her own, she felt confused, even bewildered, about how to respond to a world of young consumerist desire that she felt unable to comprehend.”

Vanessa Fong has discussed these generational gaps between parents and children under the One-Child Policy. A teenage boy named Yu Tao had a difficult time focusing on his studies. His parents could not understand his lack of enthusiasm and effort concerning his future. He felt that he had everything handed to him, and that his parents would take care of him no matter what. Unlike his parent’s generation, the concept of filial piety was not drilled into him. However, despite his attitude, and his family’s anxieties, his mother constantly defended her son. She said, “My son is smart. If he had spent on his studies just a tiny bit of effort he devoted to playing around, he would have been an excellent student! Once he starts to grow up and starts understanding things, he’ll succeed.” Since Yu Tao was her only hope, she had to stay positive. Many other students that Fong encountered fell into the same category as Yu Tao—unappreciative of what their parents have been starving themselves for. Still, many of them did not realize their destinies until their parents became ill or lost their jobs. Only then did they realize that their video games and designer clothing would not buy them or their parents a decent life. Thus, both Chinese mothers and fathers raising singletons have needed to learn to cope with these generational differences and the effects of the fast-paced modernization efforts of their county. Similarly, Chinese parents have been learning to cope with changing traditions and the generational gaps between themselves and their own parents.

**Changing Times and Alternate Values**

Some Chinese mothers have found it difficult and taxing to deal with familial expectations. In Chinese cultural (and medical) tradition, a mother is supposed to stay at

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170 Ibid., 9.

171 Fong, *Only Hope*, 47.
home for the first month after birth to rest. This tradition, called “doing the month,” insists that new mothers stay indoors at all times, not let fresh air in the house, not practice personal hygiene of any sort, not partake in recreational activities (no reading, watching television, or using the computer), and let her mother-in-law take care of the baby. Although many families have become more nuclear, many families have still chosen to accept help from their in-laws either by way of co-habitation or by visitation. Although many families might need the help of their in-laws due to monetary restraints, the decision to accept help from in-laws does not necessarily always reflect social class, or a need for help. The following quotes exhibit how some mothers felt about “doing the month”:

- I feel after I had the baby the only thing I didn’t do was housework and cooking. Everything else I did the same. During the first month some people asked me, ‘You just gave birth to a baby. Why are you brushing your teeth?’ I said, ‘Why not? I think it’s ok!’ I’d be very uncomfortable if I didn’t brush my teeth for a month. That would be horrible to talk to your child face to face if you hadn’t brushed your teeth. 172

- The ‘doing the moth’ practice is not suitable for modern women in China. It is like being in prison for me to be confined at home. I was not allowed to do anything but lie in bed. It was so boring. You know, I was a career woman before the baby was born, but I could not work during that month. I wanted to go back to work as soon as possible. 173

- If your body is dirty that is not good for your feeling or health. If you don’t let wind in then that is also not good for you or the baby’s health. It’s no good if the baby can’t breath fresh air. 174

Many women, in order to please their families, have still complied with “doing the month.” However, balancing their new progressive lifestyles as career women with the traditional values of their families has proven to be challenging for some Chinese mothers in both urban and rural areas. Middle or upper class women who hold corporate jobs might find it difficult to take time off for a baby (or for “doing the month”) because they might fall behind on their work. Lower class women who work in factories, in the fields, or even family owned shops might find it difficult to take time off simply due to financial reasons. Either way, with more women working, taking the time to “do the month” or other such customs of the past became

much more difficult. Such dilemmas and pressures have undoubtedly been difficult for Chinese parents, but what about the in-laws? In the past, a woman’s in-laws have had a large impact on family life, and as seen in Chapter One especially, often times relationships were strained.

When Harriet Evans was traveling in China doing research for her book, *The Subject of Gender*, she met a Chinese man at a New Years celebration who had the courage to say: “Why look at daughters and mothers? Why not daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law? That is much more important in Chinese culture.” In response to this man’s question, Evans proposed the following:

In the formal structures of the patrilineal family…the woman’s relationship with her mother-in-law was traditionally one of the most important in her life, and urban women continue to refer to it as one of the three relationships that were most basic to the Chinese domestic unit…With little external support to rely on, the daughter-in-law’s position as outsider in her husband’s family made her relationship with her mother-in-law one of instability and friction.

