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Premarital Abortion—What is the Harm? The Responsibilisation of Women’s Pregnancy Among China’s “Privileged” Daughters

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Abstract

In the West, women’s safe access to abortion services is central to the debate around reproductive freedom. In China, easy access to abortion arrived hand-in-hand with the one-child policy in 1979 as part of the Party-state’s birth control programme. Based on interviews with 31 women and 11 men from the well-educated 1980s generation, and using vignettes to explore attitudes towards premarital sex and abortion in the context of an increasingly sexualized popular culture, and the acceptability of premarital sex but lack of safe sex knowledge, I illustrate a strictly moralised discourse around female sexuality, where the normalisation of abortion practice does not translate into public acceptance of premarital abortion for women. I argue that the responsabilisation of women’s pregnancy reflects persistent patriarchal values and the state’s regulatory power over women’s reproductive bodies. While the heterosexual family remains the only legitimate site for reproduction, Chinese women’s reproductive freedom is subjugated to the priority of maintaining social stability. Hence, permissiveness over premarital abortion should not be simply understood as moral approval of abortion practice, but reflects pragmatic attitudes under a restrictive regime. I further argue that the Chinese case shows that a more nuanced, contextualised approach to understanding reproductive rights is necessary.

Keywords: *China, one-child policy, premarital abortion, responsible motherhood, sexual morality, state.*

China’s “opening-up” policy has been accompanied by change in the country’s sexual climate since 1979. In addition to economic reform, the implementation of the one-child policy also helped separate sex from reproduction, as it promoted the use of contraception among married couples, indicating that sex for love and pleasure are important in marital relationships (Pan, 2006; Jeffreys & Yu, 2015). The liberalisation of social and sexual mores has manifested itself

in many ways, such as increased acceptance of premarital sex, the proliferation of pornography and prostitution, a rising divorce rate and private permissiveness towards extramarital sex (Jeffreys, 2004, 2006; Jeffreys & Yu, 2015; Pan, 1994; Xiao et al., 2011; Zarafonetis, 2014; Zha & Geng, 1992; Zheng, 2006).

Despite a gradual loosening of restrictions on personal sexual pleasure and desire (Evans, 1997; Jeffreys & Yu, 2015; Pei et al., 2007; Ruan & Matsumura, 1991; Wang & Ho, 2011), the Chinese government is still constantly trying to curb these less predictable social consequences through various measures in order to maintain control—for example, through visible nationwide campaigns against pornography and prostitution, which have led to numerous arrests (Ruan & Matsumura, 1991), and debate on the legal regulation of sex-related bribery and corruption among government officials (Jeffreys, 2006). Besides, public discourse around sexuality and sexual conduct remains heavily moralised, such as through the Party-state’s promotion of “socialist morality”, and monitored, so as to maintain social stability (Zarafonetis, 2014). This state-sponsored moralisation of individual behaviours is shown through public condemnation and punishment of Party officials who were caught having extra-marital affairs, and an emphasis on the importance of “moral character” when appointing government officials (Emia, 2015; *Xinhua wang*, 2012),¹ as well as banning youth literature because of its sexually charged content (Weber, 2002). The “abstinence” attitude has generally been dominant in Chinese sex education since 1949 (Aresu, 2009; McMillan, 2006), as conservative educators worried that public exposition of sex-related knowledge would encourage young people to engage in promiscuous behaviour (Burton, 1988; Honig & Hershatter, 1988; Honig, 2003; Wang & Wang, 2012). As a result, the conservative tone around sex and sexuality from the Party-state was reaffirmed, which remains some distance from people’s lived reality in the reform era.

Major public debate on sex education did not erupt until March 2017, when a news item about a newly-published sex education textbook triggered

¹ News reports within and outside China have shown sexual bribery and scandals to be rampant among high-ranking officials: officially adultery is deemed intolerable and punishable according to the CCP’s disciplinary regulations, and can lead to expulsion (Emia, 2015).

widespread online debate (Koetse, 2017). The official media called on the public to desensitize children's sex education—citing rising numbers of premarital abortions and an increase in the number of cases of sexual violation of underage children in recent years as evidence of the need to change (Lü, 2017). This most recent debate around sex education reveals the massive gap, and tension, between realism and moralism on this matter. One of the consequences of loosening sexual morality coupled with the lack of sex education is an increase in the number of unplanned premarital pregnancies, most of which are terminated (Cao, 2015).

Abortion is framed as a remedial measure in the national population control programme (Nie, 2005). Cao (2015) cites statistics from the National Family Planning Research Institute, from 2014, to show that China performs the most terminations in the world, while large numbers of non-surgical abortions are left undocumented. Though one could attribute the figure partly to the strict implementation of the birth control policy, the prevalence of unplanned pregnancies among unmarried young women that lead to abortions is not news to the public (*QQNews*, 2015; Wang, 2015; Liu, 2015). According to national statistics, there has been a notable increase in induced abortions in recent years: 6,000,000 in total from 2000 to 2003, and 8,000,000 in 2003-2007, which rose to 9,170,000 in 2008 (Wu & Qiu, 2010). Women aged below 25, without a history of pregnancy, accounted for nearly half of these numbers. A large unmet need for temporary methods of contraception in urban areas of China has been identified as the reason behind the large number of unplanned pregnancies and induced abortions for unmarried women (Xu et al., 2004).

