



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Everybody educated?

Education migrants and rural-urban relations in Hubei Province, China

Sier, W.M.

Publication date

2020

Document Version

Other version

License

Other

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Sier, W. M. (2020). *Everybody educated? Education migrants and rural-urban relations in Hubei Province, China*.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

CHAPTER

Marrying Well

versus

Doing Well

4

做得好不如嫁得好

Doing well is not as good as marrying well.

(Xiao, March 2015)

This thesis began with a discussion of rural-urban relations in contemporary China and the ideologies of growth and development that drive rural-urban migration and educational desires. It then moved on to describe how rural youth, armed with their educational capital, endeavour to build up careers on the urban, white-collar labour market. In this final empirical chapter, I will demonstrate how higher education and the challenges faced by female rural graduates trying to build up stable lives in the city affect these young women's approaches to marriage. In contemporary China, migration, education and marriage are all considered important vehicles for rural women's upward social mobility. This chapter highlights the relation between these three realms, viewing young rural women as being doubly located on the labour and the marriage market. It argues that female rural graduates' disadvantaged position in their families as well as in society at large, as a result of both their rural status and their gender, makes it harder for them to turn their educational capital into upward social mobility, increasing their dependence on marriage for achieving long-term stability in their lives.

The young women in this study are quite different from female marriage migration as a strategy for international migration that is described in the literature (e.g. Wang & Chang 2002; Constable 2009; Kim 2010; Jongwilaiwan & Thompson 2013), as well as the rural women featured in studies of domestic marriage migration within China (Fan & Huang 1998; Fan & Li 2002; Davin 2005). They do not seek to migrate through marriage, but have already migrated and now hope to settle down through marriage. Young rural women hope to marry men who can provide a 'marriage house' in a (semi)-urban environment, and considering their relatively strong position on the marriage market due to the country's skewed sex-ratio, the purchase of such a house has become imperative for young men looking to marry. On the one hand, one might say that this dynamic strengthens the position of rural women in society. But, at the same time, since most families still insist on having a son, the reality is that the great majority of young women have brothers. And when they do, all family capital including their own savings has to be direct towards realising the marriages of these brothers.

This chapter critiques the assumption that women's education is a key solution to achieve gender equality. This assumption is quite prevalent in mainstream development agendas, despite having been critiqued by scholars who argue that increased access to education

does not necessarily inspire a transformation of the inequitable gender relations girls face in society (e.g. Goldin 1992; Chisamya et al 2012).⁵⁹ The cases presented in this chapter support this critique by demonstrating how women's educational achievements can be integrated into patriarchal narratives that promote the family and the household as women's natural and rightful place in society. These narratives are based upon ideas about 'proper' femininity and masculinity, which should be understood in relation to one another. With a core marker of Chinese masculinity being the ability to provide the security of a home, it makes sense that femininity entails needing to be provided for (Zhang 2010). Women's independence and ability to provide infringes on the masculine territory and therefore these traits are considered to be unattractive to men. Women's (educational) success is therefore a double-edged sword, for it can simultaneously enhance their chances on the job market, and be detrimental to their position on the marriage market.

Even though I do not focus solely on women in this dissertation, I will limit my discussion in this chapter to women's experiences for both methodological and theoretical reasons. As a female ethnographic researcher it was easier for me to establish and maintain intimate and intensive relationships with women than with men, especially when it came to discussing love and emotions. At the same time, in light of China's current imbalanced sex ratio which strengthens women's position in marriage negotiations, it is an interesting moment to reflect on the social position of this generation of rural female university graduates.

First, I will return to Misty, who we have met as the accountancy graduate building up a career in sales, and describe how she once got close to marrying into her dream family, who owned both a house and a business in Wuhan.

Misty's Dream of Marriage

When I see Misty sitting in the reception room of the yoga school where she teaches, I immediately notice something different about her. First of all, there is an open notebook in front of her on the table and she is reading with great concentration, behaviour very different from her usual demeanour of chatting relentlessly to everybody who will listen. On closer inspection, the notebook turns out to be filled with accountancy notes Misty took as a student. Misty had often told me that she was utterly uninterested in accountancy, despite this having been her major, so I am surprised to see her so enthralled by these notes. When she looks up, I notice other, physical, changes. Her previously thick, straight black hair is now permed and coloured and her lips are painted bright red. Her eyes sparkle with excited energy as she blurts out: 'I'm getting married!'

⁵⁹ For an example of 'the mainstream development agenda', see this World Bank webpage about girls' education: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducation>

I sit down to hear what has happened exactly since I saw her a few days ago when she was still single. Without any further encouragement, and talking a mile a minute, Misty fills me in on all the details of this unexpected match:

I was introduced to a boy by a marriage agent, and he is originally from my village, our families have known each other for a long time, but his parents have a business in Wuhan, and I am going to marry him, oh, I'm soooo happy!⁶⁰ I love him soooo much and my mother came down to meet his parents and everybody was so excited. I walked down the street with him and my mother said everybody looked at us in envy, because we make such a beautiful couple! Oh, I've never had a boyfriend before... Oh, I'm so excited! And so scared... His parents asked me for my date of birth today, because they want to consult an astrologer. Oh, I hope the result will be good, because I really don't want to break up! (Misty)