In the following quotes, three women comment on their mother-in-law relationship anxieties.

- [My mother-in-law] always criticizes me. Nothing that I do is right at all. She hurts me and makes me lose confidence. Before the baby was born, I was a confident career woman, but now I have lost my confidence and feel depressed.  

- I hoped that my mother-in-law would treat me better because my baby is a boy. But she is the same, she ignores me the same as before. It makes me so sad.

- When I was in the hospital bed after delivery, the woman who was in the bed next to me commented, ‘It seems that your mother-in-law does not like your daughter’…I knew that she didn’t like that I’d had a baby girl, as she asked me to have another baby. She is putting a lot of pressure on me. I don’t know what to do; I wish I were dead.

The mother-in-law / daughter-in-law relationship has been one of contention for centuries in Chinese history. Although the Chinese family has slowly become more nuclear, the

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175 Evans, *The Subject of Gender*, 18.
176 Ibid.
177 Gao et al., “Experiences of Postpartum Depression,” 308.
178 Ibid.
179 Ibid.
traditional family structure still remains an important aspect of life—however, perhaps not always a welcomed aspect. After a woman has been brought up to think and act independently and competitively, it might become quite taxing for a new mother to listen to the perhaps conflicting values of her mother-in-law. Still, the above quotes do not necessarily illustrate irreverence towards these women’s mother-in-laws; they illustrate frustration and the need for approval still. Therefore, regardless of the changing political, economic, or social changes happening in China, it is still quite possible for a mother-in-law to hold considerable power over her daughter-in-law. Another confusing aspect for Chinese parents in the Reform-Era concerns the gender preference debate. I have already discussed why gender preference was prevalent in Imperial China. However, between China’s advances in women’s equality, pressures from older generations, and the pressures that come along with only being allotted one child, the issue has been quite confusing for some mothers (parents).

In recent decades, demography scholars have openly debated the Malthusian model for Chinese population studies—questioning China’s reasons for sex selection. Whether for deliberate population control, or for the sake of tradition, or for the sake of financial hardship, the fact remains that sons have been ritually preferred over daughters. States Croll, “In 1981 a survey from Hebe province had revealed that 95 percent of the population wanted two or more children of which one at least was to be a boy, and if only one child was to be permitted then a mere 2.2 percent wanted a daughter.”

With the advent of the One-Child Policy, international humanitarian concerns quickly grew over sex selective practices. Access to new technologies such as ultrasounds allowed parents to determine the sex of their child ahead of time, and with only one child allowed in many areas, the pressure to abort baby girls was huge. However, current Chinese law now states that infanticide is prohibited. Eventually, with the boy-to-girl ratio becoming increasingly skewed, the Chinese government has stepped in and heavily promoted the acceptability of baby girls. “On billboards advocating family planning,” Elisabeth Croll has contended, “attractive baby girls are shown cherished between parents and smiling as befits the desired single child. The poster presence of females of all ages in the absence of their...

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180 Croll, Changing Identities of Chinese Women, 112.
male peers is important, intentional and of rhetorical significance.” The following government sponsored posters promote China’s family planning program (see Figure 2).


This poster, which says, “Having only one child in a family is good,” is also promoting that having a female only child is good. While both mother and daughter are smiling, the mother is also holding her daughter up above her—symbolizing her daughter’s importance in the world. The daughter is also wearing a yellow/gold dress, which is a lucky color in Chinese culture. Having a girl is good. Interestingly, yellow or gold was a color for royalty in Imperial China. The fact that it is still being used for political propaganda today represents a reverence or respect for China’s past (as opposed to Chairman Mao’s wishes to clean the slate).

This 1987 poster, which says, “Less births, better births, to develop China vigorously,” represents China’s goals for the future—an educated nuclear family with one child looking towards China’s future with optimism (see Figure 3). The child, once again, is

181 Ibid., 109.
female, and she is being raised up in the air to show her importance in society. Also, the color yellow/gold features prominently again, this time, on the mother.

