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# An exploratory study of asexual marriage on a Chinese website

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**An Exploratory Study of Asexual Marriage on a Chinese Website**

**LUK KA WING**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements**

**for the degree of**

**Master of Philosophy**

**Principal Supervisor: Dr. WONG Kit Mui Day**

**Hong Kong Baptist University**

**May 2013**

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of MPhil at Hong Kong Baptist University, and has not been previously included in a thesis, dissertation submitted to this or other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualification.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: May 2013

## Abstract

The process of individualization is increasingly permeating all levels of Chinese society. This research attempts to highlight some aspects on how Chinese individualization is emerging in marriage and the family through the prism of China's emerging "asexual marriage" – a consensual partnership that has no sex or a limited amount of sex. Collecting qualitative data in different ways, this study first examines the less obvious and less studied effects of China's sexual revolution as part of the individualization process brought to the asexual individuals on a specific matchmaking website WX920. One can see that these individuals undergo great suffering and are under pressure to find a partner in light of the sexual imperative in the couple relationship. My study also focuses on the idealized view of asexual marriage currently promoted by the rhetoric of affection. What is particularly striking is that the same ideal is perceived as equally worthy of a relationship in a proforma marriage with a homosexually inclined person, when one cannot meet an asexual partner. In addition, this study suggests the reintegration of individuals into a new type of collectivity – the family, which is primarily structured as a unit of emotional importance to the individual's marital decision. Nevertheless, the other side of family connection constitutes a crucial dilemma for some non-conformist individuals, who are confronted with a dual demand for satisfying personal aspirations and family expectations. Drawing on the concept of "negotiated familism", this study reveals how these individuals are by no means passive recipients and they actively engage in negotiation about their ideal of personal life through a marriage in form only. Finally, I will engage a discussion on individualizing trends by exploring asexual people's reorganization of conventional norms of marriage and other expectations such as reproduction is given.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### *Asexual Marriage Coming to the Forefront in China*

In the past thirty years of market reforms launched by China in 1979, intimate and family relations have undergone dramatic changes as a result of the withdrawal of a direct state involvement in key areas of social life. In the changed context, self-interest pursuits and expressions of personal desires are more acceptable and the diversity of family practices includes the dink family, weekend marriage, spouse swapping and so on. Among various forms of marital arrangements, asexual marriage has come to the fore in the Chinese society. Experts assert that couples that do not have any sexual relationships with each other for a month are involved in an asexual marriage and this raises the alarm about the threat of their relationship. According to a nationwide survey of 3,824 married and/or cohabiting individuals by China's renowned sexologist Pan Suiming, it is reported that a quarter of Chinese men and women engage in sexual activity once a month (Mao 2010; Pan 2011). This finding is widely cited in media reports and the issue of asexual relationship among adults, especially among married individuals, is causing widespread concern of the public. Some analysts speculate that China has entered an era of asexual marriage, which is increasingly perceived as an unhealthy and undesirable state (You 2002). Sexless couples are encouraged to find out the root of their problems and return to a sexual marriage, so as to restore conjugal harmony.

With a series of in-depth interviews, Bian's (2005) recent book documents extensively how asexual marriage in China has eroded many couples' relationship in a painful way and has caused them a great deal of distress. The book reveals a number of associations with sexlessness, which include the work-related stress, post-natal factors of decreased interest in sex, poor spousal relationships, extramarital sexual linkages or

the status of homowife (*tongqi*) – a straight woman married to a gay man. As the cases studies shown by the author, most people have an asexual marriage are tragic. When the couples are trapped into a sex-starved marriage, neither has their needs fulfilled and this regularly results in a scene of heartbreaking poignancy. The author further depicts a marriage without sex as an unfulfilled marriage that resembles “a dish without salt”, “a cake without cream” and even “a building without steel bars”. In the final section, the book states that no one should artificially create a marriage that has no sex, or this brings about both personal and societal problems; a healthy sex life is viewed as the bedrock of a happy marriage and by extension a stable society and therefore, all individuals have a responsibility for sexually satisfying their partner. In short, the author perceives that normal people can hardly endure a sexless marriage and a harmonious sex life is a necessary part of marriage. His belief that sexual satisfaction is crucial to a marital bond resonates with the majority of the population.

To avoid inflicting possible suffering on the partner due to involuntary sexlessness, a current trend of seeking an asexual marriage has emerged among a group of Chinese individuals with the intention of searching for compatibility. Increasingly, agencies and websites for asexual marriage have appeared in different parts of China, including Guangxi, Shanghai, Changsha and Nanjing (China Daily 2004; White 2006; Yu 2007; Xiao 2009; Yin 2012). These websites devoted to asexual people are operating in response to the distinct needs of Chinese individuals with perceived barriers to sexual fulfillment, particularly as a result of physical, psychological defects or an abrupt, traumatic incident. Most of them cannot have sexual relations, but still seek for emotional intimacy and happy marital love. Their voices remain highly hidden and asexual marriage in China has not been systematically examined. In a themed news of a specific matchmaking agency for asexual marriage, two stories were reported in a

column of “why choose an asexual marriage?”(Xie 2005). This reveals the under-represented account of asexual marriage in mainstream public spaces:

*Speechlessness – My Failure in Fulfilling a Husband’s Responsibility*

*Mr Ji, 40, an owner of a private enterprise*

*I married my wife in 1995. After four years of our marriage, I was promoted to manager in my work unit. My success in career further led to my happy conjugal marriage. Unfortunately, my position was replaced by a party official in a bitter power struggle. Since then, I was plagued by sexual dysfunction and was not interested in having sex with my wife. I left my work unit soon and decided to do business in other places. Still, I was unable to make any money and returned to my homeland after two years. My wife made her sexual request continuously because we have been separated for a long time. I found it impossible to meet her expectations of sex for a few months. As a result, she was irritated and proposed divorce.*

*After my divorce, I concentrated on my work and my career became much better. I started to consider marriage again. I had a girlfriend these years and we even cohabited. However, I could not fulfill a man’s responsibility by satisfying her sexual needs, even though I sought for medical treatment several times. She ended up deserting me.*

*I had discovered my problem before I first divorced and until now, do not feel a huge loss in my life. I will be content if I meet a similar person who does not have sexual desires but wishes to just develop a relationship with me seriously.*

*A Real Blessing – Success in Finding an Asexual Partner*

*Miss Su, 28, a government official*

*I was a pretty girl with a sweet voice and many boys were attracted by me since my childhood. I remembered I received so many love letters when I was in high school. During my undergraduate years, boys always phoned me in the dormitory and some even waited for me outside. However, I never accepted their love and others just gave me a nickname of “Icy Beauty”. I had my own bitterness. Due to my biological impediment, I was destined to be different from other girls.*

*At the age of 23, I met Jun. He went to work with me and picked me up after work. During the rainy days, he shielded me from the rain and we walked together. I was very touched by his considerate personality and decided to have a date, especially when I saw my close friends dating one by one.*

*We had lots of sweet moments. Jun was a decent man and never made any sexual advances during courtship. I enjoyed his love and care very much. When he proposed to me, I suddenly realized a cruel reality. I told him about my sexless condition and his eyes show a big disappointment. “You shouldn’t have deceived me.” This was the last sentence he said. Sometimes later, I received his wedding invitation.*

*After the breakup, I refused to date anyone. I was deeply upset and asked a question: Am I going to end up being alone in my lifetime? Fortunately, an aunt in my work unit who was kind-hearted introduced Fai to me, when she knew about my condition. Fai was married before and was divorced by his wife because he could not lead a normal sexual life. He got on with me for some time and said, “We are similar, let’s be a companion.”*

*We then got married. We kept the blanket warm together. We had the meal together. We held hands and bought vegetables at the market, just like ordinary couple. When I was sick, he looked after me at my bedside all day long. I touched his graying hair and was glad of the sheer bliss I had.*

These stories offer a good entry point to explore the emergence and development of asexual marriage in China. Due to their inability to fulfill the partner's sexual desires, most of these individuals with sexual impediments consider themselves as belonging to the asexual group. In view of the prevailing norm of marriage and its demands for active and harmonious sex life, asexual people tend to log onto specific matchmaking websites or agencies for asexual marriage in an attempt to find a suitable partner. With the growing acknowledgment of asexual individuals, online asexual marriage brokers have emerged in China. According to agency directors, it is observed that people from different provinces come in search of their service and this reflects a continuing need for this kind of matchmaking services. At the moment, there are a few websites of marriage for asexual individuals in China, such as 无性婚姻网 ([www.wx920.com](http://www.wx920.com)), 真爱家园网 ([www.za920.com](http://www.za920.com)), 温馨征婚网 ([www.wx179.com](http://www.wx179.com)), 中国无性征婚网 ([www.tom520.com](http://www.tom520.com)), 中国无性婚姻网 (<http://www.1998.net.cn/>) and 形婚佳缘网 ([www.gayleswed.com](http://www.gayleswed.com)).

In fact, the concept of asexuality is largely unarticulated in Chinese society and it is not a lifestyle choice or an identity or something can be explained as it is in the West. This is far from a well-defined category when compared to the Western societies: In the West, asexuality has become an identity category that is unified by the common elements of self-questioning, assumed pathology, self-clarification and communal identity (Carrigan 2011). There are also online communities for asexual people and a

prominent example is AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network) which was launched in the United States in 2001. In this network, asexuality is defined as a sexual orientation and asexual individuals refer to those who do not experience any sexual attraction (AVEN 2013). In China, it has yet to develop a real identity and there are only online dating websites for asexual people, given that the notion of marriage remains crucial in the Chinese context. On these websites, people do not define themselves as having an asexual identity, but are concerned about finding a dating partner. In the following, some quotes are taken from personal ads posted on those asexual marriage broker websites and all these show a strong aspiration to marriage, despite their different life situations:

“Sex has never interested me. In fact, I find it a little filthy. The doctor told me this is common, but it is not a short-term feeling I can change. I hope to find a girl in the same plight. One day we can walk down the aisle together, raise children, support our parents, and spend our energy on work and living a good, happy life.”

- *Little Pang, male, 23*

“I suffer from premature ejaculation. I had a love affair, but it ended unhappily. Now, I only think about finding my other half. I could have a little sex, or none, whatever.”

- *Heartfelt Love, male, 34*

“I’m an elegant, honest, intellectual woman who likes platonic love affairs and wishes for this kind of marriage. We can establish a family that is warm and sexless.”

- *Shao Feng, female, 24*

“I am not beautiful or seductive, but I am honest. Because of a birth defect, I might be unable to have a normal sex life. If two people don’t have sex, can there be love? Can

an asexual couple have a happy life together? I believe yes.”

- *Wishing for Love, female, 28*

This study will focus on the asexual matchmaking website of WX920, which was established as the first and biggest online asexual marriage broker in China (Figure 1.1). Launched by a technician with affiliation to the Chinese Communist Party in the southern province of Guangxi in 2005, this website has received extensive media coverage and attracted nearly 200,000 registered members. Its customers range from men and women who either have a low to non-existent sex drive or lack sexual functions due to biological impediments and psychological dysfunction, or lack sexual or romantic attraction to either gender. On this website, sixty percent of the site’s members are people who cannot have sex (Newsback 2006). The rest are sexual minorities, such as homosexuals, who seek to form a proforma marriage that refers to a marriage in form only without any sexual relationship in order to cope with family and social pressure. This research will primarily focus on those asexual individuals with sexually related disorders or diseases and investigate the issue by making reference to debates surrounding the sexual revolution and individualization in China.

**Figure 1.1: Homepage of WX920 dating site**



China's sexual revolution can be dated from the second half of the 1980s, although it did not become visible until the 1990s, after which it has led people to an immediate pursuit of fulfilling their sexual expectations, especially within the realm of marriage. For the past thirty years, it is not controversial to suggest that China has witnessed a long-overdue opening up of sexual freedom, with a gradual unfolding of sexual liberation. It is tempting to look at China and conclude it is going through a liberating trajectory for its people. By analyzing the practice of asexual marriage, this study will inquire into a conclusive proof of sexual liberation under China's sexual revolution and shed light on its social implications for a group of asexual individuals with perceived barriers to sexual fulfillment. This will offer a different story of living in the age of the sexual revolution. In particular, it unfolds the bare facts that the increased significance placed on fulfilling one's sexual desires has led to constraining effects for asexual individuals.

This study will further explore the searching of a happy life without sex among asexual people. In pursuit of an asexual marriage, it is of interest to know whether these individuals can break free from sexual imperatives and open up the alternative possibility of intimate relationships. In what ways a marriage with a sexless person can add a whole new dimension to their lives is also subject to investigation.

In a social context where the state has retreated from a direct intervention into citizens' private lives, however, it does not necessarily mean that individuals immediately have a breakaway from all regulations. Instead, the family has become the most significant institution that assumes a more intimate form of scrutiny in the private domain (Kam 2013). My study examines the ways in which the family exerts an influence on the individual's decision with respect to personal relationships. In



view of the continued presence of family control, I also seek to explore the negotiated aspect of the individual and this dynamic process of family relationships, as Nehring (2011) implies, is useful to understand a distinct path towards individualization in the non-Western context.

This study will engage with the discussion pertaining to the rise of conjugality in family life. The importance of conjugal relationships appears to be an accepted feature of family ideology and marks a shift in intergenerational power relations in the domestic sphere. Additionally, the notion of procreation exhibits a continual shift away from the traditional meaning of childrearing, with an emphasis on individual fulfillment and happiness. This study will bring into focus those asexual people's understanding of marriage and procreation that revolves around the centrality of personal happiness and self-realization. In short, individual emotional satisfaction in personal and family relationships is a prominent theme in this study.

### ***The Organization of the Thesis***

There are seven chapters in this thesis and they are organized as follows. Following this introduction, Chapter Two is a literature review on research and theories in relation to the sexual revolution, individualization of Chinese family and asexuality. Chapter Three introduces the methodology and discusses issues of conducting this online study, such as the ways I collected and handled the data and the basic information of respondents' details. Chapter Four addresses how the sexual revolution which underlies the sheer scale of sexual transformation impacts a group of asexual individuals who have a low sex drive or sexual dysfunction. Chapter Five depicts the respondents' projection of a fulfilling marriage without sex and further probes into their preference for a marriage in form only in connection with the development of

couple's affection. Chapter Six elaborates on the family negotiations of marriage practices among asexual people in the aspect of emotional importance of family, and examines the issue of conjugality and procreation that keeps with a focus on the individual-centred development of personal lives. Chapter Seven is the concluding chapter in which I summarize my research and offer further directions for future study.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Research has shown that the individualization of Chinese society appears to be predominant in most aspects of social and cultural life (Yan 2003, 2009, 2010; Evans 2008, 2010; Hansen and Svarverud 2010; Hansen and Pang 2010). This chapter will first examine the issue of China's sexual revolution informed by assumptions concerning the individualization. That is to say, the sexual revolution has a close relationship with practices involving individualization and many of these practices express individual aspirations for personal happiness and self-satisfaction, as reflected in a growing acceptance of premarital, extramarital, commercial sex and other previously prohibited sexual practices (Ruan 1991; Zha and Geng 1992; Farrer and Sun 2003; Parish, Laumann and Mojola 2007). In a sense, the sexual revolution is intertwined with the process of Chinese individualization in that it has unleashed individual desires, of which sexual desire is of utmost prominence.

Second, I review the changing nature of family relationships in the context of a growing individualization, which is seen by some commentators to challenge an established culture of Chinese familism. Recently, concepts of individualization have been developed to study the rising importance of the individual in the Chinese society. Chinese individualization is understood as implying a revision in the conventional understanding of family in so far as individual imperatives have a higher salience than they traditionally possess. That is not to suggest the rise of individualism in China is the manifestation of an overall challenge to established values and practices of the family. Rather, the notions of individual autonomy and self-fulfillment are compatible with filial relationships. This outcome is premised on the changes that the institution of family is less to do with the regulative force, but more to do with a unit of meaning in terms of emotional importance.

Finally, I map out the recent conceptualization of asexuality in the Western context and examine how this provides a new perspective for the understanding of asexuality in China. As indicated earlier, asexuality is mainly a Western concept that refers to a sexual orientation. There remains a relatively scant portrayal of asexualism in the Chinese context and the phenomenon has just been getting press recently. Unlike the West, asexuality often revolves around the issue of family and marriage in China and therefore the two cultures appear to view asexuality through different prisms.

### **Part I – Sexual Revolution: A Dominant Narrative of Sexual Changes in China**

Recent research and media reports indicate that China is in the midst of a sexual revolution, occurring in tandem with the opening up of its economy and the slow but steady loosening of control over citizens' private lives (Pan 1993, 2005, 2006; Farrer 2002; Pan and Huang 2011; Xiao, Mehrotra and Zimmerman 2011; Zhang 2011; Burger 2012). The beginning of China's sexual revolution can date back to the start of the reform and opening up in the early 1980s. Whether the shift in China's sexual landscape should be called a revolution is not without dispute. Some consider that the outcomes of recent changes just manifest the recurrent trends of the past. This thesis maintains that the shift deserves to be thought of as a revolution. What is remarkable about the change is the new consciousness of sexual desire experienced by the mass of the population (Manifestly, the growth of the sex-shop industries shows how the pursuit of sexual desire now becomes readily accessible to the ordinary people rather than an elite discourse upheld by a small group of individuals in the modern period). The change indeed gives rise to a kind of obligatory sexual subject, namely a sexual subject that is obligatory to have sexual desire.

A long-overdue opening up of Chinese sexual freedom is often considered to be in

delayed parallel to the revolution in the West. Both academic and mainstream commentaries suggest that China and the West follow radically different trajectories (Burger 2012; Pan 2006; Parish, Laumann and Mojola 2007; Pan and Huang 2010; Zhang 2011). In the West, the sexual revolution had come with the concurrent political revolution and was in many ways about the self-expression and the abandonment of inhibitions. Some major hallmarks include the right to choose one's own sexual path irrespective of one's sexuality and the rejection of all kinds of censorship. China's sexual revolution has occurred in a different social and political context and has yet to be on a path to Western-style sexual and political liberation. According to Chinese sexologist Pan Suiming (1993, 2006), rather than being a straightforward product of Western influences, the unintended consequences of the government policy initiatives – the implementation of the one-child policy and the influence of factors surrounding the one-child policy such as the New Marriage Law of 1980, have become the important driving force for the sexual revolution. In particular, sexual pleasure is promoted unwittingly under the one-child policy, which signposts a linear shift from “sex for reproduction” to “sex for pleasure” in the years since the 1980s. This has also aroused women's awareness of enjoying sexual pleasure rather than treating sex as a means to procreation only (Pan and Huang 2011; Xiao, Mehrotra and Zimmerman 2011).