As Misty keeps talking, an older lady from Wuhan, who regularly practices yoga with us, sits down at our table to hear what the commotion is about. When she hears about Misty's marriage proposition, she immediately starts to fire questions at her. 'What kind of family is this? What do they do? Where do they live?' Misty explains the family's circumstances: 'They are originally from my hometown, but they now have a home in Wuhan!' She looks at us meaningfully with her big, round eyes wide open before she continues to say: 'They even have a business here, it's a laundry business, and the best thing is: they need somebody to help with their accountancy!' As Misty's sudden interest in her accountancy notes starts to make sense to me, she explains why the prospect of marrying into this family excites her so much:

Their house is here in Wuhan, you know? That is *so* good! This family's conditions are really quite good... and he, my boyfriend, is really good at negotiating contracts for the business... Okay, he's not so handsome, my housemate already said that he's not handsome enough for me, but he's really nice... He has some pimples, but I think he's okay, he's quite tall. I think I'm really very suitable for this family... I can work in their company... Their son didn't go to university, he only went to high school, but I think he's very skilled. (Misty)

60 In rural China, introduction by a marriage agent (*meipo*) is very common. Generally, the prospective groom's family approaches a family with a single daughter through the agent. In the case of a successful match, the groom's family pays the agent a matching fee. In Hubei province in 2016 a fee of approximately 2000 renminbi (250 euro) was the going rate.

Misty turns out not to be so lucky. Events unfold exactly as predicted by the older lady, who had said: 'They will not tell you about the astrologer. If the result is good, you will notice, because they'll invite you again. If it's not good, they'll just take distance from you.' Within a few days, Misty starts noticing that her boyfriend stops responding to her text messages and no longer invites her out on dates. She is heartbroken and suffers from crying fits for weeks to follow. Without a clear explanation, Misty is thrust back into singlehood, feeling mistreated and disillusioned. She had experienced a few days in which she felt the ground under her feet solidify, looking at a stable future within a family that, despite not having urban registration, owned an apartment and business in Wuhan. This marriage would have ended her struggle of trying to make a living in Wuhan. But, this time luck is not on her side and she is left with only a palpable sense of loss.

Marrying into Stability

In Misty's discussion of why this potential husband and family were 'so good', the importance of their sturdy base in the city was very clear. She emphasised again and again that this family had both a home and a business in Wuhan and that these facts trumped all other considerations. It did not matter to her that she did not find her potential husband very attractive. After refusing to show his picture for a few days, she finally scrolled through some images on her phone, showing me the boy's pictures, while mumbling that he was 'ugly' and pointing out that those pictures in which he seemed okay were photoshopped by her: 'He doesn't look like that in real life'. She also did not mind that he was only high school educated. She did not even seem particularly impressed by or interested in his personality. She was terribly excited about the match, because it would improve her unstable life in the city. Misty was unemployed at the time when she was introduced to this potential husband after having been fired from her last job at a real estate company only two weeks before. In the eighteen months since her graduation, she had worked in a factory, a car dealership, a health club, a yoga school, and a real estate company. None of these jobs worked out the way she had hoped, and now her strong belief in a rosy, urban future was mainly predicated on her expectation of marrying into a family that would launch her straight into an urban middle-class lifestyle. Her last job, with the real estate company, had only lasted for six weeks. At the same time, Misty's mother had long suffered from health problems for which she could not get proper treatment in their hometown and she therefore visited Misty every few weeks to see a doctor in the city. Misty was keen to not only put an end to her tiresome experiences on the labour market, but also to gain better access to urban medical services for her mother. Marrying into a family with a strong basis in Wuhan was therefore an attractive prospect to her.

Historically, Chinese marriages have always been an important way for families to establish alliances and exchange labour (Zhang 2000: 60). A daughters' marriage was a unique opportunity for families to be economically rewarded for raising girls (Croll 1987), whereas a son's marriage was crucial for continuing the family line and safeguarding the future security of the family as a whole (Tang 1995). Especially in rural China, where parents have relatively limited access to state-provided social security, marriage is still important for families' status and stability today. It is also in rural China where the country's imbalanced sex ratio, a consequence of nearly four decades of population planning and a persistent preference for sons, is most pronounced. Between 1980 and 2000, 22 million more men than women were born, and in Hubei province 110 to 113.5 boys were still born to every 100 girls in 2015 (Greenhalgh 2013; UNICEF 2015).⁶¹ The continued wish for sons in China's countryside also explains why most women have brothers. At the same time, the lack of brides has given rise to exacerbated hypergamy, and young women and their family members now aspire to achieve stability and social upward mobility through marriage. Given that in recent decades many rural families have given up farming and engaged in rural-urban migration, a daughters' marriage has also become an opportunity for improving the family's connection with the city (May 2010).

