

State, Family and Women's Reproductive Agency in China

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Abstract: This paper describes the alternative roles that patriarchal families and oppressive state policy might play in local women's exercise of reproductive agency. Based on interviews with 26 rural women in Hunan, China, the paper explains how women, rather than experiencing their reproductive bodies as victims, act as agents. Theoretically, this paper engages with feminist discussions of coercion, victimhood, and agency. Through an examination of the different roles that marital and natal families play in women's resistance to state violence, and how women employ state policy to resist reproductive duties within families, it extends the feminist scholarship on coercion and agency by proposing further investigation of the operation of different layers of repression and the possibility of agents' manipulation of oppressions. Moreover, I reflect on the gender politics that underpin women's reproductive agency and argue that gender

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equality and reproductive empowerment should be promoted in tandem in the Chinese context.

Keywords: China; Coercion; Family; Gender; One-Child Policy; Reproductive Agency

1. Introduction

I was born in the late 1980s when the birth planning policy was coercive in China. My mother is a teacher, and she tells me that if she had given birth to another child at that time, she and my father would have lost their jobs. However, when I asked my mother whether the policy was good or not, she responded that it was good, because without the policy she would have given birth to many more children like my grandmother had, and that would not have left space for her career. My mother's response to the birth planning policy became the rationale for my research, as it led me to think about the alternative stories that women might tell about their experiences under the oppressive reproductive politics of China.

Family planning policies have been implemented in China since the 1950s (White, 1994), but the coercive one-child policy did not emerge until 1979 (Aird, 1990). International coverage of China's family planning policy in news media and international human rights organisations' reports shows that women suffered significant emotional and physical trauma under the policy. Indeed, the draconian enforcement of the policy,

especially in the 1980s and 1990s, meant that women experienced much violence and coercion from the state. Nonetheless, through my engagements with Chinese women, I observed that in addition to state coercion, family patriarchy also constrained women's reproductive freedom. Meanwhile, under the dual repressions of the state and family, women were not merely victims waiting for salvation and empathy, but they also actively mediated between the state and family so as to achieve their own reproductive desires.

In current feminist literature, the dichotomy between victim and agent under oppression has been challenged by numerous postcolonial and poststructuralist scholars (Ghanim, 2009; Madhok, 2013a, 2013b; Mohanty, 2003a; Pande, 2014; Petchesky and Judd, 1998). Aligned with these scholars, I argue that victimhood and agency are not in a dichotomy under oppressive relations. However, I will push the debate further by arguing that in situations where women experience multiple levels of oppressive relations, they can mediate among these oppressive relations, and employ one to fight against another, particularly when the two operate in opposition. Therefore, I call for a strategic transition to analysing the circulation, operation and interplay of different oppressions, and to seeking ways to enhance people's capabilities to survive and strategise under oppressive regulations, policies and norms. I hope that by employing this approach the negative outcomes brought about by coercion can be minimised, or even positive effects created. Moreover, I advocate for a critical reflection on

the values that local people's agential activities reinforce. In the Chinese context, for instance, gender equality and reproductive empowerment should be promoted together.

2. Contextualizing the Oppressive Reproductive Context in Hunan, China

In rural China the reproductive context is oppressive not only because of state repression, but also due to the patriarchal family system. As my ethnographic research was based in rural areas of Hunan province, this section will mainly introduce the birth planning policy in this province, as well as different types of family relations in rural China and how these restrict women's reproductive freedom.

While the coercive birth planning policy has been implemented in China since 1979, the Law of the People's Republic of China on Population and Birth Planning was not officially established until 2001. There was no unified birth planning law on the national level before 2001, though local regulations had long been established in different provinces. In Hunan province, the Regulation of Hunan Municipality on Population and Birth Planning was first established in 1989, revised in 1999, re-established according to the 2001 national law of birth planning in 2002 (effective in 2003), and this was revised in 2007.

The 1989 and 1999 versions of the local regulation were coercive in that it was “strictly forbidden to get married without reaching legal marriage age or to have an unauthorised birth” (Article 3, 1989, 1999). This indicates that pregnancies conceived before the marital age necessitated termination and that any other pregnancies without authorisation would also need to be terminated. In addition, it was clearly stated in the policy that “a couple can only have one child except in several special circumstances” (Article 14, 1989, 1999), “birth must be planned” and “the third child is forbidden” (Article 14, 1989, 1999).

With the establishment of the national birth planning law in 2001, reproductive politics transformed from a “rule by party fiat towards a rule by law” and from “state-centric birth planning towards client-centred health services” (Winckler, 2002). Since then, human-centred governance has replaced the old brutal practices (Greenhalgh, 2010: 9). For example, the above-mentioned coercive legal provisions such as “it is strictly forbidden to get married without reaching legal marriage age or to have an unauthorised birth,” “birth must be planned” and “the third child is forbidden” have been deleted and replaced with milder articulations such as “it is promoted that a couple has one child” (Article 14, 2003, 2007). In my interviews, I rarely encountered women who were forced to terminate pregnancies or be sterilised after 2001, which is consistent with the state’s milder approach to birth planning. However, the state remains repressive in that couples do not fully have the

right to decide for themselves the number of births they will have.

