Intergenerational Transmission of Family Property and Family Management in Urban China*

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ABSTRACT This article applies Myron Cohen's studies of family division and family management in rural China to an examination of how working class families in urban China cope with the hardships created by industrial transition and housing reform. Senior parents work with their adult children; parental authority retains a critical role. By flexibly shifting powerful domestic roles, senior women, in particular, work with their adult sons in order to transmit the domestic resources necessary to secure the filial services to which they feel entitled. In China's fast-changing economic environment, fuelled by the modernization process, the dynamics of family culture still present effective tools and strategies for individual citizens seeking to protect and advance their own interests.

When my fieldwork in China was nearly completed, I paid a farewell visit to Mrs Guan, a retired worker and widow whom I had interviewed at length throughout the summer of 2008. She found my imminent departure distressing. For years, she had no one to talk to about the concerns that were uppermost in her mind: issues related to her late husband (who had suffered from cancer), her divorced son and her grandson. She confided that her greatest fear was not of financial insecurity but of loneliness. Her only child, the son who had divorced his wife, came to visit her only once a year at Chinese New Year, and her ex-daughter-in-law had been awarded custody of her grandson, whom she had not seen for two years. When I asked whether she had the financial resources necessary to move to a nursing home should that become necessary, she practically dragged my research assistant and me into her two-bedroom home. There, she unfolded a floor plan of a

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48-square-metre apartment and asked whether we were familiar with any legal procedure that could help her to retrieve the property. Mrs Guan explained that she had owned this apartment, which was one of three pieces of real estate in her possession. When city officials announced plans for the renewal of the marginal area of Tianjin in which the apartment was located, she was presented with a proposal to surrender it to the city government in exchange for 90,000 yuan. She quickly accepted the government's offer and collected the tendered compensation without asking for additional information. At that time, she desperately needed money; her husband had just been diagnosed with cancer and was facing expensive chemotherapy treatments. It later transpired that residents in that neighbourhood, which had been targeted for rehabilitation, banded together to resist the city's efforts to relocate them, and the government eventually abandoned its plan. The property market in Tianjin subsequently skyrocketed, and the apartment that Mrs Guan had relinquished to the city had risen sharply in value.[1]

This article addresses the meaning and value that housing property holds for seniors in urban China. In particular, it focuses on the intergenerational transmission of family property from senior citizens to their adult children. It further aims to determine whether the conventional practice among seniors of distributing family property to their children can still secure for them a comfortable old age in a highly commercialized urban setting.

Neither my assistant nor I had the courage or audacity to ask Mrs Guan whether she could forgive her son for divorcing his wife and bestow her blessing on his plans to remarry. Mrs Guan's son had been dating his fiancée for a few years before his divorce, but in her eyes that woman, as the notorious "third person" (*di san zhe* 第三者), had not only destroyed her son's marriage but also doomed her own plans for a happy and financially secure retirement.

Mrs Guan's case illustrates the current trend towards individualization among younger mainland Chinese. The older and younger generations in China are choosing to pursue two distinct and incompatible paths towards personal happiness. While senior citizens still hope to find a measure of contentment through family and feel entitled to exercise parental authority over certain aspects of their adult children's lives, their children now intend to keep control of their private lives in their own hands. It was once expected by senior citizens and accepted by their children that children would reward their parents for their hard work by providing and caring for them in their old age. Members of today's younger generation, however, resent this social convention and largely refuse to postpone

1 By 2008, similar to those in other Chinese cities, Tianjin's property market was plagued with bubbles. Homes in garden-gated communities in desirable locations cost about 10,000 yuan per square metre. Even the second-hand commercial flats away from the central loop could be sold at 6,000 yuan per square metre, so that it would cost 300,000 yuan to purchase a second-hand 50 square-metre one-bedroom apartment while a state-owned enterprise retiree's monthly income was only 1,200 to 1,400 yuan and a blue-collar service job paid only 700 to 1,000 yuan per month. Few working class families could afford this.

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their own personal satisfaction for the sake of their parents. They are unwilling to wait until their own old age when an extended family would compensate them for spending their younger years "eating bitterness" and denying their own wants and needs. These divergent generational viewpoints regarding duty to family and the pursuit of personal happiness have clashed in such a fundamental way that some essential structures of Chinese family culture have been shaken.

However, it was not only estrangement from her son that was the source of Mrs Guan's loneliness. She also felt alienated by and isolated from her neighbours. As the richest and most successful woman in the immediate area, she was disliked by most of the other families in the area who were of more modest means. In addition, many of the women condemned her as self-centred and attributed her current condition to her own determination to control her son's life, which included the arrangement of his first marriage: her ex-daughter-in-law was her best friend's daughter. Mrs Guan typically socialized with a small group of women who, like herself, had been marginalized by others in the neighbourhood and dismissed as egotistical "show-offs." Many of the other seniors in the area refused to talk to me once they realized that I had interviewed Mrs Guan and her friends. Those who did described Mrs Guan as "obnoxious" (*badao* 霸道), "selfish" (*zisi* 自私) or "pretentious" (*chengqiang* 逞强). They opined that she should at least give her son the opportunity to save some face and allow him to marry his fiancée so that his difficult circumstances, and her own, could be resolved.

The significance of Mrs Guan's case and her neighbours' reactions to it is in its exemplification of conflicting attitudes towards intergenerational relationships among Chinese urbanites in an era of rapid transition. What offended her neighbours so intensely was her violation of prevailing generational and gendered hierarchical rules that regulate local family life in the domestic arena. In her neighbours' eyes, Mrs Guan was too independent and failed to "co-operate" (*hezuo* 合作) with her son in maintaining a mutually respectful and subtly reciprocal relationship. Among urban families during this period of speedy industrial change, *he zuo* was the key to survival. In their well-documented case study of Baoding, a medium-sized city in Hebei province, Whyte and his colleagues showed how cross-generational co-operation enabled working-class urbanites to survive massive lay-offs, housing shortages, welfare loopholes and low incomes.[2] In criticizing Mrs Guan, her neighbours specifically discussed how to co-operate with family members when negotiating the domestic sphere versus the public sphere.