In this paper, I draw on research with young educated professionals to highlight the gap between the distant official Party line and people's lived reality. I illustrate a strictly moralised discourse around female sexuality under the Party-state's promotion of "socialist morality", where the normalisation of abortion as a practice does not translate into public acceptance of premarital abortion for women. Through analysing narratives about the stigma attached to premarital abortion and women's interpretation of "responsible motherhood", I reveal how they navigate such moralised tensions in contemporary China. In so doing, I highlight how the responsabilisation of women's pregnancy bears

specific Chinese characteristics. I begin by describing the study from which the data is drawn.

Methodology

Previous research on abortion in China has mainly been conducted from the reproductive health perspective using demographic statistics or medical documents, and has lacked a perspective on gender. The data included in this paper derives from a study investigating the gendered lives of China's privileged daughters: well-educated, female only-children from urban China born in the 1980s. Adopting a feminist approach, it places an emphasis on women's life experience to understand women's issues from their own perspective (Letherby, 2003). I use qualitative methods, specifically in-depth interviews, to make the individual's case visible and make the rich description of women's own experiences and interpretations possible (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Snowball and convenience sampling methods through existing social networks were used, which has been proven effective in China's relation-based society (Liu, 2007). In total, I carried out interviews with 31 women and 11 men. My female participants were at various life stages, including those who were single, in a relationship, married without children, married with children, two pregnant mothers and one divorced mother. None of my male participants had children, but two were engaged and three were married. Despite some differences in their income levels, they were all employed fulltime, in various white-collar professions, and included teachers, bank managers, government employees, and office staff in private firms. All were university educated, and ranged from bachelor's to master's degree holders, plus one PhD researcher. My interview questions were designed to probe people's attitudes towards sex, abortion, reproduction, homosexuality and virginity, which are still relatively sensitive topics and are not often discussed even among friends. Therefore, several vignettes were shown to participants on these topics. Jackson et al. (2016: 37) describe vignettes as "mini-narratives or scenarios, usually centred on a problem or dilemma facing an imaginary protagonist, designed to elicit responses on what a person would or should do in the situation depicted". Contextual information provided in vignettes, instead of seeking participants'

views in the abstract, allows for the recognition that “meanings are social and morality may be situationally specific” (Finch 1987: 106, cited in Jackson et al., 2016). This is a more subtle approach than simply asking people outright about views that might be personally sensitive, and has proved successful for my project.

The Under-Discussed Reality: Premarital Sex

The increased acceptance of premarital sex among the public is shown through a survey conducted in 1989 and 1990, which included 23,000 people from 15 provinces; the majority (86%) approved of this practice (Burton, 1990). In an interview with the BBC, Li Yinhe, China’s first female sexologist, compares figures in her surveys on the number of people who engage in premarital sex, showing a sharp increase between 1989 and 2014, with the percentage rising from 15.5% to 71% (Buckley, 2016). Despite lacking much comprehensive sex education, many scholars have noted the increasingly liberal attitudes and practices of sex and sexuality among Chinese youth,² including casual sex, non-conjugal sex, commercial sex and homosexuality (Farrer, 2002; Huang et al., 2009; Zhang, 2011). China’s youth-led “sexual revolution” has been through three stages since reforms commenced: from the re-emergence of romantic love in the early reform era, moving to the 1990s’ awakening of female desires, to the new millennium’s pleasure-centred sexual practices that have become valued as a means of enhancing individual happiness (Zhang, 2011).

Against this backdrop, premarital cohabitation has also become more common among many well-educated young people (Yu, 2009). Meanwhile, the rising number of induced abortions among unmarried women, and the increasing risk of sexually transmitted diseases, have highlighted the urgent need to improve sexual health and promote sex education among Chinese youth (Ma et al., 2006; Ma et al., 2009). The recent change of tone on sex education at school, which represents a more open attitude, could be read as a response to these challenges.

² Though the concept of “youth” varies in different contexts, in China today, the post-1990s and post-1980s generations are often referred to as the “younger generation” (Jeffreys & Yu, 2015).

All of my participants described premarital sex as “very common” or “too normal” among couples, which confirms other scholars’ findings, even though a few people said that they personally did not agree with it. Nonetheless, they also stressed the importance of responsibility in sexual relationships. For them, premarital sex, including cohabitation, could be justified as part of marriage preparation. As long as marriage is on the table, sex is excusable. This indicates that the moral justification for sex has extended from strictly within marriage to marriage in prospect. Nevertheless, it is not without need of moral justification, at least in public. Research from the 1990s suggested that sex before marriage was harmful in many ways, particularly to young women, as husbands were unforgiving and “easily disgusted by promiscuous women” (Chen 1998: 48, cited in McMillan, 2006: 64). Although it has become more common, there is little sign of change in the official attitude from research conducted in the 1990s. Authority figures, including parents and schoolteachers, have attempted to control pre-marital sex in ways that include warning of its dangers to implementing disciplinary measures (Farrer, 2002).

My participants’ general tolerance towards premarital sex does not necessarily mean that everyone sees it as a positive thing worth promoting. Similar views are voiced by both genders. Maomaocong and Muyu made it clear that premarital sex is not for them.³ Though viewed as a “common phenomenon” (Theodone, male) by all, its semi-secrecy is also evident.