In addition to these constraints from the state, rural families are oppressive in that the patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal system is widely established (Johnson, 1983; Stacey, 1983). The system is patrilineal in that the lineage of a family in most circumstances can only be continued by male descendants, and patrilocal in that women are to be married out and live with marital families after marriage (Johnson, 1983: 9). Nonetheless, due to the birth planning policy, some daughter-only households have emerged. In order to continue paternal family lines, daughter-only families, rather than marrying their daughters out, will marry men into their family. Children born to these families will be named after the daughter rather than the marry-in man. This practice is called *zhaolang* (“call men in”) in the Hunan dialect or uxorilocal marriage in academic terminology. However, this practice is uncommon, since few men in China are willing to marry into women’s families and contribute heirs to their wives’ families rather than to their own, especially given the prevalence of patrilineal tradition in rural China that stigmatises these call-in men in their wives’ villages (Li et al., 2000). In the village of Long,¹ which I visited, only three of approximately 180

¹ Since the topic is personally and politically sensitive, I use pseudonyms for the city, villages and informants to ensure confidentiality and anonymity and protect my informants from harm.

households had married men in. Yet, none of the husbands lived permanently in the village during their marriage, and all of the three couples eventually divorced. Although more data is needed to support the case that uxorilocal marriages lead to divorce, uxorilocal marriage is not common, neither is it preferred by men.

The importance of unbroken lineage and the difficulty of marrying men in to continue the paternal family line result in rural people's deep yearning for sons. Mencius, one of the most prominent Confucian sages in traditional China, once made a famous statement: "there are three things which are unfilial, and the greatest of them is not to have posterity" (Stacey, 1983: 32). Even today, son preference acts as a crucial factor regulating people's reproductive choices (Knight et al., 2010; Xiaolei et al., 2013). Under this patriarchal and patrilineal system, a woman's ability to reproduce and to reproduce sons in particular is critical, not only to her marital family but also to her own fate.

Therefore, what I present as the "oppressive reproductive context" in China includes on the one hand state regulation that restricts the number of children that each woman should have and the specific methods of contraception that women should use after each birth, and on the other hand family patriarchy that reinforces rural families' yearning for sons. Both oppressive conditions constrain and enable women's reproductive desires and longings.

3. Challenging the Dichotomy of Agency and Victimhood: A Feminist Analysis

In reproductive politics, human agency is often, and has a history of being, articulated through the discourse of rights. Reproductive rights discourse has become pervasive in Western countries and international human rights organisations. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development signals the success of feminist activism in international reproductive politics, in that it centres on the idea of reproductive rights and defines reproductive rights as follows (United Nations, 1995: para 7.3):

These rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. It also includes their right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion, and violence, as expressed in human rights documents.

The discourse on reproductive rights has been extremely influential in guiding international policy, particularly in the area of development and reproduction, since the 1990s (Hartmann, 1995; Knudsen, 2006). Reproductive rights highlight the making of reproductive decisions as a matter of rational choice and underscore that people should be freed from discrimination, coercion, and

violence. However, if this discourse is applied to analyse the position of women under coercive conditions, women are predominantly regarded as victims.

At present, Chinese women are primarily represented as victims in discussions of reproductive politics, especially in the reports, news, articles, and books written by human rights academics and international human rights organisations (Aird, 1990; Baklinski, 2013; Goodenough, 2010; Littlejohn, 2014, 2010a; Mosher, 1993; Wong, 2012). Aird, one of the most significant researchers and reporters on birth planning policy in China, wrote the impressive book *Slaughter of the Innocents: Coercive Birth Control in China*, which vehemently criticised China's coercive population control for its violation of human rights (Aird, 1990). Mosher elaborated on the coerciveness of this policy and on the victimisation and suffering of women in the implementation of the policy by narrating the reproductive experience of a Chinese woman, Chi An, in the 1980s (Mosher, 1993). According to Chi An, despite wanting to have a child, she was forced to abort, and in the process underwent many psychological and physical tortures (Mosher, 1993). Numerous reports in the international media and by human rights organisations also depict Chinese women as victims (Baklinski, 2013; Goodenough, 2010; Littlejohn, 2014, 2010a; Wong, 2012). These reports condemn forced IUD insertion, sterilisation and abortion by Chinese officials, and disclose tortures that women have endured under this policy. Littlejohn, the president of Women's Rights Without Frontiers and one of the

leading critics of China's birth planning policy, has also written prolifically on violence against women, which takes the form of forced abortion, sterilisation, gendercide, sexual slavery, female suicide, psychiatric torture, imprisonment, etc. (Littlejohn, 2014, 2010a, 2010b). But while women are victims deprived of reproductive freedom, particularly under the coercive policy of contemporary China, they may still be agents due to their critical and reflective narratives and their active negotiations with the state and their families.