This article applies Myron Cohen's theories and findings regarding the division of family labour in rural Taiwan and northern China to an analysis of the role of gender in intergenerational relationships between senior parents and their adult children. According to Cohen's findings, the "family head" (*jiazhang* 家长),

2 Martin King Whyte (ed.), *China's Revolutions and Intergenerational Relations* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 2003).

whose role is to represent the family to the outside world in the realms of society, business and public ritual, is almost always a man. On the other hand, the position of "family manager" (*dangjia* 当家), whose role is to oversee family economic and financial affairs and administrate daily routines, accounts and financial resources, may be filled by either a man or a woman. This persistent differentiation between intra-familial gender roles, however, does not carry over into generational status. In other words, the role of family head can be filled by an adult son and his mother can work with him as the domestic manager.[3]

The division and transmission of family property between generations provide a unique opportunity to study how the larger socio-cultural gender hierarchy is reproduced in the home within the context of seniors' relationships with their adult children. With a skyrocketing property market and an increasingly economically competitive urban environment, is the conventional family division of labour still strictly observed within both the family and the local community? Who is appointed to serve as the family head and who manages the family accounts? In her treatment of her son and her disposition of the family property, Mrs Guan worked simultaneously as the family head and the manager ruling both her and her son's private lives. This violation not only led to her social ostracism but also revealed the explicit problem of gender within the larger issue of intergenerational transmission of family property and intra-family strategies for providing care to parents during their senior years.

Studying Intergenerational Relationships among the Chinese

Individualization of Chinese family lives

The study of intergenerational relationships among the Chinese has practical as well as academic implications. As China's population continues to age and the total number of elderly increases radically in proportion to the number of their adult children, a big question looms: who will care for China's senior citizens? Researchers have been turning their attention to filial piety, the core of Chinese family culture, in order to gauge the impact on the relationships between senior parents and their adult children of the fast-paced development and reform that has transformed China's economy over the past three decades. They are asking whether parental prestige and authority within the family can still be effectively maintained through the conventional notion of moral duty to one's elders and whether adult children are still willing and able to prioritize the interests of their extended family over their own and provide the necessary routine and daily care for their ageing parents.[4]

3 Myron Cohen, *House United, House Divided: The Chinese Family in Taiwan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976); and "Family management and family division in contemporary rural China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 130 (1992), pp. 357–77.

4 Deborah Davis and Stevan Harrell, *Chinese Families in the Post-Mao Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Charlotte Ikels, "The impact of housing policy on China's urban elderly,"

This concern has been intensified by alarming reports of a prevailing trend among families: instead of enjoying the filial services of their adult children, more and more senior citizens are working hard to provide them with financial assistance to aid in their struggle to survive in an increasingly harsh and competitive economic environment. In rural China, after a series of divisions of property in their families of birth, adult children establish their nuclear families immediately after marriage and leave their senior parents living in empty nests.[5] In urban areas, senior parents' tangible and intangible assets have become crucial resources for their adult children, both daughters and sons, as they fend for themselves through China's massive industrial transition. Parents pass their jobs down to their children; offer them a place to live; provide child care; carry out domestic chores; and assist their children and grandchildren financially with contributions from their own limited pensions.[6] In the case of the urban middle class, young white-collar professionals have benefited greatly from co-residency with their parents, which allows them to avoid paying high rents for their own apartments and to save most of their cash income. In more recent years, when a consumer property market emerged, these middle-class families pooled their savings for a down-payment on the purchase of a first home. Further, by moving into new apartments with their adult children, senior parents have been able to rent out their own housing spaces, which they originally purchased from the *danwei*, and use their tenants' rental payments as a source of additional income.[7]

Senior parents have been willing to "eat bitterness" and "sacrifice" for their children so that they can maximize the material benefit that accrues to the entire family in the market-driven economy that has emerged in urban China.[8] Now that the commercial housing market has created a freedom of movement that allows adult children to live apart from their extended families, leading some to move to locales a distance away from their parents' homes, many senior

footnote continued

Urban Anthropology, Vol. 33, Nos. 2–4 (2004), pp. 321–55; Charlotte Ikels, "Introduction," in Charlotte Ikels (ed.), *Filial Piety: Practice and Discourse in Contemporary East Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 1–15; Hong Zhang, "Family care or residential care? The moral and practical dilemmas facing the elderly in urban China," *Asian Anthropology*, Vol. 5 (2006), pp. 57–84.

5 Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

6 Jieming Chen, "The effect of parental investment on old-age support in urban China," in Whyte, *China's Revolutions and Intergenerational Relations*, pp. 197–224; Feng Wang, Zhenyu Xiao and Jie Zhan, "Privilege or punishment? Retirement and reemployment among the Chinese urban elderly," in *ibid.* pp. 61–84; Martin King Whyte, "Introduction," in *ibid.* pp. 3–30.

7 Luigi Tomba, "Creating an urban middle class: social engineering in Beijing," *The China Journal*, Vol. 51 (2004), pp. 1–26.