Tj: How to put it ... things like sex before marriage, everybody does it. But when it needs to be discussed at the table, people still feel it is not a good thing. Though people are already doing it, if you really ask them to discuss it openly, there are many people who would find it shameful to admit it.

Me: Really?

Tj: I feel it is such a private thing. Maybe in China, traditionally speaking, you should not have sex before marriage.

³ All participants’ names have been replaced by pseudonyms. Unless specified as male, they are female.

Tj's narrative reflects the tension of living between realism and moralism regarding individual sexual conduct; maintaining secrecy seems to be the best adaptation. By doing so, the public moral standard remains intact, and face is saved for both the individual and the families involved. More importantly, they can avoid the social sanctions that come from overtly challenging the establishment.

Women as Tension Bearers

Facing the increasingly common practice of premarital sex and the moralised public sexual discourse, how do young Chinese women navigate their path? For women like Maomaocong and Muyu, insistence on avoiding sex before being legally married arguably comes from a sense of self-protection. Officially virginity is required from both sexes, but responsibility has been left mainly with women to protect their sexual purity due to the generally accepted, naturalized understanding of the male sexual drive as uncontrollable (Evans, 1997; Pei et al., 2007). A decent woman, who is expected to be passive in sex, cannot be led by her own desires. Hence, she is supposed to regulate her own behaviour according to society's moral boundaries. Liu's study on white-collar women in Chinese organizations shows that women's sexual reputations are heavily moralised and are tied closely to their social status, which constrains their agency (Liu, 2017). Hence, it is understandable that women would try to defend their sexual reputation through various means. When knowledge of safe sex practices is not sufficiently provided, the most secure option is to not be involved in sex, or at least to not make one's sexual life public. Xiaozhu commented: "I think it is best not to live together, because, it ultimately hurts the woman." Her suggestion can be understood as having a double meaning: first, it reduces the physical risk of involvement in premarital sex that might lead to unwanted pregnancy. Second, at least it reduces her reputational risk by avoiding being seen by others. However, even for women who want to avoid premarital sex, it can be difficult.

Joyce: Cohabitation is so common! I feel in many cases, it is not women who initiate it. Because biologically speaking, female ... more often it is men who ask to sleep together. But if the woman wants to keep the man,

she might have to cooperate. I see it is quite common around me. Basically, those who eventually got married, they lived together or had sex before that.

Lulu: It is too common and difficult to avoid! Because now men would use all sorts of excuses and strategies to ask you to sleep with them, saying that if you love me, you should have sex with me. But in fact, 80% of girls paid a high price because of it. Surely there are also 20%, who obtained marital happiness because of it. It is rare, I feel personally. It is up to your luck.

In both Lulu and Joyce's accounts, it is male sexual desire that appears active and dominant, whereas women's sexual desire appears invisible. Her sexuality is portrayed as a means to "keep" the man, with marriage as her happy ending. The universality of marriage for Chinese youth, with women facing a harsher reality in the marriage market, is widely observed in the "shengnü" (leftover women) phenomenon (To, 2013; Fincher, 2016). Under pressure to marry, women face a "double risk" in either choice regarding premarital sex. No matter how strategic an individual woman is in navigating her way through this scenario, it would be unrealistic to assume that every woman has the means to defend herself throughout.

As a result of strictly implementing family planning policies, China has become the world's leader in contraception usage (United Nations, 2015; Sivilles, 2005). In sharp contrast to the high Contraception Prevalence Rate among married women (89%), contraception usage among sexually active unmarried women in China has remained extremely low, with more than 25% relying on less effective contraceptive methods such as rhythm and withdrawal, which has led to an annual induced abortion rate of approximately 20% among those women (Li et al., 2013). A combination of social and economic factors have been identified to explain this (Sivilles, 2005; Xiao et al., 2011; Xu et al., 2004; Zheng et al., 2001). The breakdown of different contraception measures (United Nations, 2015) shows a very low level of pill usage, and a comparatively more common male condom usage in China, which gives women little autonomy in contraception and helps account for the prevalence of abortion. Ironically, women are commonly blamed for contraception failure, as the following responses to a vignette reveal.

Vignette A: Xiaozhen recently found herself pregnant, but she and her boyfriend are not suitable for marriage. What would you suggest?

Joyce's comments reflect my participants' typical reaction to this case:

Joyce: I feel it is such a stupid situation. Very stupid! ... I would ask both of them whether they would be willing to get married and raise the child together. I won't suggest that they end a life if it is not absolutely necessary.

Me: Why you think the situation is stupid?

Joyce: Because I feel if you are not ready to get married, why would you ... have sex with no protection! Fine, a lot times it might be the man ... he didn't protect the woman. It shows that he is very selfish, right? If you sincerely want to be with a woman, you should treat her as your wife-to-be, your fiancée. Then you should have protected her from this. Second, as a woman why didn't you protect yourself? Maybe women are vulnerable in sexual relationships; she is at the receiving end of it. Maybe she didn't know how. Then she suffers from her own ignorance. If she knows but still had sex without protection, I can only say that she is too submissive in the relationship!

Joyce's answer is telling in several ways: first, it reveals the taken-for-granted belief among my participants that having children born within marriage is "a happy ending for the couple" (Quennie). Hence, Yimi's comment, "Let them get married!" (followed by laughter) is often considered an ideal solution. Second, premarital sex is acceptable if the man treats her as his "fiancée", which indicates the importance of the marriage prospect in justifying similar dilemmas like cohabitation and pregnancy. Finally, once contraception fails, it is the woman's own fault, as she is either "too stupid" and "ignorant", or "too submissive".