In fact, a host of poststructuralist and postcolonial feminist scholars have attempted to challenge the binary between victimhood and agency, and have pointed out the possibility that under oppressive conditions, women may be victims while also exercising agency (Madhok, 2013a; Madhok et al., 2013; Mohanty, 2003a, 2003b; Tietjens Meyers, 2000). Mohanty, one of the most influential postcolonial feminists, argues against the representation of women from the Third World by First World feminists as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented," and "victims of violence, the colonial process, familial systems, Islamic codes and the economic development process," as these representations are usually articulated from the viewpoint of the First World (2003a: 22, 2003b). Thus, Mohanty calls for a turn to represent Third World women as agents from a local perspective (2003a, 2003b). In addition, Madhok (2013a, 2013b), in her work on Indian development workers (sathins), has explored the relationship between coercion and agency, and she

proposes that the conceptualisation of agency in a coercive context should not only be limited to the descriptions of the oppressive context, but more importantly should investigate women's agency under coercion (2013b). Similarly, in her analysis of female genital cutting in the Middle East, Tietjens Meyers posits that autonomy may exist in oppressive contexts. She calls for an educational program directed at increasing autonomy to enhance women's agency and develop their critical attitudes towards the coercive and ideological contexts in which they live (2000). These feminists call upon a representation of Third World women from their indigenous perspectives, which is what I hope to achieve in this paper as well. However, although they have underscored the significance of representing women as agents, few have unveiled the interaction and operation of different oppressive relations and the possibility of women's manipulation of repression so as to realise their ultimate reproductive desires.

The lack of analysis of the operation of multiple layers of oppression is also evident in the small amount of literature representing women as agents in China. Greenhalgh for example, revealed that rural people actively negotiate with the state regarding the methods of contraception and number of births (1994). Moreover, White's archival research described tactics against the birth planning regulation, such as evasion, collusion, cover-up, confrontation, and accommodation (2006: 172). Although Greenhalgh and White have demonstrated the various tactics that women employ to

resist the state, they do not investigate further the intertwined roles that the marital and natal families and the state play in women's exercise of agency.

Thus, my study extends the above scholarship through a closer investigation of the interplay of different oppressions and the manufacture of women's agency from this interplay. This will hopefully find resonance in international reproductive politics, the agenda of which should not only be focused on the elimination of external repression, but also on the empowerment of local women. Moreover, some feminists have pointed out that gender equality should be advocated alongside advancing human agency (Madhok et al., 2013). I propose that this is also critical in realising women's reproductive freedom in China, where both gendered norms and state regulation constrain women's reproductive choices.

4. Interviewing Rural Women in Hunan

Between 2014 and 2015, I conducted eleven months of fieldwork in two villages in Feng, a city in Hunan province in central China. I choose Feng as my fieldwork site because I could speak the local dialect. More importantly, my personal connections with friends and relatives in this city made it easier for me to approach the personally and politically sensitive topic of sexuality and reproduction. During my interviews and conversations with local women, many tried not to speak about certain

details explicitly, assuming that I knew inside stories and understood their euphemisms. Therefore my familiarity with the local dialect and culture greatly helped me to understand and to conduct the in-depth interviews and conversations.

It should be noted however that I might be considered an outsider at times by the local people due to my educational background as a PhD candidate in a foreign university. I was clearly aware of the power relations that took place during the interview. I chose to adopt Oakley's approach (1981) that advocates the reduction of power and hierarchy between the researcher and the researched. Therefore, during the fieldwork, I tried to be very pessimistic about my future, talked and behaved in the same way as local people did, complimented them on their economic prosperity as much as I could and played Mahjong with local residents in the tea houses. The imbalanced power relation between the informants and myself was substantially bridged with this method.

Altogether, I interviewed 26 women aged from 36 to 52 who each gave birth in the late 1980s and 1990s when the policy was more coercive and any unauthorised pregnancies were to be terminated. All of the women were born in rural areas within Feng. Fourteen lived in the village, eight lived in nearby towns and four lived in Feng city. Their occupations were diverse, including birth planning officials, doctors, farmers, teachers, migrant workers and housewives. The interviews were conducted in a variety of places, some in the informants'

houses, apartments or offices, and some at my intermediary's place. These were the places where women felt most comfortable talking. In addition to individual interviews, I also conducted one group interview with four people in the village.

