


# “My Mother Wants Me to *Jiaru-haomen* (Marry Into a Rich and Powerful Family)!”: Exploring the Pathways to “Altruistic Individualism” in Chinese Professional Women’s Filial Strategies of Marital Choice

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## Abstract

In an era of individualization, Chinese individuals often have to face the challenge of balancing their personal choices with their filial obligations. While a host of “filial strategies” are well-documented in traditional areas of filial contention such as elderly care and relating with in-laws, there are none in the area of *sheng nü* or “leftover women’s” marital choices. This study sets out to explore the “marital filial strategies” of unmarried Chinese professional women who face filial contentions in their “marriage timing” and “partner choice.” It was found that the combination of the filial strategies of “deferring” to parents’ matchmaking demands, followed by “negotiation” of one’s partner choice, led to the ideal condition of “altruistic individualism” that “combined personal freedom with engagement with others.” On a wider level, *sheng nü*’s filial strategies of marital choice could serve as an exemplar for all modern Chinese individuals who strove to conduct congenial filial relationships without compromising their own ideals.

## Keywords

intergenerational relations, filial piety, individualization, *sheng nü* (“leftover women”), marriage timing, partner choice, matchmaking, grounded theory

## Introduction

In recent years, an important area of filial contention had appeared as a result of Chinese women marrying later in life following their rising educational levels and professional statuses. While some argued that later marriages reflected modern career women’s more “individualized” attitudes (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992), others found that this was caused by men’s discrimination against high-achieving women who deviated from traditional domestic roles, thus rendering them “leftover” in the marriage market To, 2013, 2015). Regardless of the cause of Chinese women’s later marriages, it would lead to the same consequence—the chagrin and opposition of Chinese parents (To, 2013, 2015; Zhang & Sun, 2014). Given that marriage was a collective affair that came with the obligation of furthering one’s family lineage according to the Confucian tradition, parents still expected their children to marry and to choose a high-status marriage partner who could benefit the whole family and its future generations. While there had been many studies on the “filial strategies” performed by Chinese adult children in

more traditional areas of filial contention such as elderly care (Lan, 2002) and mother- and daughter-in-law relations (Shih & Pyke, 2010), there had been none that explored the “marital filial strategies” of unmarried Chinese women.

According to Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992), individuals who made more reflexive choices independent of external obligations would be able to enjoy more personal satisfaction compared with those whose choices were made to satisfy others. This theory of “individualization” incited much controversy among “cultural pessimists” in the West (Bauman, 2003) and the East (Yan, 2003) who were concerned that traditional values like social cohesion and filial piety would be lost. However, large-scale empirical studies by Whyte (2004) and Hu and Scott (2014) revealed that the

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younger generation of Chinese individuals actually exemplified equally strong, if not even stronger, proclivities toward filial piety than older generations. Moreover, Hu and Scott further showed how Chinese women who enjoyed enhanced educational and career opportunities were only “selectively detraditionalized” from their “patrilineal beliefs” but not from “filial piety” (p. 21). This concurred with To’s (- 2013, 2015) previous research that showed how *sheng nü* were unrelenting in their struggle against patriarchal constraints imposed by their male partners and suitors but were guilt ridden and agonized over how their relationship choices affected their parents.

It is important to point out that having the noble intention to observe filial piety did not necessarily mean that one’s choices concurred with one’s parents’. This could be due to intergenerational differences in values. The struggle and adjustment that were associated with asserting one’s own individual choices and fulfilling one’s parents’ demands constituted the core of all “filial strategies.” For instance, individuals who had conflicting work-lifestyle habits and schedules with their parents’ were found to hire domestic helpers from their parents’ hometowns who spoke the same language to take care of them, which would bring about a higher degree of compatibility (Lan, 2002). Or daughters-in-law who experienced conflicts with their mothers-in-law would perform various filial strategies to alleviate their conflicts, such as acting more docile in front of their mothers-in-law or asking their husbands to play the mediating role (Shih & Pyke, 2010).

Suffice it to say that the main objective of all filial strategies was to find the *most satisfactory* balance between asserting one’s own choices and fulfilling filial obligations. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) proposed the concept of “altruistic individualism” that was about “combin(ing) personal freedom with engagement with others” (p. 162). The aim of this article would be to explore the pathways or “marital filial strategies” performed by *sheng nü* that could lead to this ideal balance and theoretical condition. By providing an exploratory theoretical account of filial strategies, this study would go beyond a mere descriptive account of filial strategies that was found in previous qualitative studies (Lan, 2002; Shih & Pyke, 2010). This article will begin with a brief history of individualization in the context of contemporary China, followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework, methodology, and empirical outcomes.

### **Intergenerational Relations in China: From Familism to Individualism**

Pre-modern imperial China had been governed by the Confucian philosophical thought for over a thousand years. Under Confucian doctrine, human relations were underpinned by a distinct hierarchy, and there were five basic types of relations known as the “five cardinal relations” that included “those between father and son, ruler and subject,

husband and wife, older and younger brother, and between friends” (Stockman, 2000, p. 71). Conforming to the appropriate behaviors, attitudes, and decorum that were associated with one’s position in the social hierarchy was essential for maintaining the whole country’s order (Whyte, 2004). The pecking order of social relations was “generation, age, and sex” (Baker, 1979) that meant that men and the elderly had the most power, and women and children were in positions of subordination. One of the core values in the Confucian doctrine was hence “filial piety,” meaning “children’s unconditional obedience and respect for their parents” (Yan, 2003, p. 172). Besides providing physical care and financial support to their parents in their old age, individuals were also expected to obey their parents in all aspects of their personal lives, such as in their education, career, and marital choices (Stockman, 2000). Because parents gave children the “gift of life” (Yan, 2003, p. 88), which was the biggest gift one could ever receive in one’s lifetime, children were expected to spend their entire lives repaying their parents through material and non-material means, and failure to do so would render one “unfilial” or “immoral.”