Xiaozhu also believes: "Girls should be responsible for the consequences of abortion. She failed to take 'her own' responsibility to treat herself with respect and take herself seriously". For her, women who fail to live up to society's sexual moral standards deserve the consequences. Whereas "men are just men. This is his nature. You cannot control men; you can only control yourself". Due to the

embedded understanding of the naturalized male sexual drive and a moralised female sexuality, women are expected to take both responsibility and the blame. The overwhelming consensus among my participants is that there are only two feasible options for women in this scenario: marriage or abortion.

Abortion in Contemporary China

Official attitudes to abortion have also been through radical changes since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The regulation of abortion has changed according to the demands of the Party-state's population policy. When population growth was viewed as good for national defence and economic development, between 1950 and 1956, strict administrative procedures restricted abortion (Nie, 2005). The gradual removal of legal limits on abortion since the late 1970s resulted from the Party-state's ambition to control its population by implementing the national birth planning and control policy (Nie, 2005, 2010). To achieve this, women have reportedly undergone coercive measures from sterilisation to forced abortion regardless of their gestation stages (Greenhalgh, 2005; Nie, 2005), though officially and euphemistically, abortion is described as a remedial measure.

The controversial one-child policy came to an end at the beginning of 2016 as China found itself facing a looming population structure crisis (*Xinhua wang*, 2015). Despite all the policy changes mentioned, the ethos remains the same: the Party-state's attempts to control reproduction to suit its agenda, under which the abstract collective is deployed as the official moral discourse to justify the absolute submission of individual interests to state power. Relevant Western values and ethics, and traditional customs and norms that are not in accord with the present policy, are officially dismissed or condemned (Nie, 2005). Scholars have criticised the lack of consideration for women's right to choose, and the right of the foetus to life, in the policy (Aird, 1994; Mosher, 1983, 1993). Yet paradoxically, Chinese women do not have to fight for their choice of abortion or face social stigma like their peers in many other jurisdictions, where such choices provoke strong moral controversy (Sumner, 2014).

Cao (2015) argues that the notion of “glorious motherhood” is constructed to justify the state’s use of women’s fertility as a platform to achieve its population goals. Unlike the official praise for abortion within marriage, the abortion law construes premarital sex as a legal taboo for women, which in turns reflects the “social taboos” of premarital sex and premarital fertility in China (Li & Liu, 2004). Though abortion is widely practiced in China, this does not translate into public acceptance of premarital abortion for women. To avoid the disgrace of premarital fertility attached to women and their families observed by Guo (2012), women are more likely to hide away from family and friends instead of seeking their help (Pu, 2013). The legal restriction of the state-funded abortion services to married women means large numbers of economically disadvantaged unmarried women have to turn to unlawful abortions, which are highly likely to be unreliable and dangerous for their health. The double social and legal taboo can leave them vulnerable.

Damaging the Reproductive Body

The idea that “abortion damages a girl’s body” repeatedly occurs in my participants’ accounts. The blurred linguistic boundary between a woman’s own body and the “bone and flesh” she carries can literally mean in Chinese terms that abortion is easily read as an “unnatural” intrusion. Hence, even without an established understanding of a foetus as having its own moral and legal status that is independent of the women before birth, women’s embodiment of pregnancy makes it hard to separate the “harm” to this “bone and flesh” from her own health. Nevertheless, the physical harm referred to by many of my participants also indicated the fear of damaging the reproductive body. Xiaozhu warns that “abortion does not negatively affect men, but it does affect women, especially her body. For some people, it might mean lifelong infertility. I would say a woman should avoid abortion if she can.” In addition, common stories of spontaneous miscarriage after bad abortion experiences circulating among friends serve as warnings for women.

Lulu is the only woman who shared her own abortion experience, as she was married when it happened, which legitimised it: “For two years after that, I miscarried three or four times. I was unable to keep them.” Qincai, an unmarried woman, used her friend’s similar experience to make the same point:

She is an older mum, and had her first child when she was over 30. She told me that she had abortions several times before that. Then it caused several miscarriages afterwards. When she was one month pregnant, she took time off to keep the baby. She lay in bed all day; it seemed that she would start to bleed once she stood up. The doctor told her it was the result of her previous abortions, which damaged her body. So I think one should avoid this situation when you are not ready.

Qincai stressed that “I have not had such an experience”. Her deliberate distancing of herself from premarital abortion again indicates the taboo nature of this topic. Safeguarding the reproductive body is the main concern in the bodily damage narratives. It illustrates the tight association of Chinese womanhood with maternity. As a result, despite the fact that abortion has little negative effect on women’s subsequent fertility and is even safer than childbirth (Rowlands, 2011), the fear that they might lose their reproductive ability remains strong.

Women as “Devalued Property”

Regardless of whether or not the experience of abortion leaves a mark on women’s physical bodies, it certainly negatively affects her marriage prospects. Using the following vignette, I was able to understand the evolved “virginity complex” in contemporary China’s dating scene.⁴

Vignette B: Chenlu and her boyfriend decided to get married after living together for a while. But her boyfriend found out that she had an abortion with her ex-boyfriend. He is bothered about her past. What do you think?