The life story method was employed in individual interviews. Usually, I began by asking questions about how the interviewee got to know her husband and whether her pregnancy was planned or unplanned. Then I let them take the lead and narrate stories about reproduction. The group interview was open-ended and was conducted in a natural environment where people felt relaxed to talk. Women narrated their reproductive experiences in a natural way, and sometimes, women would even relate to other women's experiences in the village.

In my analysis of the interview transcripts, I pay particular attention to women's narratives concerning reproductive negotiations, and I find their negotiations are largely mediated between the state and family. Whilst each woman's narrative is conditioned on and can hardly be disentangled from a particular context, including a specific personal background and set of family relations, there are still overlapping narratives and shared values among these women. The intersectionality of family, gender and work is evident in shaping women's exercise of reproductive agency. To be more specific, the reproductive negotiations of women living patrilocally are quite different from those living uxorilocally, and

female villagers' negotiations are also different from those of the local birth planning officials. Thus, I select the stories of two female villagers—one daughter-in-law, Hang, and one daughter, Jie—to represent how different types of family relations impact on women's negotiations with the state. I also select the story of one birth planning official, Niu Zhuren, to reveal how a woman's work as a birth planning official influenced her reproductive negotiations. I focus mainly on these three women's stories, because they reveal different interrelationships among women's reproductive agency, family, and the state. I also incorporate other women's stories alongside theirs in order to add complexities and nuances in the process of women's reproductive negotiations.

5. Female Villagers' Reproductive Negotiations with the State

Son preference has long existed in rural China (Croll, 2000, 1994; Greenhalgh and Li, 1995; Greenhalgh, 1993; Johnson et al., 1998; Li and Cooney, 1993). Clearly, the establishment of the birth planning policy collided with rural people's yearning for more children, in particular, more sons. One may assume that materialising families' ideal gender for their children would generate resistance to the state policy. White and Greenhalgh also revealed that local women employ strategies to resist the birth planning policy (Greenhalgh, 1994; White, 2006). My in-depth interviews with local women in Hunan confirm White and Greenhalgh's arguments, but further shed

light on the roles that marital and natal families play in women's exercise of reproductive agency.

5.1 Women's Resistance in Patrilocal Families

Most women interviewed are daughters-in-law living patrilocally in the village. The patrilocal practice in fact became an administrative requirement of the government in Hunan during the 1990s, when women were required to transfer their *hukou* (household registration) from their birthplace to their marital place of residence. In many rural patrilocal families in the 1980s and 1990s, marital roles were still very much gendered, and typically women remained at home doing housework and taking care of children, while men were breadwinners. (Judd, 1990) Daughters-in-laws' subjection to gender hierarchy within the family was very much mapped onto their reproductive negotiations with the state. Throughout my interviews, I found that most of the daughters-in-law of the village repeatedly mentioned their husbands' opinions in making crucial reproductive choices, and that these women stood with the whole family in either resisting or complying with the state. After all, as daughters-in-law of the village, they are outsiders, while their husbands are the local people born in the village who know about local politics and relations. Hang is one of the daughters-in-law who stood with her family to escape coerced abortion.

Hang is a woman aged over 40 who lives patrilocally and who has given birth to two children, an elder daughter and a younger son. Hang was born in a village, married to a township entrepreneur and lived together with her parents-in-law in the town for more than ten years before moving with her husband to the city in early 2000. Hang gave birth to her daughter in 1989 and became pregnant again in 1992. The latter pregnancy was considered unauthorised since the one-child policy was strictly implemented in Hunan at that time and no additional child was allowed unless the first was disabled.

Hang was a housewife while her husband was the breadwinner in the family. Living under the same roof with her parents-in-law, she had to show respect, listen to and take care of her parents-in-law on the one hand, and be attentive to her husband on the other hand. As a daughter-in-law, Hang stood with her husband's family in their negotiation with birth planning officials to allow the birth of a son to continue the family line. When talking about her negotiations with the local birth planning officials that had occurred more than 20 years previously, Hang remembered the details vividly:

When I got pregnant, we gave two big red envelopes to the birth planning cadres in the town, with each containing 1,000 RMB. At that time, the 100 banknotes did not exist yet, so all the money consisted of banknotes with a value of 10 RMB. Such two thick envelopes! It was said that if the previous child was not healthy, the couple could have an additional quota. We thought we could

have the second child through bribing the cadre and we even had a disabled certificate issued for our first daughter. But when I was eight months pregnant, a host of cadres came to our house, pushed me into the car and suddenly forced me to terminate my pregnancy. On the road to the office, however, I told them that I wanted to go to the toilet and needed to pack up some clothes as I might need to stay in the hospital for several days, so I asked them to stop by at one of my relative's house. I then ran desperately as soon as I got out of the car. That was really adventurous. I ran with all my effort, with the firm belief that I wanted to keep the child... After this, I hid in another sibling's house for more than a month until I finally successfully delivered the second child.²