The main symbol of urban stability is being a homeowner. Since the disassemblment of the urban social housing system during the reform era, China has changed from a predominantly public housing regime to a country with one of the highest rates of private home ownership in the world, and the ability to purchase real estate has become an important marker of status and belonging (Fleischer 2007; Zhang 2010).⁶² Yet, homeownership is much more common among China's urban than its rural population. At the time when many of China's urban citizens were encouraged to buy their apartments from their work units as state-owned companies were broken up and privatised, rural communities returned to the family-sized plots system, which merely increased the control they had over still collectively-owned land. The subsequent urban 'real estate boom' further widened the rural-urban wealth gap, and made it increasingly difficult for rural-urban migrants to enter the urban real estate market at a later point. For youths like Misty, constantly landing low-paying jobs and without any family capital to back her up, it is therefore nearly impossible to buy property in Wuhan. Marrying into a family that has been able to do this and that can therefore

offer her the rare opportunity to really build up a stable existence in Wuhan is thus a very attractive opportunity for her.

The central importance of real estate in marriage negotiations was also corroborated by other experiences in the field. When attending a wedding in rural Hubei, I was taken, together with the rest of the bridal party, to the 'marriage house', which is the apartment that was purchased as part of the wedding negotiations. We were informed of the house's number of square metres, square metre price, and all the furniture and facilities that the house was equipped with, including air conditioning, a washing machine, and a flat-screen television. During and after the wedding, the details of the house were discussed at length in conversations about whether the bride had made a good match. It was said that the pre-wedding negotiations had gone on for two years. A year later, Morning Sunshine informed me via *weixin*, the popular Chinese social media application, that she had gotten engaged. She immediately followed her announcement with a text message that told me that her first date with her now fiancé had been a visit to the house he owned, and laid out the particulars of the house. Her message read:

'It is 90 square meters, has two bedrooms, one living room, one bathroom, and it is located in Huangshi city, a smaller city close to Wuhan. It's close to a big shopping centre' (Morning Sunshine).

Morning Sunshine, the young woman who dropped out of her accountancy degree with a nervous breakdown, had originally intended to return to university after her recovery. Yet, when the time came, the university failed to let her back in, claiming that she would only be allowed to return if one of her parents would move to a location near the campus to support her in her studies. With this being impossible for her parents, who barely scraped by working as migrant labourers in Wuhan, Morning Sunshine dropped out indefinitely. During the two years that followed, she worked in a large number of jobs. She lived in a room in her sister's rented apartment, and saved every penny to pay back the bank loans she had accumulated as a student. She first worked in a milk-tea shop, then, in real-life order: a restaurant, an English language training centre, a shop selling aloe vera beauty products, a beauty parlour, a 'financial investment' company, and an online gaming company. In the beauty parlour, Morning Sunshine was asked to leave with only a 'consolation salary' of 50 renminbi (6 euro) per day that she worked there. The 'financial investment' company had not offered her a base salary at all, only paying her commission per extra staff member she recruited into the company. In the eleven days she worked there, she had recruited one person, for which she received 600 renminbi (78 euro).

61 Link to the UNICEF Report Population Status of Children in China in 2015. Facts and Figures: <http://www.unicef.cn/en/uploadfile/2017/1009/20171009112814506.pdf>

62 The number of square meters sold on the real estate market has increased from 27 million in 1991 to 55 million in 2006, and 157 million in 2016 (Zhang 2010: 1; statistics provided by NBSC). Link to statistics: http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/pressrelease/201701/t20170122_1456808.html

When we met in the summer of 2017 Morning Sunshine looked pale and tired. The night shifts at the online gaming company were hard for her, and she had been sad to see her dreams crumble in the last few years. She finished her long update of all the work she had done since we saw each other last, with a sad, 'My heart is tired'. Knowing how hard these years had been for her, I was not surprised to receive the news that Morning Sunshine had decided to be married. The young man who would be her husband had been introduced to her family by the marriage agent in her home village. Morning Sunshine was completely unexcited. She had long been in love with another man, who she had dated on and off for some years, but who could neither afford the marriage house or the bride's price. The potential groom to whom she was introduced was not only more suited because the families had vaguely known each other for a long time, his family also had their own business. Moreover, they had already bought a house for their son in a nearby small city, and were able to pay a bride's price as well. In the knowledge that the man she had dated before could never meet these requirements, Morning Sunshine never told her mother about him, and quietly renounced herself to the fate of marrying the man to whom she was introduced. With an air of defeat she went through all the steps leading up to the wedding, meeting the family, taking the wedding pictures, making preparations. Without making her feelings known to her mother, she sometimes privately complained to me via text: 'I'm just going to have to marry this man who loves himself a little too much'. Morning Sunshine, whose family recently lost their land to a land consolidation project, forcing her parents to become labour migrants for the first time in their lives in their mid-fifties, felt like she had no choice. Her year in university had been expensive and her experiences on the urban labour market had been dreadful, so she could not afford to marry the 'wrong' man.