The answers show that this phenomenon is very common.

⁴ According to Wang and Ho (2011), the female virginity complex (*chunü qingjie* 处女情结) is a popular term used to describe how the “fetish of female virginity” remains strong for young Chinese men and women.

Maomaocong: It is certain that the man won't be happy about it. Abortion before marriage in China indeed is a bad thing. It is normal that he holds a grudge against her.

Me: Is it common for men to mind in such a situation?

Tj: Sure! They even mind if you are not a virgin! [Laughter.]

Though female chastity does not hold the same repressive institutionalized power anymore, as premarital sex is commonly practiced, it still exerts considerable influence on the Chinese psyche. The symbolic importance of women's chastity, reflected in the "female virginity complex", in contemporary Chinese date and marriage selection, remains strong (Wang & Ho, 2011; Zhou, 1989). Lulu's answer below indicates that the "boundary" of chastity is fluid and contested, facing social changes: losing virginity now is less bad than having an abortion for unmarried women. Despite that, the devaluation of women remains the same.

Lulu: It is perfectly normal for men to care about women's abortion history! Now we have a saying: in the past, it is said that you must save your virginity for your husband; whereas now, you should guarantee that your first child is your husband's.

Scholars have found plenty of evidence to show the persistence of double standards across cultures, despite the boundary of sexual virtue having been redrawn (Jackson et al., 2013; Jackson & Scott, 2010; Ho & Tsang, 2005, 2012). How women are judged in the Chinese context illuminates this sexual double standard (Jackson & Cram, 2003), which continues to objectify women under the persistent patriarchal value system. D explains how the gendered difference is played out in the marriage market:

Me: How do you see the consequences for both men and women after an abortion?

D: It is different. For men, there might be some moral criticism at most, but there won't be any practical social rejection of him. He might become less popular in the marriage market. People might think he is cold-hearted. But if he is willing to repent and tell his new girlfriend: "I didn't love her enough at that time, but I love you very much", most

people would accept him again. Whereas, if a girl had an abortion, and it was known by others, it would be much harsher! Many men absolutely cannot accept a girl who had an abortion with another man. Furthermore, as a friend of this girl, I would not set her up with any of my friends. Because I would worry that if one day my male friend found out, it would end our friendship. He might blame me for giving him something bad. Even if I do introduce her to somebody, it won't be my good friends and I won't tell him the truth. I don't want to take the responsibility for covering up the fact. Because men do mind!

D's honest answer not only highlights the sharp contrast in consequences for men and women, it also demonstrates how women's sexual experiences are understood as a moral marker for drawing binary images of the good/bad girl. Her abortion experience makes her "less complete and pure" and thus not presentable in the market. Chain's explanation further demonstrates the objectification of the female body as a commodity that needs to be kept intact.

Chain: I think men would mind this. Because abortion is like ... I am not sure how to put it. I feel they might see girls who had an abortion ... they become somehow different. It seems they are broken. Men cannot be broken in this way.

Furthermore, a striking metaphor shared by both Lixia and Lisi illustrates vividly that the continuous objectification of the female body in Chinese marriage transactions is common knowledge: "People might not mind buying a second-hand property, but they do mind buying a house in which somebody had died." This metaphor paints plainly the cruel reality: nearly one hundred years after the abolishment of arranged marriage on a monetary basis, Chinese women can still be subjected to objectification, such that men can pick and choose them, like property. The invisibility of men, contrasted with the concentrated judgment imposed on women, reflects the persistent patriarchal value system that continues to give men the voice and choice as a subject, but presents women as objects that are subject to men's choice. It further mirrors the invisibility of the internalised male dominance in contemporary Chinese patriarchy, which treats a woman's reproductive body as an object, and hence potentially degrades her full humanity.

The Implications of Sexual Double Standards

Facing a heavily moralised public discourse on female sexuality, Chinese women's compliance with societal expectations concerning her sexual behaviour is closely tied to her social standing.

Xiaoliu: It happens within my family. My uncle's daughter, she has not been good at school and has had lots of boyfriends. I heard she also had an abortion more than once. From my point of view, I do not agree with her behaviour. Because I feel as a girl, she is unable to behave in a respectable way. If one cannot respect oneself, how can she expect others to love her? Right? So I do not agree with abortion. You should prevent it from the beginning. Why wait until it has happened?!

Xiaoliu's description of her cousin as "not good at school", as having had "lots of boyfriends", and as having "had an abortion more than once" reflects the expectations surrounding a decent girl's behaviour in Chinese society: she needs to be good at school, have no boyfriends during her school years, and to preferably remain a virgin (Evans, 1997; Xiao, 1989). She is not only blamed for contraceptive failure, but is also portrayed as not respectable. Based on her behaviour, she does not deserve to be respected or loved. Hence, any subsequent social punishment is justifiable. My participants often gave examples of the public discourse describing such women as "morally loose and improper" (Maomaocong) and "like girls from outside" (Lili). Tracing back to China's gender segregation, which existed until the late Qing dynasty, women who exposed themselves to the outside world were not considered respectable (Mann, 2011). Hence "girls from the outside" connotes "morally loose and improper". Such damage to women's reputations would directly result in them being disadvantaged in the marriage market, where all of them are expected to perform well. Xiaozhu's comments below further pinpoint how Chinese women's sexuality is strictly moralised and commodified.