However, in the late imperial era, educated scholars and urbanites became concerned that Confucian familistic values had an insular effect and were a hindrance to China’s modernization on the worldwide economic and political scale, and they initiated the May Fourth Movement to fight for their own rights to make free choices in marriage, education, and career (Stockman, 2000). This revolution was unstructured and participated in by an intellectual few, but later on in the Maoist socialist era of 1949, there was the New Marriage Law of 1950 that officially abolished arranged marriages and granted all individuals the right to choose their own marriage partners. The state also allocated jobs and accommodation to individuals in various urban work units known as *danwei*, and this had greatly diminished their reliance on their parents for economic support. The result was that youths were encouraged to live on their own and to make their own personal lifestyle decisions independently from their parents at a much earlier stage in life.

These acts of individualization that were set in motion in the Maoist era continued to exert their influences in the post-Mao reform era, as individuals were still legally free to choose their own marriage partners. Owing to the relaxation of migration laws since 1981, it became the common practice for many youths to leave their homes and families in the countryside to pursue their education and careers in the cities (Yan, 2009). Moreover, China’s transition to a capitalist market economy led to the termination of “paternalistic” socialist welfare benefits, and this, according to Yunxiang Yan (2010), further propelled individuals to develop their own self-actualizing tendencies for personal survival and sustenance, albeit this being a more *involuntary* kind of individualization compared with the “first stage” of individualization from parental rule that occurred in the Maoist era.

## The Challenge of Pursuing Individual Choice and Fulfilling Parental Demands

Despite past efforts of the Maoist regime to enhance individuals' autonomy, and the capitalist economy's push toward more individualized practices, Chinese individuals continued to observe the traditional virtue of filial piety (Hu & Scott, 2014; Whyte, 2004). Nevertheless, there were still bound to be some individual cases of "unfilial" behavior exemplified by those who chose to pursue their own personal goals at the expense of their parents' feelings and well-being. One such example was where individuals who migrated from the villages to the cities to pursue better educational and work opportunities rarely went back to visit their parents (Yan, 2003). In Yan's (2003) study on the Xiajia village in Northern China, he found a number of elderly villagers who were abandoned by their children who left the village and never returned. There were also those whose children did return, but it was for the utilitarian purpose of asking them for financial support. In the most extreme cases, elderly parents who did not have the means to support their adult children were even physically and emotionally abused (Yan, 2003, 2009).

Another controversial aspect of individualization had to do with the One Child Policy in 1979 and how it produced generations of "spoilt" only children. It was believed that parents' excessive doting and concentration of material resources on their only children had led them to become self-centered and "unfilial" (Fong, 2004). One extreme example found in Fong's (2004) study on only children who came of age in the 1990s was when one boy in secondary school threatened to abuse and abandon his mother in the future when she demanded that he study for his university entrance exams, as he was aware that he was his mother's "only child" and "only hope." However, it was important to note that Fong's study was conducted on only children who were in secondary school at the time, and it was difficult to tell whether they would grow up to become filial or not based on interviews with them in their childhood. It may well be that their "spoilt" or "unfilial" behavior was only a vent for their exam frustration and did not reflect their actual behavior toward their parents in their adulthood.

On the other side of the coin, there were parents who intervened *too much* in their children's lifestyle choices, thus depriving them of any autonomy in their own personal lives. One example was when parents sought to control their daughters' marital choices, which often led to devastating results (May, 2010). In Shannon May's (2010) study on a poor Northeastern Chinese village, she found that it was a common practice for parents to arrange for their daughters to go work in a more prosperous city with the objective of finding a man to marry there and consequently improving their whole family's livelihood. Most of these attempts were unsuccessful given how low the probability rate of "chancing on" eligible men was, and thus these

daughters returned to their villages with tainted reputations (May, 2010). The most unfortunate ones were those who found a village man to marry, but then found themselves unsuited to the rustic lifestyle after their stint in the city, and they would end up abandoning their husband and children for city life (May, 2010).

As illustrated in the above cases, neither the extremes of being "too self-centered" and "unfilial" nor being "too acquiescent" and "unreflexive" would lead to desirable outcomes. This showed how finding the right balance between observing filial obligations and asserting one's own choices was crucial and necessary in modern intergenerational relationships.

## Altruistic Individualism

In response to the moral dilemmas induced by individualization, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) proposed the theory of "altruistic individualism" that was about "combin(ing) personal freedom with engagement with others" (p. 162). "Individualization" was deemed as a kind of "institutionalized individualism" by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, as they believed that it was an inevitable and inexorable process that was generated by the wider institutional changes in highly developed societies under global capitalism. Due to the overdevelopment of late modern societies, a profusion of unintended consequences had emerged that rendered many previous institutions such as welfare systems, educational and occupational systems, and family systems dysfunctional. Having lost their previous bearings, individuals were forced to rely on their own "reflexivity" and self-actualizing spirit to resolve their own practical and existential dilemmas. This individualizing process was considered to be a positive one by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) as they believed that heightened human reflexivity could have the potential to rectify existing socioeconomic and ecological problems and improve the overall human condition:

The decline of values which cultural pessimists are so fond of decrying is in fact opening up the possibility of escaping from the creed of "bigger, better, more" in a period that is living beyond its means ecologically and economically. It is particularly the apostles of the status quo who grumble that individualization means egocentrism . . . While in the old values systems the ego always had to be subordinated to patterns of the collective (also always designed by individuals), these new orientations towards the "we" create something like a *cooperative* or *altruistic individualism*. Thinking of oneself and living for others at the same time, once considered a contradiction in terms, is revealed as an internal, substantive connection. Living alone means living socially. (p. 162)

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) also equated individualization with "detraditionalization," implying that departure from obsolete moral reference points was not negative as the

“cultural pessimists” augured, as new values and reference points were now needed to contend with new and ever-present dilemmas. They believed that “reflexivity” could be unleashed when individuals were “detraditionalized” from their outmoded ways, and it was a crucial component that was needed to create new modes of living and thinking. In other words, “reflexive individualization” was beneficial to individuals on a personal level, as it could lead to heightened self-awareness and the resolution of personal and social dilemmas. Under the new ethics of “altruistic individualism,” both the “self” and “others” would ultimately benefit, and cooperation between the two was the way toward survival in the late modern era (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

## A Continuum of Individualization

Carol Smart and Beccy Shipman (2004) conducted a study on second-generation Indian, Pakistani, and Irish youths in Britain to gauge the extent to which they adhered to traditional values while growing up in a Western society. Their area of inquiry was “marriage partner choice” given the prominence of marriage in South Asian and Irish cultures that were more family oriented. They found that these youths enacted a range of different filial strategies that could be categorized into three different types on a “continuum of individualization.”

On one end of the “individualization continuum” were the youths who performed the strategy of “compliance” by having their marriage partners arranged by their parents. When asked about his reason for entering into an arranged marriage, one Pakistani youth responded in a “matter of fact” way (Smart & Shipman, 2004, p. 9), implying that he never thought of what type of wife he wanted to have. It happened that he glimpsed his wife in a family wedding video and married her out of convenience (“I didn’t mind actually ’cos I actually saw her in my cousin’s wedding film so when I was asked I said yes I would marry that girl!”; Smart & Shipman, 2004, p. 8). Smart and Shipman (2004) considered those who chose arranged marriages to be the “least individualized,” as arranged marriages were “a long way away from the basic tenets of the individualization thesis where it (was) held that people (sought) marriage partners who fulfil(ed) a psychological and emotional need or gap in the psyche of the single person” (p. 9).

On the other end of the individualization continuum were the youths who performed the strategy of “negotiation” when their partner choices conflicted with their parents’ expectations. An Indian youth wanted to marry an Indian girl who was from a different religion, but he knew his parents would disapprove. He hence negotiated his future childrearing plans with his parents, which was to pass on his religion to his children to prevent it from being lost. In this way, he hoped that he could preserve his relations with his parents and his choice of partner.

Another case of negotiation was a Pakistani girl who decided that she was not interested in any of the men her parents introduced to her within her extended family, so she negotiated with them by citing examples of her cousins who were in love marriages with partners found on their own. By negotiating her choice to have a love marriage with her parents, she hoped to “sustain good relations” with them “while embracing some degree of cultural shift” (Smart & Shipman, 2004, p. 13). These youths who negotiated their differences with their parents were seen as the “most individualized,” as they had chosen partners who could fulfill their own “psychological and emotional needs” instead of the needs of their parents.

In the middle of the individualization continuum were those youths whose choices “agreed” with their parents’ by coincidence. For instance, there was an Irish girl who chose a husband on her own who was also Irish and Catholic, and he happened to fit with her parents’ traditional expectations. These individuals were described as “mildly individualized” in that they demonstrated reflexivity in their partner choices, yet they did not have to face the challenge of defending their choices to their parents.

## The Study: Method and Data

The 14 informants of this study were derived from a wider study of 50 never-married Chinese professional women interviewed in Shanghai from December 2008 to January 2011. Highly educated unmarried women who were over the age of 27 were branded as *sheng nü* or “leftover women” in China (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2007), and their marital prospects were highly scrutinized and speculated. The objective of the wider study was to investigate the marriage views and partner choices of 50 unmarried professional women using a grounded theory and symbolic interactionist approach (To, 2013; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994). The interactions between the women and their male partners are discussed in another article (To, 2013). This article will discuss the interactions between the women and their parents.

The 14 informants in this article were aged 27 to 31 and they were from Shanghai, Hong Kong, Nanjing, Harbin, Jiangsu, and Henan. They were all managers and professionals working in Shanghai in the fields of law, finance, advertising, information technology, media, retail, and manufacturing. Six of them had master’s degrees and three of them were educated in overseas institutions in the United Kingdom and Australia. These women who had high educational qualifications and professional statuses were representative of the new group of upper middle-class elites who successfully capitalized on the new opportunities of post-reform China (Hanser, 2002) and could afford to make individualized lifestyle choices (Giddens, 1991, 1992).

The informants were gathered by snowballing from my own personal contacts in Shanghai, and then subsequently



from several professional networking bodies such as the Shanghai Oxford and Cambridge Society (SOCS; previously “CamOx”), the Overseas Chinese Network (OCN), which was a professional networking group for expatriate professionals of ethnic Chinese descent, and a private finance professionals’ networking group. The women were interviewed in their offices, homes, coffee shops, and restaurants, and their interviews lasted on average 50 min. All of the interviews were recorded after gaining permission from the informants, and they were transcribed verbatim by me. The informants were told that they would be given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality, and that the names of their companies and other identifying information would not be disclosed.