The rapid 'emaciation of the countryside' (Yan 2008), discussed in Chapter One, has led Chinese youths to turn away from countryside living en masse. This change has greatly affected marriage practices among rural Chinese youths. Uprooted by rapid social change, rural female graduates do not want to spend a lifetime 'floating', the word often used to – disapprovingly – describe the lifestyle of the generations of labour migrants who have worked in the cities since the 1980s, characterised by a lack of stability and local rights (Solinger 1999). These young women, having gone through long educational trajectories aimed at achieving urban, white-collar lifestyles, wish to 'settle' in the city. Misty and Morning Sunshine are both examples of education migrants who at one point were very ambitious and career-driven, but after having been disappointed with their success in the education system and on the urban labour market came to believe that 'marrying well' was essential for their future stability. For both of these young women, the extreme labour mobility they experienced in the years after graduation shifted their focus from their individual careers to marriage. Following the often-heard explanation 'marrying well is more

effective than doing well', they hoped to achieve social mobility and, especially, stability in urban society through marriage. Their yearning for stability made them foreground pragmatic considerations when choosing a marriage partner, with a strong focus on the partners' ability to provide a house.

Marriage and Love

The potent romantic ideal that puts forward that 'real love' is pure, blind, located completely in the realm of passion and affection, and devoid of interests other than the emotional, has quickly gained ground across the globe. Studies show that nowadays young people from Pakistan to China, and from Polynesia to Malawi, dream of being swept off their feet by a soul mate rather than entering an arranged marriage (Lindholm 2006: 5). Yet, for romantic love to be considered a good basis for marriage is a rather modern development, first noted in 19th century Europe.⁶³ Earlier, in both non-Western and Western societies, such as the Greek and the Roman, marriage was considered vital for the survival of clans and families, and thus partners were chosen for their promise of advancing the collective economically and politically (Coontz 2006; Lindholm 2006: 11).

It is against this backdrop that I analyse the approaches to love and marriage taken by my informants, whose conflicting experiences of love highlight the ongoing currency of the age-old idea about the separation of love and marriage. Yet, this is, of course, not an either-or question. The fact that Misty and Morning Sunshine's considerations were mainly pragmatic does not mean that their marriages will be loveless. There are many societies in which the expectation is that love will blossom after marriage (Hamon & Ingoldsby 2003). In fact, after Morning Sunshine's wedding on October 1st, 2018, she wrote that she 'now started to love and accept her husband'. At the same time, love is such an enigmatic and personal concept that can be interpreted in a great variety of ways, that it is impossible to measure and difficult to judge. During her short period of courtship, Misty talked endlessly about 'being in love', and her happiness about making these marriage choices in an era of 'free love', in contrast to her parents' era of arranged marriage. Yet, in some cases the language of romantic love was evoked to describe a genuine excitement about bonds made for largely economic reasons, and as I will show in a later section, even in this period of 'free love' parents remain heavily involved in marriage choices.

⁶³ Of course, the human ability to be passionately in love has a much longer history and has never been unique to Euro-American culture, despite the widespread and euro-centric belief that romantic love is a Western invention (Jankowiak & Fischer 1992). A great body of literary evidence studied by Yehudi Cohen (1969) shows that the practice and ideology of romantic love was well developed in many pre-modern non-Western societies, including Japan, China, India, and the Middle East (Lindholm 2006).

Anna also spoke a lot about the dilemma of love and marriage. Before seriously dating anybody, she had been convinced that it was important to keep feelings of affection and ‘reality’ separate, saying: ‘these are two different things’. She reflected on previous infatuations, explaining that she had had passionate feelings for men before, but had not considered them important. ‘You also have to think about reality, and consider whether the person is suited for you. This is very important for your future. So I wouldn’t let such an important decision, about marrying somebody, be directed just by my feelings. You have to think about reality.’ When she talked about ‘reality’, Anna meant the day-to-day situation of having to get by, needing a place to live, and being able to afford everything that is needed for having one’s own family. Anna has lived on the Foxconn factory ground ever since she started working there and naturally hoped that her marriage would improve her living conditions in the city. Interestingly, Anna’s dating practices did not completely align with her tough words. When she sometimes went on dates she seemed as interested in the young men’s personalities, interests, and even horoscopes, as in their financial situation. In her considerations of her partners, she surely applied a bottom line – the men had to be at least as educated as her, prove to be hard-working, and have a ‘promising future’.

Anna fell in love with Tang, a young man introduced to her by a colleague. Anna and Tang both grew up in Hubei province in families with a rural background, and with parents who worked as migrant labourers, but whereas Anna had a Bachelor’s degree from a Hubei university, Tang had a Master’s degree from a Beijing university, which is considered more prestigious. After having established that the match was suitable, they started communicating on the Chinese messaging app and talking on the phone. Having intensively communicated for two months, Anna was certain that Tang was her ‘Mr Right’. It was not just his education and his current internship with Petrochina in Shandong province, but also their open communication and shared interests that she liked. They brightened up each other’s days by sending each other gifts. After two months of talking, Tang made use of a short break at work to take the overnight train to Wuhan to meet Anna. Escaping Wuhan’s summer heat, the couple spent the day in a mall, having snacks and watching a movie. At night Tang slept at his brother’s house in Wuhan, before returning to Shandong province the next day.