Zhang's (2003, 2007) work articulates that China has changed from seeing sex and sexuality solely in terms of reproduction to seeing these in terms of sexual pleasure nowadays. While seeking treatment for sexual failure was primarily for reproductive purpose in the Maoist period, recent developments in the new clinical specialty of men's medicine (*nanke*) have acknowledged impediments to fulfillment of sexual desire as conditions worthy of treatment in the post-Mao era. In other words, seeking

sexual pleasure has become a legitimate reason for receiving medical treatment now. Zhang suggests that such a change is in response to a changing political economy in China, namely a diminishing ethics of collectivism and a rise in consumerism.

To some observers, China's sexual revolution has advanced with integration into the emerging consumer revolution. Under the state-sponsored process of individualization, as being intended by the state to serve economic growth and manifested in the introduction of consumerism, the articulation of individual needs and desires is legitimately justified so long as it does not provide the impetus for social and political activism (Yan 2003, 2010). As Zhang (2010) similarly notes, the sexual revolution, combined with the coinciding rise of consumer revolution, has unleashed individual desires of which sexual desires have taken precedence. The continued commercialization of China's economy has led to the ongoing sexual revolution by reinforcing the notion of sexual pleasure, as seen in the "hot sites" such as sex shops in China. For example, McMillan (2006b) notes that under commercialism and market pressures, emerging sex shop industry has gradually moved away from dealing with the repairs of sexual body, and now has more to do with pleasure and preference. Increasingly, "sex toys" are replaced with "sex aids" with the momentum of the market where pleasure sells better than cure<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Within these new spaces of sexual entrepreneurship and consumption, sexual morality and understandings of sex are being reworked and reconstituted and profit motive seems to push the market into areas that have no clear curative purpose. One major reason is that the government acknowledges the importance of enjoying a healthy sex life and manages the industry through ambiguous legal boundaries (Burger 2012). As quasi-medical establishments, sex shops carry a social and educational function and exist to improve public health; on the other hand, they have no problem with selling a range of sexual products such as vibrators and lubricants for enhancing pleasure.

However, one must caution against a claim of a notable effect of the one-child policy that the state effectively forces people to acknowledge most sexual activity is oriented to pleasure and not procreation. For instance, Friedman (2006) provides a counter-argument of “reprosexuality” that highlights a prominence of the reproductive focus of state population policies through requiring couples to use some form of birth control and this eventually privileges reproduction over pleasure. She observes that reproduction takes central stage when talks of ultrasounds, intra-uterine devices, sterilizations and abortions are stirred up by the widespread implementation of reproductive control in a rural village of China. In her analysis of the official discourse of women’s sexuality, Evans (1997) also points out that there is a strong link between female bodies and reproduction from the 1950s onwards and therefore women’s bodies are depicted as predominately reproductive. This has been resurrected by the market-state’s naturalization of women’s conventional roles and widespread assumptions about women’s appropriate role in the family and household life. We should not lose sight of the continued significance of reproduction in the sexual revolution, despite the fact that the implementation of the one-child policy has removed individuals from the reproductive consideration and offers the new possibility of pursuing the non-reproductive sexually active life.

In addition, China’s sexual revolution apparently occurs against a backdrop of the decision of China’s leaders to allow people a considerable degree of personal latitude in the hope that the population accedes to its political legitimacy. As Burger (2012) indicates, this is largely an outcome of the state’s strategy of increasing personal freedom in exchange for limited political freedom.

Although China is paralleling most other societies that have loosened their grip on

citizens' private lives, it is evident from some observation that this continues to be circumscribed by the regime of morality and sexual health, or precisely an assemblage of the two. The government perceives the conceptions of appropriate nature of legitimate sexual relation as monogamous, heterosexual and preferably marital, as a way to ensure family and social stability. Sigley (2006: 57) suggests that the Chinese state has acknowledged the importance of sex to marital unit, given that a harmonious conjugal family is crucial to maintain social stability and by extension party-state existence. That stability is closely linked to neo-Confucian morality, in which a family is deemed as a basic unit of society, and social harmony is based on family stability (Li et.al. 2009). Thus, the expression of sexuality outside of wedlock, such as adultery, prostitution and pornography, is strictly condemned (Burger 2012).

In close connection with this, the linking of concepts of sexual health with "legitimate" sexual relationships - monogamous, heterosexual, marital is worth noting. As McMillan (2006a) and Jeffreys and Huang (2009) note, sexual health in the current context is in part understood as involving a satisfying sexual life in a relationship between a husband and a wife, and the appeal to medical discourse with sexual ill-health or medically based efforts to cure apparent and perceived problems such as sexual dysfunction, impotence or lack of libido has been associated with improving sexual satisfaction within the scope of a monogamous, heterosexual and conjugal context. In short, one can see that sexual pleasure is being encouraged but the traditional marriage institution remains predominant.

The above review on China's sexual revolution shows that the recent proliferation of sex-related discourse does not mean that the society is devoted to complete sexual liberation, but rather just as Jeffreys (2006: 4) argues, it constitutes an extension of the



Chinese Communist Party's disciplinary power that is tied to government-led agendas to promote social stability. Unlike the sexual revolution in the West, China's version is embedded in a different social and political context and the government always seeks to control it, while slowly giving its people more sexual freedom to keep them satisfied and ensuring greater stability and harmony. Greater freedom is usually within boundaries that are tacitly agreed upon, with conjugal sexual behaviors preferred over non-marital behaviors. Against this backdrop, it can be seen that a satisfying sexual relationship has taken as an expected aspect of monogamous marriage in which both men and women are justified in pursuing sexual pleasure within the sanctity of marriage.

A handful of studies address a mistaken impression that those changes in China have increased an individual's sexual desire in a taken-for-granted way. For example, McMillan (2004, 2006a) provides an empirically rich discussion about the marriage manuals and handbooks published in China with usually scientific formulas for perfect and harmonious sex among married couples. Examining the Chinese marital sex self-help literature, she indicates that "healthy" sex is strictly demarcated into what is natural and unnatural by using the pseudo-scientific arguments about natural behavior to imply what is "appropriate", "healthy" and "moral" sex: heterosexual, married, with traditional gender roles and cultural norms enforced. She is critical of the current regime of sexual health and its associated medical rhetoric of deviant types, illnesses and unhealthy practices – a healthy body is a sexually active one and at the same time this imposes a sexual order that pathologizes a lack of desire. Zhang (2011) also points out that the establishment of excessive, unrealistic norms for sexual practices particularly serves as a main culprit of a curtailment of happiness and wellbeing for some individuals. More recently, by analyzing the narrative structure of

asexual individuals' stories, Wong (2012) discusses the emerging ethical sensibility in relation to the discourse of pain, as a result of valorizing pleasure within heterosexual marriage. When asexual people cannot satisfy the sexual desires of their partner, they experience psychological pain in the form of shame, guilt and emotional distress.

Along this line of argument, this study seeks to enrich the discussion about the sexual revolution in response to the limits of realizing the potential for sexual pleasure in a context where individual desire is promoted progressively under Chinese individualization. China has certainly experienced a sexual revolution and its trend is understood as pointing to increasing liberation and freedom. How much more freedom is expressed in different segments of the Chinese population remains to be seen.

## **Part II – Chinese Individualization and its Impact on Marriage and Family**

The concept of individualization has been developed by some Western theorists to account for social change and emergent forms of individual experience in Europe subject to recent globalizing trends. The concept has also been used to explain the massive transformations in contemporary China, such as Yan Yunxiang's (2003, 2010) discussion of Chinese individualization. Yan suggests that the current trend of disembodiment of individuals from the former encompassing social categories such as family and kinship is a defining feature of the individualization process in China, where the individual alters the structure of social relations to a great extent. However, his application of individualization thesis to China is being challenged in some ways as there are many differences between the individualization described by the theorists of second modernity and that which he observed in China. Particularly, the Western

generalization seems less applicable to the Chinese context in which the continued significance of family relationship remains pertinent to the individual well-being even though the style of its execution is variable over time (Croll 2006; Barbalet forthcoming). Yan uses the newer framework of individualization thesis as his point of departure and his generalizability appears to be limited by missing out the importance of the ongoing Chinese familism. Actually, his discussion revolves more around the trends in individualism currently undergoing in China, even though he frames those changes in comparison with Ulrich Beck's individualization thesis. This study is not to repudiate entirely Yan's individualization thesis, nor to imply Yan has completely misinterpreted changes occurring in China. It seeks to supplement his focus on the aspects of individualism particularly in the domain of private lives, while not losing sight of continued relevance of family in the individual's lives.

A wealth of studies has shed light on China's "intimate turn" that illuminates the important changes in Chinese citizens' private lives. For example, in his ethnographic study in Xiajia village in northeastern China, Yan (2003, 2009) maps out the emergence of romantic revolution that gives rise to an increased intimacy in courtship and the prevalence of romantic talk with more open expressions of emotions to lovers. He also observes that the rise of conjugality is characterised by the greater control of the individual over his or her life, the centrality of companionate marriage and conjugal relationships, and an emphasis on personal wellbeing and affective life. This points to an increasingly accepted view of the family as a nuclear family, with the husband and the wife as the core. Still, some sources show that the ideal of conjugal family has long been existed in China, as seen in the legacies of the pre-modern and socialist modernity where conjugality rather than the joint-family was a dominant type of family form (Freeman and Skinner 1979: 235; Hsu 1943: 555; Eastman 1988:

16; Barbalet forthcoming).

Nevertheless, the marketization of the reform period has offered space for a new public openness concerning love and intimacy that comes with the open communication between sexes regarding courtship and acceptance of female sexuality. For example, Friedman's (2006) study in rural Huian reveals that the growing popularity of the ideal of romantic love has encouraged a widespread desire for conjugal intimacy among younger generations. In particular, unlike their older generations, it is not until the 1990s young women have taken a more active role to have conjugal visits after their weddings rather than seeking to delay to a shift to conjugal residence. The generational difference is mainly because of the force of the market that empowers women through their expanded economic (such as working in stone-carving factories that made them financially independent) and social activities (as in mixed-sex socialization in workplaces and in entertainment).

Some studies discuss the rising demands and expectations for individual satisfaction and self-fulfilment in intimate lives that result in the emergence of new forms of negotiation with the family. As noted, critiques of individualization thesis have showed that the life of individuals is now characterized by "choice", but the notion of choice in the family life is contextual or relational choice involving negotiation, compliance or at least some attentiveness to the wider family (Smart and Shipman 2004; Koo and Wong 2009), this is also typical of Chinese context under the influence of familism and the individual choice is usually embedded in the relationship with their family members, especially in the case of marriage considerations (Honig and Hershatler 1988; Riley 1994; Hansen and Pang 2010; Chang 2011). For example, Hansen and Pang (2010) demonstrate how individualization has taken place among

younger generations in both rural villages of Shanxi and more urbanized villages of Fujian. Despite the fact that young people have detached themselves from the family in many ways, they still engage in a discourse of the family as a unit of direct economic, social, emotional and psychological importance in practicing an ideal of free love. Examining the rural youth's narrative, Hansen and Pang highlight that individual autonomy vis-à-vis the family is constantly under negotiation. Similarly, Yuen, Law and Ho's (2004) study in a rural village documents changes in concepts about marriage from different generations and show the changes in familial culture over these past decades. They indicate that the youth's ideal of free love increasingly brings about the tension between individual autonomy and traditional familial culture.

Recent studies about today's sexual minorities in China particularly bring into focus the individuals' negotiation with the familial influence and this suggests that the transformation of intimate life in Chinese society involves a continuing attachment of family in tandem with the increasing focus on individual orientation in the private sphere. For example, Kam's (2013) study on Chinese *lalas* (literally lesbians) reveals that the state has weakened as a form of social control and the family has correspondingly assumed a greater role of exercising an immediate form of surveillance over the individual's lives. Under these circumstances, one can see that *lalas* create alternative spaces to accommodate their same-sex relationships while minimizing the direct conflict with their family, such as entering into a cooperative marriage (a reciprocal marriage between a gay and a lesbian). Luo's (2012) study on functional marriage (same as a cooperative marriage) also unfolds the family dynamics between parents and children with non-normative sexualities. While the family exerts considerable power on these individuals' sexuality through four mechanisms, namely, community maintenance, resources allocation, care provision

and blood tie continuity, adult children of same-sex desire simultaneously negotiate their sexuality with the power imposed through those mechanisms. She highlights the idea of individualism within familism in China, by suggesting that Chinese people can hardly embrace a kind of individuality without consideration of family connection in a context where the family serves as a key unit of organizing production and providing welfare within a relatively underdeveloped social security system.

In his study of transformation of intimate life in Mexico, Nehring (2011, 2012) introduces a neologism “negotiated familism” in response to the international generalizability of individualization and this serves as a relevant framework to understand the contested process of individualization. Such a familism cannot be explained as a persistence of patriarchal discourses and practices characterized by obligation or duty to family members and intimate partners. Rather, negotiated familism is understood to enable individuals to pursue a reflexive life plan through complex negotiations with the family, and rework it into a source of meaning and continuity in everyday life. This legitimizes personal aspirations and choices and at the same time, accommodates the historical patriarchal beliefs in the organization of personal life.

After all, it is significant to note the changing character of family appears to signpost a growing intimacy between parents and adolescent children, especially in terms of the importance of the family as a unit of life meaning. For example, in Evans’s (2008, 2012) analysis on mother-daughter relationships in urban China, she suggests that communicative intimacy replaces traditional expectation of the younger generation’s obedience to parental authority and she places attention to the growing emphasis on individual emotional self-fulfilment in personal relationships. The state has weakened

as a form of social control, and correspondingly the family has assumed a greater role over the individual's lives. Its influence has less to do with the direct paternalistic control, but rather being an emotional device through an intimate attachment with the individual on the basis of daily care and love (Kam 2013).

It is also worth noting that the individual's relatedness with one's family is structured by the state's agenda in the face of the eroding socialist welfare system and subsequently this has led to the individual's reliance on family support, when the role of the state in the society and economy becomes limited and the social welfare is by no means secured (Croll 2006; Fu 2007). From the Chinese government's point of view, there is a continued recognition of the family as a unit of care and welfare (Palmer 2007). The close linking with one's family is further reinforced by the government's emphasis on filial commitment (Bakken 2000). For example, the 1980 Marriage Law requires the adult children to take responsibility for the care of aging parents and this extends to involve three generations (Hashimoto and Ikels 2005). The Chinese government has also implemented other legislative measures to foster the practice of filial norms, such as the 1970 Criminal Law, the 1985 Inheritance Law and the 1996 Law on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly. Most recently, the authorities have issued a set of guidelines on filial duties as a public education exercise (Zhuang 2012)<sup>2</sup>. Some articles are even included in the new draft of Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Seniors.

In short, the current development of China includes individuals' disembodiment from

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<sup>2</sup> The new guidelines revisit the concept of filial piety in the original version of Twenty-Four Filial Exemplars in Yuan Dynasty, including duties such as teaching senior parents to surf the Internet and encouraging widowed parents to re-marry. Still, the motion triggers mixed reactions. While some consider the new standards are up-to-date and capture the modern meaning of showing care for one's parents, some others do not think the guidelines are feasible, especially many children live far away from parents and have little time outside of work.

socialist collectivities, while people are being re-integrated into a significant collective social institution of the family and therefore one's family continues to matter. The individual subject depicted by individualization thesis usually refers to the ways people are solely autonomous beings rather than having "linked lives" in which family can serve as a context for decisions and choices. Like in Smart and Shipman's (2004) study on transnational families of three ethnical minority communities in Britain – Indian, Pakistan and Irish, it is suggested that the contemporary theorizing about the individualization needs to be attentive to the more nuanced and specific aspects of how people manage to sustain obligation and commitment to their family life when entering into intimate relationships. Their study displays a great sensitivity to complexity, context and culture, which is useful to understand how people organize their personal lives on very different bases (ie. different sense of obligation and family/kin commitment) to those depicted by the individualization theorists. This study examines the ways in which one's emphasis on individual choice is interconnected to the shared concern of family, with a view to investigating a more complex process of the recent tendency of individualism.

### **Part III – Asexuality in the Western context**

With the increased visibility of asexual support organizations, the phenomenon of asexuality is gaining ground in the West. The formation of Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) in the United States in 2001 is highly influential in the development of asexual communities, by declaring asexuality as a sexual orientation in need of a community<sup>3</sup>. This marks a watershed of asexuals' positioning as an

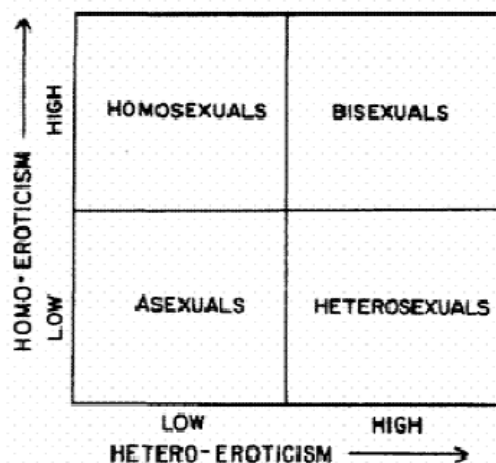
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<sup>3</sup> Founded in the United States in 2001, AVEN (Asexual Visibility Education Network) has created a supportive community for asexuals and works towards enabling communication among asexuals and raising public awareness of related issues. With approximately 30,000 members worldwide, AVEN has two distinct goals, namely, creating public acceptance and discussion of asexuality and facilitating the growth of an asexual community. The official website is available at: <http://www.asexuality.org/home/>



indifference to sex rather than being anti-sex, thereby shaking off a pathological status. Still, there is a lack of social science literature on asexuality and existing research is mainly in the Western context. Storms's (1980) research is one of the first references to the term asexuality, which offers a definition of asexuality as sexual fantasies are considered low on both homo- and hetero-eroticism. His bilateral model of sexual orientations identifies asexuality as an integral component of sexuality spectrum alongside other sexual orientations, such as homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality (Figure 2.1).