This poster, which says, “The sprouts are fat, the flowers big too, one plump baby’s enough for you; girls are tough, boys are strong, it doesn’t matter which you have,” (see Figure 4) promotes the notion that everything in life will be good with only one child. By adhering to the family planning program, food will be plentiful, life will flourish, and it will not matter whether you have a boy or a girl. Again, both mother and daughter are depicted as happy and optimistic. The daughter is wearing a yellow/gold dress, and the mother is wearing a gold hairpin—again, symbolizing good fortune and prosperity. Lastly, the mother is proudly educating her child and preparing her for the future.
Figure 4. The sprouts are fat, the flowers big too, one plump baby’s enough for you; girls are tough, boys are strong, it doesn’t matter which you have. Source: Four Modernizations Era. “The Sprouts are Fat, the Flowers Big too, One Plump Baby’s Enough for You; Girls are Tough, Boys are Strong, it doesn’t Matter which You have.” Accessed May 5, 2010. http://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/graph/9confour_files/image007.jpg&imgrefurl.

This poster, which has been translated already on the poster itself, says, “Carry Out Family Planning (see Figure 5). Implement The Basic National Policy.” Firstly, the fact that this poster states its message in both Chinese and English makes a statement in itself about China’s expectations—that learning English is important to China’s future. Secondly, in terms of family planning, this poster is visually similar to the previous three posters. A young mother, clad in yellow and red (both colors of fortune in China) is holding her son up
towards the sky where he appears to be happily carrying the weight of the future on his shoulder. The baby is depicted as slightly chubby—a sign of prosperity. In an urban and futuristic setting this mother is symbolically doing her part to help propel China forward. She and her one child are the building blocks for China’s successful future.

Although surveys in the 1980s showed that most mothers still preferred to have boys, testimonies in the late 1990s and twenty-first century have shown that most urban Chinese mothers have no strong gender preference—yet they have still felt the pressure from their elders to produce a son. The following quotes exemplify some modern Chinese mothers’ points-of-view on gender preference:

- Perhaps older people prefer grandsons according to tradition. But now my husband and I both think a girl is better…because girls will have a closer relationship with the mother. Her heart is closer to the mother’s heart. Boys, in this aspect, are not as close.\(^{182}\)

- I thought that it didn’t matter if the baby was a boy or a girl, or if it was beautiful or ugly. But it must be healthy. That was my only hope.\(^{183}\)

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\(^{183}\) Ibid.
• I think most mothers, if they are well-prepared, will have the same feeling as me: excited, happy. No matter whether it is a boy or girl. I feel very happy because it is my own child.\textsuperscript{184}

• She is my everything. She is my future and my hope.\textsuperscript{185}

The mother in the first quote says something truly interesting. As demonstrated in Chapter One, not only was a boy preferable over a girl in imperial times, the mother-son relationship was something incredibly special—a relationship of remarkable closeness. However, after a century of radical political, social, and economic changes in China, this particular mother now believes that she will have a closer relationship with a girl. At least in urban China, gender preference may be continually subsiding into a preference for healthy, quality, babies; however, a difference in opinion has still remained on this subject between rural and urban areas. In most rural areas, couples have still been allowed to have two children for economic purposes. One child simply is not enough sometimes when there is a family farm involved. Furthermore, boys have continuously been seen as more advantageous in rural areas for their physical abilities. In urban areas, where corporate jobs have proven less physically demanding, and perhaps more profitable, the gender preference has successfully diminished in importance. The replacement preference has instead become quality over quantity.

The question, however, has remained: how do Chinese parents (mothers) feel about their restrictived reproductive rights? In a country that has been trying to foster a new sense of nationalism since the mid-1900s, most children have been brought up to view the good of the nation as an important factor in everyday life. Therefore, what is good for the nation, is good for the family, and vice-versa. Additionally, the societal pressure to raise each singleton to perfection has created the sense that two children might be too much responsibility. However, even nationalism and societal stress cannot always deter motherly instincts. The quotes below exemplify several mother’s thoughts on having only one child:

• In China there is the One-Child Policy. It’s different from other countries where they can have many children. If you have too many you won’t treat them like we do. Because we can only have one child we are more nervous in caring for it and treasure it.\textsuperscript{186}