The above statement from Hang reveals the strategies that she and her husband's family used. First, they sought to bribe local birth planning officials, but the plan failed. Hang later told me that whilst local cadres originally promised to let them have a second unauthorised child, several months later the upper-level birth planning officials came to examine the local work in this area. Fearful of being punished by the superior birth planning officials, the local cadres broke their promises and attempted to force Hang to terminate the unauthorised pregnancy. At that point running away became Hang's last resort. Hang's marital family showed support by providing the bribery money and later encouraging her to escape. Meanwhile, Hang's natal family showed support

² Interview with Hang over a dinner, 24 October 2014.

in providing a place for her to hide temporarily from the cadres of her marital place. In this sense, her marital family played a primary role in enabling her desires and actions in escaping, while her natal family played a secondary role in providing a place to hide. When I asked Hang whether her escape happened because of her parents-in-law's desire for a grandson, Hang nodded, but added after a while, "I myself wanted a son as well."

Hang's experience potently demonstrates how patrilineal family relations, however oppressive, can initiate and facilitate women's transgressive actions. Hang's story is typical in that the preference for a son and patrilineal culture permeated rural society at that time. This also explains why the subsequently established birth planning policy in Hunan in 2003 appealed to the reproductive desire of rural villagers by giving an additional quota to couples whose first child is a daughter (Article 16, 2003). Nonetheless, this is not to say that every woman chooses to resist as Hang did, nor that every family would support women's resistance.

However, for daughters-in-law, the family's support, especially that of marital families is important in successfully protecting unauthorised pregnancies. Cui Jie, for example, was subjected to abortion against her wishes, because she lacked the support of her husband and his family. She explained,

My man said since people from above require me to terminate, I should terminate then. Otherwise, the

*furniture in our house could be removed altogether. We were so poor at that time and did not have much furniture. If they removed it altogether, we would have to sleep on the floor then.*³

At this point, Cui Jie smiled bitterly and continued, “My husband then said to terminate while you are still young.” Cui Jie followed her husband’s suggestion not to run away, but still regrets this choice today.

Thus although the family is patriarchal, daughters-in-law can resort to and rely on it when faced with the state’s coercion. I do not deny that there might be cases where daughters-in-law successfully escaped coerced abortion even without the support of family. Such cases, however, would be rare, since daughters-in-law living in the village are largely economically dependent on the marital family, and it is hard to imagine that they could live and survive under the surveillance of the state without family support. Hence, generally speaking, daughters-in-law stand with the marital family to either resist or accept abortions required by the state. Marital and natal families play crucial roles in women’s exercise of reproductive agency, though since daughters-in-law belong to their marital rather than natal family after marriage, the marital family is oftentimes more important than the natal.

³ Interview with Cui Jie in a group interview with another three women, 27 January 2015.

Nonetheless, considering that, like Hang, many local women resist based on their belief in the importance of giving birth to sons to continue the family line, the gendered norm of son preference and the patrilineal tradition that such resistance reinforces should be cautioned against. In this sense, the educational program that Tietjens Meyers (2000) has advocated in order to develop women's critical attitudes is also necessary in the Chinese context.

5.2 *Zhaolang* Daughters' Reproductive Negotiations

If daughters-in-law within patrilocal families are mostly representative of the marital family, daughters within uxori-local families act as "surrogate sons" of their family to negotiate with the state. Compared to daughters-in-law who live patrilocally, uxori-local women are generally much more economically independent, since they and their natal family are to take care of their child. This is shown by the fact that all of the three uxori-local women in one of the villages where I conducted interviews worked as a migrant worker, entrepreneur, and village doctor respectively; none were housewives financially dependent on their husbands. Also, as the objective of marrying men in is mostly to continue the family line and the daughter is the only person in the family who can fulfil this reproductive obligation, uxori-local women and their parents tend to resist the state more decisively when they are confronted with coercion that prevents them

from fulfilling their reproductive desires. This is particularly reflected in the following story of Jie.

As the only child in her family, Jie's parents decided to let Jie marry a man into their family rather than marry her out. As Jie elaborated on her relationship with her husband, I could clearly see a reversed gender relationship in her family:

*Alas, I felt that my husband was another family's man anyway. He was not willing to take the responsibility. I was so yaoqiang (independent, ambitious) and thought, if you do not want to take the responsibility, then let me do it. So I kept working outside and earning money to support my son.*⁴

Jie stopped for a second and then continued:

He (her husband), at that time worked in a factory in the town and earned several hundred Yuan a month. But he was never willing to spend his money. He held on to money so firmly. I feel that for people, family affection is more important. The child is our own. When the child is ill, of course, we should take him to see the doctor. But sometimes he was not willing to take the responsibility. I was very yaoqiang, and thought I could also earn money through work. Then, I migrated outside...anyway, my attitude is, since you are in my house, I am willing to take every responsibility, as much as I can.