Xiaozhu: Plus, people might think that if you are married once, you may try to find a man to marry again! Definitely, a man would consider your abortion history ... you might not be able to bear children after that!

Furthermore, you failed to behave in a respectable way even before marriage. How would you be afterwards?!

Xiaozhu equates women who have had an abortion with divorcees, which highlights their devaluation in the marriage market. Moreover, she also points out the moral concern for such women as untrustworthy, and as failing to demonstrate desired female chastity, which would directly reduce her bargaining power in partner selection.

In sharp contrast to the woman's moralised body, my participants all agree that men have it easy, though they struggle to comprehend the reason. Chain: "People do not gossip about men in this scenario. I also do not know why they never talk about men." It is the consensus that men are often invisible even in gossip, whereas women become an easy target.

Lily: If I say it bluntly, he just played a bit. Nothing serious would happen to him. If he doesn't want to be responsible, he can totally be let off the hook. Society will not pick on him, whereas the girl will be the target of all arrows. They will judge her morally, and say things like she doesn't protect herself or gossip, saying she is one of those girls from outside.

The sexual double standard is made explicit here. She is blamed for all the failures, while the man's marriage prospect can remain largely intact. Lulu: "But in reality, I discover that many girls ... never married and never had children, and still accept men like my ex-husband. I really do not understand." The active sexual life of a man is often read as "normal", and is easily laughed off.

Xiaoliu: People think it is normal for men to have many women in their lives. People might only comment that he is fickle in love.

Maomacong: It doesn't matter to men. Seriously, they might laugh at men, but discriminate against women instead.

A few mentioned the moral guilt a man might feel, but also said that it strongly depended on the individual. For women, there could be multiple layers of guilt coming from both public condemnation and from within themselves.

Tina: She would have to wait and see whether this man can gradually accept it [his girlfriend's abortion history]. I think the woman herself might also feel guilt towards her current boyfriend. She might think of herself as constantly owing him something, these kinds of mentality, etc.

Women often internalise the sexual double standard and feel guilty of not being able to present themselves as "pure and complete" to their husband-to-be, worrying that they might not be able to bear a child for him. Living under such a moralised discourse of female sexuality, the emotional stress women need to go through in this scenario is widely acknowledged by my participants as a form of "double damage".

Lilin: For girls, it is double damage. First, damage to her body is unavoidable. Then it hits her psychologically as well as emotionally. It doesn't follow the normal sequence and is not ideal for how things should be after all.

Lilin indicates the power of a normalised "ideal" life trajectory that one should follow: marriage first, then childbirth. Chain further illuminates the disadvantageous position women face.

Chain: She might think now she has even had an abortion for this man. Therefore, she would naturally have more expectations of him [expectation of marriage]. If any change of circumstance occurs between them [i.e. they split up], then she might feel even more hurt.

As the power of women starts to decline following their loss of virginity (Xiao, 1989), women face a more precarious situation when it comes to maintaining power in heterosexual relationships, when premarital sex becomes prevalent. Though she could use her sexuality to keep a man, ironically it simultaneously increases the risk of her ending up in an even weaker position: pregnant without securing a marriage. In this scenario, her agency is constrained in front of a powerful conventional discourse of female chastity. The sexual double standard silences her. Secrecy becomes her last resort to shed the stigma, as recommended by many, in order to fulfil the universal marriage expectation facing Chinese youth. The amount of emotional stress women face is obvious.

Nie (2005) reveals that the public silence on abortion practiced under the one-child policy, which is commonly interpreted in the West as China's moral ambiguity on abortion (Aird, 1990), often hides a diversity of views regarding foetal life and the morality of abortion. Similarly, among my participants, behind the consensus on abortion as the last remedy, concerns about the foetus's right to life with reference to religious beliefs, were also mentioned by a few.

Yimi: Let them get married! [Laughter.] First, she should not have an abortion. I am a Buddhist. I think having abortion will make you end up in hell.

Lijun: Because that is also a life. I feel it is a gift from God. It is a life! You won't easily kill a kitten or a puppy, how can you kill a human life?

Though officially declared an atheist country, scholars have reported a gradual religious revival since the economic reforms were initiated (Lai, 2005; Potter, 2003; Yang, 2011). Among my sample, the hesitation to take a life was expressed by only four women, which remains the minority. No matter how vague the influence of religion was on the decision to have an abortion or not, their concern about taking the foetus's life signals another dilemma that could make women experience internal emotional torment. Nevertheless, in the future, the main concern of women facing this scenario is damaging the prospect of future motherhood, expected in a patriarchal society, and not jeopardising her future husband's masculinity or depriving him of fatherhood. It has little to do with mourning the loss of a child. On the contrary, abortion in this case is understood as part of being a responsible mother. The paradox a Chinese woman faces in this scenario is that if she chooses abortion, she is irresponsible regarding her own future fertility. However, only if she chooses abortion, is she considered responsible to the unborn child, her natal family and her own happiness in the future.

Abortion: A Responsible Choice

Despite the stigma attached to premarital abortion, all of my participants suggested having an abortion if marriage was not attainable. They acknowledged that abortion was not ideal, but necessary. Both Java and Lilin

put it similarly: “For our generation, it is something unspeakable. But one will do it when it needs to be done.”