8 Friederike Fleischer, "Speaking bitter-sweetness: China's urban elderly in the reform period," *Asian Anthropology*, Vol. 5 (2006), pp. 31–56; Vanessa Fong, *Only Hope: Coming of Age under China's One-Child Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Jieyu Liu, *Gender and Work in Urban China: Women Workers of the Unlucky Generation* (London: Routledge, 2007).

citizens are experiencing profound loneliness and disappointment as they fail to collect the expected filial services from their children.[9]

This profound transformation in China's child-centred family culture has evoked a wide range of academic and social criticism. In his new work, Liu Xin condemns the prevalence of such individualism and egocentrism in urban Chinese society. He argues that the catalyst of this social phenomenon is the rise of the global economy and the spread of consumerism and capitalism in the Chinese state.[10] Yan's analysis of the problem focuses more on the dynamics that exist at the family level. He incisively points out that, in the wake of the May Fourth movement, the state's discursive campaign against traditional Confucian culture advocated the freeing of individuals from their bonds to the family collective. However, the state's socialist policies and management of the labour force then re-bound these same individuals to collectivist socialist institutions. When market-driven economic reforms disentangled this collective framework, a self-interested "I" replaced the collective "we," and individualization in China entered a new stage.[11]

Smaller family size, tighter conjugal bonds and, most importantly, an emphasis on individual privacy and autonomy within the family have replaced the conventional model of a collective, intergenerational-centred family built around parental authority that dominated Chinese culture for so long. More significantly, a commercialized culture that encouraged self-indulgence and an emphasis on self-realization and the quest for personal identity as positive ideals have allowed young Chinese to develop a sense of entitlement which has been expressed through a demand for consumer and property rights, as well as a right to free expression of personal feelings.[12] This set of values stands in glaring contrast to the conventional Chinese ideology that required young family members to "sacrifice," "eat bitterness" and "suffer" for the sake of the collective family interest, for the personal happiness and welfare of the family elders, and for the assurance of peace and comfort in their own senior years.

Critiques of the individualization interpretation

My own research findings echo the trends remarked upon by the scholars cited above: the new paradigm of intimacy and personal relationships that emerges in modern and modernizing societies is not a democratic one. The intergenerational parent–child bond, once asymmetrical in favour of the parent, has now become lopsided in the opposite direction, with the power shifting from senior parents to their adult children. While the conventional parent-centred family

9 Ikels, "The impact of housing policy on China's urban elderly," pp. 321–55.
10 Xin Liu, *The Mirage of China: Anti-Humanism, Narcissism, and Corporeality of the Contemporary World* (NewYork: Berghahn Books, 2009).
11 Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism*.
12 *Ibid*.

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dynamics were mediated by gender and class, the new child-centred family culture is a product of consumerism and state capitalism.

However, my case studies also demonstrate that this "downward attention" away from senior parents and towards adult children does not necessarily or inevitably result in an irreconcilable opposition between the individual "I" and collective "we." From the gender perspective, this research also echoes critiques of the individualization of Chinese family lives that emerge from studies of the mother–daughter relationship. Evans' studies of intergenerational families show that a commitment to intra-familial reciprocity and a yearning for mutual respect has actually tightened mother–daughter bonds in Chinese families and has not resulted in the expected clash between the individualistic "I" and the collective "we."[13] Liu's case studies of laid-off female workers and their daughters reveal the emergence of individualization in the younger generation, but the reciprocal bonds between mothers and daughters remain intact and have actually facilitated the younger generation's efforts to serve its own self interest.[14] Thus, from such gendered socialist examples, it seems that the effects of individualization on the family are not as simple and linear as some scholars would believe.

Even in families that have adopted the new model, new family members do work together and, in some families, the conventional rules of family culture still apply. From the perspective of gender, the shift in domestic power between generations still occurs as it always has, and, in fact, has become an even more reliable social phenomenon in market-driven urban settings. With the co-operation of family members from both generations, senior parents may cede the symbolic and public title of family head to one of their adult children while continuing to serve in the role of family manager in the private, domestic sphere. When seniors maintain legal ownership rights over family real estate and other property, they can maintain a measure of prestige and power within the family structure, ensuring that their adult children will care for them into their advancing years.

Family Management and Distribution of Domestic Power in China

Two players in one game

In his study of the rural Chinese custom of dividing family property as it is practised in both Taiwan and the mainland, Myron Cohen carefully distinguishes the role of family head from that of family manager. Although both roles can be filled by men, only death, divorce or other dissolution of the family group can deprive a man of his position as family head, while a variety of factors, including senility, incompetence, illness or simply a desire to "retire" and rest in old age

13 Harriet Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

14 Jieyu Liu, *Gender and Work in Urban China*.

could lead a male family manager to relinquish his authority and responsibility to another family member.[15]

A second level of the division of labour in the domestic arena is represented through the dichotomy between domestic affairs related to the "outside" and "public" world and those belonging purely to the "inner" or "household" domain. The distribution of family property and the transmission of wealth from one generation to another are important issues that pertain directly to the outside world. The richer the family, the more complex and extensive its financial affairs tend to be, and the more male members will be needed to administer them. Especially in the case of family-owned and operated business enterprises, domestic financial matters are generally handled by men.[16]

However, this does not mean one man, let alone one woman, can effectively handle the roles of both family head and family manager. Cohen perceptively points out that the division of labour between the family head and the family manager is rational and practical; the integrity and trustworthiness of a family manager, who exercises control over finances, could be questioned by other family members if he became deeply involved in the glamour and politics of the public sphere. The motivations behind decisions and measures adopted by an individual who served as both family head and family manager could be considered "impure" (*bu danchun* 不单纯), as it would be difficult to ascertain whether he was choosing a particular course of action to benefit the family or to enhance his own prestige. To avoid breeding such mistrust and suspicion within the family, the family manager must generally isolate himself or herself from the realm of public affairs. In other words, it is culturally required to have two persons who assume related but separate goals in terms of dealing with the transmission of family property.