⁴ Interview with Jie in her house, 23 September 2014.

Jie's narrative reflects two levels of reversed gender roles. First of all, Jie's emphasis on her husband being in her house reveals that she considers herself as a host and an owner within the family, which contrasts with the traditional patrilocal family where the husband is the host. In addition, Jie's decision to migrate out to work and shoulder the economic burden of nurturing and educating her children reveals her transgression of the traditional feminine role confined within the family (Judd, 1990; Mann and Cheng, 2001) by becoming a breadwinner—a role traditionally assumed by the husband. This reverse gender relationship also very much impacts women's reproductive negotiations. Compared to daughters-in-law who are mostly followers of the family, *zhaolang* daughters are more capable of and willing to act on their own desires.

Jie's first pregnancy happened when she was 18 years old—an age far below the minimum legal age of marriage of 21 at that time. Therefore her pregnancy was considered officially unauthorised, and Jie was asked to terminate it. As stated by Jie, “The people from the town were just like bandits, and took away the TV, pigs, oil, grain, everything,” Jie could not help crying when talking about how the cadres came to her house and brutally confiscated her property:

I was fined 3,000 Yuan. I did not have money at that time and my parents were so hardworking without much money. My parents borrowed the money from others to

pay the fine, and of course I had to migrate to work outside.

Compared to daughters-in-law who are usually no more than followers of their marital families, Jie stood up for herself throughout the reproductive negotiation. Jie was faced with two choices when having the unauthorised pregnancy: either pay the heavy penalty of 3,000 Yuan or terminate the pregnancy. In fact, according to Jie, the setting of the fine as 3,000 Yuan was just a strategy of the local birth planning official who expected that she would choose to abort due to the hefty fine that her family could hardly afford. However, to the officials' surprise, as a woman who strives for economic independence and lacks connection with her husband's family, Jie chose to pay the fine, despite the economic strain that placed on her family. Therefore, Jie and her mother risked falling into poverty by borrowing money from another family at a high rate of interest in order to resist the state's demand for a termination. In order to pay back the debt, Jie then migrated to the city to work while her child was only one year old. After all, Jie believed that she could alleviate economic hardship through working outside whereas she would not save her lost child as if she accepted the termination. Throughout the whole reproductive negotiation, Jie acted as an agent deciding on her own, supported by her natal family, while she rarely mentioned her husband's family.

To some extent, Jie's reproductive agency is performed like a surrogate son within the family. This economic and

masculinised self has the transformative power to challenge the oppressive state which seeks to eliminate any unauthorised pregnancies. This is also demonstrated by Jie's response to her second unauthorised pregnancy. Again she chose to reproduce rather than terminate. Considering that Jie had a son already, her second reproductive non-compliance even transgressed the traditional norm of son preference. In Jie's words, she was motivated to have a second child by her desire to have company for her son, rather than to continue her family. Jie was fined 20,000 Yuan this time, and when she talks about this experience, she is filled with anger:

Those cadres really think they are something. When they came, first of all, they showed you their cards; they flagged it in front of me and told me what they came for. It seemed like I was a culprit. I admit I violated the birth planning policy or whatever, but I feel that there were so many people in our village giving birth to two children. I am a zhaolang female and just had one child. I admit I am not allowed to give birth to a second child if my first child is a son. But I didn't give birth to my second child within four years. I gave birth to the second daughter when my first son was 18. They are really inhumane fining me so much money. The cadres in the village and the town collude with each other.

Jie's description of local cadres as "inhumane" and her dissatisfaction with being treated as a culprit vividly reveals her anger and her challenge to local officials' practices; and this anger is further demonstrated through

her non-compliance with the coerced termination. With these two decisions combined with her delivery of unauthorised children regardless of sex, Jie not only challenged the coercive state but also disrupted the norm of son preference.

However, this is not to generalise that all women in uxorilocal marriages would challenge the norm of son preference. For instance, another *zhaolang* woman, Hong, who was sterilised after having her first daughter, still thinks about having a test tube baby—preferably a son, as she claims, “previously I liked to court and date people, now I am only into children. I really envy other people’s children.” It is not the case that every uxorilocal woman would resist, and many still feel ashamed if they could not give birth to a son for the family.

There are debates regarding whether uxorilocal marriage contributes to gender equality or not. Some argue that women within uxorilocal marriage may be more empowered since they can inherit property, do not need to adapt to the community life in their husband’s village and can gain much parental and community support (Zhang, 2008: 115). Others argue that despite its positive effects, uxorilocal marriage is just an alternative means towards continuing male descent—the woman’s father’s lineage under the patrilineal tradition (Wolf, 1972: 172). Jie’s story demonstrates that the greater economic power that *zhaolang* women have and their empowered status within the uxorilocal family do give them greater capabilities to realise their own reproductive desires, but

they are still continuing the family line, though with occasional secondary transgressions.