EtÚographies of love, intimate relationships, and marriage show that passion and romantic feelings are universal human experiences, and that they are expressed and given meaning in a variety of ways much too great to be discussed within the scope of this chapter. The etÚographies tackling questions about the intricacies of love range, among others, from studies among sex workers in the United States and Europe (Bernstein 2010) to Philippine ‘mail-order’ brides marrying into the United States (Constable 2003), changing marriage

practices in a transnational South Indian Muslim community (Osella 2012), and love-letter writing among youth in Nepal (Ahearn 2001). On the one hand these etÚographies provide evidence that the ‘discourse on romantic courtship and companionate marriage, expressed in the idiom of love, has become a prominent marker of the modern around the world’ (Donner 2012: 2). Yet, at the same time, the more pragmatic considerations that were previously mostly associated with ‘traditional’ and arranged marriages certainly continue to play a role, even if they are, in the words of Nicole Constable, ‘often denied, mystified, mediated, transformed, or disguised’ (2009: 58).

To better understand the cases of the young, Chinese female graduates discussed in this chapter it is very important to contextualise their experiences of love. Although marriage rates in China are dropping and people in the big cities are marrying later and later, marriage is still considered of utmost importance by rural graduates and their parents. It is important to know that for young women like Misty, Morning Sunshine, and Anna, it would be very difficult to leave behind this time of precarious contracts and dorm-living without marriage. At the same time, their lives do not allow for much dating. Anna, for example, has lived on the Foxconn company terrain on the far-away outskirts of Wuhan since 2015 where she is mainly surrounded by female office workers. Misty currently works in a restaurant in a smaller city, and lives upstairs from it in a dorm room. Both of these young women are dating young men who work in far-away cities and maintain their relationships through exchanging presents and talking on the phone. Anna especially uses very romantic language to discuss her relationship, yet she is not afraid of pointing out her boyfriend’s good qualifications and ‘promising future’ as important reasons for loving him. In a similar way, Misty referred to the advantageous positioning of her former fiancé’s family when she talked about how deeply in love she was. The ways in which they experience romance and express their feelings blurs the binary lines between relationships that are ‘traditional’, pragmatic, and kinship-driven and those that are modern, romantic, individualistic, and based on ‘free love’. In fact, these observations challenge the way in which studies on love tend to juxtapose practical considerations and feelings of affection, creating the illusion of material and emotional interests existing in realms completely separated from one another. Think, for example, about Misty, who felt strong emotions of love and excitement exactly *because* of the promise of security the proposed marriage candidate embodied.

Rural and Highly Educated Women

To understand why it is difficult for female graduates to achieve social mobility and stability in the cities it is important to consider their stories within an intersectional theoretical framework that allows for a multiple-axis analysis. As it stands, female rural graduates are not only confronted by obstacles as a result of their gender, but also face discrimination

on the labour and marriage markets as a result of their rural status. Intersectionality, a theoretical concept coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1991, challenges essentialism in identity politics and enables scholars to consider the ‘crossing’ of multiple layers of oppression simultaneously. For young women like Misty, Anna, and Morning Sunshine, this means that their educational and career trajectories have been curbed by their rural backgrounds as well as their gender.

In the previous chapters of this dissertation, I have argued that even though ‘being rural’ means little to these graduates, who have often spent very little of their lives in the actual countryside, their background as well as their ‘rural’ registration has an effect on their life trajectories because it puts them at a disadvantage within the education system, as well as on the labour and marriage markets. When it comes to marriage, rural and urban youth rarely cross paths. Research on inter-*hukou* marriages indicates that real rural-urban marriages are still very rare and that when rural women marry urban men (the other way around is extremely uncommon), marriage partners do not relate to each other as social equals (Fan & Huang 1998; Lu 2004; Lui 2016).

Concerning gender relations, it is mostly the studies focusing on urban China that argue that China’s one-child policy and the subsequent gender imbalance have contributed to the empowerment of young Chinese women. In the cities, the one-child policy was much more strictly enforced and in lieu of sons, parents invested more seriously in their daughters’ education (Fong 2002; Lee 2012). Scholars researching ‘gendered educational expectation’ in rural areas report mixed results (Li & Tsang 2003; Hannum, Kong & Zhang 2009). More importantly, my research shows that the increased participation of women in education should not immediately be understood as the strengthening of the position of young women in Chinese society without considering the meaning that is attributed to their education as well as parents’ motivations behind educational investments. During my fieldwork I found that the meaning of young women’s education was often contested by their parents as well as their peers. Helena Obendiek, who conducted research among rural graduates in Gansu province (2016), argues that parents invest in their daughters’ education with the explicit aim of improving their position on the marriage market and overcoming the rural-urban divide. Similar to Obendiek’s findings, my research shows that women’s educational capital is often exchanged on the marriage market for what Obendiek calls ‘a geographical advantage’ (1266), by which she refers to the opportunity to move to a geographical area that is wealthier or relatively more urbanised. Subsequently, and in contrast to young men, whose dedication to their careers made them good husbands and fathers, women are expected to show their dedication to their families by sacrificing their careers. One young male graduate expressed this idea in the following manner:

Women educate themselves *for* marriage. If they only finish high school, not many people want to marry them. Educated people think differently, so it is important for a couple to have a similar level of education. It’ll help them get along and they’ll have things to talk about. And... what’s even more important... an educated girl will raise her kids differently. To have an educated woman as a mother is very important for the next generation. (Xiao)

Xiao made these claims in the presence of his sister and Anna, both one year his senior. The young women, both graduates and office workers, acknowledged his point earnestly. Anna sighed: ‘For women, family will always be more important than career anyway.’ Xiao’s sister added: ‘Yes, and it’s important to make the right marriage choice for women... especially when they’re educated’.