A rural convention in an urban setting

Cohen's research, both in Taiwan and on the northern mainland, was conducted entirely in rural settings. Here, the flexible division of domestic labour enabled senior parents to collect filial services by ceding the symbolic and public glamour to their juniors while still holding on to parental authority by managing the affairs of the extended family. Current research among rural Chinese families confirms that such practices still prevail in villages. Shannon May's chapter in this volume demonstrates that, in order to create a secure senior life, rural parents strategically pull their sons and their daughters-in-law back to the countryside so that they can be guaranteed their filial services. In those stem or extended families that they formed with their sons, the authority of senior parents is further maintained by manipulating their daughters' chances of marrying up into the cities so

15 Myron Cohen, *House United, House Divided*; "Family management and family division."
16 Cohen, "Family management and family division," p. 364.

as to improve the material welfare of the whole family.[17] Vulnerable adult children, sons in particular, may also rely on the cultural practice of filial piety to gain more material benefit from their senior parents.[18]

In urban settings, a range of societal changes and a lack of change in the gendered expectations of the younger generation have also occurred under the wider rubric of filial piety. If the empowerment of rural women was the major social force that initiated such changes in the countryside, socioeconomic differentiations and social engineering via the development of real estate market in the post-industrial urban transition forced urban families, working-class families in particular, to adopt the conventional domestic wisdom in order to remain afloat. The substantial economic opportunities brought to the younger generation of China's urbanites may have threatened the authority of parents whose Spartan socialist values could seem outdated and whose resources in a declining state-owned system could be limited and irrelevant. However, detailed research reveals that, during the post-industrial transition time, urban parental authority remained crucial in various respects. The universal distribution of housing stock to the employees of state-owned enterprises during the socialist period provided the precious guarantee of welfare to working-class parents and their grown children. In her multiple-site research in Liaoning Province, C.K. Lee reported that, after a long day of protest, the fact that there was a home to go back to became the key reason that there was no large-scale social turmoil in the massive transition of China's oldest industrial base.[19] Martin Whyte and his colleagues' survey of Baoding demonstrated the same tight intergenerational bonds. In the name of filial piety, adult children, both male and female, maintained their daily interactions with their senior parents. A tremendous amount of tangible and intangible resources was exchanged among family members so that each could benefit from family co-operation.[20] According to Luigi Tomba's research in a newly developed middle-class residential neighbourhood in Beijing, intergenerational collaboration was also essential in creating China's first generation of commercial housing owners and landlords.[21]

17 Shannon May, "Broken hearts and broken homes: young women's lifecycle labor mobility as a family managerial strategy," in Harriet Evans and Julia C. Strauss (eds.), *Gender in Flux: Agency and its Limits in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

18 If necessary, vulnerable sons would also pay filial services to their wives' parents and turn to her extended family to gain domestic security. In Shi Lihong's case studies, she points out that, because of the empowerment of rural women, i.e. the entitlement of claiming divorce without paying back the brideprice, increasing numbers of rural males provided more filial practices to their in-laws. See Shi Lihong, "Little quilted vests to warm parents' hearts," *The China Quarterly*, No. 198 (2009), pp. 348–63.

19 C.K. Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

20 In 1994, Martin Whyte and his colleagues interviewed 1,002 residents of Baoding to examine the fluctuation of intergenerational relations and the impact of successive and overlapping socio-economic and political changes in China throughout the 20th century. Whyte, *China's Revolutions and Intergenerational Relations*.

21 Luigi Tomba explicitly specified five crucial steps to domestic collaboration in the process of purchasing new residential apartments when they first became available in Beijing. His detailed ethnographic data demonstrated the flexible domestic strategies employed by both senior parents and their adult children in

Gender perspective

Gender hierarchy is equally important to Chinese domestic culture as intergenerational hierarchy. Any change in the distribution of power between the genders would also be reflected in the intergenerational power structure and vice versa. The effect of the domestic division of labour between *jiazhang* and *dangjia* on the reproduction of gender inequality is profound.

Gender roles in China are organized along a dichotomy defined by the fundamental difference between *nei* 内 and *wai* 外. Women's status in the domestic arena has long been a favourite focus of anthropological studies of Chinese family culture. Even in the "zone of dependence," women's agency and initiative has enabled them to create a "uterine family model" which, in turn, has helped them construct social networks and domestic hierarchies. This "uterine" model permits women to transcend their inferior gendered status via the manipulation of male members of the family. As daughters, wives, mothers, mothers-in-law and grandmothers, women find their lives heavily regulated at every turn by intensive cultural rules that nevertheless facilitate the creation of niches of autonomy and authority for women within the domestic arena.[22] Women derive their authority within the family and home primarily by controlling and regulating domestic family affairs. Because of the strict division between the public and the domestic through the separate roles of the family head and the family manager, women's authority is not challenged when their husbands or sons function as the family's representative in the public domain. This conventional uterine model, through which women exert control over family affairs while permitting male family members to serve as the family's public face in the role of family head, has enabled senior women to exchange familial power and authority freely and flexibly with their sons and receive in reciprocation the promise of their sons' filial services during their senior years.

The sense of the domestic sphere as inferior and unimportant has been bolstered in discourses concerning modernity that emerged in the aftermath of the May Fourth movement and in conjunction with Mao's women's liberation movement. The goal of releasing women from their imprisonment within the confines of the domestic sphere became the foundation of China's ambitions towards modernization. But this over-simplified formulation of the division between the public and domestic spheres ignored the existence of conventional cultural mechanisms that actually enabled women to find "self" and develop personal power and meaning within the home.[23] The Maoist policy of gender equality was

footnote continued

the domains of living space arrangement, family financial pooling and intergenerational exchange of public entitlements. See Tomba, "Creating an urban middle class."

22 Margery Wolf, "Uterine families and the women's community," in Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1972).