The interview schedule was semi-structured, and new questions were added onto it at each new stage according to the evolving theoretical needs of the study (Charmaz, 2006). Sampling and coding were conducted at four different stages in the wider study, and the first three pertained specifically to gauging the filial dynamics between the women and their parents. The first and last stages were aimed at gauging the gender dynamics between the women and their male partners, and are described in detail in another article (To, 2013).

In the pilot stage of sampling, a set of guiding questions were devised to preliminarily gauge the women’s marriage views, to “determine the dimensions and boundaries . . . of the project” (Morse, 2007, p. 235).<sup>1</sup> This sample consisted of 20 tertiary-educated women and men who were married, unmarried, divorced, and separated, and in the age range of 27 to 59. On coding and analysis of their interviews using ATLAS.ti (used in all four stages), I narrowed down the sample to include only never-married women who were in the age range of 28 to 33 because these informants had the most interesting and relevant courtship experiences. I eliminated the men from the sample because their views did not contribute much to the understanding of women’s views toward marriage, and I narrowed down the age range because the disparities in marriage views had been too great between different cohorts, and exploring cohort differences was not my objective. Eventually 9 of these 20 informants were retained in the final sample.

The codes that emerged from the analysis of the first set of interviews were found to contain many instances of *parents’ demands and expectations* when it came to the women’s marital choices. As a result, new *filially related* questions were added onto the interview schedule in the second interviewing stage:

1. Did their parents want them to get married?
2. Did their parents ever introduce any partners to them? What criteria did these men possess?
3. Did they ever have any conflicts with their parents regarding their partner choices?

In view of these filially related questions, new informants who encountered parental interventions in the areas of

“marriage timing” and “partner choice” were purposefully sourced in the manner of “purposeful sampling” (Morse, 2007). This second sample consisted of 16 informants, and all of them were retained in the final sample.

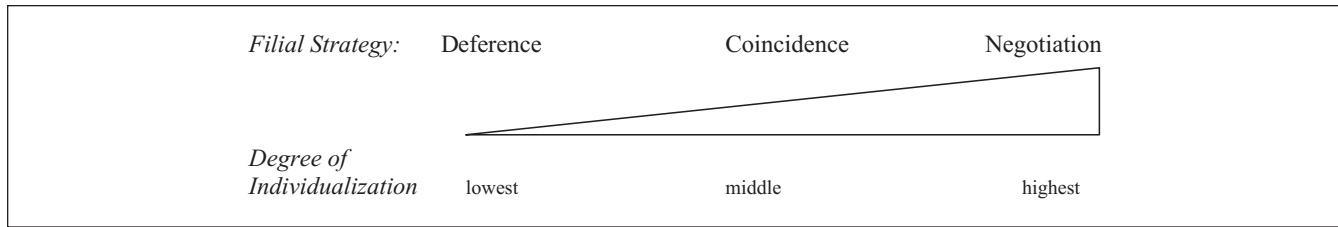
### *Deriving the Filial Strategies From the Codes*

Eventually, the filial codes that emerged from the first two stages of coding were developed into more analytical “conceptual categories” with the technique of “constant comparison” that entailed comparing the codes and the data against each other, the data against data, and codes against codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994). The main filial conceptual categories were “parental influences on women’s marriage timing” and “parents’ emphasis on the economic status of women’s partners.”<sup>2</sup> To fill in the dimensions and properties of these two filial conceptual categories, “theoretical sampling” was performed in the third stage to “seek participants who have had particular responses to experiences, or in whom particular concepts appear(ed) significant” (Morse, 2007, p. 240). In the third sampling stage, 17 informants who had the more specific experience of “matchmaking” in which parents introduced partners to them of similar family and economic background were interviewed, and all of them were retained in the final sample.

The fourth and final stage of theoretical sampling was conducted to fill in the properties and dimensions of the *gender* conceptual categories,<sup>3</sup> and women who were at the top of their professions were sourced, as they were postulated to have the most difficulties in bridging their economic gaps with their male suitors and partners. Eight women were interviewed in this final stage, and a total of 50 informants were gathered in all four stages.

Finally, all of the filial conceptual categories and remaining filial concepts were integrated into the conditional/consequential matrix (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1994) that elucidated their relationships and associations. The two main filial conceptual categories of “parental influences on women’s marriage timing” and “parents’ emphasis on the economic status of women’s partners” were the “filial constraints” against which the women made their marital choices. In response, the women enacted various “filial strategies” that could be broadly categorized into “deference,” “negotiation,” and “coincidence.” For instance, when in the face of the filial constraint of one’s parents disagreeing with one’s choice of partner who had lower economic status, some women would heed their parents’ demands and break up with their partner (“deference”), some would break up with their partner because they shared the same views as their parents (“coincidence”), or some would try to persuade their parents to accept their partner (“negotiation”).

Adopting Smart and Shipman’s (2004) “continuum of individualization,” the filial strategy of “deference” would be found at the “least individualized” end; “coincidence” would be found in the middle, representing “neutrality”; and



**Figure 1.** Continuum of individualization (based on Smart and Shipman's, 2004, study).

“negotiation” would be found at the “most individualized” end (see Figure 1).

Given how this study's aim was to illustrate the process of finding a balance between asserting one's individual choices and fulfilling parental demands, or achieving “altruistic individualism,” only those informants (14) who experienced some form of filial contention in their marital choices in the areas of “marriage timing” and/or “partner choice” would be included, and their filial strategies of “deference” and/or “negotiation” (not “coincidence”) would be discussed below.