Hang's and Jie's stories, demonstrate how the family relations in which women are embedded impact on their reproductive negotiations with the state. According to their narratives and actions, the norm of son preference is repeated, reworked or occasionally rejected, and in the process women have challenged coercive abortions required by the state. Their stories demonstrate how family relations can play a crucial role in women's performance of reproductive agency, although the hidden cultural norm of son preference that underpins some of their resistance should also be cautioned against.

It should be noted that oppressive family relations may become the condition that enables and supports women's reproductive negotiation, but oppressive state policy can also be manipulated to fight against patriarchal and patrilineal family relations. The following section will present the story of Niu Zhuren. As a local birth planning official, Niu Zhuren's identity is very much dependent on compliance with the state, and her reproductive negotiations represent how the state power of limiting the number of children, preferably to one, can be wielded against family patrilineality.

6. State Regulation as a Weapon Against Family Patrilineality

Niu Zhuren is a cadre working in a township birth planning office near Feng. When I entered her office, she was busy inputting women's reproductive information such as marriages, contraceptives, births, and abortions into the computer. I refer to Niu Zhuren as a "rural elite" due to her job in a *danwei* (unit). *Danwei* is the name of a working unit operated by the state, which provides welfare services, housing, and medical care to its staff, as well as taking charge of birth planning and political education (Liu, 2007: 65). Compared to rural women who work in agriculture or rural migrants, women working in a *danwei* are guaranteed lifelong economic stability.

Liu analyses familialism in a *danwei* and points out that female members' reproductive performance is closely watched and monitored. In this way the *danwei* exerts familialism towards its staff through birth planning (Liu, 2007: 74). Indeed, the reproduction of women like Niu Zhuren, who works in a *danwei*, is severely monitored and controlled by the patriarchal workplace. For them, reproduction and work are closely tied. According to the birth planning policy in Hunan, a member of staff for the state who violates state reproductive policy will be removed from their post, demoted, or even fired (Article 38, 1989, 1999; Article 45, 2003; Article 44, 2007). The loss of a job would bring with it loss of medical insurance, pension, housing, and other social benefits

that these jobs provide. Therefore, rural elites who work in a *danwei* are subjected both to the patriarchal tradition which requires them to give birth to more sons to continue the family line, and to strict enforcement by the state policy limiting births to preferably one so as to contribute to the modernisation of China.

As it is such a matter of prestige, pride and honour for a rural woman like Niu Zhuren to finally move up to be guaranteed economically by a *danwei*, Niu Zhuren attentively conforms to the birth planning policy. Much literature on birth planning also documents that few women working in a *danwei* would violate the policy (Liu, 2007: 76; Milwertz, 1997). Milwertz, in her ethnographic study of women from Shenyang and Beijing, convincingly demonstrates how women accept the birth planning policy without questioning the ideology of the population policy or the demographic targets (Milwertz, 1997). In my interviews with women working in *danwei*, I also found that unlike rural women who dare to resist the policy blatantly, these women usually accept and obey the policy in action. As Stacey has argued, “a one-child family system could level a serious challenge to patrilineality by making parents as dependent upon their daughters as their sons” (Stacey, 1983: 279). Niu Zhuren’s narrative does confirm what Stacey found.

Niu Zhuren has given birth to only one daughter, and she claims that she decided on her own to stop at one child, rather than being forced to do so by the government. By

articulating her decision to have one child as voluntary rather than forced by the state, Niu Zhuren performs the role of a modern woman who cares about her personal career. Moreover, Niu Zhuren embraces the policy as a legal weapon she can use to fight against the son preference of her parents, saying:

It is not because I am a birth planning cadre that I think the birth planning policy is good. I really feel it is good personally, and it is best to give to just one child. In the past, if your first child were a daughter, of course, you would have another child or even more under familial pressure. But reproduction impacts on mothers more than on fathers, from conception to nurturing. Also, a mother's work might be affected, as some danwei might arrange an inferior position for women during the period of reproduction and nurturing.⁵

Niu Zhuren's sincere happiness with an only daughter reveals an embrace of gender equality and a willingness to become a modern working woman with a better balance of career and family. Her narrative reminds me of my mother's comment on the birth planning policy in the introduction of this paper. Both my mother and Niu Zhuren maintain that the birth planning policy can protect them from unwanted additional pregnancy and birth, and exempt them from the reproductive duty of giving birth to at least one son demanded by the patriarchal and patrilineal family. Moreover, the birth

⁵ Conversation with Niu Zhuren in her office, 16 September 2014.

control policy allows them to better balance work and family, and excel in the workplace.