*Figure 2.1: Storms's bilateral model of sexual orientations*



More recently, the burgeoning of literature deals with asexuality on the basis of three kinds of definitions, namely, one's desires (whether a person experiences any sexual desire), one's behavior (whether a person engages in sexual activity), and one's self-identification (whether a person self-identifies as an asexual). For example, using nationally representative data, Bogaert's (2004) influential research conceptualizes asexuality as a lack of sexual attraction and indicates that 1.05% of the British population shows no interest in sex. Some researchers focus on the behavioral aspect of asexuality among individuals who have engaged in little or no sexual acts such as

Rothblum and Brehony's (1993) study on lesbian relationships. Other studies explore the identity formation of asexuality and the emergence of asexual communities. For example, drawing on qualitative, internet survey research, Scherrer (2008) highlights that asexuals' adding of terms such as romantic/aromantic attraction constructs and unique ways of being asexual complicates the landscape of sexuality. Carrigan's (2011) study finds that people within asexual communities have a range of differences in relation to sex, romance and object choice and he also examines the acquisition of a shared communal identity. According to him, the biographical stories of asexuals indicate the common elements of individual differences, self-questioning, assumed pathology, self-clarification and communal identity as typical of the asexuals' coming out and identity model.

In the field of asexual research, some academic considerations have started to emphasize the political aspect of asexuality such as Fahs (2010) and Przybylo (2011a, 2011b). While Fahs' project suggests asexuality is a viable and politically significant choice for women – as “radical refusal” of the sexual imperative, Przybylo, like Fahs does, approaches asexuality as a cultural construction but one with transgressive possibilities, which has the capacity to challenge substantially both sexual norms and the structures that reify them – the “sexusociety” moulded by a set of intersecting discourses, such as compulsory heterosexuality, coital imperative and orgasmic imperative. In fact, what Przybylo describes as “sexusociety” in contemporary Western societies is insightful, especially it bears similarities to the China's sexual revolution that shapes the individual's sexual experience. In short, Przybylo perceives that the resistance of asexuality is more about *doing* than *being* within the bounds of sexusociety. Instead of defining itself reactively as absence, people should focus on what asexuals do or their culturally contingent set of sexual practices, such as their

desire for intimate physical contact. Through making connections with asexual practices, identity and broader socio-cultural frameworks, this will ultimately unfold the political meaning of asexuality.

To sum up, most research in the West is concerned with asexuality as a sexual orientation particularly informed by the AVEN's definition, stressing the legitimacy of individual sexual rights and activism. This approach is seen as incompatible with the development of asexuality in China given its highly politicalized nature. In view of the notion of family and marriage whose influence has continually impacted on the Chinese individuals, this study, without denying the Western formulation of asexuality, seeks to accommodate the crucial dimension of family and marriage among asexual individuals in China. This may offer a source of inspiration for emergent expressions of asexuality in the non-Western context.

### **Chapter 3: Data and Methodology**

In response to an increasingly technologically mediated “everyday life”, there is a growing orientation to the Internet as a valuable sociological field to explore different social practices. In this study, I research a group of asexual individuals through a particular website to understand a social phenomenon which exists online primarily, that is, Chinese asexual people using the Internet to meet dating partners. I focus on the most popular and largest asexual marriage and dating site, WX920, as the major fieldsite of this study. It has received massive domestic and foreign media coverage since its launch in 2005. As indicated on the website homepage, there are currently almost 200,000 members who surf this website in search of a partner.

Given the highly hidden and stigmatized group of asexual individuals in China, I rely on this online channel to undertake this study on the grounds that the advantage of online research (particularly the anonymity) appears to allow people to disclose more intimate details about the topic being studied than they would share in real life. Some online studies show that the distinct advantage of online setting offers a potential to defuse the embarrassment that might be presented one-to-one in face-to-face interactions, such as Ayling and Mewse’s (2009) Internet research with gay men on the aspect of HIV/sexual health. In other words, the anonymity of the research interview is likely to encourage participants to be more open in their responses, particularly when discussing sensitive topics.

#### ***Research Methods***

This qualitative research was conducted in different ways, including online in-depth interviews and a close analysis of web-based materials in the virtual arena. For online interviews, one-to-one communication was done through the protocol of “QQ”, which

is the most popular instant messenger in Mainland China. Compared to face-to-face interview, the communication form of this medium has obvious advantages of wide geographical access and saving travelling costs and time (Opdenakker 2006). As long as both the interviewer and the interviewee are competent in word processing and have access to a computer, this enables the researcher to reach out to people over geographically dispersed areas without travelling to the interviewee, while face-to-face interviewing can be very expensive and takes too much time.

The online interview in this study is also characterized by the immediacy of the exchange due to synchronous communication of time. James and Busher (2009) summarize a few features of instant messenger interviews: 1) Temporal co-presence can intensify online interactions, thereby creating an atmosphere to flourish discussions. 2) The immediacy of synchronous chat leads to the expression of more emotion and heated exchanges. 3) Synchronous written communication is seen as more oral, especially many of its linguistic characteristics mirror the spoken word. In short, synchronous online communication is characteristic of a dynamic, chatty form of dialogue that allows for a real-time interaction in much common with the everyday conversation. The practice is also described as providing an account without the intervening lens of the researcher, given that data are transcribed automatically in synchronous text-based interviews. That is to say, the data are subject to remove transcriber's potential bias or errors when the exchange of texts is recorded verbatim by participants in their own words (Hines 2000; Mann and Stewart 2000; Robinson and Schulz 2009).

The interviews were conducted over nearly one and a half years and I had several QQ messengers' sessions with each of the interviewees. Initially, I approached a potential

pool of research participants electronically via the postal mailing on the website. Interested individuals made contact with me through QQ and online interviewing followed subsequently. Informed consent to participate in the study was obtained at the onset of the interview and so respondents under investigation were notified of taking part in this research. I used an informal or unstructured style of interviewing with topics arising from the situation at hands in the course of conversation. The very essence of unstructured interviewing is to establish a human-to-human relation with the respondent and to have a thorough understanding (Fontana and Frey 1994). The researcher has to put him- or herself in the role of the respondents and attempt to see the situation from their perspective, rather than impose the world of academia and preconceptions upon them. Unlike structured interviews, in which the interviewer is akin to a mechanical recorder to extract information in a detached, efficient yet pleasant manner, unstructured interviews typically do not have a set of questions prepared in advance but questions arise more naturally (Kristin 2002). This is to give informants an opportunity to develop their answer outside a standardized format and allow for a much freer exchange between the researcher and those who are researched. Of all interview types, unstructured interviews tend to be the most like real conversation, although there is a fair amount of leeway. With an exploratory intent, one important thing of this study is to allow participants to speak, not to keep them on track rigidly. These interviews are fairly open-ended in format, so as to encourage people to talk and open up topics for further discussions.

Apart from conducting online interviews, I observed web-based materials to supplement the subsequent analysis of interviews by examining the narratives of asexual individuals' personal ads and individual postings such as "true confession" and online dairy. These sources sit within the public sphere of the Internet service and

could be freely referenced. While personal ads are a brief biographical sketch and provide demographical details (eg. age, location and education level), “true confession” contains the members’ self portrait of their expectations of asexual marriage, and past experiences or reflections of everyday happenings and events. Some of them also narrate their story on the website’s blog. These various documentary data can be used to gain access to the biography of an individual and add additional depth and context to the participant’s words in the interviews. In particular, those online statements such as true confession are valuable to the researcher to undertake the narrative analysis that was built around the individuals’ subjective account of their lives. As for the issue of distortion and deception of personal documentary evidence, like the autobiographical materials of “true confession” in this study, Burgess (1991) points out that the researcher’s detailed knowledge of the informant from other sources can help understand the individual’s motives for writing a particular document. While privileging the insider’s account, this study complemented those written records with materials that were gathered through interviews and observations. By developing a close relationship with the informants, this allowed me as the researcher to corroborate their accounts and detect any points of exaggeration and misrepresentation.

### ***Description of Respondents’ Background***

In this study, I had conducted online interviews with thirty three research subjects. All data was anonymized to remove any information that might reveal the identities of participants and their names were pseudonyms. This study population comprised Chinese adults between 21 and 45 years of age and their length of joining the WX920 membership ranged from less than one month up to five years. I include both male and female for a more complete picture: Twenty were men and thirteen were women.

The interviewees were from different regions of China and therefore a geographically dispersed population. The majority could be described as members of the middle-income “salary-earning classes”(gongxin jieceng) and their social status varied from white-collar workers to service workers. In particular, a number of them were relatively well-off individuals who could afford to pay the membership fee ranging from RMB\$299 to RMB\$599 in order to subscribe the service on this commercialized dating website. Only a few respondents earned less than the median of the monthly income level in the respective provinces.

In terms of educational attainment, thirteen of them had completed at least junior to high school. Twenty of the interviewees were either university graduates or individuals with a master’s degree or post-secondary qualifications. In brief, the asexual group under study was a largely educated group of individuals, particularly among those who could afford to use the Internet.

While previous source shows that 60% of the registered members cannot have sex and the remaining 40% sexual minorities seeking proforma marriage on the WX920 website (Newback 2006), the pool of research subjects I recruited might not necessarily follow the 60:40 ratio. I mainly focus on those who claimed to opt for an asexual marriage not related to a sexual orientation (ie. homosexuality).

### ***Methodological Notes***

Given the sensitivity of the topic, refusal to answer questions and expressions of embarrassment from my research subjects was not uncommon. The process was not smooth and my initial research encountered a series of obstacles, particularly in terms of a mistrust of a stranger. Conducting in-depth personal research without ever



meeting participants in person, I was fully aware of people's suspicion of me throughout the interactions. Many openly acknowledged their suspicion of me who claimed to be a college student in Hong Kong conducting a study of asexual marriage in China and even perceived me as a reporter who would reveal to outsiders certain aspects of their lives, resulting in the possibly painful outcome of personal exposure. It was commonly found that a number of them approached the asexual topic as irrelevant or an unwelcome subject to be skirted around. Sometimes, I was confronted with hesitant expressions and angry refusals to collaborate. Some respondents would lecture me about satisfying my curiosity of others' private suffering; others might keenly grill me for answers to questions like "What is so worthy about studying us?" or diverted me to other topics like "Why not study the hot topics such as China's corruption?".

At times, conversations on the topic became silenced or came to an abrupt end due to participants' distraction and disinterest. Being aware of the delicate relation, this reminded me of playing a sensitive role through the careful use of wording in the interview context and avoiding injecting opinions of evaluating the respondents' responses. After all, those reactions showed a sign of keeping a distance from the researcher and the researcher-participant dynamics were affected when I was seen differently by the stigmatized group. Apparently, a personal distance between the research subjects and me arose from my inability – both perceived and real – to understand their lives given my non-asexual identity.

As my research progressed, I was not surprised by the unfriendly wording and reaction from my respondents but sought to establish trust and bridge personal distance by positioning myself not so much as a researcher, but as a friend, a

confidant or a person wishing to listen and learn from my participants. Online listening was not to be expressed as silence, but as words: Non-response seemed to undermine a developing sense of rapport. Text-based online interactions, through exchanges of text, require a close management of the very basic element of the conversation, such as turn-taking, or comments such as “mmm”. The “listening” to the written script of participants entails a sensitivity to change in tone of the conversation, to any fracture in the flow of a response that might point to a reluctance to speak or a failure to understand the points, and to verbal “cues” which might suggest that participants would be happy to talk more about something if asked. On occasions, I expressed overt interest in particular points made by asking follow-up questions or echoing what the interviewee had just said, as a way to show my active listening with continued interest. One of the hardest things for me to do was to deal with periods of silence in the interview without sufficient verbal cues. I tried not to rush in to fill the gap and looked for subtle cues to decide if my participants had finished “speaking”, in order not to stop their thought process or cut them off.

In line with Mann and Stewart (2000), I attempted to have self-disclosure as a means of dispelling feelings of caution and working towards the levels of trust which allow rapport to develop. I shared information about myself to encourage a pattern of mutual sharing online, and especially found that most mainland informants were curious to hear about my Hong Kong origin. These efforts were rewarded and helped establish rapport: The more individuals knew about each other, the more others were likely to reciprocate and the more likely it was that trust and the sense of being in an online relationship ensued.

Throughout the whole one and a half year’s fieldwork, I also sought to develop a

close relationship with my informants by maintaining a certain amount of interaction on a regular basis over an extended period of time. In the online setting, as in real life, relationships took time to build. It was evidently seen that trust and warmth increased with the repeated interview interactions over time. It was also not exaggerating to say that the participants' strong desire to be "heard" spontaneously gave rise to the researcher-participant closeness, especially when there has been a lack of acknowledgment and acceptance of asexuality in China. A group of people actually found it a cathartic experience for being able to talk to a virtual, faceless listener about their marginalized reality, rather than conflict with their desire to keep information private.

**Table 3.1: The demographical details of male respondents**

	Respondent	Age	Region	Education Level	Income Level (RMB)
1	joyful life	45	Guangdong	University	\$12000-20000
2	sincere heart	38	Guangdong	Junior High School	\$2000- 3000
3	dd7345	36	Hunan	University	\$3500-5000
4	polo	36	Chongqing	University	\$2000-3000
5	donkey	33	Qinghai	University	\$2000-3500
6	wind	30	Guangdong	Associate Diploma	\$3000-5000
7	shugu	28	Shanxi	University	\$7500-10000
8	delight	28	Shanxi	Senior High School	\$3500-5000
9	peaceful heart	28	Guangdong	Junior High School	\$2000-3000
10	spy	27	Liaoning	University	\$2000-3500
11	mrdu	26	Sichuan	Associate Diploma	\$3000-5000
12	batman	25	Shanghai	Associate Diploma	\$3500-5000
13	spring snow	25	Guangdong	Junior High School	\$2000-3000
14	leaf	23	Jiangsu	Associate Diploma	\$3000-5000
15	simple love	23	Hunan	Junior High School	\$2000-3500
16	little pig	23	Jiangxi	Junior High School	\$2000-3500
17	xiao1	23	Zhejiang	Junior High School	\$2000-3500
18	js1413	22	Jiangsu	University	Below \$1000
19	pc520	22	Hunan	Senior High School	\$1000-2000
20	holding-hand-and-smiling-together	22	Guangdong	Senior High School	\$2000-3000

*Table 3.2: The demographical details of female respondents*

	Respondent	Age	Region	Education Level	Income Level (RMB)
1	carefree	34	Guangdong	University	\$1000-2000
2	flower	34	Anhui	Senior High School	\$2000-3500
3	white sheep	33	Jiangsu	Master	\$5000-7500
4	kellychen	32	Beijing	University	\$5000-7500
5	Chap1	31	Sichuan	Associate Diploma	\$2000-3500
6	rabbit	27	Sichuan	Associate Diploma	\$2000-3000
7	cc101	27	Hubei	Associate Diploma	\$3500-5000
8	mulin2	26	Beijing	Master	\$2000-3000
9	GZPANG2	25	Guangdong	Junior High School	\$3500-5000
10	hx520	25	Guangxi	Junior High School	Below \$2000
11	sexless-true-love-seeker	23	Tianjin	University	\$2000-3000
12	ghost	23	Jiangsu	Junior High School	\$2000-3000
13	XQJ	21	Shanxi	Associate Diploma	\$2000-3000

## **Chapter 4:**

### **Seeking Asexual Marriage on WX920 in the Age of Sexual Revolution**

China's sexual revolution is complicated by an imperative to sex in intimate relationships. It is argued that China has witnessed a sexual revolution since the 1980s and this sexual transformation has produced a greater openness and liberation on many issues. Under the sexual revolution, both men and women are no longer prevented from experiencing and expressing sexual desire in today's China and the emphasis on the satisfaction of sexual life within the bound of marriage is widely acknowledged (Evans 1997, 2002; Erwin 2000; Pan 1993, 2005, 2006; Sigley 2000, 2006; Zhang 2003, 2007, 2011). Yet, a fundamental contrast to this liberal side is seen in the practice of asexual marriage. When sexual pleasure becomes a common experience in China, we can see the overwhelming pressure on a group of individuals who are anxious about sexual incompatibility and desperately look for a freedom from pain through seeking a companionship without sexual strings attached. The respondents with serious bodily illnesses or problems related to sex seem to be marginalized due to their reduced capacity of having sexual desire and pleasure. Reflecting on the ethical implication of the sexual revolution in a recent volume on China's transformation, Zhang's (2011) question as to whether this revolution makes people happier, freer, and more capable of realizing their human potential is worth pondering.

In the following section, I will focus on a group of asexual individuals who depend on a specific website for asexual marriage – WX920. Owing to certain perceived barriers to sexual fulfillment, this group of Chinese individuals is motivated to enter into an asexual marriage. The widely perceived normalization of sexual pleasure within marriage is an important theme in the discourse of these individuals and their subtext

cannot be understood without putting it into the larger context of China's sexual revolution. They have to turn to the online dating agency in order to meet a person who will accept their condition. Despite the fact that they can reach out for alternative space of mate-seeking, it is important to note that the whole issue of meeting and developing relationships on WX920 is largely a chancy quest for partnership. Some are less optimistic about forging a solid relationship not built around sex, given the importance of sex placed by society under China's sexual revolution.

### ***Perception of how Sexual Dysfunction Impacts a Relationship***

The following narrative elaborates what informants revealed in relation to how their perception of sexual dysfunction impeded them from embarking on a relationship. These individuals exhibit a strong concern about a lack of sexual gratification and turning to WX920 is seen as a preferred solution to the lack of sex in marriage among those who come under pressure to marry in reality. For example, due to physiological reasons, *simple love* and *rabbit* lacked interest in sexual relationships and considered WX920 as a viable option to meet a dream partner. They commonly had great difficulty in finding a partner in real life and their self-portrait on WX920 stated,

*“Because I fail in sexual ability (性能力不合格), I am now here and am very surprised when I come across this website. I just think that I can end the loneliness soon. Yet finding a life partner is extremely difficult. From the bottom of my heart, I look forward to meeting this person with a ray of hope. I have never dated anyone before and harbor a hope to see you.” (simple love, male, 23; True confession from WX920 website)*

*“I am basically sexless because of different reasons. I will not be able to accept*

*people who pursue me and to tell my problem. My family members just think that I am a demanding old maid. I can only pretend to be demanding in mate choice. Even though I meet a good man, I cannot accept him. I have a huge pressure. I am keen to meet a suitable man and live a happy life. This will both satisfy my family and me.”*  
(*rabbit, female, 27 ; True confession from WX920 website*)

Regarding their bodily problem, while *simple love* shared that he had never initiated any romantic affair, *rabbit* bottled up her enthusiasm for dating with ordinary men she encountered. Particularly, *rabbit* had to cover up her condition under the pretence of being demanding in mate selection because she found it impossible to articulate her problems with others. In a sense, their condition had a detrimental impact on them in terms of finding a potential partner and made them restrain from embarking on a relationship. It was also a grim truth that the pool of suitable partner was limited in range among them. For instance, *simple love* found it unrealistic to meet a non-asexual partner with a corresponding physical disability in real life. Instead, he steadily accepted the online channel as the chief agent of transforming his life. Apart from joining the asexual marriage brokering website of WX920, he also made use of the DINK forum of baidu (百度丁克贴吧) for dating, in which he could meet potential asexual partners. By examining the online asexual channel for asexual dating, this somewhat manifested how these individuals struggled to socialize with the opposite sex in real life.