## Findings

### “I Went Matchmaking for My Parents' Sake!”— “Deference” as a Filial Strategy

Actually I didn't really intend to find someone in the first place, but my parents wanted me to get married very early. When I didn't have a boyfriend, my mom would keep saying to me, “You're getting older and it'll be very difficult to find someone!” And that if I don't get married, I'll be very lonely for the rest of my life. So she hoped that I could find someone very early on. I went matchmaking for my parents' sake, so that they won't worry. I personally think that I'm happy being by myself. I have a lot of friends and activities. I'm living a happy life. (*Have you explained to your mom that you're happy being alone?*) It won't work, she won't understand. . . . We're from different generations so it's difficult to make her understand. (Vera, 30, technology analyst)

Vera, a 30-year-old technology analyst in a multinational beverage company, was found to have had the same “marriage conversation” with her parents as many of the unmarried women. It could be seen how marriage was still considered to be a significant rite of passage that most Chinese adult children were expected to follow in the eyes of their parents. Women were especially expected to marry, as they traditionally belonged in the domestic sphere and were regarded as dependents of men. Hence, Vera's parents who were more traditional would expect her to follow the traditional path, and their biggest fear would be that she did not marry and had no one to take care of her in the future.

Vera, who also planned to marry eventually, did not plan to do so that soon. But knowing how her parents felt worried about her future, she was willing to “defer” to their expectations to expedite her marriage timing. Vera's parents also

worried that the longer she waited, the more difficult it would be for her to find a man. Seeing how Vera was already 30 years old and without any marriage prospects, her parents arranged for her to go to *more than 10* matchmaking sessions. As it was, Vera did not manage to find a partner at matchmaking, and she ended up finding someone on her own on a matchmaking website. This greatly satisfied her parents, as they were relieved that their daughter's marital future would soon be secured.

Giselle, a Hong Konger based in Shanghai for the past 5 years running her family's retail business, had not been in a serious relationship since she moved there. Although she eventually wanted to get married and have a family, she felt that it was not the right time given how she had just achieved some success in her career. It had taken her a long time to learn the ropes of her family business since she moved to Shanghai, and now was finally the time she could savor the fruits of her hard work and bask in the self-sufficiency that came with it. But apparently, her father had a different opinion, as he thought that a woman's career was nowhere near the importance of her marriage. He felt tremendously guilty for having “jeopardized” his daughter's marriage chances by asking her to devote herself to developing his business. Giselle took it as a sign that he wanted her to shift her priorities, and she “deferred” to his wishes:

My dad usually doesn't talk about these things, but last year he told me that he thinks he spoiled my chances by sending me to work in Shanghai. I said no, because I like working here. I wasted a bit of time at the beginning but I was very satisfied when I saw the results. I've changed a lot. I know what I want more and I won't wait for other people to give me happiness. I'm happy that I can do my own thing. That brings me happiness too. But after my dad talked to me about it—with tears in his eyes—I started to seriously think about my love life, if I should really start dating more. I mentioned this to friends and they started to introduce guys to me. I started to date a lot more. (Giselle, 29, general manager of her family business)

As her father did not have any eligible partners to introduce to her, Giselle turned to her friends for introductions. She hoped that she could soon find a suitable partner to expedite her marriage plans and assuage her father's guilt.

Winnie, a 28-year-old assistant brand manager at a global consumer products company, was strongly averse to the pragmatic nature of matchmaking, as it reminded her of

“buying pork at the butcher’s” where all candidates’ external criteria were “put on the table first” before they even met. Nevertheless, Winnie still went matchmaking several times at the demand of her mother:

My mom asked her friend to introduce some guys to me. I think there’s a very big difference between matchmaking and dating someone you met on your own . . . In matchmaking you get to know someone’s criteria first. I’ve been to matchmaking three to four times. Men look at women’s appearance first, to see if they’re pretty or not. For the women, they don’t even have to ask about the economic background of the men, as the introducer would automatically tell them that this guy is very accomplished, he’s from what university, what education level, and if he has a house or a car. In matchmaking, you put all of each other’s criteria on the table. And if they fit your requirement, then you go on to see if your personalities are compatible and if you can develop feelings for each other. I think it’s too practical that way. (Winnie, 28, assistant brand manager)

Even though Winnie was against the pragmatic nature of matchmaking, and would rather find a partner on her own, she still “deferred” to her mother’s demand and went “three to four times.” However, Winnie’s matchmaking episode did not end here, as it would be revealed later on that she adopted a different filial strategy when facing her mother’s formidable partner choice criteria.

The same could not be said for Nancy, a 28-year-old IT consultant, as she “deferred” to her parents’ choice of man whom she did not find so agreeable:

They’re really satisfied with him but I don’t think we are the same type of person. (*Why?*) Mainly because of work nature. He works in a local company. His way of thinking and the situations he has to handle are completely different. At my age I can’t spare a lot of time and energy to try to understand what he’s thinking about. I just think that he’s very different from me in the way he thinks and does things. (*Do you see each other all the time?*) Not a lot. We talk a bit every day and see each other once a week. (*Only once a week?*) Yes, because I think we both have the same mentality; that we’re not that compatible, but because our parents introduced . . . (Nancy, 28, IT consultant)

Nancy confessed that she and her boyfriend both felt that they were not that suitable for each other, and that they were only together because their parents were good friends. It was obvious that Nancy would not choose someone like him if they had met under normal circumstances:

My parents know his parents. They used to be my father’s old schoolmates, and he knows that they are very good, kind people. They think that if I marry into their family I will have very kind and honest mother and father-in-laws. Their way of thinking is very simple. (Nancy, 28, IT consultant)

Nancy believed that obeying her parents in every aspect of her personal life was the best form of repayment for their

painstaking upbringing. This was seen as a “purest” form of filial piety where one considered it to be their lifelong objective to repay their parents for their “gift of life” (cf. Yan, 2003, p. 88). For the sake of her parents, Nancy was willing to sublimate her individual desires, but having made such compromises for the collective good, she could not help but feel ambivalent about her future marital happiness:

I can give myself time but my parents would be under a lot of pressure. (*So you will put their wishes first?*) Yes, because my parents sacrificed a lot for me and my sister. They’ve given us all the money they have. I don’t need to find someone who’s extremely compatible with me, or someone who’s exactly like myself. I don’t think that’s necessary. I think that what my parents say usually make a lot of sense. (*Do you think you’ll be happier married than you are now?*) I don’t know, it’s very hard to say. It may be better or it may be worse. I can’t just run in one direction. I have to learn how to be a good partner, a good mother, and I have to learn how to be accountable to my parents and society. I have to consider these things. (Nancy, 28, IT consultant)

### “Luckily My Family Wasn’t Very Hard-Headed and I’ve Always Been Allowed to Express My Views”—“Negotiation” as a Filial Strategy

Yes, my mother does want me to *jiaru-haomen* (marry into a rich and powerful family). Those families would usually want to manage their daughters-in-law’s life paths. They would tell them what to do, like where to go study and where to go to work. I can’t accept that. (Ingrid, 28, accountant)

Ingrid, a 28-year-old accountant with a law master’s degree, had a mother who had incredibly high expectations for her partner’s economic criteria. Ingrid would rather find someone who was from a more similar family and economic background, as she thought that they could find more affinity with each other in terms of lifestyle and values, but her mother believed that hypergamy, or marrying up, could better secure her daughter’s future livelihood.

Ingrid’s mother would hence “sift through the candidates first” to pick out only those who fulfilled the “most basic” criteria of “having a house and a car.” Ingrid was against the pragmatic nature of matchmaking, but she still went to satisfy her mother. Eventually, she did manage to meet a candidate whom she liked, but her mother was still not satisfied, and asked her to go meet even *more* well-off men:

My father is pleased because his daughter found someone she likes. But my mother still thinks that I can find someone better. She wants me to observe a bit longer and get to know him more. Actually when we first met, my mother was still introducing men with better criteria to me. There was one who liked me but I didn’t like him, so I told my mother that I like the other one more. But that guy was very accomplished. He had a house, a car, and was a senior manager in a big company. (Ingrid, 28, accountant)

Even though Ingrid eventually “negotiated” with her mother to retain her original partner choice, she still went to meet the other well-off candidates on her mother’s demand. She could not help stressing the impressive economic criteria of one of the other candidates, not because she admired him, but because she knew that choosing him would please her mother more. Nevertheless, after much struggle between retaining her own personal choice and satisfying her mother, Ingrid decided that fulfilling her mother’s “most basic” partner choice criteria of “having a house and a car” (which her boyfriend had because he was “sifted through” by her mother) was already good enough in terms of showing her filiality.

In the last section, Winnie was found to “defer” to her mother’s demand for her to go matchmaking, even when it was against her own preference. However, when it came down to her actual partner choice, she refused to “defer” to her mother’s choice of a *nouveau riche* candidate:

I met this guy who was very accomplished. He had his own business in Shanghai and had three to four houses, all luxury apartments. He had many expensive cars . . . I went out with him for a few times; three times in total, and then I said I can’t do it anymore. (*You had nothing to say?*) Having nothing to say was one thing . . . the feeling I got from him was that he thought that a girl like me with rather good criteria would be looking for a rich man to marry, that I was after his money. He kept bragging about how rich he was in front of me. He would tell me what brands of clothes he bought; that it cost several tens of thousands (of *yuan*), and that he was the VIP of this brand, and he gave them several hundreds of thousands (of *yuan*) in business. I wasn’t very happy with all of that. He was quite inconsiderate. He would ask me to go buy something with him. (*Is it for you?*) No, not for me, but for himself. He’d take me to a brand name store to go shopping for himself, like LV (Louis Vuitton) or Bally. Even if he did buy things for me, I wouldn’t dare accept as my mom would scold me. I’m not that greedy. Whenever we’d go into a shop, those salespeople would give us weird looks, like we’re from different worlds. He’d act like a big boss, telling people to get this and that for him . . . He took off his shoes. After that I really thought I couldn’t do this anymore. He acted like he owned the shop. There were some chairs in the shop, and mannequins were sitting on it, with scarves and other accessories. He’d sit on top of them. There were sofas in the shop as well, he should’ve sat on those. It was so embarrassing. The salespeople would stare at us. I’d ask him to sit on the sofa, but he wouldn’t listen to me. I really hated that. After that I told my mom that I couldn’t see him again. She said forget it, as it was all too scary. (Winnie, 28, assistant brand manager)

Eventually, Winnie decided that she could no longer tolerate the vulgar and inconsiderate actions of her *nouveau riche* suitor, and she “negotiated” with her mother to terminate her courtship. She realized that her mother cared more about her feelings than her being with someone who was extremely wealthy, and that her mother would never force her to go along with something she felt so uncomfortable with, if only she had told her earlier. However, the fact that it had taken as

much as *three whole dates* for Winnie to decide to terminate her courtship with the insufferable man showed how she really took her mother’s wishes into account. In the end, after heartfelt communication, both Winnie and her mother came to the conclusion that someone like that would not be a good choice for Winnie, no matter how superior his economic criteria were.