Of course, other women working in units criticise the policy. For example, Lin Yisheng, a gynaecologist in a public hospital, articulated her criticisms of the policy:

I feel nowadays China indeed needs to relax the birth planning policy. Last year one of the elder relatives in my family celebrated his seventieth birthday, and there came a host of relatives: a bunch of old grandmothers and grandfathers, a group of people like us aged in our 40s, while only one or two young children came. It seems people around us are all aged. In terms of only children themselves, they did not have company when they were children, and felt very lonely. So when they grow up, they don't know how to get along with others, and lack the sense of competition.⁶

However, Lin's criticism is retrospective rather than synchronic, which can be seen in her statement, "I did not feel so when I was young". After all, when Lin was young, she was one of the doctors who conducted terminations. Also, during her reproductive years, Lin still confined her births to one.

In fact, the acceptance of the policy in action is widespread among the cohort of people working in

⁶ Interview with Lin Yisheng in the reception of a hospital, 22 January 2015.

danwei (Milwertz, 1997). In my interviews with people working in *danwei*, I rarely encountered or heard of any state functionaries violating the policy. Many, like Lu Zhuren and Xu Zhuren, claim that they voluntarily chose to have one child.

*I never thought about giving birth to a second child. I just wanted to have one child ever since my marriage. If I really wanted a second child, no one could stop me. I would not have been sterilised either. I only wanted one child, so I think it was fine to be sterilised. What's the point of giving birth to so many children? The more children, the more of them might become useless.*⁷

*That the state does not allow it is just one aspect. I could have given birth if I really wanted to. The more critical factor is that I do not want to. I feel it's fine to just bring up one child well. One well-brought up and developed child is much better than ten children. It's useless to reproduce many children without cultivating them.*⁸

All the above officials claim that one child is enough, wholeheartedly embrace the notion of the one child family as the ideal family and prioritise the “quality” over the “quantity” of children. For them, the birth planning policy allows them to concentrate on cultivating and educating children at the same time as pursuing their own career, rather than fulfilling the reproductive duty

⁷ Interview with Lu Zhuren in her office, 9 February 2015.

⁸ Interview with Xu Zhuren in her office, 13 October 2014.

required by their families. Thus, while the state's coercive birth planning policy constitutes an oppressive reproductive context that forces women to constrain the number of births, it can also be wielded by women to resist patrilineal and patriarchal traditions and pursue their careers, especially when the one child family is what the women themselves want.

7. Conclusion

Reproductive choices are not only influenced by the state, but also by the families in which women live. Clearly, Chinese women are victims of dual repressions. This paper based on women's lived experiences, however, has demonstrated the possibilities of women's exercise of agency under coercion.

Admittedly, oppressive norms and policies often exert violence and discrimination, which should very much be deplored. The gendered norm of son preference and patrilineal practices treat women's reproductive bodies as instruments to continue the family and discriminate against daughters (Croll, 2000). The coercive birth planning policy, meanwhile, subjects women's pregnant bodies to state surveillance and violence. But we cannot neglect the wisdom and agency of local women, and the possibility that they may be capable of manipulating oppressions so as to satisfy their own reproductive desires in everyday life.

Although I have focused on three women's reproductive negotiations in this paper, their negotiations are in no way unusual. These negotiations demonstrate interactions between women, family and the state in everyday life. Of course, I have also encountered women who were forced to terminate their pregnancies in the last trimester who experienced much trauma and suffering, as widely represented in the international media, and I have witnessed discrimination against daughters within villagers' families. But the alternative local women's stories and narratives presented above remind us that women not only suffer, but also negotiate and act within multiple levels of oppression and the outcomes that follow can be transgressive as well as normative. Nonetheless, through representing women as agents rather than victims, I in no way aim to promote oppression or coercion. What I aim to do is to call for a strategic transition to examining the operation of oppression, and to paying attention to the procedural, fluid and contextual exercise of reproductive agency by women.

In international reproductive politics, eradication of oppression has been considered as one of the most important conditions for achieving reproductive freedom (Corrêa and Reichmann, 1994; Hartmann, 1995; Petchesky and Judd, 1998). The problem is that external oppression cannot always be eradicated. In the reproductive context in China, the social norm of son preference persists from the pre-modern to the contemporary era and national and provincial birth

planning regulations are widely established and implemented, hence very difficult to transform within a short period. Therefore my proposal might also find resonance in international human rights organisations, to encourage them to pay attention to the circulation, operation and outcome of repressive policies, norms and relations, and to empower local women in an effort to minimise violence or even produce positive effects that benefit local people's interests and well-being. I also call for a critical reflection on the values that women's exercise of reproductive agency contributes to, and highlight that gender equality and reproductive empowerment should be promoted in tandem, particularly in the Chinese context.

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