23 Evans, *The Subject of Gender*.

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built solely on a campaign to include women in the labour force. As the state enthusiastically promoted the glorious aspects of working outside the home, women who remained in the domestic sphere were portrayed as selfish, lazy and old-fashioned.

It was generally assumed that, once women were empowered to construct a public identity and assume authority in matters outside the home, their status in the domestic sphere would also automatically increase. However, the state never mandated a specific programme or vision as to how women's status in the domestic sphere would actually grow or how that growth would be manifested. The actual effect of the state's campaign for gender equality, with its nebulousness regarding domestic matters, was to create the expectation that women work outside the home while maintaining the traditional division of domestic labour. The double burden prevailed: women were now expected to work outside the home while working as hard and efficiently as they always had inside the home as well. These internal contradictions explain why, after the "iron girl" ordeal, women turned their imaginations back to the inner domestic arena where they could find some measure of beauty, romance, leisure and material comfort. After all, they concluded, the positive nature of domestic life had been distorted by the state's socialist campaign.

The following sections draw upon case studies to illustrate the power dynamics operating within the urban Chinese family and demonstrate how they serve to maximize material benefit for family members.[24] The analysis approaches this issue from a distinctly gendered perspective. Women as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers and mothers-in-law participate in family management and intergenerational transmission of domestic property. They shift from role to role within both the public and domestic spheres and negotiate the boundaries of their authority with male family members. Women's flexibility and their ability to transfer power and authority from one role to another has become a key factor in the ability of families to derive material, financial and social benefit in an increasingly competitive urban economy.

Capable Mothers

Mrs Liu is a sweet but firm old lady. Under her skilful management, her extended family is living harmoniously. She and her husband have two children, a son and a daughter. From the beginning, Mrs Liu's daughter was a good student. She always received excellent grades, attended prestigious schools and socialized with children of well-connected parents. No one was surprised when she entered medical school and became a doctor. She also married well. Her husband is a

24 Ethnographic data were collected in a working-class neighbourhood in Tianjin during summer 2008. As a neighbourhood, Xinshuli, a state-owned enterprise dormitory area, is composed of two five-floor apartment buildings and 13 rows of connected single-room red brick houses. Each room is about 12 to 16 square metres.

senior manager in a property company, one of the most coveted positions in Tianjin. Both Mrs Liu's daughter and her husband work hard; the couple is childless.

Mrs Liu's son was not that fortunate. He worked in the same factory where his parents had worked and married a female coworker. When the factory's business slowed down, his wife was laid off and his own hours were cut in half. He is now collecting less than 1,000 yuan per month in salary. He and his wife have a son who attends middle school. Mrs Liu's daughter and her husband pay for the boy to take extracurricular classes in a good art programme so that he will have a better chance of eventually being admitted to an art college, which does not require especially high academic scores on the competitive college entrance examination. Mrs Liu's daughter and her husband also pay for all of Mrs Liu's utilities at home and cover her medical bills.

Mrs Liu and her husband played an active and key role in setting up these family financial arrangements. Mrs Liu frequently mentioned that parents need to "balance the bowl of water" (*yi wan shui duan pin*一碗水端平) among their children. Mrs Liu's daughter might be successful, but she does not have her own child. It therefore seems right and rational that she uses some of the resources that she would have spent on a child of her own to help her nephew. The boy's parents might be unsuccessful and unlucky, but, with an aunt and uncle who are prosperous and resourceful, his educational opportunities are not compromised. According to Mrs Liu, it would be ideal if her daughter, in addition to funding the boy's art lessons, could also help him prepare his school lessons and homework. However, her daughter's busy schedule makes this impracticable. Says Mrs Liu: "Whenever my daughter wants to buy things for me, I ask her to spend more money on her nephew, he needs more investment. I always tell her that treating her brother's family well is to treat us well." Thus, the boy is not simply the son of Mrs Liu's son and Mrs Liu's only grandchild; he is, to some extent, the child of the family as a whole, for whom all members of the extended family share responsibility.

Mrs Liu's son lives in the same neighbourhood as she does. Frequently, he and his immediate family spend time at Mr and Mrs Liu's home in order to help the senior couple with daily chores. Mrs Liu never asks her son for pocket money for herself and her husband. In her mind, "balancing the bowl of water" means daily visits and household help from her son and monthly financial assistance from her daughter. Both her son and her daughter are providing filial services to their parents, albeit in different ways. In addition, by mediating the transfer of resources from her relatively wealthy daughter to her struggling son and his wife and child, Mrs Liu has also used her own parental authority to benefit her son's nuclear family.

The key individual around whom this whole arrangement revolves is actually Mrs Liu's grandson. Because he is the only child in the family's third generation, his grandmother believes that the entire extended family should assume the duties of raising him. The unfortunate career mishaps suffered by Mrs Liu's son and

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daughter-in-law further consolidates her position. Because they are the parents of the family's only heir, Mrs Liu argues that the more prosperous family members should provide them with financial assistance, especially when it comes to providing the resources necessary to raise and educate their son. Mrs Liu and her husband's parental authority inheres in the fact that they can draw upon their daughter's resources to help their son's family. Somewhat atypical but nevertheless socially acceptable, the practice of urban Chinese women providing resources and filial services to their brothers is on the rise. As a consequence of China's one-child policy, a new generation of adult women has grown up to become the sole providers of filial care for their parents. The case of Mrs Liu's daughter is different only in that she is providing support and assistance not only to her senior parents but also to her brother's family. However, Mrs Liu and her husband are the ones who actually mediate these services, and their daughter provides these services to her brother under the umbrella of her parents' authority. Because the senior couple are responsible, indirectly, for the financial assistance that their son receives from their daughter, their son owes them his gratitude for allowing him to "save face" by providing him with the resources necessary to care for his own child. Their son's gratitude seals the guarantee that he will repay their generosity by providing his own filial services to them in their old age.