There were cases where women who met partners on their own did not satisfy their parents’ partner choice criteria. One such case was Bernice, a 28-year-old telecommunications manager who met her boyfriend at work. Unlike those who met their partners at matchmaking, it was more difficult to guarantee that partners met on one’s own would fulfill the specific criteria that parents looked for. Bernice’s boyfriend was an accomplished software engineer, but her parents were looking for someone who was from a more prominent family background, given how prestigious theirs was. The lacking of this criterion in Bernice’s boyfriend caused many conflicts between her and her parents over the years:

B: At first they didn’t quite accept my boyfriend, so when they heard we broke up, they were so happy and immediately introduced other guys to me. But afterwards they gave up because they knew we always got back together.

S: They didn’t like your boyfriend before?

B: Yes, for a lot of reasons. They think he’s a bit effeminate; also because our two families aren’t very *men-dang-hudui* (of similar backgrounds).

S: Yours is better?

B: Yes, they want me to find someone who’s from a similar or better background.

S: But he’s capable himself, no?

B: Yes, but my family looks at family background more. I don’t know if it’s like this in other places, but over here, marriage is an affair between two families. Even if they think this person is good, they want to know more about his family, where they’re from and what his parents do.

S: What do his parents do?

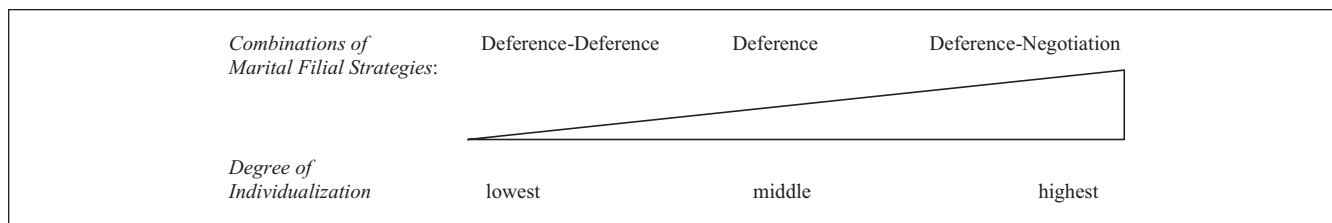
B: His parents run a store.

S: What do your parents do?

B: My grandfather is deceased, but if he were here, we’d be a typical “government-business” combination. My grandfather was a government official and my grandmother does business. We’re still running the business now. (Bernice, 28, telecommunications manager)

Over the years, Bernice’s parents had introduced many other candidates from more prominent family backgrounds to her, even during the course of her relationship with her boyfriend. However reluctant she was, Bernice still agreed to meet these other men, which was a sign of “giving face” to her parents and taking their wishes into account. But eventually, she mustered up the confidence to “negotiate” with her





**Figure 2.** Integrated continuum of individualization.

parents about their different values and to make them understand why she chose her boyfriend:

I don't care that much about where they're from or what their family background is. I just look at that person himself, whether I like him or not. I never ask about what their family does or if they're rich or not. My ex-boyfriend was even worse off than this one! (Bernice, 28, telecommunications manager)

Bernice's "negotiation" strategy paid off, and she was finally able to persuade her parents to stop introducing other men to her. Admittedly, Bernice had to have had considerably reasonable and open-minded parents who were willing to negotiate with her in the first place. If her parents adamantly insisted that she find a man from a more prominent family background, she would have had a much more difficult time struggling to assert her own personal choice and fulfilling her filial obligations. Perhaps it could be surmised that her parents' living far away in Jiangsu made them more tolerant and understanding of her situation, as they did not have a chance to see her and her boyfriend that often. As it was, their distance could be said to have played a large part in alleviating their filial conflict:

Actually I was the one who insisted in the first place. My family was quite against it, they wanted to break us up. I was very persistent about it. Luckily my family wasn't very hard-headed and I've always been allowed to express my views. Anyway, I'm in Shanghai and they don't come to Shanghai that often. (Bernice, 28, telecommunications manager)

## Discussion and Conclusion

The two main areas of filial contention faced by 14 *sheng nü* were "marriage timing" and "partner choice." It was found that their parents generally wanted them to marry earlier and to find a husband with high economic status, but this may not cohere with their own life plans or partner choice criteria. To resolve their filial contentions, the women performed the "marital filial strategies" of "deference" and/or "negotiation."

It was interesting to note that filial contentions in "marriage timing" and "partner choice" elicited different filial strategies. Most women who chose to "defer" to their parents' matchmaking demands (to marry earlier or to find a high(er) status partner) would "negotiate" their actual partner choices

in the end. For instance, Winnie who thought that the idea of matchmaking was too pragmatic (like "buying pork from the butcher's") still went to satisfy her mother, but she refused to yield to her mother's choice of a *nouveau riche* candidate, and negotiated with her mother to terminate her courtship. Similarly, Bernice and Ingrid also went matchmaking at their parents'/mother's demand, but ended up negotiating with them to retain their choices of less prominent or well-off men than their parents/mother hoped for. These instances of "deferring" first and then going on to "negotiate" suggested how filial obligations were observed to a certain extent to which the women felt were reasonable and acceptable, but they would not go as far as to compromise their own innermost needs and wants. This satisfactory balance that was found between filial obligations and personal choices exemplified the ideal condition of "altruistic individualism" that entailed "combin(ing) personal freedom with engagement with others" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 162). By showing a high degree of individual reflexivity regarding their own partner choices, these women would be on the "most individualized" end of the "integrated continuum of individualization" (see Figure 2).