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 110.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 108.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
• If it were possible I still want another baby.187
• One baby is enough…double income, no kid.188
• One is not enough! But in China it is not allowed [to have more].189
• The family used to be two members. Now it is three. With the coming of the third member the family now seems complete.190

Whether influenced by family tradition, national tradition, political responsibility, or motherly instinct, the fact remains that each Chinese mother must live with the One-Child Policy in her own way. Furthermore, although some mothers have found the generational gap difficult to deal with, other Chinese mothers found a new respect for their elders after having their own child. One mother admitted the following:

You are not able to appreciate your parents if you don’t have your own child. Only if you are a mother can you understand how hard it was to give birth to you. You can love and understand her, and feel closer to your mother…and my husband and I are much closer. Now we have the result of our love.”191

This realization and new-found respect for one’s parents is, and never has been, unique to Chinese mothers. One can never understand battle unless they have gone through it personally; and only then can they truly commiserate with another survivor. Again, what remains unique about modern Chinese mothers is the One-Child Policy umbrella that they have been put under. Both the advances and the constraints of their rapidly modernizing nation have forcibly altered their experiences as mothers.

**CONCLUSION**

One of the most striking commonalities amongst the Chinese mother bloggers was their general disinclination to complain about their reproductive restrictions.192 Zhang states, “Chinese women are conscious that they change their habits and identities because of the arrival of their babies. However, they gladly make the changes of themselves and accept their

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187 Ibid.
188 Ibid.
189 Ibid.
190 Ibid., 109.
191 Ibid., 108.
identity of being mothers in relation to their children.”193 In recent history, an overwhelming sense of sacrifice for the greater good has rang through the voices of Chinese mothers. Although the One-Child Policy was written in terms of modernization and economics, its underlying terms have always been different. Regarding the goals of the nation—to ensure sufficient sustainable resources, to ensure the jump from third-world to first world, to ensure an educated nation, to ensure a quality nation—Chinese mothers have been given extremely important jobs. From family planning, to financial planning, to educational planning, to retirement planning, Chinese mothers have not been cut short on responsibilities. Of course, these responsibilities have also been placed on the shoulders of Chinese fathers. However, the special bond that a mother has with her child (children), and the responsibility she feels towards their well-being is undeniable. Whether she makes sacrifices in her health, her career, or her morals, Chinese mothers have appeared to do it out of a combination of unyielding maternal love and an extreme sense of loyalty and obligation to the nation.

193 Ibid., 85.
CONCLUSION

In starting this thesis, I sought to fill a gap in Chinese history gender studies. I chose to look at Chinese motherhood from 1800 to 2011 while searching for changes and continuities in the roles and expectations mothers of over four periods of time. The existing scholarship on Chinese motherhood helped me formulate questions, seek answers, see gaps, and eventually recognize changes and continuities. In the beginning of this process, I asked questions such as:

1. How did the mother/daughter, mother/son, and mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship evolve over these four periods of Chinese history?
2. Is there a point at which the gender of a child becomes less important and therefore enables scholars to look at women as mothers of children, as opposed to mothers of sons or mothers of daughters?

By the end of this process, I have not only been able to answers these questions, but I have also discovered several other major changes and continuities in the roles of Chinese motherhood. The roles and expectations of motherhood became increasingly varied over time. This was not only due to China’s changing political, social, and economical environment, but due to each Chinese mother’s cultural attitudes, personal values, and social class; and these changes and continuities reflect all of these factors. As stated in my Introduction, the most major change in motherhood roles over these four periods has been a move from the domestic to the non-domestic sphere. Secondly, a mother’s preference for sons has proven to be both a change and continuity over these four periods of time. Lastly, the act of child abandonment also proved prevalent in one form or another in each period. As I have discussed these changes and continuities at length both in the Introduction and throughout the entirety of my thesis, I will continue on to answer my two original questions from the beginning of my research.

**Question One:** How did the mother/daughter, mother/son, and mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship evolve over these four periods of Chinese history?