In fact, *donkey* who was psychologically disturbed by sex looked for an asexual marriage through an online platform, because he perceived an intolerance of ordinary women to his lack of sexual desire. He was not willing to reveal his inner thoughts in those marriage interviews and showed his resistance to the marriage introductions in



reality. He felt more comfortable with using the online platform for asexual matchmaking because of the comparative advantage of expressing his condition in a straightforward manner on the website:

*“I need to hide my condition in everyday life, while I don’t need to deceive somebody online. I can simply tell the truth and express a real self. Well, silently waiting a suitable partner on the Internet is even better than randomly bumping into a person in reality. That’s more relevant to my condition and I’d get a higher chance of a successful match.” (donkey, male, 33)*

As the excerpt from the interview demonstrated, *donkey* showed a lack of interest in partner choice in reality and preferred to rely on online channel to reach for a potential partner. Even if he took a passive role in interacting with others online, he believed that it was more likely to meet a compatible partner without being acutely embarrassed. After all, the dependency of Internet-based platform seemed to be a protective strategy for matchmaking among this hidden group of population, given that they could not speak freely of their condition in everyday life. This also pointed to an issue of marginality in view of seeking a marriage partner on the Internet. For example, *cc101* was frustrated by the fact that unlike ordinary people, she and the people alike had to rely on online marriage broker on the grounds that they could not bring their bodily condition out into the open and this resulted in a reduced chance of meeting a potential partner:

*“It’s quite difficult for this group of people to find a partner. Some of them spend more than seven or eight years on this website and don’t manage to meet their better half. Unlike ordinary people, they can’t openly seek for a partner and attend the marriage*

*interviews without worries. Well, it's also hard to know a real person comprehensively on the Internet.” (cc101, female, 27)*

*spy* was also hesitant to pursue a close friend near his region. He and his friends have been good friends since childhood and the girl was a good listener. However, *spy* thought that love was out of his reach because of his biological impediment. In his view, sexual dysfunction would ruin the life of an ordinary girl and entering into an asexual marriage was not fair to her. Since he affirmed that sexual intimacy was the key to a marriage, this hindered him from having a date with her. Given the scarcity of a conducive environment for asexual people to meet a potential partner, he also tried to browse a relevant forum on baidu for dating: the infertile women forum (石女贴吧).

*GZPANG2*'s condition was one of the website's most marginalized groups – women without a uterus and having a flat chest. Concerning her lack of sexual functions due to biological impediments, she was pessimistic about looking for love outside of WX920 and considered this website as a platform of hope that provided her with an access to a pool of possible partners one could not easily approach in everyday life. In her view, sexual incompatibility among married couples was reportedly fueling the rising divorce rate, let alone being in a sexless relationship. She had never dated before and indeed lacked confidence in getting along with any partner in real life. She did not rely on other online platforms except WX920. Despite a slim chance, she stated that she waited for the 1/10,000 chance of meeting a right person and hoped to find a person in the same plight as her in order to form a partnership with empathy and mutual tolerance.

Apart from infertile women like GZPANG2, some females with psychological problems also registered for asexual soulmates on WX920. For example, facing frigidity, it was a struggle for hx520 to find a partner in real life. hx520 said that she previously attempted to have sex with others by taking soft drugs, so that she could become relaxed and overcome her frigid condition. However, she felt uncomfortable with the practice and resorted to WX920 as a way out. She revealed that her condition was likely to scare away ordinary men and subsequently she shied away from having a boyfriend in reality:

*“I’m afraid that men can’t really accept my passionlessness. After discovering my problem, I don’t date people anymore. Visiting WX920 is to find a partner with the same issue...(How far does your frigidity impact on you?) Quite a lot, say, I dare not hook up with the boys I like.” (hx520, female, 25)*

In fact, China’s sexual revolution sets off in immediate pursuit of its rich promise of fulfilling sex lives. Yet, these individuals will not be able to have an explicit disclosure of their sexual functioning with ease, given their deviation from the supposedly natural ways of being sexual. In the following, one can see the real life consequences experienced by those individuals with sexual dysfunction – a failure of their relationships. This reveals how unwelcome are those asexual individuals who cannot conform to the expected ways of being sexually active under the sexual revolution.

### ***A Loss of Intercorpearility: Actual Experience of how Sexual Dysfunction Cripples a Romance***

A number of respondents disclosed that they broke up with their former partner

because of the impediments of bodily sexual function. A discursive merging of love and sex in consolidating a relationship was found to be a main theme among my informants. There was a close relationship between sex and love and once sex could not be fulfilled from at least one side, a breakdown of love, or an eroding intercorporeality would follow suit. The notion of intercorporeality was introduced as an analytical concept by Everett Zhang's 2003 study. It demonstrated how sexual dysfunction altered the intercorporeality in the context of sex, namely to undermine the state of physical and emotional closeness between two bodies in sex. Such a loss of the ability to synchronize the two bodies in intimate relationships was what made impotence occur as trauma and Zhang was critical about the construction of the traumaticity in relation to a demise of sex intercorporeality. However, what my respondents said seemed to assume a heterosexual relationship could hardly exist without sex in the long run.

For example, *spy*'s estranged relationships were closely tied to sexual incompatibility, or precisely a loss of intercorporeality as Zhang (2003) called, resulting in his "tragic life". His failure to keep a relationship with at least three partners was spelled out in his talk and women's increased capacity for sexual pleasure was indicated explicitly:

*"After knowing my bodily problem, my first lover refused to stay together and was afraid of a dead marriage (守活寡) in future. We had been together for long and didn't have any sexual relationship. A woman won't favor a man without potency. I later met a girl on WX920. When she recovered from her condition, she had a strong desire and demanded to have sex every day. I can't meet her request. That's my tragedy in life and sex is really more important than love for women. My latest partner (now separated) also shows distaste for my sexual performance, especially*

*after her first intercourse with me.” (spy, male, 27)*

*flower* was also confronted with the failure in romantic life because of a decline of intercorpearility arising from her sex phobia and frigidity. She said that the unpleasant experience of her first intercourse triggered her phobia about sex and she also lost her sexual drive at an early age under drug effects. Her sexual dysfunction had led to a series of broken relationships - at least two of her former partners could hardly put up with her coldness of sex and ended the relationship. A former partner even attempted to seek out a counselor for her and forced her to use a sex toy, so as to overcome her sex-phobic condition. However, this proved to be a vain attempt and their relationship worsened. Reflecting on her failed relationship due to sexual problems, she was convinced that there was an inseparability of love and sex and linked men’s betrayal to the aphorism “*she se xing ye*” (食色性也). This often-quoted line is from the work of Mencius (372-289 B.C.) which literally means that human being’s appetite for food and sex is natural (Farquhar 2002; Chang 2011). Now, she is determined to enter into an asexual marriage and is enthusiastic about connecting with somebody having endured a similar experience as her:

*“The previous experience makes me understand men well. Being sexless is incompatible with ganqing (affection) cos sex and love are closely associated. I hope to find the similar others, namely those with corresponding physical or mental disability...I’ve lowered my expectation in such a reality. All my boyfriends deserted me just because of sex.” (flower, female, 34)*

Similarly, *mrdu* concluded that the disharmony in sex was the main reason for his breakup. He had a poor relationship with his former partner who was sexually

frustrated. This girl did not take a violent dislike to him, but became less intimate than before, like no longer sitting closely with him in dinner. She finally proposed a breakup with him on an occasion. Recounting the past experience, he believed that a lack of sexual intimacy was a burden on the sexual partner and rejected the claim that love should be above everything else.

In the above-stated cases, those informants seemed helpless to prevent the emotional estrangement of their partners as a result of a loss of sex intercorparity. Under China's sexual revolution, their traumatic experience also went hand in hand with a new ethical sensibility of providing sexual happiness (Wong 2012). As shown in the following, some narrated in a self-blaming way and exhibited a strong tendency to hold themselves responsible for a failure of their relationships. This kind of ethical sensibility reflected the issue of marginality among people with bodily problems related to sex.

### ***The Discourse of Harm: The New Ethical Sensibility of Providing Sexual Happiness***

A handful of works are concerned about the ethical dimension of China's sexual revolution. For example, the term ethical dilemma has been used by Farrer and Sun (2003) in explaining how people use competing discourse of motives to make sense of extramarital love in the context of their own lives and those of people around them. Many people feel that romantic love justifies a relationship outside of marital union, especially in relation to marriages that no longer seem to be based on love. This study will engage in exploring the ethical aspect of the sexual revolution in a slightly different way – with reference to a predicament faced by the respondents which is intertwined with notions of ethics revolving around duty, expectation and

acceptable/unacceptable behaviors in a relationship or in a marriage. That is to say, one is obliged to engage in sex with one's partner and to have sexual desire, and this is perceived as acceptable behavior. If one is unable to fulfill the sexual needs of his/her partner due to sexual dysfunction or a low sex drive, one might perceive that one is inflicting harm on his/her partner and in the sense, what 'harm' underlies is an unacceptable form of behavior and therefore, unethical. In a word, the discourse of "harm" reflects a new ethical problem arising from one's failing of providing sexual happiness in an intimate relationship.

In the following, most respondents commonly had a fragile hope of a lasting relationship without sex and responded with great disbelief of their partner's acceptance of the unmet need of sexual fulfillment. These individuals, who did not want to jeopardize their "sexual" partner's happiness and plans for life, felt pressurized to sustain a relationship. They perceived that an unsatisfactory sexual relationship was prone to "harm" others. To avoid the mismatch, some of them were driven to terminate a relationship and return to singleness, while others could not hold on to the partners by satisfying them. In particular, the need for women to assert the desires and dislikes in sexual relations was consistently stated by the male informants:

*"It's impossible that girls do not need a sex life. That's unfair to her...I don't want to **harm** others. When time goes by, there are still barriers and I'm not confident in the relationship. Therefore, I broke up with her with the excuse of lovelessness." (js1314, male, 22)*

*"I don't want to be single for long and that's why I pursue my colleague. I understand my body well and can't **harm** her. Finally, I end the relationship as soon as I can."*

(shugu, male, 28)

*“(Why did you decide to break up?) Sex problem. I fail to give her xingifu<sup>4</sup>(性福)... Ordinary girl will have sexual desires very often... My ex-girlfriend doesn't mention this explicitly, but I can sense it. I don't want to shamelessly **ruin** the wellbeing of the other. That's a lifelong issue.”* (xiao1, male, 23)

The case of *spy* also exhibited an obvious sense of self-blaming on his failure to fulfill a partner's sexual desires due to biological impediments. His perception of “harm” was about inducing the suffering of others by being unfit to provide sexual happiness. *spy* said that a sexless marriage was unbearably cruel to an ordinary woman as well as marked by a deficiency. He apparently put the blame on himself regarding a failure to make her deserve better – a full sense of sexual fulfillment:

*“To an ordinary girl, a marriage without sex or with limited sex is a cruel reality. A man should consider her wellbeing instead of making her suffer. Of course sex is just part of the marriage life, but she deserves a full sense of fulfillment. It can't compensate her for a lack of sex with something else. Well, asexual relationship appears to be more pure in terms of feelings. It's more about a deficiency in terms of quality of life when compared to the sexual one.”* (*spy*, male, 27)

The rhetoric of “harm” was also a recurring theme among female respondents. For example, the case of *Chap520* illustrated a strong tendency towards self-blaming with a repeated rhetoric of harm. *Chap520*'s biological impediment prohibited her from

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<sup>4</sup> In Chinese cultural view, the word ‘xingfu’(性福) is an appropriation of Chinese language with ‘fortune’(幸福), which equates sex to a blessing.



sexual enjoyment and a harmonious sexual relation was considered unlikely. Her self-portrait on WX920 painfully shared that she had no faith in sexual intimacy and did not want to harm a man on the grounds of sexual incompatibility, even though she eagerly yearned for a romantic life. During the interview, she revealed that a lack of sexual intimacy was prone to harm a male partner and she had even terminated a romantic relationship earlier:

*“My case is biologically determined and I don’t want to **harm** an ordinary man, that’s why I hope to find a partner here...I dated a boy in real life before, but I was unwilling to **harm** the other and broke up with him finally. I’m unable to satisfy him in terms of sex. If you love a person, you can’t bear to make him unfulfilled sexually in his whole life. Sexual desire is something natural for ordinary people. It’s very hard for them to overcome this and the problem will exist over time.” (Chap520, female, 31)*

Chap520 perceived that sexual craving was something normal for heterosexual individuals and in this sense, her thought revealed the presumptions of sexual relationship as natural and ideal; a failure of meeting the partner’s sexual need – both quantity and quality – was a practice hardly tolerable in a heterosexual relationship. It was also of interest to note the more a person loved a partner, the lower the likelihood he/she would bear to a disharmony in sex with the partner. As a consequence, many informants tended to make a conscious decision to split up with the partner.

In typical, *rabbit* described the male suffering in a disharmonious sexual relation as a “torture” instead of using the word “harm”. She said that her former partner was willing to accept her condition, but she found it difficult to see him being tortured by

a sexless relationship in his lifetime. With a strong sensibility of providing sexual happiness, she took the initiative to end the relationship in order to resolve the problem:

*“He doesn’t mind it (sex), but I can’t stand it. I have difficulty in sex. Even if he doesn’t mind it, he’s a sexual indeed. We have a disharmony in sex and I also suffer. He is tortured and doesn’t feel good, but he continues to accept my condition. I really think it can’t work out in the rest of his life...He doesn’t mind it just because he loves me, but the problem in sex does exist. You really think that two persons can be together with only love?” (rabbit, female, 27)*

From *rabbit*’s self-expression, she actually passed an accusatory remark on her sexual dysfunction that made her boyfriend suffer. Despite never uttering the word “harm”, she kept on stating that the sacrifice of her boyfriend’s sexual fulfillment was a sheer torture, which was interpreted as an act of doing “harm” on him. She also perceived that there was no ground for anticipating that a relationship could be sustained without sex, as reflected in her denial of her partner’s genuine acceptance of an unsatisfactory sexual relationship.

It was noteworthy that the perceived harm also included the physical harm to the partner. Some women respondents felt that the refusal of the partner’s sexual request was tantamount to inflicting considerable harm on the male. For example, *flower* perceived that her psychological dysfunction would bring about negative effects on sexual relations. She drew a direct link between sexual incompatibility and the far-reaching consequence of male impotence:

*“I know all about my condition and don’t want to **harm** others. If the female has sex perfunctorily, the male partner will have a physiological suffering and even impotence at the worst.” (flower, female, 34)*

From the above, it could be seen that the rhetoric of “harm” was not uncommon among my respondents. This finding was confirmed by Wong (2012) in her study of Chinese asexual marriage and she indicated that providing sexual happiness had become a new ethical sensibility in the age of China’s sexual revolution. In addition, in his ethnographic account of impotence, Zhang (2007) also suggested that the current shame of sexual deficiency was no longer about revealing concerns about sexual desire commonly occurring in Mao’s China; the new ideas of shame, however, revolved around the inability to have sex and pleasure one’s partner. What Zhang depicted in his empirical study was also central to an understanding of the discourse of “harm” in the cases, as my informants similarly felt ashamed of having unsatisfactory sex with their partner in previous relationships. While Zhang’s study was confined to male impotent patients, this study has extended into exploring both male and female experience of sexual dysfunction in relation to their intimate life, with a focus on the new ethical sensibility of providing sexual happiness.

### ***A Further Sign of New Ethical Sensibility: Sexual Intimacy as a Precondition of Marriage***

Finding love and a suitable partner through an asexual matchmaking website WX920 was the main aim of my informants. In fact, the new ethical sensibility of providing sexual happiness also involved the ideal of sexual intimacy as the prerequisite for a successful marriage. Under the sexual revolution, a harmonious sexual relation was widely acknowledged as a necessary component of fostering the marriage tie and this

deterred people with sexual deficiency from marrying in reality. For example, *donkey* was aware that the female partner was entitled to satisfy sexual desires in marriage and he would not choose to get married with an ordinary girl who expected an active sex life. As a result, he wished for an asexual marriage with mutual consent and his views conformed to the values espoused by China's sexual revolution:

*“China has witnessed a sexual revolution currently. The notion of sex has been escalated to a right. As we can see, all erotic things have a particular appeal to both men and women. However, something has turned sour in China and xingfu (sexual happiness) is regarded as a necessity of a conjugal family. I'm aware of my failure of performing this obligation which is unfair to the partner. Unless she also shows a similar orientation by rejecting the fulfillment of this obligation, then we're on an equal footing. In this way, marriage without xingfu can still be a happy one.” (donkey, male, 33)*

In *donkey's* word, sex in marriage was considered as a mutual obligation one has to fulfill; otherwise another partner would be unfairly treated. Regarding the “sexual” yardstick of conjugal marriage, his lack of sexual desire discouraged him from pursuing a marriage outside of the asexual matchmaking website. He was insistent on approaching a similar person who did not feel obliged to have sex for fear that his failure of performing the “obligation” would not enable a relationship to start on a level playing field. In other words, his awareness about sexual happiness led him to avoid entering into a conventional marriage at the moment.