That women’s education does not necessarily help to diminish social gender stratification has long been discussed by scholars in the United States. The book *Educated in Romance* by Holland and Eisenhart (1990) argues, based on a ten year study in two universities in the southern United States, that a ‘culture of romance’ has caused talented women to scale down their career aspirations in order to marry, accepting job positions economically inferior to those of their husbands. Additionally, Goldin (1992) referred to those degrees obtained with the aim of becoming a better wife and mother as the ‘Mrs. degree’. Moreover, around the world, in areas ranging from Egypt to China and the United States, it has been observed that a relatively large share of female university graduates remain unmarried (Solomon 1985; Cookingham 1985; Liu 2015; Fincher 2016). In China, highly educated single women are regularly disparagingly referred to as ‘left-over women’ in the media and popular speech (Fincher 2016).

Female graduates are keenly aware of the fact that their ambition could hurt their chances on the marriage market. The current trend of hypergamic marriage practices makes it difficult for successful women to find marriage partners; the higher they climb on the ladder of success, the fewer potential suitors. Women’s success on the labour market has therefore become a double-edged sword, since it can implicate their downfall on the marriage market. An often raised example of these dynamics in Chinese popular culture is Andi, a character in the popular TV series ‘Ode to Joy’ about five women living in a Shanghai high rise.⁶⁴ The scenes that portray Andi in the series move between showing her as a brilliant, wealthy and beautiful career woman, and a lonely and sad figure working away in the evenings

⁶⁴ The popular tv-series is called *huanlesong* in Mandarin and is available on www.iqiyi.com

behind her laptop to the sound of dramatic music. Andi, who was interestingly given this typically male name, was both admired for her intelligence and pitied for her loneliness by fans of the show.

This dynamic of women's success diminishing their prospects on the marriage market is nothing new. Beverly Hooper (1984) drew on survey results published in the *Beijing Review* in 1983 to illustrate that Chinese male university graduates were reluctant to marry female graduates: 'The 1983 survey of ten higher learning institutions in Beijing found that only 28% of male students wanted their future spouse to have a university degree. (In contrast, 79.5% of female students said they would prefer to marry university graduates.)' (1984: 331). Moreover, the same survey showed that 50 percent of the male students agreed with the Confucian statement: 'A woman without talent is virtuous'. The analysts of this survey therefore concluded that men wanted their future wives to be devoted wives and mothers and that they were afraid of a lengthy educational trajectory making them lose their 'traditional feminine virtues of gentleness and devotion' (quoted in Hooper 1984 from the *Beijing Review*, no 37, 1983: 26-27). The contemporary debates on China's urban 'left-over women' (Fincher 2016; Liu 2015) illustrate that these ideas should not yet be considered outdated and even note a resurgence of patriarchal traditions (Fincher 2016; Ji 2015).

In today's China, the tension between 'doing well' and 'marrying well' is well-captured by the popular concept of the hero woman (*nuqiangren*), which describes a female go-getter; a strong, adventurous and successful woman who is ambitious and independent minded.⁶⁵ During my fieldwork women often used this term to explain what they were not. The mention of hero women tends to evoked strong reactions: 'I am definitely not a hero woman' or, disapprovingly, 'I don't want to be that kind of woman'. These reactions should be understood in relation to new masculine ideals in post-reform China. Since masculinity is increasingly defined by a man's economic status, his entrepreneurial ability and the power to provide and consume (Zhang 2010: 186), femininity has come to entail needing to be provided for. Zhang Li's (2010) analysis of spousal advertisements shows that whereas men comment on their material possessions, generally a house and a car, as proof of their ability to get by in the post-reform economy, women rarely describe themselves in terms of possessions, but rather use terms that are considered 'feminine' and focus on appearances, using words like 'beautiful and fashionable', 'model-like body', and 'elegant' (171). Women's independence and ability to provide can be threatening to men and are therefore considered to be unattractive. The term 'hero woman' therefore has the strong connotation of a career-focused woman without a love or family life. Young women with

romantic dreams about future love and family are careful not to tread on these gender boundaries for fear of aligning themselves with this type of woman who, although respected for her success, lives a life of work and solitude. At the same time, for many young women, the idea of marrying soon and then having to prioritise family over career tempers their ambitions. Xiao, the young man from the conversation above, explained: 'For women it's just about getting some experience, and having some fun, after graduation. If they can, they quickly make themselves successful, but they can't wait too long. They can't start thinking about marriage when they're 28!'

These ideas all came together in the often-heard statement: 'for women, marrying well is more effective than doing well'. This claim was supported with stories about, for example, a female high school classmate who had not attended university but rather moved directly to Shenzhen, one of China's southern megacities. In Shenzhen, this young woman first worked in a manufacturing job, but soon after her arrival met a rich man whom she married and now she was better off than most of her high school classmates who went to university. 'You see? A girl can do well in school or in her job, but it's never as good as marrying a rich man', Xiao said. His sister followed up with a story about a 30-year-old single, female friend who had warned her against waiting too long for marriage: 'Don't wait too long, because as soon as you go beyond 26 or 27 years old, suddenly nobody will want to marry you anymore', was her advice. This friend felt like she had waited too long to marry, while she enjoyed working in a good job in Shenzhen, and now regretted 'wasting her time' and missing out on marriage opportunities.