In contrast, if "deferring" and then "negotiating" demonstrated the merits of achieving "altruistic individualism," those who performed the filial strategy of "deference" in *both* "marriage timing" and "partner choice" would be seen as lacking reflexivity, and as Giddens (1991, 1992) suggested, they would not be postulated to achieve much individual satisfaction from choices that were made to satisfy others instead of themselves.

Nancy was an example of one who "deferred" to her parents' partner choice even when she knew he was "not her type." If given the choice, she would have chosen someone who was more compatible with her in terms of personality and work interests. However, she chose to fulfill her parents' expectations instead of her own as a form of repayment for their lifelong upbringing. Repaying parents for their "gift of life" was deemed as a "purest" and most traditional form of filial piety (Yan, 2003, p. 88). Nancy's abidance by this virtue was indeed invaluable and commendable, especially being someone from the "individualized" modern generation. However, on the downside, she had effectively let her "obligations to defer to parental wishes trump (her) own personal desires and preferences" (Whyte, 2004, p. 120). By deferring completely to her *parents'* partner choice, she

would be on the “least individualized” end of the “integrated continuum of individualization” (see Figure 2). As Smart and Shipman (2004) maintained that arranged marriages were “a long way away from the basic tenets of the individualization thesis where it (was) held that people (sought) marriage partners who fulfil(ed) a psychological and emotional need or gap in the psyche of the single person” (p. 9), it was understandable that Nancy would have serious doubts about her future marital happiness. (“I don’t know, it’s very hard to say. It may be better or it may be worse.”)

There were those who performed the filial strategy of “deference” (only), but did not exactly belong in the category of “least individualized.” Those were Vera and Giselle who “deferred” to their parents’/father’s wishes to expedite their marriage timing even when they felt unready to do so at their own pace. Vera went matchmaking for over 10 times on her parents’ demand, and eventually found a partner on a matchmaking website on her own. This satisfied her parents all the same, as they appreciated the idea of her getting married over any specific partner choice criteria. Giselle’s father did not have anyone to introduce to her, so she turned to her friends for help. So far, it was not known whether Giselle would succeed in finding a partner through her friends’ introductions.

Because Giselle had not reached the stage where she had a partner for her parents to evaluate, she did not need to “negotiate” or “defer” in terms of “partner choice,” and would therefore be deemed as “mildly un-individualized” based on her strategy of “deference” in “marriage timing” (see Figure 2). However, if she did find a partner in the future, there would be possibilities of gravitating toward the “most individualized” end if her parents disagreed with her partner choice and she chose to “negotiate” with them, or toward the “least individualized” end if she chose to “defer” to her parents’ partner choice and compromise her own. Thus, it could be seen how for some women who were in the beginning stage of their marital trajectory (at “marriage timing”), their individualizing tendencies would be open to much variation. In other words, “mildly un-individualized” would not necessarily be their final destination. But for those like Vera who did reach the latter stage of her marital trajectory wherein she found a partner on a matchmaking website who satisfied her parents, “mildly un-individualized” would in fact be her final destination, as she did not face filial contention in the area of “partner choice” and hence did not have the option to further “defer” or “negotiate.”

It was interesting to note that not one of these women above “negotiated” in the first stage of “marriage timing,” which could well suggest that all of them eventually wanted to get married, despite feeling “not quite ready” or being against the pragmatic nature of matchmaking. Hence, it did not take much swaying by parents for one to decide to expedite one’s marriage timing, and “deferring” would not be seen as conflicting too much with one’s long-term marital goals. However, when it came down to actual “partner choice,” only the staunchest observers of filiality would “defer” to parental expectations and sacrifice their own need

for “emotional and psychological” fulfillment (Smart & Shipman, 2004, p. 9).

In the past, there had been many studies that investigated the filial strategies of modern Chinese individuals in the areas of caring for elderly parents (Lan, 2002) or relating with in-laws (Shih & Pyke, 2010), but there had been none that investigated the filial strategies of unmarried Chinese professional women known as *sheng nü* or “leftover women” who faced filial contentions in their marital choices. This study has provided both an empirical and theoretical account of the “marital filial strategies” performed by *sheng nü* and their pathways to achieving “altruistic individualism,” that is, finding the most satisfactory balance between their own individual choices and fulfilling filial obligations. On a wider level, their experiences could serve as an exemplar for all modern Chinese individuals who strove to conduct congenial filial relationships without compromising their own ideals.

## Notes

1. These questions were generated from a review of the literature on the impact of women’s economic status on their marriage chances, in line with the wider study’s objective of exploring single professional women’s marriage views and partner choice. These guiding questions were as follows: (a) Did the women want to get married in the first place? (b) If yes, then what obstacles did they face? (c) What types of partners were they looking for?
2. Other lesser filial conceptual categories were “parents against Western partner,” “parents against partner being too old,” and “parents against partner being divorced/having children from previous marriage.” In comparison, the categories related to “partner’s economic status,” and the women’s own “marriage timing” far outweighed the others and were thus chosen for analysis.
3. The gender conceptual categories were “men’s discrimination against accomplished women” and “men’s control over women’s work-lifestyle choices” (To, 2013, p. 9).

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