I argue that China’s quest for stabilization and modernization profoundly altered the roles and expectations of Chinese mothers as well as their relationships over time. The mother/daughter relationship, often defined in the Imperial period by marriage preparations
(foot binding and lessons on how to be a good wife and daughter-in-law), familial hierarchy, and filial piety, was significantly altered in the decades following the 1911 Revolution. Mother-daughter relationships in the Republican period varied widely according to Confucian values, feelings of domestic responsibility, changing cultural attitudes, and opportunities available to mothers of different social classes. Similarly, the mother-daughter relationship during the Mao and post-Mao periods was greatly affected by a mother’s social class, her geographic location (urban vs. rural), and her relationship to the Party. An urban social elite mother might not see her daughter as much as she was sent off to school or if the mother went to work. A rural mother might work more closely alongside her daughter before she went to school later in life or got married. However, the gradual de-emphasis on Confucian values, the change in marriage laws, the right to divorce, and radically changing politics allowed many mothers and daughters the opportunity to create longer lasting relationships.

Despite the lasting preference for a son (by some mothers, not all) into the twenty-first century, the mother/son relationship saw dramatic changes as well. I argue that in the years following the 1911 Revolution, the level of reverence and respect between mother and son, that once outshined all other relationships during the imperial period, gradually wore thinner as both men and women gained more independence. By the end of the Republican period, and certainly within the Mao period (which severely disrupted nearly every sense of normalcy and tradition), many Chinese sons no longer felt the same pressures to meet the expectations of filial piety. As many sons, daughters, and parents alike were struck by the revolutionary fever, their attentions were redirected outward and away from the family. By the twenty-first century, many families had already begun to live in nuclear family households—changing traditional relationship dichotomies indefinitely.

Similar to the previous two relationship dichotomies, I argue that the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship also dramatically evolved as China’s politics repeatedly changed and the effects of women’s liberation took hold. Like the mother-daughter relationship, in-law relationships were tested and altered based upon a gradual de-emphasis on Confucian familial values, a de-emphasis on the domestic sphere, and the change in marriage laws. However, not all in-law relationships changed dramatically. In fact, many
women in recent years have still expressed anxious relationship dichotomies between themselves and their mother-in-laws in response to these changes in cultural values.  

**Question Two:** Is there a point at which the gender of a child becomes less important and therefore enables scholars to look at women as mothers of children, as opposed to mothers of sons or mothers of daughters?

At the beginning of the research process, I had hypothesized that this tipping point had arrived, enabling us to look at women as mothers of children without further relationship labels. However, upon completion of my research, I was proven wrong. Even with women’s liberation in China and the eras of reform and modernization, Chinese mothers are still being categorized. I argue that although a child’s gender has become increasingly less important to Chinese mothers (primarily in urban areas—many rural families still rely on a son’s ability to help with manual labor) the general population and scholars alike have not been able to break free from using what I call relationship-referencing titles when discussing Chinese mothers. I argue that this relationship-reference titling has remained in tact mostly because of the One-Child Policy—ultimately labeling Chinese mothers as “mothers of only children,” “mothers of singletons,” or for rural and ethnic minority families, “mother of two.” This relationship-referencing has become a method of categorization that seems unbreakable for the time being. Ultimately, a mother is forever connected to her children, and therefore it is reasonable to say that her life will always be reflected by the relationships within it.

Although I believe that I have gained much ground in the field of Chinese gender studies, and in the field of Chinese motherhood specifically, there is still a vast amount of scholarship to be written. There are many gaps in my own research to be filled. As I stated in my Preface, my research was limited by inability to speak, read, or write Chinese. Therefore, I was not always able to compare Chinese mothers from similar backgrounds. Some of the mothers I discuss were from wealthy social elite families while others were from poor families. Some mothers were from urban areas and some were from rural areas—both which account for different types of opportunities, advantages, or disadvantages. Although this deficiency in my research leaves room for further comparison, I think that it also gives an interesting taste of what Chinese motherhood was like over four periods of time. Furthermore, there are many other facets of motherhood that I did not cover, and would prove very interesting for future research: concubine mothers, single mothers, lesbian
mothers, transnational mothers, urban vs. rural mothers, foster mothers, etc. The fact that Chinese gender studies is still a relatively new field leaves countless exciting gaps to be filled and changes and continuities to be discovered. I look forward to expanding my research in the future and to the continual growth of Chinese women in history as a fascinating field of study.
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