The notion that for women marriage should be prioritised over education and career can give rise to tension between mothers and daughters. In the case of Morning Sunshine, her mother's lack of belief in the value of her education was detrimental to her ability to stay motivated while studying for her accountancy degree. When she was trying to return to university after her medical leave, she was met with a lot of resistance from her mother, who made clear that she considered further investment in Morning Sunshine's education completely useless and wanted her to get married urgently. In the evenings, when Morning Sunshine and her mother sat together in their bedroom in the bare village home, conversations often turned heated when the topic of her education came up. Morning Sunshine's mother argued vehemently against the idea of her return to school the following September: 'What's the use of that? It's a *shit* school and you'll be 24 years old when you graduate! Everybody's already married!' Clearly suffering from these attacks, Morning Sunshine would stare at the wall in front of her, quietly repeating, as if talking to herself, that she would go back to school, no matter what. Yet, as time went on, and her previous university gave her a hard time re-enrolling, while the jobs she was holding in the meantime

⁶⁵ The Chinese word *nuqiangren* translates literally to woman-strength-person, but the *hero woman* translation is commonly used.

always demanded too much for too little, Morning Sunshine saw no other option than to go ahead with the marriage after all.

Julia: a Trailblazer

As we stumble down the stairs of Julia's home carrying the bags and suitcases she brings back with her to Shanghai after the New Year celebrations, her mother keeps saying: 'Make sure to bring a boyfriend home next year! Don't you be coming home alone!'. Julia is at that time still employed at the Shanghai fashion brand. As we continue our way to the bus stop, she whispers to me, annoyed: 'Hear that, my whole life she's been at me, forbidding me to date anybody in high school and university, because I had to concentrate on my education, and now she just expects me to find some husband like this'. We wait for the bus with her mother, her brother, and Anna, who is Julia's best friend. Little do we know that Julia, instead of thinking about getting married soon, is making plans to leave her 6000 rmb (750 euro) per month (double the amount of most of her peers in Wuhan) job to pursue a completely different career in Shenzhen. In the months that follow, Julia experiences a tumultuous phase in her career, rapidly going in and out of jobs. Throughout this period, her mother, from whom Julia inherited her fiery character, phones her regularly, saying: 'Make sure to bring a boyfriend home next year!' She argues that her family relies on Julia marrying soon, since her marriage is expected to provide her mother with the funds for her brother's marriage. When I visit Julia in Shenzhen after she has been there for only a few weeks, she tells me despondently:

My mother doesn't talk to me anymore. She is mad, because I stopped dating a guy who she thought was great. He was tall, had a stable income, a good job, and a house and a car. Even a PhD degree. I met him at a speed-dating event. There were seven girls at the event, and only one guy, but he asked me to go out with him again. I should never have told my mum, but I just wanted her off my back for a while, and I knew it'd make her happy. Me and this guy... we didn't get along, he thought I was too forward and opinionated for a girl, so we stopped seeing each other, and now my mother is furious that I didn't bend over backwards to make him marry me. (Julia)

Two months later, Julia has a new boyfriend, a 25-year-old intern at Tencent, one of China's biggest internet companies, named Liang, who had been her flatmate in Shenzhen. Again, her mother gets deeply involved in the relationship. After finding out that the young couple has the habit of splitting bills, Julia's mother is terribly alarmed and convinced that this man has no serious intentions with her daughter. 'Don't you know that you can measure how much a man loves you by how much he spends on you?', she yells through the phone.

Eventually, these constant phone fights with her mother lead Julia to ask Liang directly whether his spending are reflective of his intentions. To her surprise, having been genuinely in love with him, this conversation results in an explosive break-up, during which Liang admits to not having taken Julia very seriously as a girlfriend. The status differences between them in terms of backgrounds, education, and occupation, had made him feel like she was 'not good enough' for him. Julia is left heartbroken, especially since this break-up means her mother will pick up her campaigning again.

Julia's mother kept urging her daughter to marry, saying that she urgently needed to receive a bride's price to pay towards her brother's wedding. For her brother to marry, he must own a house and a car, and pay a bride's price, which was at least 10,000 renminbi (1264 euro) in rural Hubei in 2016. With Julia's father having passed away, there was a sense of urgency in the family. In recent years, they have all been separated, working in different cities in the south of China. Julia's mother believes that it is very important for the future wellbeing of the family that Julia marries a rich man while she is still young enough. Yet, despite sharing this deep need for stability with her mother, Julia sees things differently. For her, nothing is more important than being able to depend on herself. She explains that not being able to help when her father was ill shaped her greatly, and has given her this determination to take care of herself and her family. She said, 'I have seen what happens when a situation like that hits you. I have seen how you can only depend on yourself in that kind of situation, how nobody can support you. I want to be ready when something happens to me or my family again. I want to be able to support them.' Julia's brother has been a migrant worker since he was 16 years old and has 'picked up bad habits' like smoking, drinking and gambling, according to Julia and her mother. Living from hand to mouth, he has not been able to be of much support to the family. On the one hand, Julia resents him for skirting his responsibilities, but on the other hand she feels guilty in the knowledge that she is the one who was able to continue her education, whereas her mother would never have been able to afford education fees for two.