In fact, my informants mostly held a belief that marriage without harmonious sex was likely to trigger divorce. *dd7345's* anxiety indeed revealed the important aspect of this

revolution in his consideration of asexual marriage. *dd7345* has suffered sexual dysfunction for a few years. Even though he sought medical treatment for his decline of potency, he still had difficulty performing the sexual activity. Being aware of women's increasing need to fulfill their sexual desires, *dd7345* was sensitive to his declined potency and was afraid of being ill-matched with others. In this way, he hoped to find a marriage with limited sex on WX920 and his narrative drew attention to his predicament arising from a diminished capacity for sex:

*"Sex is a matter of compatibility, just make it equal and suitable. WX920 is quite accurate in defining my condition. I hope to have a limited amount of sex. Frankly, I don't want to get a divorce. Women have a relatively huge demand for sexual gratification nowadays, that's why we should be well-matched in expectations of sex. Quite often, I see many men of my age getting divorced because of sexual disharmony."* (*dd7345, male, 36*)

Based on what *dd7345* said, one can see that sexual intimacy was a necessity in a marriage. Many affirmed the notion that sex served as the glue of the couple relationship and this explained why they chose to find a partner on WX920, in order not to get divorced because of sexual problems. For example, similar to *dd7345*, *batman* lays emphasis on women's capacity to fulfill sexual desires by sharing an incident with his peer group: After a woman was engaged to be married and realized her partner's erectile problem, her family was determined to break off the engagement. *batman* then concluded that a lack of consensus about the sexual aspect of marriage was likely to bring about marital conflicts. For him, selecting a spouse on WX920 was a means to avoid marital dissolution due to sexual disparities.

One informant also experienced an actual dissolution of marriage because of sexual disharmony. *delight*, a divorced man, believed that WX920 was his only way out given his serious bodily problem – penile veneuos leakage. He did not have any sexual experience until his first marriage. After finding out about his erectile dysfunction, his former wife was willing to stay with him and waited for his recovery for two years, but her parents forced her to end the “sexless” marriage eventually. In short, the end result of *delight*’s divorce demonstrates the incompatibility arising from the unrelenting emphasis on fulfilling sex in marriage.

Under China’s sexual revolution, individuals involved in sexual relationship within the traditional context of heterosexual marriage have become more aware of sexual fulfillment. Existing research indicates that the growing importance attached to discontent with the sexual aspects of marital relationships has increasingly become a cause of divorce (Evans 1997, 2002; Woo 2006; Davis 2011). It is not controversial to suggest that pursuing sexual intimacy in marriage is now an entitlement of married couples to achieve conjugal happiness. Coupled with a new ethical sensibility of providing sexual happiness, the importance of sexual satisfaction to marital harmony has gained strength among Chinese individuals. Some of my informants also seemed helpless in the face of such an imperative when they are in search of an asexual partnership.

### ***Speculating a Little Likelihood of a Sustainable Asexual Partnership***

Given the strong emphasis on a couple’s sex life under China’s sexual revolution, some informants were not optimistic about the possibility of asexual partnership on WX920. In their view, WX920 had yet to be proven effective at consolidating a relationship not built around sexual fulfillment. For example, a big question mark

hung over the unconventional practice of asexual marriage in *flower*'s view. She thought that sex provided the foundation for marriage and an asexual relationship was subject to collapse because of the abstinence from sex:

*“Love is conditional upon a number of factors. If one component is missing, it’ll break down rapidly. A pure love is simply non-existent and I have to be realistic. The challenges can range from the partner’s family background, the ways of living and so on. The most important one is sex, which is a cornerstone of marriage. This is even more important than the romantic love. Members on WX920 are a rare group of people. Whether they can form a sustainable partnership is a controversial issue.”*  
*(flower, female, 34)*

*flower* was convinced that sex served as “a cornerstone of marriage” and did not think that the asexual marriage on WX920 was easily testable, given a relatively small number of people who chose to enter into this marriage at the moment. With this in mind, she said that being single was the worst possible thing she prepared for.

Another respondent *cc101* said that she has an unattractive sex organ and her flat chest could hardly arouse men’s desire. She showed a great determination to enter into an asexual marriage and preferred to have a limited amount of sex. In her view, a pure asexual marriage without sex and children was too ideal to sustain in one’s lifetime. In particular, an ordinary person could not just sustain a platonic relationship without sex. Even though *cc101* was aware that love was an essential component in an asexual marriage, she found it very difficult to find it in a marriage without sex and thought of it as loving a non-existent historical figure in real life:

*“A platonic relationship is beyond my imagination. I know a famous scientist in China who is called Yang Chen-ning (楊振寧). He’s 82 years old and his wife is 28 years old. I wonder whether the woman is dedicated to him or just his reputation. Perhaps she loves him and that’s platonic love. Well, maybe two persons can live together, but I don’t believe one can take a real fancy to a stranger platonically. Would you love a historical figure and for him, you decide not to get married anymore?”*  
(cc101, female, 27)

cc101 was puzzled about the future of an asexual partnership and pondered whether this would lead to a lasting relationship or a divorce. For her, there was nothing worse than being deserted by the man due to a lack of sex.

In fact, the intra-difference of sexual compatibility was a common concern among WX920 members. As noted, the asexual matchmaking website of WX920 comprised a good mix of people. Sixty percent of the site’s members were people who could not have sex (Newsback 2006). The rest were either homosexuals or individuals without bodily problems who were less passionate about sexual desires. As an infertile man without much sexual desire, *polo* thought that most people in asexual marriage faced a bleak married future life. Since sexual dysfunction was often caused by sexual impediments and might be curable, he actually highlighted the potential mismatch of sexual needs between himself and those members who had psychological dysfunction and might be curable in future. He associated such a disparity to a metaphor of an “uneven starting line” subject to marital decoupling:

*“Divorces are commonly seen in the asexual partnership, although personality is also a factor. Asexual marriage is primarily due to etiology. If one’s problem can be*



*curable, it's the case of uneven starting line. When one person has a normal sexual functioning and another has an abnormal one, that's prone to a failure of relationship..." (polo, male, 36)*

A further manifestation of a similar concern about an “uneven starting line” could be seen in *GZPANG2*'s worry over the perceived “sexual” threat of the outside lover among those people with curable psychological dysfunction. This explained why she did not relate to people who had an increased sex drive after receiving medical treatment because people whose sexual dysfunction may be curable were likely to return to a sexual marriage. In fact, she had a low sex drive due to a biological impediment. She articulated the likelihood of infidelity without sexual attraction in such a case, even the possible dismantling of an asexual marriage.

After all, under the sexual revolution, it is evident from some observation that sexual pleasure continues to be embedded in a heterosexual marital context and a satisfactory sexual relationship is a precondition or an expected aspect of marriage. The prominence of pleasurable aspects of marital sexual relationship also affects those who seek for an asexual marriage. They are doubtful about forging a solid partnership without sex in the long run. Moreover, in a supposedly “sexless” relationship, my informants' perception that they would never be able to fulfill the sexual desire of their partner even though they are successful in finding a marital partner through the website, may ultimately lead to the dissolution of the marriage or unhappiness of their married life. Those lingering anxieties could be seen as a constraining dimension of the sexual revolution among this group of Chinese individuals. In a sense, the pressure of sexual compatibility somewhat overshadowed their pursuit of asexual marriage.

## Summary

As we have seen, China has witnessed a sexual revolution in this era. Sexual liberation has become a fact and sex has been the focus of so much popular discussion, but some people are unable to live up to the new expectations of sex and therefore they are in a predicament. Talking about sexuality may not be intrinsically more liberating than silencing it. The prevalence of the Chinese sexual discourse about harmonious sexual lives in relation to satisfactory marriages further assures us of such a dark warning.

In this chapter, I have highlighted the implication of China's sexual revolution for a group of Chinese individuals with perceived barriers to sexual fulfillment. This revolution has heightened people's sexual desires and pleasure, yet produced different impacts on the Chinese population. The hidden script surrounding one's inability to fulfill one's partner's sexual desire has placed constraints on a small group of people seeking out asexual marriage and limited the ways of being within a normative framework for fostering the marital bond. In my findings, my informants struggle for a "normal" expectation of sexual pleasure in intimate relationships when they cannot measure up to sexual expectations; at the same time, they are plagued by the belief that a healthy body is a sexually active one and tend to view the lack of sexual desires as a hurdle to intimacy in an accusatory tone. The discourse of harm and the assumed precondition of sexual intimacy for marital happiness are embedded in the interview narratives. All these demonstrate the respondents' frustration in not being able to conform to the expectations in a society with an unrelenting emphasis on sex in marriage.

To recap, the social implications of China's sexual revolution are that the way of

interpreting intimate life in terms of sexual imperative within a heterosexual, monogamous marriage has created a hard reality among people with sexual impediments.

## Chapter 5:

### Seeking Companionship without Sexual Strings Attached on WX920

On the top of the homepage, an eye-catching placard saying “people can depend on each other through thick and thin; asexual marriage is equally meaningful” (风雨同舟 携手人生 无性婚姻 同样精彩) has often been displayed on the asexual marriage broker website of WX920, with the feature of a romantic picture of a Chinese man and woman. Given the growing expectations of sexual pleasure, this online marriage broker for asexual marriage serves as a haven of intimate attachment and feeds the hope for romantic partners among a particular group of Chinese individual with a deficiency of sexual desires.

This chapter will explore the idealized version of a couple’s relationship through examining the subjective meaning of asexual marriage and proforma marriage among the WX920 members. Quite often, my respondents desire a lifelong relationship with an emphasis on affection, assuming that this would provide them with stability, security and continuity of family life. Particularly, this is manifested in the way individuals advertise themselves online through the column of “True Confession”, which provides opportunities for members to spell out their specific criteria of mate selection as well as narrate their own story, so as to attract prospective spouses. This column of member’s display offers a valuable starting point for analysis of the imaginings of asexual marriage in addition to providing grounds for understanding intimate life that is contingent upon the pursuit of affective bond. Similar expectations can be found in the discussion about proforma marriage as most respondents emphasize the prominence of affection.

## **Part I - Pursuit of Affective Love in the Imaginings of Asexual Marriage**

Regarding the emerging trend of intimate life, there is a romantic revolution taking place in China and this has led to greater spousal choice and an attendant emphasis on romantic love, which has occupied an important place in courtship (Yan 2003, 2009). Premarital sex and sexual intimacy contribute to the development of romantic love. It is worth noting that sexual love (*xing'ai*) has taken hold under China's sexual and romantic revolution and the notion of love has a distinctive connotation of sex (Zhang 2011). In the following, those people with sexual deficiency, however, opt for a different kind of love that is affection-based in their pursuit of asexual marriage. Their notion of love is conceptually closer to that of sentiment or affect, which clings to a hope of being close to, and having reciprocal care and mutual appreciation in a relationship. In other words, their narrative undermines the dominant discourse of sexual love and opens up a broader definition of romantic love in terms of affection.

### ***From Sexual Love to Affective Love: A Shifting Rhetoric of Love in the Asexual Partnership***

This section provides an overview of the rhetoric of love informing asexual marriage among my respondents. There were quite a number of members sharing the feeling of grasping a glimpse of hope for a marital partner through WX920 and most of them had a burning need for romantic love with intense sentiment. They reconstructed the notion of romantic love beyond a sexually charged connotation and focused instead on affection. For example, despite his sexual impediment, *delight's* true confession explicitly articulated a wish to have a romantic partner and he pinned his hopes on finding a "warm love" on WX920:

*"I am a positive, sincere boy and I had a broken marriage before. Because of my*

*sexual impediment, I hope to find a similar person who yearns for romance and family. At times, I think it is unfair that I cannot enjoy a blissful family just as ordinary people. Fate plays cruel tricks and we are deprived of the right of love. We seem to suffer a fate that can hardly reverse. Still, my hopes for love and family are not dashed. I am hoping that I can find a warm love here.” (delight, male, 28; True confession on WX920)*

As seen in the above-stated true confession, despite the fact that *delight* suffered from a sexual impediment and had a bitter feeling of losing the right of love, namely sexual love, he did not lose hope of embracing a kind of love that was more about sentiment or affect: It was the “warm love” that was seemingly important to him. During the interview, he laid emphasis on sentimental attachment and was longing for a warm home that he and his partner could support and care for each other. He wished to develop such a partnership that was no different from a conventional family.

With a low sex drive, *seeking-sexless-true-love* also has the ideals of affective love when sexual intimacy was hardly accessible. As her net name indicated, she was eager to seek for a purely sexless marriage with true love inside. Her true confession revealed her emotional state of loneliness that was beyond description and she showed a dream to pursue an asexual relationship on the website, so that she no longer found herself alone. She described a romanticized picture of life while awaiting her future partner and spoke about a wish to experience affective love with a companion in an ideally platonic relationship:

*“Being sexless is my highest standard of true love. I pursue a platonic, equal relationship. I like daydreaming and watching ancient dramas. I once imagined that I*

*was dressed like a fairy, listening to music and living peacefully; I also vehemently dance in front of the mirror without tiring out. But all these are the leisure on my own. I hope to have a dance of love with someone in the not too distant future. Hope that you are my other half!” (seeking-sexless-true-love, female, 23; True confession on WX920)*

In fact, the romantic revolution signposted China’s “intimate turn” that illuminated the important changes in the individual experience of private life. This revolution allowed for a more open expression of romantic love and the pursuit of love was of great significance for Chinese individuals. Those individuals who were incapable of romantic talk face difficulties in finding a partner (Yan 2003, 2010). As shown above, a capacity for romantic love could be seen in the ways my respondent spoke of her affection to convey her romantic desires. On top of this, her net name of *seeking-sexless-true-love* showed an explicit expression of romantic feelings and her aspirations to lead a full and happy life with a strong belief in love. This reflected some of the trends associated with China’s romantic revolution.

Another example could be seen in the poetic true confession of *sincere heart*. He looked for a pure love that was built on the heart-to-heart exchanges of partners and hoped to experience such a romantic life with someone in his lifetime:

*“I walk alone most of the years. Perhaps I can find a person here and I can hold her hand forever. We go to see the sunrise and sunset, listen to the tidal currents in the seashore and enjoy the scenic beauty in the desert. We have fun and grow up together...” (sincere heart, male, 38; True confession on WX920)*

*simple love*'s case was a typical example of emotional expressivity. He showed a great expressivity of love when he once met a potential partner on WX920. His romantic involvement demonstrated an ability to communicate his affection to the opposite sex:

*"I think she's gorgeous. She's a teacher who sings very well and has a positive outlook. We get to know each other through webcam... Just at Christmas a year ago, I hoped to give her a gift. I made a video and designed a slide show with subtitles and music. She was so touched when she received this on the Christmas day. It took me several days to finish it and I hardly believe that I'd make such a huge effort, maybe I really have a kind of good feeling to her."* (*simple love, male, 23*)

In addition, some respondents showed a reflexive engagement with the notion of love and tended to account for a prominence of the affection-based love over the sexual love in their narration of romantic life. For example, *donkey* showed a different understanding of romantic love that was not exclusively tied to passionate, sexual love and rejected the idea of marriage as equivalent to sexual love. His account was critical of a limited understanding of love as passionate love, and his conception of romantic love pointed to a trusting relationship with the partner, which was constitutive of a true love in an asexual marriage:

*"I think marriage is not equal to sex. The sentimental attachment and care are the most important. Don't you agree that asexual marriage can be a happy one? My point is that, we always mix passionate love with romantic love. Passionate love is more about the excitement stimulated by biological elements, while romantic love is a trustful relationship on the basis of sincerity and responsibility that can have no correlation with something about sex. Asexual marriage doesn't mean an impossibility*



*of true love. Two persons can still fall in love even if there's a lack of passionate love." (donkey, male, 33)*

*peaceful heart* also affirmed the importance of affection-based love and perceived that affection was the single most important component within an asexual marriage. He problematized the pursuit of sexual love by saying that sex was somewhat an attributing factor of a deteriorating relationship:

*"When there's no sex, affection is good enough. We wholeheartedly take care of each other in our life. Sex doesn't mean affection; ironically it's sometimes a source of emotional estrangement. I'm seriously looking for my partner, who is the one and the only one." (peaceful heart, male, 28)*

Similarly, *GZPANG2* as an infertile woman showed her preference of love based on the affect or sentiment and she perceived that affection in a relationship could transcend the pursuit of sexual happiness. Despite a lack of sexual love, she was convinced that a couple was capable of reaching a mutual understanding by offering each other emotional support given the fact that they both had sexual dysfunction. With the presence of mutual affection, they could get along well and remain close to each other:

*"A true affection can make two persons get close to and depend on each other without complaining. We are proud of one another and life becomes more colorful. I think that's beyond sexual pursuit." (GZPANG2, female, 25)*

As seen above, a distinctive pattern of a shifted emphasis of romantic love as

affection-based love can be noted. In this era, romantic love has become a new discourse of interpersonal relationships which marks a clear shift from the Maoist era and it is mostly a sexually charged notion (Zhang 2011). To date back, love as a phase exclusively referring to romantic love was accomplished until after the May Fourth movement in 1919. Before this movement, the relationship between husband and wife was defined by mutual gratitude and appreciation (Pan and Huang 2011). After the Communist Party took power in 1949, love began to be modified by terms such as *revolutionary* so as to stress the proper link between passion and collectivism in the Communist ethos, with a meaning of one's dedication to the Party, Socialism and the Party leader. A resurfacing of the discourse of romantic love has been witnessed at the beginning of the reform era in the late 1970s and this follows a rise of the discourse of sexual love (*xing' ai*) further into the economic reform era. Today, the word "love" has come to be more closely connected to the concept of sexual love as a popular term for sexual relationships in the new millennium. In the findings, my respondents, however, displace a sexual focus on romantic love while the pursuit of the affect or sentiment has become important in these individuals' lives. In a sense, their narration allows for a broader scope of understanding romantic love.

### ***Rolling Out Affection-based Ways of Living in the Asexual Marriage***

In the previous section, I have outlined a prominence of affective love in the pursuit of asexual marriage among my respondents. This section will focus on how they realize this goal in different ways. Without conventional scripts that informed the practice of asexual marriage, they actively construct their own expectations of a fulfilling relationship without sex. Built on the ideal of affection, my respondents' account shows a strong emphasis on commitment, care and emotionality to live out an asexual partnership. Others also devise meaningful practices of intimacy in an attempt

to build a close relationship with their possible partner. Some of these understandings of the couple relationship draw attention to a salient trend towards an individualistic organization of intimate life, namely a reflexive engagement with different cultural logics of intimacy to account for and manage their respective experiences and practices (Nehring 2011, 2012).