Cao (2015) argues that due to the social stigma attached to unmarried motherhood, and administrative measures including financial punishment to prevent unauthorised parenthood, abortion becomes the only “rational and reasonable” choice for unmarried pregnant women. This justification is similar to the stigma and prejudice against unwed mothers in Japan (Hertog, 2009), as the mechanism of mixed guilt and shame explain women’s conforming behaviour. The pragmatic rationale behind the abortion decision becomes evident through their elaboration of what “responsible motherhood” is. Unlike their European and North American counterparts, among whom the moral status of the foetus could invoke strong debate, my participants’ quiet but firm decision to abort was attributed to their desire to be a responsible mother in the Chinese context. Viviankuku, a junior doctor, puts it like this:

I do not support abortion, but it doesn't mean that you have to give birth to the child if you are pregnant. One needs to take the real case into account. Abortion is definitely bad for the girl’s body. This is for sure. But if you keep the child because you don’t want to damage your body, you are not being responsible to the unborn child.

For Viviankuku, abortion is being responsible to the unborn child, even if it sacrifices the woman’s own health. The existing public discourse that regulates childbirth within marriage illuminates the reason behind this. Children from single parent households are often portrayed as deviants and somehow lacking.

Muyu: If you keep the child, they will grow up in a single parent’s home, which will have lots of problems. If you want the kid not to suffer from the single parent influence, then you must really try hard to foster ... it would be so exhausting. So I think it is better not to have the child.

Chenchen: If the couple’s relationship is not stable enough to enter marriage, even if you keep the baby, it might not be the right environment for the child to grow up in.

Lisi: I would say have an abortion. It is not a matter of losing a life. If you cannot give the baby a good environment to grow up in, it is much better to not bring the kid into the world in the first place.

These answers reveal the general consensus that children should be born into a “normal” heterosexual family, which is the “right” and “good” environment. Otherwise, it is much better to not be born. My participants from single parent households always consciously introduced themselves as such. This indicates that the label has become embedded in their self-awareness as different from others. Though they were all born within marriage but later experienced their parents’ divorce, which is different from children born outside marriage, their deviance from the family norm still creates similar stigma. It is worth noting that children born without permission from the local family planning authorities may not be registered or treated equally until their parents pay the fines, which are imposed as punishment (Hemminki et al., 2005).

Growing up with his mother after his parents’ divorce, Roger (male) says he suffers from low self-esteem that he believes to be a common characteristic of children from single parent families: “You feel inferior ... like myself. I have been trying to get over it most of my life. ... The biggest thing from a single parent home is that you feel you lack security. ... It has a huge impact.” D reports her experience of being told by her mother-in-law that her single parent background makes her less qualified as a marriage candidate for their son. Fully aware of the power of such stigmatization, it is understandable that women want to protect their future child from such an experience by avoiding it. Chain: “In a society like ours, I feel my child will become the target of gossip and be hurt by it. So I won’t do it.”

Single mothers are often viewed as “indiscreet and decadent” (Chenchen). People commonly equate single mothers with mistresses who plot to overthrow other people’s marriages. Practically, Chenchen noted that not registering with the government would create further problems for the child’s schooling and other activities that require legal identification. Against such a backdrop, Chenchen explains: “If a woman decides to raise a kid on her own, without having any other dodgy motivations, I personally admire her great courage.” A mother’s primary responsibility in childrearing is common knowledge in China,

particularly in providing physical care. Without the father bringing in his gendered resources (Zuo & Bian, 2001), often in financial form based on the conventional heterosexual family model, the mother faces multiple difficulties.

Lily: It seems to be the responsibility of women only. In this situation, she is left in a passive position. Really, she doesn't have much of an option, and she needs others' help. Raising a kid is not only a matter of money, they need ... oh, this is such a complicated topic.

Western scholars have recognised the vulnerability of single mothers in many ways, including that they are more likely to suffer from low income and increased mental distress (Brown & Moran, 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur, 2009; Neises & Grüneberg, 2005; Franz et al., 2003). Premarital fertility is considered a disgrace for both Chinese women and their families (Guo, 2012). Facing low public tolerance, no wonder Lily adds that "it depends on whether her families are willing to confront the rest of society or not." Though this sounds dramatic, it highlights the tension. A woman's decision to become a single mother does not only matter for her own life, but also affects her family's social standing, which presents another dilemma that she will feel responsible for. Even though she has adequate resources to raise healthy children, Lilin, from a wealthy family, illuminates another challenge for single mothers.

Lilin: It is always the girl who bears the cost of sexual relationships ... First, she might say: "I can raise the child on my own". I believe a lot of us now have the financial capacity to do so. She can even provide enough love for the child to prove the conventional belief that kids born outside of marriage will lack love wrong. But first of all, I do not think it is fair for the kid to have such an upbringing. Second, I think it is also not fair for the woman herself. Under the current social circumstances, if she raises the kid on her own, what will happen when she meets somebody later who is appropriate to marry? Then the kid will become an obstacle between them. This would be so unfair both to her and her kid. Moreover, I feel she will have to bear lots of pressure from her parents and our society. She will have to put up with much discrimination as a single mum.