In September 2018 Julia surprises me with a message: 'I just bought a house'. With her mother's help, she managed to put down 270,000 renminbi (34,000 euro) for a yet to be built apartment in Jingmen, a smaller city in central Hubei province. It had taken her about one year of working extremely hard in a sales job to save up 190,000 renminbi (24,000 euro). After having purchased the apartment, Julia immediately indicated that she would probably 'give' the apartment to her brother. She also wrote that her mother had now told her that she 'finally realised that she has a fabulous girl'. Julia's impressive perseverance demonstrated her desire to gain control over her own life. She moved from one city to the next, in and out of countless jobs, always fighting courageously to prove to her mother that she did not need

to get married in order to take care of her family. Julia was not principally opposed to the idea of marriage, but strongly disliked the feeling of being dependent on others. Now that she had achieved the greatest hurdle for many rural families by acquiring a house for her brother, who was therefore able to marry, she hoped that she would be rewarded with some freedom regarding her future decisions. Yet, after a few weeks of relative peace, Julia's was deeply saddened when her mother started yet another campaign for her to marry. By telling her daughter that she would always be too embarrassed to retire from her migrant labour work as long as her daughter remained unmarried, she put Julia in an impossible position in which her resistance to marry became directly connected to her mother's inability to retire. Having heard these words, Julia felt disappointed in the knowledge that no matter what she achieved, she could never make her mother proud as long as she remained unmarried.

Even though Julia had first been pushed to marry as soon as possible because this would help with the purchase of her brother's house, the pressure did not subside after she almost single-handedly made this purchase. Her mother now argued that it was not only for her brother's sake that she wanted Julia to marry, but also for her own sake, saying she could never retire as long as her daughter remained unmarried. Julia's best friend Anna found herself in the almost opposite situation. Her family had struggled for years to get the money together for her brother's wedding, a process her brother only slowed by buying a 120,000 renminbi (15,650 euro) car on a loan that he could not pay for, further increasing the financial stress his parents were already under. When I accompanied Anna on her visit home during the Chinese New Year's celebrations of 2016, she gave her parents 10,000 renminbi, which was the equivalent of three months' worth of salary, and almost half of what she had earned since her graduation. In 2019, when Anna was home for Chinese New Year again, her family members made clear to her that they did not considerate it appropriate for her to marry before her brother had tied the knot, since it would be harder for her to make contributions towards her brother's marriage as a married woman. Anna, feeling desperately unhappy with being asked to make sacrifices for her brother over and over again, fought with her mother and brother, and returned to Wuhan early.

Having to hand over their savings to be invested in their brother's futures undermines these young women's potential to build up their own lives in the city. Despite their hard work, Julia and Anna are not able to build up any capital of their own. Unable to hold on to their own savings and with their parents' financial support all being direct away from them, it is no surprise that young women feel like they have no choice but to rely on marriage for their own future wellbeing. It is important to know that these family arrangements have

far-reaching consequences for the position of women in Chinese society, especially in light of the fact that women generally cannot claim ownership of the marriage house.⁶⁶

Conclusion

The stories in this chapter illustrate the difficulties faced by rural female university graduates in China as a result of limitations imposed on them because of their gender as well as their rural status. It is of utmost importance to understand these young women's strategies in the context of their family situation. First of all, this chapter demonstrates that rural women's weak position on China's urban labour markets, as rural citizens and as migrants, makes them dependent on marriage for stabilising their lives. Second, in families with both sons and daughters, sisters contribute financially to their brothers' futures. A young man's marriage is an enormous expense for a rural family. Achieving a son's marriage shapes rural household strategies for decades, directing the work and migration decisions of parents and siblings. Needing to support brothers has a profound effect on the position of young, rural women in Chinese society, who are left economically dependent on their future husbands after having handed over their personal savings and with no family capital left to be invested in their futures. This context is of great importance when we try to understand the impact of rural Chinese women's increased participation in higher education on gender relations. This chapter shows that women's education does not necessarily promote gender equality when deeply-rooted and age-old gender ideologies remain unchallenged, and that challenging dominant narratives and existing power relations is especially difficult when people are simultaneously subjected to multiple modes of repression. The cases in this chapter also illustrate how these female rural graduates are always balancing on the line between doing well and marrying well. Afraid of being very successful and being branded a 'hero woman' and diminishing their chances of finding a husband, women temper their ambitions and present themselves as 'proper' women who care more about family than career. Those 'trailblazers' who throw caution to the wind and give it their all to prove that they can be successful independently are met with a great deal of resistance from their family and friends.

⁶⁶ Deborah Davis (2014) wrote about marriage and house ownership rights in China. Importantly, in 2001 a new law that strengthened individual property rights within marriage was introduced, which especially protected parental investments. First it was stated that parental investments in property made before the marriage should be seen as a gift to their child alone, but in 2011 an addition was made that stated that parents' investments made in 'immovable property' after marriage are also protected (2014: 559).