For some respondents, it was not difficult to grasp the concept of affection in an asexual marriage. For example, *holding-hand-and-smiling-together* said that he could still pursue a true love, despite the fact that he was deprived of sexual fulfillment. To him, love in an asexual marriage is simply a matter of being a committed partner and he perceived that a deep sense of serious commitment would earn the partner's understanding in return:

*"I can be considerate, caring and thoughtful of her. I treat her well wholeheartedly. I can work on this in many facets of daily life. Say, when she's off duty, I'll greet her warmly and serve her a glass of water. When she's tired, I'll finish all the domestic chores. When she's on holiday, I'll go shopping with her. When she's cold, I'll hug her. When she sleeps, I'll keep the blanket warm for her. All these might not be enough, but I think she can sense my sincere love when I show a genuine devotion. We are human beings with the emotion."* (*holding-hand-and-smiling-together*, male, 22)

*peaceful heart* also highlighted that commitment to the partner was an organizing principle of experience and practice within an asexual marriage, like providing companionship, emotional support and trust. His account of true confession was characterized by an ongoing effort to maintain a lasting affective bond with his partner:

*“Everyone will gain and lose something in his life, but he still needs to commit himself...Many people on WX920 lose the entitlement of ordinary people, yet they are concerned about affection. Let spend more time on the partner, though it is impossible to spend 10 hours a day together. If two persons are at times not together, dialing a number or sending a message shows plenty of love and warmth. This means a happiness of two hearts. Giving my partner the freedom and trust is a necessity. The more the empathy and tolerance, the less the quarrel and impatience. Hope to hold your hands and walk together till the end of life.” (peaceful heart, male, 28; True confession on WX920)*

During the interview, *peaceful heart* talked about his exclusive attachment to his partner. To foster the intimate bond, he would try his best to meet the expectations of his partner and spend a significant amount of time to care for her. He was convinced that an inadequate commitment could bring about emotional estrangement. If this happened unfortunately, he said that he would not blame her but give her the freedom to walk out on him or stay with him.

*seeking-sexless-true-love* elaborated on the ways of developing an affectionate tie with an asexual partner. On her WX920’s blog, one can see her ideal relationship would mean that “each one lives freely, provides romantic surprise and shelters one from the storm”. Since she was a tidy person, she hoped that her partner could complement her in doing housework so that they could feel a sense of belonging to their home. On top of this, she was aware that intimate attachment needed to be balanced against the need for individual autonomy and she would avoid intruding on her partner’s personal space. She also had an all-encompassing notion of love by

saying that she was willing to look after her partner's parents.

In fact, some respondents also said that the end result of asexual marriage would be a family-like relationship. Within an asexual partnership, they perceived that the marital bond would naturally turn out to be a relationship characterized with a family bond and the couple would grow up as members of family out of affection. For example, thinking about the practice of asexual marriage, *XQJ* said that the romantic tie would evolve into a family-like relationship:

*"I think the destination of love is family bondage. Have you ever heard that family bondage is the destiny of romance? I read this from a book and it sounds so true."*  
(*XQJ*, female, 21)

In a number of instances, traveling with the partner was seen as an ideal lifestyle of maintaining an asexual marriage. The travelling experience was a new bourgeois leisure that opened up opportunities for a kind of cosmopolitan lifestyle among upwardly mobile individuals in China. Such a preference was also shared by my respondents with a middle income background. For example, *spy* articulated that emotional support served to cement a long-term intimate attachment in an asexual marriage and he further perceived that going on a trip could spice up the couple's lives:

*"Asexual marriage is built on emotional support. Taking a trip and enjoying the scenery can foster the bondage. Well, the difference between asexual marriage and conventional marriage is to use emotions to compensate for a lack of sex and downplay its undesirable effect, so that the partner still feels warm and lives happily"*

*in everyday life.” (spy, male, 27)*

*simple love* also envisioned a fulfilling partnership between two asexual persons in the presence of love and hoped to strengthen the emotional bond by travelling around with his partner:

*“When it comes to having an asexual marriage, there’s still love inside. We can travel around together and it’s just like the condor heroes (神鵰俠侶) depicted in the novel. A wonderful feeling indeed. Of course sex is a God-privileged gift for humankind, but I’d say asexual marriage has its own uniqueness and perhaps draws the two hearts more closely.” (simple love, male, 23)*

*simple love* perceived that traveling would bring them enormous enjoyment that was akin to the wedded bliss in the novel. He seemed not to feel a great loss within an asexual marriage. Rather, he believed that the common background of sexual deficiency could put the couple in closer contact than ever, when the partnership was anchored in a sense of mutuality.

Apart from travelling, some respondents also explored other forms of intimacy not consisting of sex. For example, *GZPANG2* stated that the couple could have a certain degree of physical closeness by practicing what she called “marginal sex”, such as hugging and kissing. Przybylo (2011a, 2011b) noted that some asexual individuals might derive pleasure from pursuing an interest in kissing, cuddling, holding hands or relating to others in non-physical ways, thus complicating the understanding of sexuality. *GZPANG2*’s preference indeed rendered alternative to different expressions of intimacy and provoked a rethinking of which was commonly understood in our

culture as the most intimate and pleasurable act, namely coital sex. In addition, GZPANG2's idea of "marginal sex" was indicative of the notion of "alternative sex intercorporeality" (Zhang 2003), which pointed to an understanding outside the phallogocentric framework of sexual desire and pleasure. As opposed to the male tendency to focus on sexual pleasure, alternative sex intercorporeality represented a broader sense of women's desire and happiness which was integrated into both women and men's pursuit of pleasure.

dd7345's view was also resonant with the notion of alternative sex intercorporeality. He was against the narrow focus of sexual intimacy on intercourse only and endorsed other physical contacts of romantic nature as part and parcel of intimacy:

*"Broadly speaking, hugging, kissing and touching are all sexual intimacy, which is desired by everyone. It doesn't necessarily mean intercourse. I'd also say the emotional fulfillment is of top priority. Of course sex is a primary drive that cultivates love, so I don't think there is an entire lack of sex within the asexual marriage."*

*(dd7345, male 36)*

Investigating the cultural trend in the non-western regions, Nehring (2011, 2012) suggests that individuals' lives are intertwined with a range of social, economic, and cultural factors; they have exposure to different cultural logics in daily lives or normative expectations in their immediate social environment. All these are constitutive of the particular frames of reference and set of opportunities within which individuals can reflexively engage with different cultural logics of intimacy to account for and manage their respective experiences and practices. dd7345's actually questioned the centrality of sex as the only form of intimacy in our culture and incited

a reflection of other possible expressions of intimate practices.

## **Part II – Two Sides of the Same Coin: Orientation to Affective Bond in the Proforma Marriage**

This section elaborates what informants revealed on the aspect of proforma marriage associated with the need for affective bond. Literally, proforma marriage (*mingyi hunying*) means a marital union in form only and can be practiced by people with all kinds of sexualities and intentions, although it usually refers to a marital alliance conducted between a gay and a lesbian under the pressure of marriage. There is only a limited body of literature investigating the emergence of this partnership in Chinese society. For example, Luo (2012) discusses the case of “functional marriage” with gays and lesbians (another term for “proforma marriage”) by focusing on how Chinese family exerts influence to make its adult children conceal their homosexual identity and engage in this marriage and how children respond to the family surveillance while performing functional marriage. Kam (2013) also documents that some lesbians in urban China opt for a “cooperative marriage” with the gay men in order to deal with family pressure for marriage. They perform a heterosexual marriage in the public eye and live homosexually in their private life. This study will examine the issue with a slightly different focus, namely to explore the perception of people with sexual deficiency in relation to the discussion about proforma marriage revolving around the need for an affective bond. That is to suggest, whether the nature of proforma marriage is perceived as affection-based will determine one’s choice of engaging in a nominal marriage with the same-sex attracted individual among my respondents. In short, the considerable emphasis placed on affection in proforma marriage is a salient theme throughout the narrative.



### ***Refusal of the Proforma Marriage without Affection***

WX920 has featured two forms of sexless marriage – asexual marriage and proforma marriage, and a majority of my informants were not receptive to the option of proforma marriage due to a perceived lack of affection. Proforma marriage was commonly seen as a practical strategy organized between same-sex attracted individuals to pass as heterosexual couples, with a view of escaping family pressure for marriage and keeping their sexual orientation concealed, leading to what they coined “a performance without affection”. My respondents perceived that most Chinese homosexuals who opted to marry were trying to succumb to the pressure for marriage so it was pointless in getting married and deceiving others. For example, *kellychen* held a negative view of proforma marriage with a gay person where one felt pressurized to get married out of self-interest. She also stated that a loveless relationship was even worse than one that did not depend on sexual relations and subsequently she was reluctant to commit herself to a marriage in form only:

*“For proforma marriage, those people just make an excuse for satisfying the parents’ desire and live a separate life after marriage. Marriage without sex is fine, but love is a must. Two persons ought to be sincere and treat each other like family members. They can’t get married for the sake of marriage itself. Otherwise, it’ll be better to be a single. My parents are open-minded and don’t push me hard for marriage. So, I need not form such a marriage... To me, marriage is a family home and I’m reluctant to accept a proforma marriage.” (kellychen, female, 32)*

As seen above, affection was highly valued and expected by *kellychen*. She recognized clearly that a marriage involved the pursuit of love and family formation. She was also free of marital pressure and this further made her hold to her belief that

love was of essence in a marriage.

Similarly, *white sheep* perceived that proforma marriage was virtually a performance in front of others and distinguished between proforma marriage and asexual marriage, with the presence of affection in the latter:

*“Within a proforma marriage, two persons are just couples in front of their parents or friends, and they lead an independent living. But people really have to show a deep affection in an asexual marriage. It’s only a lack of sex between the couples.” (white sheep, female, 33)*

*white sheep* perceived that it was not possible to have committed love in a proforma marriage and she even hated meeting some gay members with a procreative motive only. What she desperately looked for the quality of partnership was the primacy of care, not reproduction. She said that love and sex were not independent of each other and without the component of love, it made intercourse and even reproduction impossible for her in a marriage. This explained why she tended to reject a proforma marriage.

*GZPANG2* also shrugged off the practice of proforma marriage because of the perceived indifference of the gay partner. She said that a gay was not romantically attracted to a heterosexual woman within marriage and this would cause a great deal of agony to the partner. She insisted that romantic feelings could not be stirred up in a proforma marriage:

*“I won’t consider a gay partner. The wives of the gay person reportedly suffer a lot. A*

*person who is not interested in you is unwilling to take care of you, even if you ask him to buy a bottle of water. There are many unsuccessful cases. Those girls who have an experience before share their story on baidu (百度). It seems that many project a very ideal image of gay partners who are disinterested in ordinary women.”*

*(GZPANG2, female, 25)*

To GZPANG2, although some homosexuals resorted to proforma marriage out of desperation, she would not accept such a partnership. At the heart of the matter was her belief that she could not achieve mutual understanding with her gay partner given that he had not endured the same sexual deficiency as her. However, she showed an adjustment of her attitude after meeting an undesirable asexual member on WX920. She complained that she often got a lukewarm response from that person and felt a sense of insecurity. She then realized that an asexual partner might not be necessarily ideal and turned to the whim of a proforma marriage. She started reconsidering the possibility of getting care and support within a proforma marriage and held a positive attitude to the practice of a sibling-like relationship. Still, she would only accept a proforma marriage when she cannot find a romantic partner who would enter into an asexual marriage with her. After all, she perceived that a proforma marriage was a less desirable preference and such a choice appeared to be a compromise between a love-based relationship and a sibling-like relationship.

Male respondents also embraced the ideal of affection when deciding whether they would accept a proforma marriage. Those individuals with sexual deficiency expressed an expectation of the emotional aspects of interpersonal relations. For example, *dd7345* set a lower priority for proforma marriage because he assumed a lack of affection in such a relationship. In a similar vein, *spring snow* refused to marry

a lesbian, even though he had a narrow range of partner choice due to his biological impediment. He made a blunt comment on a lack of romantic affection in proforma marriage:

*“I won’t accept a lesbian and never make do with this. It’s impossible to have a lasting relationship. I don’t hope to see any conjugal infidelity from each side. Do you think it’s meaningful to stay together with someone you don’t have any affection?”*  
*(spring snow, male, 25)*

Based on the above excerpt, one can see that affective tie was a prime concern for *spring snow*. As a consequence, he showed a rejection of proforma marriage with a lesbian partner. On top of it, he also raised a concern about infidelity in case his partner of the same sex had a lover outside the marriage.

In fact, an exclusive love was a recurring theme among my respondents. Some of them remained conservative when it came to tolerance of an outside partner. Although many held to more liberal and tolerant attitudes towards proforma marriage, they did not accept this kind of marriage as a path to an enduring relationship on the ground that two persons of different sexual orientations could hardly develop a committed relationship in the long run. Like *js1314*, he defined a boundary within proforma marriage. He noted that a lesbian would reserve her own personal space of same-sex relationship with others but he did not buy into the kind of love where a person had a few partners:

*“I don’t want this type of relationship. That’s not what I want. They generally need their own personal space and it’s hardly acceptable.”* (*js1314, male, 22*)

In addition, an unexpected disclosure of proforma marriage was subject to tensions and disappointments. For instance, thinking about the possibility of entering into a proforma marriage, *donkey* was well aware of an outside partner of the homosexual person. What worried him most was the possibility of his parents' discovery of proforma marriage that would upset them greatly, in particular an unfulfilling marriage with a homosexual:

*"The marriage with lesbian is unstable, cos it's easy for others to discover the relation. My parents can't really stand it. You need to be thoughtful of the parents' view. They are elderly persons and will have lots of worries. After all, the lesbian wife is not sincere in the first place cos she marries for dealing with the family pressure only. If we finally get divorced, our parents will be very upset. I don't want to see this."* (*donkey, male, 33*)

Couples in proforma marriage were usually described as sibling-like partners (Bao 2010), given that they had no interest in the other person of the same-sex and agreed to cooperate with each other in dealing with the living arrangements. However, some of my informants were skeptical of developing a family bond with a gay person and therefore such a relationship was widely believed to be an illusion. In addition, two persons did not have any blood ties in a proforma marriage, so it was literally difficult to expect a sibling relationship in real terms. *cc101* was skeptical of entering into a marriage with a homosexual and forming a love attachment or family bond. In her view, two persons could hardly forge a deep affection without a transition from an acquaintance to a close friend. She perceived that any kind of marriage was founded on a mutual understanding and communication, which did not exist in a proforma

marriage:

*“Bro- and sister coupledness within a marriage is a complete joke. They hardly build up a close tie without any difficult experience. You can’t tell the truth about their feelings. Also, family bondage is usually built on blood ties. It can’t be justified by the words only. Real siblings are likely to get into an argument with each other, let alone “siblings” in a proforma marriage.” (cc101, female, 27)*

As we have seen, the practice of proforma marriage was often portrayed negatively as a relationship without affection. Nevertheless, that was not to say the option for proforma marriage was foreclosed entirely. There was good evidence that some would accept this kind of marriage on condition that there was the presence of a caring and supportive relationship. This pointed to different attitudes towards proforma marriage and some discourses were overtly associated with the idea of love and affection.

### ***Love and Warmth in the Proforma Marriage***

The following section discussed what informants revealed in relation to how the practice of proforma marriage brought the possibilities of an affective relationship. *simple love*, a man with biological impediments, did not rule out the chance of entering into a proforma marriage. He refused to date a lesbian who wished to display a heterosexual performance for the sake of escaping family pressure, but accepted a “non-pure” lesbian with a likelihood of falling in love with someone from the opposite sex. In fact, the distinction between “pure” and “non-pure” homosexuals is unique in the Chinese context where the notion of marriage is so forceful that it exerts a huge pressure on them to get married. While “pure” or “real” homosexuals refer to those with a determination to identify with their sexual orientation, “non-pure”

homosexuals are uncertain about their sexual orientation and exhibit a temporary or futile attempt to adopt a homosexual identity and therefore, they are likely to follow the mainstream of entering into a heterosexual marriage (Fang 2004). In *simple love*'s case, he said that he would be attracted to a "non-pure" lesbian who was willing to convey a sense of care and attention to him and was able to get married as ordinary women. The following excerpt offered a glimpse of such a receptive attitude:

*"I can't predict the actual practice of proforma marriage. I'm afraid that she just puts on a show in front of the family and I can't accept the kind of marriage with lesbian in form only. But I know some lesbians dare not have romance with the girl and want a traditional family eventually. It's good if she'll care about me and I'm fine with this. Just know somebody can't really identify with their homosexual orientation on the Internet. They're willing to live in a usual way and find a person like brother... That's good enough as long as she cares you. It's much better than the passer-by in some proforma marriages."* (*simple love, male, 23*)

What is noteworthy is that, although *simple love* was aware that a "non-pure" lesbian would probably treat him as a brother in a proforma marriage, he still accepted living with her due to the care she gave him. This reflected a considerable emphasis on emotional fulfillment among the members.

Similar to *simple love*, *ghost* would not reject a sibling-like relationship within a proforma marriage even if the partner was a "pure" gay. She also did not preclude the likelihood of developing romantic love with him by saying that a human being was an "emotional animal". She perceived that the partnership was good enough as long as she could get rid of her solitude. She looked forward to having a sibling-like

coupledom with a warm, homely feel:

*“We live as if we were brother and sister. We hang out, have a tea or dine out together. Like friendship, we don’t need to weigh up gain and loss. Still, I’d say it’s sometimes more than that of friends cos siblings will be a bit closer. He can share the happiness and sorrow with me. I can be a good audience. It’s alright as long as I don’t feel a sense of loneliness. I’m so touching whenever I think of this homely picture. Well, no rule tells that a home must have a husband and a wife only. We can have a sister, a brother and even a brother’s partner in a household. It’s even better to have one or several dogs. We can walk the dog together on occasion.” (ghost, female, 23)*

*ghost* projected a distinctive picture of family life which was not restricted to a husband-wife relationship and the one with blood ties. Her definition of family included a person in a relationship involving emotional connections and daily care, as well as the intimate others like the “brother’s partner” (the partner of her gay partner) and the pet. Her concept of family expanded the definition of kinship and showed what Cherlin (2010) described the “created kinship” where people constructed their kinship ties actively that are not necessarily blood-based, such as friend-based support networks among lesbians and gay men in Western countries. In short, *ghost* was convinced that such a sibling-like relationship could give her a huge sense of comfort and satisfaction.