Powerful Mothers-in-Law

Mrs Wang lives with her youngest son and daughter-in-law in two separate rooms located in the same alley, and both properties are under her name. Her granddaughter attends college and is home only infrequently. We were surprised to learn that the girl's college tuition was paid for fully by her own mother. Every month, Mrs Wang's son pays her rent and monthly expenses out of his own personal account. Her son works as a manual labourer at a massage centre. Her daughter-in-law, after being laid off from her original job in a factory, works as a salesperson at a shopping centre.

The rest of Mrs Wang's children have their own living space. Mrs Wang is very satisfied with the agreement that she has reached with her youngest son. It provides her filial services from her son; in return, her son's family gets a place to live and her granddaughter's education has been fully covered. Mrs Wang rarely mentioned her daughter-in-law during our interview. She disapproves of how her daughter-in-law raised her granddaughter, believing that the girl was spoiled by her mother's expenditures of money on her behalf. However, she realizes that her daughter-in-law had the authority and right to spend her own money in any way she saw fit. As far as Mrs Wang is concerned, she is fully satisfied with the arrangement she and her son have negotiated.

Mrs Wang is in her 80s and never had a formal education. Her detailed financial calculations impressed us, but we never asked how she thought her daughter-in-law felt about the filial arrangement. Mrs Wang is in total control of her own domestic affairs, but she also demonstrates a great deal of deference

and respect towards her son. She introduced him to us and let him participate in the interview. But as we asked detailed questions relating to the family property and the management of domestic chores and duties, Mrs Wang was the one who answered all the questions. She explained that her son visited every day to help her with household tasks and that he also usually cooked for and dined with her. Once in a while the son's daughter, Mrs Wang's granddaughter, joins them for meals, but the daughter-in-law does so only rarely. My assistant and I never had a chance to meet or to talk to the powerless daughter-in-law, but we did speak to the granddaughter who confided in me that, because she was the only college student in her extended family, her mother had pinned all her hopes on her.

According to the formal registration records, both Mrs Liu and Mrs Wang live in their own household units, separate from those of their children, but they nevertheless manage to organize their daily life within the context of their extended families and interact and co-operate frequently and closely with their adult children. By managing their own resources and distributing their children's labour and resources, they have been able to plan for and ensure their own security and comfort during their senior years. Mrs Liu has never presented herself as the family head or even the manager of her family's domestic affairs. If asked, she would insist that her husband, son and daughter are all more important than she is to the conduct of family business. However, although she consults her husband and children and co-operates with them, everyone knows that she is the central authority in the family. Mrs Wang, on the other hand, is nominally the head of her own one-person household. However, she knows that, without her son's assistance, she would never be able to survive on her own. By the end of our interview with her, she told us that she had a plan for the disposition of her property. Upon her death, she will bequeath to her son her property rights to the room that her son and his family currently live in. After all, her son has faithfully performed his filial duties and has sincerely and diligently attended to her needs. She further intends to bequeath the rights to the room in which she herself currently lives to the family as a whole, to be shared equally between all her children.

Handy and Submissive Wives

Mrs Zhang and her husband have two sons, both married with children. Everyone in the extended family is doing well. Mrs Zhang's elder granddaughter has just been admitted into the computer science department at Shandong University. Her younger son and his family will soon migrate to Canada, a country in which he will have no need to worry about his welfare when he enters his senior years. For two days, we sat in Mrs Zhang's spotlessly clean apartment to talk while her husband and their elder son sat just outside the door, listening patiently.

It was never easy for this family of eight. Both of Mrs Zhang's daughters-in-law were laid off from their jobs in the late 1990s, and she and

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her husband made so little from their pensions that they were unable to provide any financial assistance. Fortunately, they were able to use the extra housing that they received from the factory where they had worked to provide their sons and their families with a place to live. In order to make more money, her eldest son left his job in a state-owned enterprise to start his own business with friends. Over the course of the next ten years, the son attempted several different business ventures, including selling clothes in the street and opening his own stores. At the time we interviewed Mrs Zhang, he had just opened his own wedding photo studio and the business was going well.

Mrs Zhang's second son went to college and worked as a computer programmer at Zhongguancun, the computer centre in Beijing, in the 1990s. He was earning the highest salary of anyone in the entire family, but he knew that, because he was working for a Taiwanese entrepreneur, there would be no guarantee of lifelong employment or of a retirement pension to support him in his senior years. Although he was making good money, he continually questioned how long he could keep working at such an intense pace and how long his health could endure. Eventually, he opted to transfer to another computer firm in Tianjin where he worked fewer hours for less pay but was able to spend more time at home with his family. He subsequently decided to emigrate and relocate his nuclear family to Canada.

Mrs Zhang is aware that her son might never have the opportunity to work as a white-collar professional in Canada. It is very possible, based on the experiences of her son's friends who have previously migrated to Canada, that he will be unable to find work except as a supermarket clerk, a mover or a security guard. However, she is satisfied knowing that her son's nuclear family will be able to enjoy government welfare benefits and that her grandson will be able to receive a free education in English. She is happy that she and her husband could help her sons reach the point in their lives and careers that they have achieved today. After working in the same factory for about 30 years, Mrs Zhang and her husband have accumulated three properties in the dormitory neighbourhood, and they are aware that the value of these properties is increasing. While both their sons were working hard to make a living, Mrs Zhang's husband, a former technician in the factory, tutored both his grandchildren to make sure that their education would not be compromised by all the changes occurring in their lives.