Lilin lists here the multilayered difficulties women need to tackle as single mothers. In a society that emphasizes patrilineal continuity (Barlow, 1994), a single mother and her child challenge the established family structure; therefore, both face social sanctions. Like Lilin, many share concerns over the woman's future marital happiness and emphasise that she does not have to marry the man just because of the pregnancy. Besides her responsibility to her unborn child and her natal family, her responsibility to ensure her own marital happiness appears strong in my participants' accounts.

Java: I think the relationship should be based on the couple themselves. If marriage is based on the kid, it is not sustainable. It would result in more future problems. If she didn't want to marry him herself, but did it because of the kid ... more likely she would regret it later on, feeling bitter that the kid changed her life. Because of the kid, she missed lots of opportunities, which should have been hers. Then it is not fair both for her and her child.

Like Java, many prioritize the woman's future happiness in this decision, carefully weighing up the man's suitability as a good husband. Abortion is further justified, if it jeopardises the woman's future happiness. Tj: "If you use marriage to solve your current problem, you will only create more troubles in the future." My participants view the relationship between the couple as the primary consideration in the woman's marriage decision. This signifies the importance of pursuing personal happiness for this generation, which reveals the neoliberal responsibility of self-realisation.

Zhangsan, who had watched the American film *Juno* (2007),⁵ mentioned giving up the child for adoption as another option. However, she soon realized that without a well-established adoption system like in America, practical implementation of this idea would be difficult.

⁵ *Juno* (see Reitman, 2007) is an American comedy-drama about a teenage girl confronting an unplanned pregnancy. It has received criticism and praise from members of both the pro-life and pro-choice communities regarding its treatment of abortion.

Summarising all of the practical difficulties linked with the stigma generated from public rhetoric regarding single motherhood, and the lack of alternative public arrangements, the multi-layered responsibilities voiced above make abortion indeed appear to be the most responsible choice for the unborn child, the woman's family and herself, if they are to avoid further troubles. Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005: 4) note the shift from Leninist to neoliberal biopolitics in terms of the governmentality of China's population since its reform, arguing that the governmentalisation of PRC birth planning includes "the disciplining of conduct by nonstate social institutions and the cultivation by individuals themselves of the capacity to regulate their own behaviour" besides a direct intervention by government in its early Leninist style. The recent party-state's emphasis on "traditional family values" such as filial piety is a good example of its effort to draw on existing cultural repertoires about male and female attributes and family morality in formulating its own policies and narratives. By transferring responsibilities to capable "neoliberal subjects", individuals are able to govern themselves in ways deemed appropriate by the regime. Premarital abortion, understood as a responsible choice is a case in point. The responsabilisation of women's pregnancies so as to fit into the heterosexual family model, through regulative power generated by certain discourses and practices, serves to maintain the Party-state's desired social stability.

Conclusion

Following the Party-state's use of "socialist morality" to regulate sex and sexuality within heterosexual marriage in order to maintain social stability, premarital sex became widely accepted and commonly practiced among the young generation. The lack of safe sex knowledge and contraception provision for unmarried women leaves them vulnerable to unplanned pregnancies. Women's agency is constrained by a moralised discourse of female sexuality and by the sexual double standard in the marriage market. Facing universal marriage pressure, women become the bearers of this tension, while their reproductive freedom is subjected to the priority of maintaining social stability.

Exploring people's attitudes towards premarital pregnancy, I reveal the gendered consequences: women face multi-layered damage as a result of objectification and stigmatization under China's contemporary patriarchal marriage regime, whereas men's privileges remain intact and unquestioned. Having an abortion in secret becomes the only responsible choice for the unborn child, the woman's natal family and herself when marriage is not attainable. Through analysing the stigma attached to women after premarital abortions and their interpretation of "responsible motherhood", I argue that the neoliberal biopolitics employed by the Party-state to govern China's population, which sacrifice women's reproductive freedom to further its political agenda (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005) have proven to be powerful and effective. Hence, their permissiveness regarding premarital abortion should not be simply understood as their moral approval of abortion practice, but as reflecting their pragmatic attitudes under a restrictive regime.

Despite the stigma and harm Chinese women face regarding pre-marital abortion, it is important to note that I am by no means saying that women are completely powerless victims even in these difficult scenarios. Hengehold (2000: 194) states that the dominant discourse portraying women as "victims" of male power deprives these women of "authority regarding the complexity of their own experience". Gilfus (1999) reveals the need to recognise the strength that women often display and develop when facing trauma in order to survive in harsh circumstances. Confronting multi-layered constraints in given scenarios, Chinese women's responses demonstrate their resilience and determination to forge a better life, through careful evaluation of multiple factors and an analysis of the pro and cons of different options.

Nie's (2005) analysis of the Chinese silence on abortion highlights the basic survival strategy people employ under authoritarian regimes: guarding one's tongue. At the same time, without sufficient public support in providing alternatives for resolving premarital pregnancy, and facing a strictly moralised public discourse of female sexuality, easy access to abortion does not mean there is a more liberal public attitude towards premarital abortion. Chinese women face a different stigma to that faced by their Western peers (Sheldon, 1997; Jackson, 2001); a more nuanced approach is therefore needed to understand reproductive rights in the Chinese context. Unlike the pro-choice

battle in the West, the choice of Chinese women to have an abortion bears the imprint of a patriarchal regime and its ambitions for governance. The responsabilisation of women's pregnancy illustrates Chinese women's embodiment of their struggle with persistent patriarchal values and the regulatory power of the state.

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