Realizing the difficulty of finding a partner due to sexual impediments, *spy* was willing to enter into a proforma marriage so long as affection was present in the relationship. He expressed a desire for a caring partner, a commitment and a willingness to develop a couple relationship with the homosexual partner. Since there



was no actual relation except for the relation of husband and wife in law, “couples” in proforma marriage could either choose to live together in their own apartment or live independently up to mutual consensus (Fang 2004). Still, irrespective of whether they live together or apart and even the presence of an outside partner, *spy* was determined to sustain a close relationship in different ways. What he eagerly looked for was tender loving care in the proforma marriage:

*“Well, it’s difficult for me to find a partner and I really hope to have someone who cares about me. Even if the lesbian has a partner, it’s alright as long as she thinks of me from her heart. I want to have a partner who always cares about me, no matter we live together or separately. If we live together, I can hug her every night when I sleep. Sleeping alone is not good. If we live apart, we can still take care of each other, say, stay in contact or visit each other from time to time...It’s more than a friendship and I devote my love, energy and responsibility to her, even though she has an outside partner.” (spy, male, 28)*

As the above-stated excerpt showed, *spy* made a very transgressive choice, but a fully informed one. Being a heterosexual man, he was willing to get into a marriage with a lesbian even if she had a partner. His narrative also revealed a strong sense of attachment to a homosexual partner no matter they stayed together or lived apart, with an ultimate concern about developing a companionate relationship. He even revealed that he would make his commitment to his partner – both emotionally and financially – beyond the factor of sexual orientation.

As a heterosexual, *mulin2* was a female respondent who succeeded in finding a gay partner unintentionally on WX920. Initially, she was driven to WX920 because she

feared any sexual advances of men in previous relationships. *mulin2* was satisfied with the current relationship with her gay partner who relieved her of the abuse of sexual relations and more importantly, showed her much affection. She recounted,

*“I feel a great affection for him and he treats me well in daily life. This is something subtle, say, he always respects and cares about me. He doesn’t do something special, but I like a partner who loves me little and loves me long.” (mulin2, female, 26)*

Despite the fact that his partner had a homosexual orientation, *mulin2* was attracted to him and they enjoyed the moment of chatting, shopping, reading books and having meals together. She also found his expression of relating comfortable, like hugging her whenever they met and saying goodbye to her. She described her relationship with him as a mutual attraction on a spiritual level. She once struggled to choose a gay partner for fear that he would fall in love with someone. Yet, she reasoned that her gay boyfriend was not promiscuous and had a healthy lifestyle with a range of hobbies. He also agreed not to find a homosexual partner anymore. In this way, she found him reliable and was prepared to enter into a proforma marriage with him. She justified her choice with a sense of humor:

*“Every decision involves risk-taking. Who knows a marriage with a straight won’t bring about an extramarital affair?” (mulin2, female, 26)*

## **Summary**

To sum up, it is worth noting that the ideal of affective love serves as a key ingredient for a marital alliance. There is also a notable affinity between the respondents’ narratives and the current model of individualization of intimate life, with an

emphasis on the autonomous and reflexive construction of individual life plans. Regarding the practice of proforma marriage, this relationship strategy has its root in the negotiation of reconciling personal same-sex desires with the normative social pressure in the face of the pervasive significance of marriage. The above cases indicate that this kind of marriage is open to mixed sexual orientations but not just confined to a single orientation such as the homosexual one, thereby enabling asexual respondents to meet the ideal of affective love through this marital practice.

## **Chapter 6:**

### **Individualization of Family Life among Asexual Individuals**

This chapter will explore the important changes that are occurring within the family, in relation to the rise of the individual in China. In the first section, I use familism as a point of entry for comprehending the transformation of family relations, by examining how my respondents make sense of the issues and ideas about marriage. It is found that the family has increasingly assumed an emotional unit of importance for young people, through the deep care and affection of everyday practices. Yet, this is not to suggest that the influence of familial normative constraints disappear entirely. Some respondents are to a certain extent under family pressure, but they negotiate their personal needs with the wellbeing of the family through opting for a marriage in form only. Their account points to the changing concept of familism as a negotiated, contested one, in which individual autonomy is compatible with filial relationships.

In the second section, I focus on the development of a conjugal relationship among asexual individuals, particularly in the aspect of mate choice and reproduction. While a traditional Chinese family downplays the importance of conjugal intimacy over the domestic sphere, it can be seen that a couple's relationship now features the centrality of family life and the horizontal conjugal bond has replaced the vertical parent-child relation as the relational centre of gravity. It is worth noting that practices of reproduction are manifested in various forms among my respondents and the change in concept of reproduction is closely associated with a rising awareness of individual emotional fulfillment. In short, my findings are suggestive of a growing focus on individual desires and interests, and the emotional self-fulfillment appears to be a defining core of the individualizing discourse, as reflected in both parent-child relationships and reproductive issues.

## **Part I – Family as an Emotional Unit and Negotiated Familism in the Shaping**

### ***In the Aspect of Marriage Decision: Family as an Emotional Unit of Importance***

Among those WX920 members, it is not surprising to note that many of them register as subscribers on the website with a deep concern for the parental expectation of marriage, alongside their desires for personal relationship. For them, looking for a partner is in part to allay the great anxiety of their parents over their future dependence. For example, the following narrative of *wind*'s true confession typically shows my respondent's understanding of his parents' worry and his strong emotional tie with them. It is also noteworthy that the parents hardly use any regulative means to subjugate the child's will. Rather, the influence of parents is manifested in a subtle way, namely the emotional tie with the child through deep care. The emotional dependence on parents is further stirred up in *wind*'s case when the parents dote on the child by allowing him considerable freedom of choice without much interference and this makes *wind* harbor a sense of gratitude towards his parents. His account is emotionally attached to his parents and this serves as a horizon of meaning in the pursuit of an asexual marriage:

*"I am a man with sexual impediments, but I look for a happy marriage. I am anxious about my marital future when I see many friends get married and my parents worry about me...I hope to comfort my parents and those relatives and friends. In particular, I do not want to see my mom's worrying face and my dad's blank expression anymore. I also do not want to see them being disappointed by my single status whenever I return to my homeland at spring festival. {My parents are kept in the dark about my condition. They do not coerce me to find a partner, but allow me to find my partner freely.}" (wind, male 30; True confession on WX920)*

As the above excerpt of “worrying face” and “blank expression” showed, it seems that relative silence from the parents is no less significant than the verbal nagging generally experienced by adult children. This kind of invisible pressure somewhat exacerbates a sense of shame among my respondents.

*little pig*'s account similarly shows how the effect of parents' silent anxiety stirs up a powerful moral sense of filial responsibility. It is clearly seen that he exhibits an individual pursuit of asexual marriage to meet his parents' expectations:

*I want to get married with the right person. I don't rely on feelings now, just hope that my parents don't worry about me anymore...It'll be my benming nian (a life cycle of every twelve years; 本命年) next year. I'm fine with being single, but it'll let my parents down even though they don't talk about this. When parents can't see their child get married in life, that's unfilial (爹媽養兒不成家不孝). They will be worried sick until the day I get married. (So you marry for the sake of parents?) I'd say I look for a companion as well. I hope someone can hug me so that I'm no longer alone. I'm an introverted person indeed.” (little pig, male, 23)*

A strong sense of emotional attachment with parents is significantly found among my respondents of only-child generation. In relation to their only-child status, they seem to be attentive to a special nurturance to their family and demonstrate a remarkable sense of filial piety. For example, *polo* wished to pursue an asexual marriage given his congenital disease of Klinefelter syndrome (someone suffering this syndrome is unable to give birth to a child). He revealed a deep concern about the social pressure faced by his father, as a result of his only-child status without offspring:

*“My illness is not curable. This is not only me who suffer, but my parents are also extremely upset. My condition is really a bitter experience to my parents. They can’t give utterance to this with their friends...Especially for my father, he’s almost eighty years old. Many friends of his generation have already got great-grandchildren. He faces huge pressure.” (polo, male, 36)*

Similarly, *pc520* was emotionally attached to his grandmother who had reared him since childhood. In view of the fact that his ailing grandparent had a strong desire for a grandson’s wife, he found it difficult to meet her high expectations of him. Such a sentiment was further reinforced by an only-child status. He felt obliged to get married for the sake of his grandmother’s happiness:

*“My grandma is getting old. I feel upset that she hasn’t got a chance to have a grandson’s wife. I’m really sorry for this. Sometimes, she says she’s so old when I phone her. At that time, I try to hold back my tears. She’s the one who raised me and she had an operation last year. I am disappointed in myself. You know, I’m the only male descendant in my family.” (pc520, male, 22)*

In fact, *pc520*’s grandmother implicitly exerts the pressure on marriage by implying she was old enough to wait for a grandson’s wife. This indicates that the regulative element of family has not faded away entirely. Rather, it takes the form of emotional tie with the individual through deep care. In my findings, the continued influence of family is usually seen in the parents’ frequent nagging or close attention to the child’s marital prospect. Many respondents are motivated to enter into an asexual marriage on *WX920* on the grounds that their parents have been nagging them to find a partner or spouting about the marriages of others. In response to this undue pressure, some

tend to keep a distance from their family through geographical mobility, like in *mrdu*'s case:

*“I have graduated for three years in Hubei. My parents have been expressing considerable concern about my marriage these two years. Because of this pressure, I work in Guangdong and dare not return to my homeland on spring festival...” (mrdu, male, 26; True confession on WX920)*

Still, *mrdu* did not give up hope in finding a partner in order to fulfill the familial expectation of marriage. He hoped that his parents could brush off the unpleasant remarks arising from his unmarried status.

As seen above, the family as a salient unit of emotional importance runs through the narratives of many of my interview subjects. Still, there are also cases in which the respondents rely on the economic support from the family to cure their sexual problem through medical treatment, while not disclosing their plan to recourse to an asexual marriage on WX920. In this way, they manage to pursue their self-interest at the same time this reflects that the economic dependence is associated with their articulation of individual needs and desires. Far from being downplayed under individualizing trends, it can be seen that the family somewhat takes on an important role in the form of both serving as the economic and emotional pillar of support.

### ***Negotiated Familism: A Marriage in Form only as a Compromise between Family Expectation and Self-fulfillment***

In my findings, some respondents deployed a strategic way of entering into a marriage in form only when they were confronted with the marriage pressure from their family.



A number of asexual individuals held a different understanding of personal life and were less than enthusiastic about the idea of marriage. Nevertheless, family constituted a unit of meaning in terms of emotional importance and therefore, they attempted to pursue their personal goal without putting aside a filial sensitivity to the familial expectation of marriage. This study points to the salience of “negotiated familism” that serves as a distinct model of individualization developed in the non-western context (Nehring 2011). That is to suggest, family control had taken place not without contestation. Instead of a radical confrontation with the family, some of them subscribed to “a marriage in form only” in an attempt to accommodate their personal needs without suspending a desire for nurturance to parents. After all, “negotiated familism” provides a framework for us to understand the contestation of the individual as a salient aspect in family relationships, particularly in light of the continued presence of family control.

For example, *leaf* spoke of his pursuit of a marriage in form only to conform to filial reciprocity. He had a limited sex drive and was comfortable with staying unmarried. He revealed that he yearned for an alternative way of life not based around sexual desires and was critical of societal norms of marriage. However, he was aware that a life without marriage remained unthinkable as a socially recognized form of lifestyle and would exert huge pressure on his family, especially he found himself unfilial to make parents keep worrying about his unmarried status. In order to save his parents from social pressure and anxiety, he opted for a marriage in form only on WX920, irrespective of the partner’s sexual orientation. His account was indicative of a filial sensitivity accompanied by the individual notion of self-fulfillment:

*“I didn’t intend to marry originally but I hope to give my family at least partial*

*fulfillment. Well, the society will label people quite often. I'm suitable for an independent life, or living with someone who shares my belief. I don't pursue an excessive lifestyle and want to find my real self. I'm frustrated by some societal norms that problematize my lifestyle. It's alright to have a simple life and I seek to trivialize everything, including sex or something else. I look for a marriage in form only, although it's typically defined as a gay and lesbian marriage. I've specified my condition on the website. I hope to show the marriage certificate to my parents, so that they have a "normal" life. Not only I suffer the social pressure, my parents are also under severe pressure. Even if I get my desired life, my parents still suffer." (leaf, male, 23)*

As the above excerpt disclosed, *leaf* acknowledged the duty he owed to his family and attempted to accommodate his ideal lifestyle within a marriage in form only. He once considered leaving behind his family and becoming a monk, but he finally decided to enter into a marriage and succumb to family pressure, in order to minimize disruption to his family under the social pressure. He was responsive to the need of his parents and at the same time, he hoped to realize a personally chosen goal in a nominal marriage with a similar person as a passive resistance.

As a woman with frigidity, *ghost* had a thought of marriage as a bondage and accepted a single life, yet she was acutely aware of parental anxiety of her wellbeing. Her mother showed great concern about her marital prospect and even demanded that her daughter had to get married by next year. *ghost* revealed,

*"It's a great pity that children are always a big worry of parents. I don't want to let my mother know my real thought. I don't want to upset her and that's why I go to*

*WX920. I guess this will make her feel better at least on the surface. My mother says a girl should settle down in a marriage. If not, nobody will take care of me whenever I'm sick. I'll also become lonely when I get old. She doesn't want to worry about me after death. I've conceded to her marital arrangement finally, yet I'll choose the partner on my own." (ghost, female 23)*

In fact, *ghost* had a plan of entering into a marriage in form only with a gay person because of her passionlessness and more prominently, her special interest in Boys' Love comics (a genre of male-male romance narratives aimed at the female audience). Her interest gradually made her have sympathy for male homosexuals. In view of the relative intolerance of homosexuality in society, *ghost* felt that a mission of her life was to help gay couples, so that they could free themselves from the trammels of prejudice in mainstream society. She said that she lacked sexual desires and aspired to a family-like relationship. Even though she was not a homosexually identified person, she found it acceptable to engage in a marriage in form only with a gay person, while articulating her need of satisfying both the familial expectation of marriage and her personal desire of gay-right cause. She strived to live independently after marriage and wished to adopt an orphan at a suitable time. Only when her mother visited them, she and her partner would put on a show of being a normal couple in front of the family. She hoped to live away from day-to-day intervention of her family and decided to leave her hometown for an independent life when she settled down in a marriage. To realize this goal, she would adopt a preemptive strategy by getting married first and informing her parents about it later. To recap, *ghost* was acutely aware of parental anxiety through the everyday language of love and care, yet her account revealed her desire for autonomy by actively constructing her own ways of personal life in a marriage in form only.

Based on the above, all the cases show how family pressure has pushed some non-conformists into adopting a coping strategy of a marriage in form only. As Kam (2013) points out, China's changing contours of social control of sexual deviants in relation to heterosexual marital institution have manifested in the shift from a direct state control to an intimate day-to-day scrutiny executed by one's family, particularly through a compulsory system of reciprocal care and love between parents and children. Her observation pinpoints the subtle way of family control underway in Chinese society, namely one's emotional tie with parents conditioned by the institution of family. However, the process has taken place not without contestation. In the strategic negotiation of individual fulfillment with family interests, these individuals seek to arrange their lives autonomously through a marriage in form only.

In sum, my findings suggest that the controlling force in the family sphere is still a common occurrence. It is worth noting that family control is less commonly seen in the form of one's absolute obedience or adherence to parental authority, but rather the exercising of individual agency is intricately tied to an emotional attachment to the family. In addition, the controlling aspect of family also opens the door to the individuals' contestation, which constitutes a salient part of "negotiated familism". This enables them to pursue a personal life built around the notions of self-actualization and individual fulfillment, while articulating a fulfillment of family life.

## **Part II – The Rise of Conjuality and Negotiating Reproduction**

### **In Marriage and Reproduction: Changing Power Dynamics in Conjuality**

The following cases capture some of the trends associated with the rise of conjugal family in today's China (Yan 2003, 2010), particularly in the aspect of marriage and

reproduction. This change represents a shift of family's relational centre of gravity to the couple and conjugal happiness has become a crucial feature of the new way of family life that dramatically increases the power of the younger generation. The rising conjugality seemingly brings out new negotiations and contestations over the domestic sphere, and the "husband-wife" mode of association now forms the core of a family that challenges the traditional family pattern in which the "father-son" mode of association formed the mainstay of Chinese family (Yuen, Law and Ho 2004). This enables an individual to dissociate from the bondage of family intervention, when it comes to the relationship between husband and wife.

The case of *joyful life* is typical of this shift in generational power in terms of marital behavior. As a middle-aged man, he was married once and experienced a divorce several years ago. He shared that he had often come into conflicts with his previous partner because of personality clash. During the conflicts, his parents exuded a kind of sorrowful awareness of his situation, yet they never made any intervention. At most, they would express support for the couple through a phone conversation. *joyful life* explained it was the grandparents' role model that allowed their adult children a considerable degree of personal latitude and his parents followed suit. Finally, the conflicting relationship between his materialistic mother-in-law and him exacerbated the tension, resulting in his marital dissolution. *joyful life* now turned to seek for an asexual marriage in order to make life less complicated. He also exhibited a lack of sexual desire, so he opted for an asexual partner. When asked if his parents expressed any concern, he said that they would have had no objection to him dating an asexual partner, even if they were informed of this later:

*"(Have your parents known about your wish for an asexual marriage?) Not yet. Even*

*if they know about this, they won't interfere...I don't need to hide this on purpose, cos they're different from those traditional parents who have a finger in every pie. They think that when the child has grown up, they need not get involved anymore.” (joyful life, male, 45)*

As noted, *joyful life* had been enjoying a high degree of individual autonomy in his marital life and it was likely that his parents would be flexible about his choice of an asexual marriage.

As a man with sexual impediments, *spy* recently embarked on dating relationship with a younger partner and this was also indicative of a rise of youth autonomy and independence in relation to the matter of mate choice. *spy* met his current partner who was only 15 years old on the infertile women forum. He had not yet disclosed his partner choice in order not to bother his parents. Still, both *spy* and his partner appeared to take significant control of their personal decision which had a greater role than parental influence in developing their relationship:

*“My partner's parents know about our relationship. Because that's her own decision, her parents can hardly prevent her from dating someone. Their attitude is quite open-minded. As for my parents, they might think she's a bit little when they know about this. She's only a secondary school student. But if I get along with her finally, they won't have any objection even though it's likely to have a generation gap. I guess they'll worry about this, but they also hope to see their son having a companionate partner in the lifetime.” (spy, male, 27)*

As showed above, *spy's* partner was given a free rein with her romantic life when her

parents got to know about her current relationship with an older person and did not stop her from seeing him. On the other hand, *spy* highlighted that children's personal happiness was a major concern of his parents and so he was confident that he would gain acceptance for this relationship with a younger partner, given that his parents were likely to support him for the sake of his wellbeing. Particularly, he stated that his parents knew about his bodily problem and had been supportive of him throughout his adulthood.