Mrs Zhang's daily duties include cleaning, cooking and doing chores for everyone in the family. Her role in the family makes her very happy. Both her daughters-in-law work hard in low-paying positions. While she is very proud of the hard work performed by her extended family members, she was also very cautious not to reveal any crucial or sensitive information to us. With her son and her husband sitting outside the door listening to our interviews, she repeatedly consulted them to confirm details of her account and to cross-check the numbers she provided us. Most of the time she got the numbers right, but it was always her husband who ultimately confirmed that she had come up

with the correct figure. Her elder son was not happy about letting us know that his parents owned three properties, rather than two, as a result of their work at the factory. We were never able to work out how two full-time employees managed to obtain three dormitories from one factory. Some time after that initial interview, Mrs Zhang passed by as we were talking to Mrs Guan in the courtyard. Mrs Zhang declined to speak with me after that encounter. We learned from others in the neighbourhood that Mrs Zhang never socialized with Mrs Guan. "They are different types. Zhang would never mess up (*jiaohe*搅和) her sons' lives. She is not obnoxious," said their neighbours.

Mrs Zhang's husband is obviously the head of the family. Even her elder son exercises a degree of control over her. Given her second son's plans to migrate with his nuclear family to Canada, it is very possible that the elder son will inherit the entire family estate, including the three dormitories. But for Mrs Zhang, that is not the most important point. She is content to let her husband and sons deal with the outside world. Throughout the interview, I continually suspected that I would not have been allowed the opportunity to speak to her about these critical domestic matters had I not already met her family and interviewed her ten years previously. It was clear her husband and son were afraid that she might say something "wrong" during our interview. These two powerful men in her life sat just outside the room, within earshot, during our interview, zealously defending the boundary between *nei* and *wai*. Mrs Zhang did not seem to resent their controlling attitudes. She said over and over that, as long as everyone in her family was happy, then she was happy too.

Filial Daughters

Mr Liu has a bicycle stand in the neighbourhood. His wife died several years ago and now he lives with his youngest son, daughter-in-law and grandson in the two-and-a-half-room apartment that he purchased from the factory where he used to work. Mr Liu and his son's family "separated the stove" (*fenzao*分灶) and cook separately. Mr Liu has deliberately remained single and financially independent from his son's family. His one room is small; half of it is occupied by a single bed and the other half with piles of tools, bicycle tyres and a small desk. Having this one-room dormitory has allowed him to run his business and earn some extra cash for himself and his eldest daughter, who lives in a one-room dormitory in the same neighbourhood with her own son.

Mr Liu's daughter is divorced and is raising her son by herself on an income of less than 1,000 yuan a month that she makes by doing odd jobs. Every month, Mr Liu helps her out by giving her several hundred yuan. In return, she comes to cook for him every night. The dormitory she lives in is owned by Mr Liu's apprentice and, because of this relationship, she pays her landlord rent of only 200 yuan per month.

When I interviewed Mr Liu, he clearly wanted to pass on the one-room property to his daughter upon his death. She is the only one of his children who spends

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a significant amount of time with him and she takes care of him on a daily basis. Even though they live next door, Mr Liu's son and daughter-in-law never visit him, and they do not get along with Mr Liu's eldest daughter. In their mind, this one-room property belongs to them, or at least, this one particular room legally belongs to all of Mr Liu's children. However, Mr Liu has remained steadfastly on his eldest daughter's side in this dispute. He wants his daughter to rent out his room after his death so that she and her son will have an additional source of income.

Because he has these hopes of passing his property on to his eldest daughter, Mr Liu does not want to be relocated to another area of the city if the city government decides that the neighbourhood should undergo renewal. He knows that, once he moves to an affordable housing project or to another residential neighbourhood on Tianjin's fringes, he will probably end up living with his son and losing title to his one-room property. Given his poor relationship with his son and daughter-in-law, he knows that they would not willingly provide any filial services for him. Further, his relocation to a whole new neighbourhood would be devastating to his eldest daughter and her son. His daughter would probably lose her own living space and have nowhere to go.

In this case, the boundary between *nei* and *wai* is maintained by an elderly father in his 80s and his financially struggling daughter. While the senior father, as the owner of a small home-based business, serves as the family head, his daughter serves as family manager, overseeing daily family routines and administering care to her father in his home. The loose but effective family structure enables three disadvantaged urban dwellers – father, daughter and grandson – to survive. As the family head, the father is determined to avoid dealing with his son's immediate family and chooses to co-operate instead with his daughter and her teenage son. In the long run, Mr Liu hopes that his grandson will find work in Binhai New District, Tianjin's satellite city, as a labourer on a manufacturing assembly line. It will be much easier for him to gain admission to a technical school than to pass the competitive college entrance exam. If his grandson does find a good job in a manufacturing plant, both Mr Liu and his daughter can look forward to security and comfort in their senior years.

Competing Siblings

Ah Mei is the third daughter in a family with seven adult children. Ah Mei's parents died several years ago and left their one-room dormitory to her and her husband to use as a storage facility for the breakfast stand they operate every day. I interviewed Ah Mei's mother in 1997 and remember her clearly – an illiterate woman who had worked full-time for 27 years while raising seven children. When I interviewed her, she was 65 years old and still running a lunch stand with her second daughter, who had been laid off, in order to earn a monthly income. Both of Ah Mei's parents collected early retirement packages in order to give their jobs to their children when they returned from the

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countryside in the late 1970s. Then both parents worked in their friends' restaurants to make extra income for themselves. When three out of seven of their adult children were laid off, the parents gave their restaurant jobs to two daughters and came home to start the lunch stand with the second daughter. Altogether, four children benefited from their senior parents' job transition.