Childbirth has occupied a prominent place in Chinese family, especially the traditional concept of reproduction for the purpose of continuity of family lineage is still evidenced today. The issue poses difficulties for asexual people. In my findings, the pressure of reproduction which confronts asexual individuals is tackled by different ways of having children, ranging from adoption, artificial insemination to natural gestation. Some are also willing to accept people who are married previously and have given birth to a child, thereby shaking off the childless status through being one's stepparent. It is worth noting that traditional norms of reproduction appear not to fade away entirely, yet the issue of choice in matters connected with reproduction has been reworked with a growing concern about individual emotional fulfillment.

For example, artificial insemination was considered a viable way of childbearing, just like in *mulin2*'s case. Currently in a relationship with a gay partner, *mulin2* as a heterosexual woman did not mind having a child within a marriage in form only. Despite her low sex drive, she did not reject the possibility of giving birth naturally after reaching a consensus with her partner:

*"I'll choose a gay who's willing to have a child, no matter through artificial*

*insemination or gestation. I prefer to give birth to a child myself, cos the process of pregnancy is wonderful. (You say it's okay to have sex for the sake of reproduction?) Sure. I guess this idea is similar to some Hindus. I'm fine with the natural way of getting pregnant.” (mulin2, female, 26)*

Another respondent *pc520*, who had a low sex drive, disclosed a eugenic concern about childrearing by looking to find the sperm bank, so as to produce a quality child. The importance of eugenic fitness in reproduction had occupied a prominent place in his mind:

*“I'm afraid that my child isn't healthy enough and I think of selecting the sperm bank, so long as I find a girl who wishes to do this through a spousal relationship. If not, I consider adopting a child instead...Even though I don't have a direct blood tie with the child by using the other's sperm, the child still shares the blood tie with my wife. That's better than a complete lack of bondage and I'll treat him or her as my own child. I don't mind this if the baby is much more talented than me.” (pc520, male, 22)*

*pc520* said that the investment for a quality child was important to him. In particular, he felt inadequate about himself and wanted to fulfill his wish of reproducing a more superior child through the scientifically conducted method. His account actually mirrored some elements of the traditional concept of cultivating a talented child with high achievement in return for one's family honor. Still, this hope reflected to some extent that the continuity of the traditional ideal of quality childrearing can be relatively much easier to realize given the accessibility to modern technology.

Unlike the conventional purpose of childbearing in the past, not only the respondents



were receptive to different ways of raising a child without any blood relations, childbearing was also seen to add to one's happiness. For example, *carefree*, as an infertile woman, looked forward to a conjugal family with the presence of a child through adoption, despite the lack of a blood tie. In the narrative, she had not emphasized on a responsibility of continuing the family line, but rather she hoped to have a daughter due to a desire of communicative closeness between a mother and a daughter. In her view, a daughter's relationship with the mother would bring about a more intimate emotional bond. In line with Evans's (2008, 2010, 2012) observation about the natural positioning of women's responsibility as a mother in terms of an all-round confidant, educator and moral guide of their children in dominant discourses, *carefree* held a similar belief of motherhood. The empathetic sharing with the child appeared to occupy a prominent place in her personal aspiration and this could in itself be its own reward:

*"I plan to adopt a daughter and live happily with her. I'd say a daughter appears to be more tiexin (closer, intimate; 贴心). I like children a lot and that's why I've become a primary school teacher. Although difficulties are the expected aspect of childrearing, there're still moments of happiness. My parents probably don't have any opinion on that. Elderly people won't dislike having a grandchild. Irrespective of blood ties, children are always lovable and who won't like them?" (carefree, female, 34)*

It was commonly seen that quite a number of respondents viewed a female child equally as desirable as a male, despite the fact that most couples were restricted to have only one child under the current one-child policy in China. They articulated that the reason for having a child was more about their intrinsic interest in raising a child of a particular gender. Such a gender neutral position – an openness to both female

and male child – revealed a deviation from the traditionally held belief of the undesirability of girls – Having a son had long been valued as necessary for continuing the family lineage and linked to a traditional concept of “rearing a son to prepare for old age”.

In fact, the rising conjugality could also be seen in the aspect of the couple’s reproductive decision. For example, *donkey*’s account showed a high degree of the couple’s latitude in not conforming to the reproductive practice. Although his parents were inclined to a traditional view of having grandchildren, he stated that he valued his wife’s choice and foresaw that he and his wife’s fertility choice would probably override his parents’ wish for a grandson:

*“My dad is a bit liberal. My mom can only express her opinions and can’t exercise any power. I’ve told them that I don’t intend to raise the child. Of course, I must respect the will of my wife. If she really wants it, then I will consider it and vice versa. I guess my parents won’t force us even if we don’t have any child. They are open-minded. It won’t be a problem as long as I and my wife share the same view. I’d say my sister has already given birth to a child, it relieves me of some pressure.”*  
(*donkey, male, 33*)

Quite often, my respondents stressed the need for respecting the spouse’s wish when deciding whether to have a child and it was considered to be far more important than the traditional value upheld by their parents. This was also seen as a way to resolve differences and build up a marital life between the spouses. With a limited sexual desire, *donkey* did not wish to produce a heir and opted for a childless conjugality, yet he reiterated that he would strive to reach a consensus on reproduction with his wife,

irrespective of whether she wanted a child or not.

Similarly, with a relatively weak family influence from his widowed mother, *peaceful heart*, who had a lack of sexual desire, placed a high premium on his future wife's preference for procreation. He expressed a preference for a girl over a boy, yet his partner's decision appeared to take precedence over everything else:

*"I'm open to this (childrearing), it depends on the female's decision. To me, I won't take it for granted, though I like the child. I'd say daughter is so lovely in particular. Well, boys or girls are okay, but I don't want to be the one who makes the decision for the sake of respect. If she doesn't want a child, why I still insist? If she wants a boy, isn't it ridiculous that I opt for a girl and argue with her?" (peaceful heart, male, 28)*

Based on the above, it is seen that the familial culture seems to have less influence on decisions made in relation to marriage and reproduction than in the past, as horizontal conjugal ties have gradually replaced the vertical parent-child relationship. According to Yan (2003, 2009), conjugality has now triumphed over patriarchal family arrangements largely due to changing definitions of the ideal family and intergenerational shifts in power relations within families. He highlighted a new discourse of private affect and desire that permeates everyday life and a growing independence of younger generation from parental control over the couple's lives. My findings appear to point towards the increasing prominence of husband-wife union and to some extent capture the changes in family life characterized by a rise of autonomy among the youth, particularly in an evolving cultural context where the concept of conjugal love has become important for Chinese individuals.

Among those respondents, it is worth noting that the choice of childrearing seems to represent a turning away from the traditional concept of reproduction as a sole responsibility for family continuation and moving towards the individual-oriented vision of personal happiness arising from raising a beloved child, which reflects a parallel development of the rising individual in China. In a typical example, XQJ as an infertile woman had a strong desire for childraising and wished to adopt two children. Her personal aspiration for childrearing appeared to be part of her expectation for a fulfilling life and her true confession clearly projected a scene of a happy domestic life with the presence of children:

*“I am a kind-hearted person, yet I am destined to be infertile by fate. I love children very much. I am willing to have adoption or other medical means to raise a child...I want to set up a business with a considerate husband in future and we enjoy a tranquil life. I would also like to have a son and a daughter around and lead a life of aspiration and warmth. That is a sheer blessing!” (XQJ, female, 21; True confession on WX920)*

## **Summary**

To sum up, traditional value systems of familial culture seem not to be the only standard that guides this generation’s horizons, particularly in relation to issue of the choice of spouse and reproduction. The individual-oriented vision of reproduction has placed greater value on one’s family life, rather than adhere to the traditional norm of treating procreation as a sole responsibility for family continuation. A number of asexual respondents look upon resources in their immediate social environment to satisfy their personal desires of raising a child and it has now more to do with the individual-oriented vision of reproduction. Some respondents start to take a different

view of reproduction, and childrearing is intertwined with pursuing their individual emotional fulfillment. The emotional dimension of reproduction now has marked a clear distance from the traditional obligation that dominated procreation in the past.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion and Discussion**

This thesis presents a picture of social transformation under individualizing trends in China through the practice of asexual marriage. The rise of the individual is captured by a gradual shifting from collective-oriented interests to individual-oriented rights and choices in the aspect of one's private life, including sexual desire. The first part of the thesis demonstrates how China's sexual revolution has had a profound impact on leading one's sex life and in what ways sexual happiness is linked to one's intimate life. The sexual revolution has been progressing for years, yet this new-found openness does not mean increasing liberation and tolerance. The greater sexual freedom has yet to become synonymous with a sense of wellbeing among all segments of the Chinese population. As I have shown in Chapter Four, the discussion has highlighted how asexual individuals' feeling of inadequacy discourages them from attempting to seek a partner for marriage. The discourse of my respondents also suggests that a low sex drive or sexual dysfunction has a detrimental impact on one's relationship and most of them express deep sadness at their inability to satisfy their partner. Being an asexual person in China today seems to be difficult and painful, and some of them even have to keep their asexual condition, or what a few respondents describe the "invisible disability", a closely guarded secret.

A straightforward social implication of China's opening up of sex is at least palpable in this study: The dominant emphasis on marriage as a sexualized arrangement has led to increased difficulties for those asexual persons who desire to marry, and has consequences for how they understand themselves and their partnership. The mere fact of asexuality as a stigma cannot be understood without putting it into the wider context of China's sexual revolution that imposes a sexual order with an increased significance placed on fulfilling one's sexual desire in intimate relations: Particularly

the individual increasingly becomes a sexual subject that is obligatory to have sexual desire. In view of the asexual individuals' reality, this calls into question the narrative common amid those excited reports of a sexual liberation authorized by an emerging individualistic ethos. While open expression and fulfillment of sexual desires have become increasingly permissive in China owing to the sexual revolution, what kinds of subject are shaped on certain segments of the Chinese population is worthy of critical interrogation, and this will address the question as to whether the sexualization of China has contributed to the wellbeing and happiness of Chinese people, as raised by Zhang's (2011) recent research on the moral experience in the new China.

To take a step further, this seems to illuminate a particular mix of both liberating and constraining individualizing trends the Chinese people are facing in the present era, where ideally citizens on their own will seek for conjugal harmony through individual initiatives within a biomedical framework reminiscent of socialist modernization agenda that links one's sexual health in heteromartial context with the good of the nation as a whole. From a Foucauldian perspective of governmentality, this reveals that the gradual shift in responsibility from the state to the individual does not mean the absence of state control over the individuals, but rather a change in how the state exerts influence, particularly one that builds around the autonomy and choice of the individual. In other words, the "story" of the interviewee is best understood as recorded words produced in complex institutional and social relations, instead of extracting some simple "facts" from an informant.

Nevertheless, the second part of the thesis has shown that those informants do not lose hope of developing genuine affection when they are in search of the asexual partner on WX920. This part apparently manifests the trend in "expressive individualism"

that emphasizes developing one's feeling and connecting emotionally with a romantic partner, as many of them are concerned about how well a relationship providing the emotional satisfaction they value so highly – intimacy, love, personal commitment. Examining the imaginings of asexual marriage, some respondents explore alternative ways to satisfy themselves and their partners, by envisioning a variety of practices to realize the solidarity and endurance of marriage. These include a language of affectionate care and nonheterogential intimacy in combination with medical treatment, or an assemblage of all of the above. Noteworthy, the perspective on the non-phallogentric eroticism as a means for gaining intimacy (touching, hugging, kissing, etc) serves to reshape the current mode of intimate expressions under the sexual revolution, particularly in terms of the vagina-penetration-centred intimacy.

An affectionate basis to their marriage is similarly emphasized in their perception of having a proforma marriage, or a marriage in form only, with the homosexual partner. Some straight-identified respondents reveal a willingness to enter into a proforma marriage on the basis of affective bond and they pursue reflexive life plans built around notions of love and happiness. This demonstrates the potentially transgressive feature of contemporary marriage with varying degrees of flexibility in choosing one's partner, irrespective of the sexual orientation. The flexibility in this kind of marriage also manifests itself in Chapter Six, of which my respondents use it as an innovative solution to balance between their parents' expectations and their personal needs in a flexible partnership. In the findings, we can see the move towards individual aspiration is so complex in the Chinese context and dose not necessarily signal a break with one's family commitment but it serves to be an important context for their decisions and choice in marriage.



In the third part, I raise the concern about the changing character of family relationships, which is congruent with some studies about a general tendency towards the importance of individual emotional fulfillment as a component of personal relationships. As Chapter Six demonstrates, a softening of family attitudes is a pervasive feature of my participants' experience on the issue of marriage. The family serves as an emotional anchor that motivates individuals to renegotiate their sense of filial responsibility to their parents alongside their own desires for self-fulfillment. It is worth noting that the importance of family unit is intertwined with socioeconomic changes – The overall result of the reform in the past thirty years has limited the role of the state in the economy and the society and subsequently the family constitutes a collective of indisputable social, economic and emotional importance for the young people, thereby reinforcing the structural attachment of the individual with the family.

This study also reveals the domestic ideal of conjugality in practices and aspirations for marriage and reproduction, with the core of family shifting to a husband and a wife. The rising demands and expectations for individual autonomy and choices bear significance in my findings. In particular, this study gives an account of shifting meanings of procreation. Having children is one major aspect of life from which asexual individuals may be excluded, yet the issue of childbirth remains a normative expectation of marriage under familism. As the findings suggest, those asexual people are receptive to different reproductive possibilities of having future offspring not dependent on direct blood relations. Some discussion about reproduction features with individually oriented concerns about personal happiness and emotional satisfaction. This departs from a sole preoccupation with the traditional ideal of reproduction as lineage continuation. That is not to say the individualistic orientation signifies an entire breakaway from tradition, but it highlights the issue of a reconfiguration of

tradition, particularly the competing ideal between individuals' perceptions and traditional beliefs that is constitutive of the change in marriage and family life today.

### *Limitations and Further Studies*

Several gaps are left for further exploration. Firstly, this study has suggested that the family serves as an important unit of the individual, which is particularly tied to one's emotional importance. However, it has yet to reveal more in what ways individual autonomy remains entangled with one's family as a collective of indisputable economic or social importance in light of the recent changes in the social structure, where the individual increasingly becomes self-insufficient in a context of a state and society that lacks a robust welfare system. Due to the limitation of the research design, this study does not pay enough attention to the material dimension that is also of paramount importance in understanding the individualization of contemporary China. A comprehensive investigation into the role of the family will help illuminate a more sophisticated picture of Chinese individualism and its affinity with family members.

Significant gender imbalance arising from the one-child policy has already been part of China's reality and it is expected that more than 24 million "bare branches" men cannot find a wife by 2020 (Burger 2012). The consequence is especially acute among relatively poor and less educated single men, while educated, financially secure men will find greater opportunities to have a wife. The distinct subgroup of internet-literate asexual people in this study has a higher representation of educated, financially independent individuals than the general population. Even so, many male respondents have faced a narrow pool of partners to choose from. It is plausible to speculate that the poorer segment of the male population with much lower education levels is more likely to have a hard time competing for brides. Previous studies conducted in rural

Chinese population have shown that there exists a shortage of women for males (Li et al. 2010). It is unclear from this study how far the gap in socio-economic characteristics impacts on mate-seeking among asexual people. Based on the initial findings of this study, it is worthwhile to re-examine the trend of asexual marriage in relation to the differences in socioeconomic status and its impact on mate-seeking. This may yield insights into the issue of looming gender imbalance in China.

Most importantly, this research is a limited representation of asexual people in China. The results cannot be generalized to the asexual individuals in China as a whole, and even less to other regions of the world. Since I recruited the respondents through a random sample at the onset of the research and it occurs that my pool of research participants is mostly related to those with dysfunctional problems. Because of this hiccup of research design, my study is limited to the understanding of asexuality in neither 'descriptive' Chinese sense such as the involuntary sexlessness experienced by migrant spouses nor the Western sense - A large proportion of informants have physical or psychological dysfunction and this somewhat differs from those asexual individuals as perceived in the West. This study, therefore, should be seen as an exploratory intent rather than an endeavor to develop an analytic concept, given the shortcoming of sample selection. Nevertheless, the findings of this study focus on asexual persons who may not have been influenced by the Western perspective on asexuality. Little is known about what effects the exposure to Western understanding of asexuality has had on the preference for asexual marriage in China. To pave the way for further data collection initiatives, future researchers should investigate the interactions and linkages of asexuality in the West in relation to the development of asexuality in China.

One major shortcoming of this research includes the recruitment bias which privileges individuals who have access to the Internet. My study is confined to asexual individuals using a certain website in China. Because of this limitation, I am unable to reach a vast number of asexual people who are not users of WX920 website as well as those without Internet access. In addition, the study employs a convenience sample that recruits participants who are cooperative. This could have resulted in a selection bias and thus affects the breadth of research findings. On reflection, which groups of informants can be accessed is dependent on the researcher's positioning. As a non-asexual and geographical outsider to my informants, these identities will influence the process of interviewing. Future researchers are required to be reflexive of numerous methodological and ethical concerns in the research process, especially when one needs to gather intimate knowledge that might be difficult to obtain by researchers of a different gender, age, ethnical or sexual identification.

Another limitation of the study is that the findings only suggest the projection of asexual practices, given that most respondents were still seeking a marital partner at the time of the interview. Under a limited timeframe, it is beyond this study to offer a comprehensive account of the actual practices of family life among asexual individuals. Longitudinal studies may thereby shed light on the trajectory of asexual marriage where it is heading. Nevertheless, this exploratory study can shed light on the more general situation of asexual individuals who depend on the asexual matchmaking website to pair up with a partner. This sketches out a brief understanding of the topic, especially in light of the paucity of research on asexual people in the non-Western context.

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