When Ah Mei and her husband got laid off, they took over the food stand their parents had started with her second sister. Every month, the food stand brings in about 1,000 yuan. Ah Mei also works as a cook in a local school canteen; that position brings in 700 yuan per month. The couple's other major source of income is 1,100 per month rent from the tenants of a one-bedroom apartment that they own in the city centre. They purchased the apartment in 1991 when that part of the city was regenerating. They were eligible to do so because they were living with their in-laws and had a claim to their share of their property. They worked hard and utilized every resource available to make money because their daughter was still in college.

Ah Mei's daughter is her only hope. Majoring in accounting in a good university, the girl might find a job that pays well. But her monthly expenditures are currently too high. In addition to tuition and room and board, Ah Mei has also spent money on a mobile phone and a laptop computer for her daughter. When I asked why she did this, she first said it was because everyone in her daughter's class was doing this, but then she told me that her daughter was dating. The suitor is her classmate and comes from a well-to-do family, and Ah-Mei does not want her daughter to be rejected. She has tried her best to raise a typical cosmopolitan girl. Her daughter's boyfriend comes from a county town between Beijing and Tianjin, and he looks forward to finding a job in Tianjin after he graduates. "Luckily once she gets married, I do not have to buy her a flat," Ah Mei said. She further explained that her daughter's education and lifestyle at college will be her dowry: instead of saving up for a dowry for her daughter, Ah Mei has given her experiences and opportunities that she hopes will help her find a good husband.

Ah Mei feels grateful to her deceased parents: "My mother left me this fortune [the one-room flat]. At least I still have a place to stay. My brothers and sisters are fine with this. They all had better life than me. If we divided the monthly rent of 300 yuan among us, it would not be a big amount for anyone anyway."

It turns out that Ah Mei and her youngest sister are struggling to ensure that their daughters finish their college education. Because of a significant age difference, Ah Mei's eldest sister and brother received a better education, did not have to work in the countryside and found employment in the city in better work positions. They married well, and their children became doctors and teachers. Ah Mei's cohort, on the other hand, was severely hampered by the effects of the Cultural Revolution. Pressures from her more prominent siblings pushed her to work harder, handling responsibilities on both the *nei* and *wai* sides of the dichotomy. Her careful but independent arrangement for her daughter and herself is temporary. She knows that the property legally belongs to all her siblings.

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Once the neighbourhood is targeted for renewal, she will have to move out, collect the compensation fee, and divide it equally among all her brothers and sisters. Her food stand will be closed, and she will be forced to move back to a neighbourhood closer to her in-laws. She hopes that, by then, her daughter will have finished college and found a good job in the city. I never asked her whether she wanted to move back closer to her in-laws, but I do know that she does not want to leave her parents' property, where she can run her own public and domestic life independently and without interference.

Conclusion: Parental Authority and the Flexible Rules of Family Management

Current studies of the impact of individualization on Chinese family life, especially rural family life, claim that the death of the patriarchal system combined with the early formation of nuclear families to elevate the status of daughters.[25] According to these studies, filial piety, the core of Confucian family values, which signifies the superiority of parental authority as well as the inferior status of adult children in the intergenerational family, is waning as most rural young couples establish nuclear families immediately after marriage and leave their senior parents in empty nests. The combined effects of the one-child policy and the entry of Chinese women into the labour force has maximized daughters' economic contribution to their families and consolidated their authority and value within the home. China's participation in the global economy and the rise of consumerism in Chinese culture has intensified individualization in the domestic sphere and resulted in such serious social ethical ills as egocentrism, selfishness and ruthless competition with little concern for the well-being of others or society.

Countering such general conclusions, which are based on studies of rural and urban middle-class families, this article argues that among the urban working-class population that weathered the effects of the industrial transition that began in the 1990s, the conventional corporate family model remains a highly effective cultural unit that has helped urban Chinese families survive massive, large-scale social and economic reorganization. In these families, parental authority still plays a crucial role and has been further consolidated by the rapid growth of the urban Chinese property market. Daughters from working-class families still seek to achieve their dreams of a better, more comfortable life by "marrying up" into wealthier families. In China's fast changing economic environment, fuelled by the modernization process, the dynamics of family culture still present effective tools and strategies for individual citizens seeking to protect and advance their own interest.

25 Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life Under Socialism*; Hong Zhang, "China's new rural daughters coming of age: downsizing the family and firing up cash-earning power in the new economy," *Sign: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (2007), pp. 671–98.

These conventions of family dynamics and filial piety have been especially strongly tested by urban property bubbles. The state's policies regarding housing, compensation and property should all be made responsive to the new urban social phenomena that have emerged with economic globalization. An inflated and booming housing market provided hope and increased the value of family property at a time when working-class families were still reeling from the lay-offs and other negative consequences of China's industrial transformation.

The famous corporate model of Chinese family culture has been analysed and delineated by anthropologists from all over the world. As a culturally beneficial family paradigm, this model has generated a great deal of energy and response. The conventional notion of the Chinese family is shaped by issues relating to property, inheritance and the economy. Upon measuring the performance of contemporary urban Chinese families, we see little deviation from these conventional standards. As Cohen argued, filial piety is itself a cultural construction, and families use the concept and define it flexibly in order to serve collective and individual interests and improve their material conditions.[26]

The case studies presented here reveal a more complicated and nuanced picture than the one generally portrayed in the academic literature. Urbanites have grown more flexible in their methods of utilizing family labour and resources during a time of economic transition to maximize the benefit that accrues to the family collectively. The state remains a strongly influential force in the shaping of family life. When the industrial transition organized by the state and the emergence of capitalism and consumerism weakened the economic position of the urban Chinese populace, urban families were forced to work together as a corporate unit in order to survive.

26 Myron Cohen, "Development process in the Chinese domestic group," in Maurice Freedman (ed.), *Family and Kinship in Chinese Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1970), pp. 21–36.