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The Changes in Mainland Chinese Families During the Social Transition: A Critical Analysis

Anqi Xu^{*}
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INTRODUCTION

Modernization theory offers possible explanations for family changes related to advances in science and technology, and socio-economic development in industrial societies. Modernization impacts family structure, relationship, values and beliefs. Families become nuclear while people become mobile and the society becomes urban. Economic development provides employment opportunities outside the birthplace. Away from kinship network, a nuclear family is less influenced and controlled by elder members in the extended family in fulfilling its traditional roles and obligations (Parsons, 1943). The changes occur in all societies although they may vary in pace across societies (Goode, 1982). Modernization theory is criticized for valuing Western practices and ignoring other cultural and non-western experiences (Brugger & Hanna, 1983) and is challenged for the linear causal relationship posited between industrialization and social changes (Hareven, 1976; 2001). In spite of the criticism, widely accepted is its proposition that nuclear families increase with industrialization and urbanization. Such an increase of nuclear families has been observed in China during its current socio-economic transition (Hu, 2004; Peng & Mao, 1994; Wang, 2007).

China has seen a rapid urbanization and industrialization, and economic development since its economic reform started in 1978, first in rural and then urban areas. Chinese per capita GDP had grown 14.7 times by 2010, with at least 6% annual rate and double digits in 8 out of 22 years (NBSC, 2011). Family incomes have increased and living conditions have improved while the gap grows between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, and the coastal and the inland. China has lifted 600 million people out of poverty in the last three decades (World Bank, 2012). Around the same time, the Chinese government began to implement One Child Family Policy. Meanwhile, Chinese families have undergone noticeable changes in structure and relationship. While traditional extended families exist, there occur various forms of Chinese families, i.e., nuclear families, single-parent families, families with double income and no kid (DINKs), single person households and cohabitant households. Some scholars predict that China will follow in the footsteps of family modernization in Western industrial societies. They believe Chinese marriage and family

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have declined in importance. These changes are viewed as the weakening of family functioning (Wu & Li, 2012; Yue & Yuan, 2008), filial piety and familial collectivism, and growing emphasis on individualism and potential crisis in elderly care (Li, 2011; Meng, 2008; Sun, 2008; Wang, 2008).

Although families around the world bear many similarities in values, strengths and challenge, they all have unique characteristics shaped by their historical, cultural, social and economic context. For example, in China, individualism had been and is still seen, to a great extent, as the bad influences from the West. Pursuing personal interests is viewed negatively as selfish, irresponsible and demonstrating lack of control. This belief is being challenged during Chinese social, economic transition. The changes in the social and economic context have impacted beliefs about marriage and family, and family life practice, e.g., living arrangements and care of children and elderly. One of the many changes is abolishing the old pension system. Urban parents who expected to receive pensions provided by the workplace have found themselves dependent on their children in retirement. Rural parents do not have pensions and have to completely rely on their children for their old age. Children may become the major source of some parents' financial support. During the social and economic reform, planned economy is being replaced by a marketing economy and the old job security system is replaced by competition. All these changes have led to wealth and a dramatic improvement in living conditions and at the same time brought about uncertainty and instability in an individual and family's life. As a result, Chinese families as a life-boat have become even more important than ever for family members. With One-Child Per Family Policy, Chinese parents and grandparents become *only-child centered*. Unlike industrial countries China relies on families rather than a sophisticated social security system to care for the elderly, and values collectivism more than individualism. It does not have a governing system based on Western democratic ideology. Therefore, the transformations of Chinese families during the social and economic development may have unique patterns and trajectories. The current paper critically analyzes the studies of Chinese families over the past 30 years to understand the changes in family relationship, values and structure since the rapid economic development started. Three questions are asked: 1) Has Chinese family become nuclear in structure and diverse in form? 2) Have Chinese shifted their values from family collective interests to individual interests? 3) Has Chinese marriage declined in importance?

Has Chinese Family Become Nuclear in Structure and Diverse in Form?

Xiaotong Fei, the founding father of sociology and anthropology in China pointed out a misconception about Chinese family size and structure. On average a Chinese family in the past did not have a dozen or more but 4-6 people; nor did it have five generations living under the same roof as fictions or movies portrayed (Fei, 1981, 1982). The results from other studies consistently supported his findings (Yuan, 1991; Wang, 2002; Wang, 2003; Luan, 2006). China has conducted six population censuses since 1950. The data show that the average size of a family household was 4.33 in 1953, 4.43 in 1964, 4.41 in 1982, 3.36 in 1990, 3.44 in 2000 and 3.10 in 2010 ("China Census Data", 1982; NBSC, 2011). In addition, the 1982, 1990 and 2000 censuses revealed the nuclear family was the dominant family structure (nearly 70%). Contrary to the belief that Chinese families are big, small families accounted for up to 80% of the total household when single-person household was included (Zeng & Wang, 2004; Wang, 2006a). Can we predict that with industrialization and urbanization, China will follow the same path of industrialized countries in Europe and North America? Namely, families will become nuclear, small in size and diverse in structure, and that individual interests will precede family or collective interests.

It is too early to conclude that Chinese families will transform in the same way although the survey data show more than two-thirds of Chinese families are nuclear families and individual interests are more recognized today than ever in the past. The development and transformation of Chinese families will take a path and forms influenced by unique social, economic and cultural factors and their interactions. Hareven (2001) once said, "To me, the most important cross-cultural comparison is that the phenomena of social change that appear similar on the surface are not necessarily the same underneath. Grand social changes are mediated through local cultures" (p.35). This paper examines data related to family structure and relationship from a Chinese social, political and cultural context.

There is a discrepancy between census data and actual living arrangements suggested by the data from large scale randomly sampled surveys.

China Census data do not reflect actual family living arrangements. Instead Chinese census collects data according to *Hukou*, a registration system of Chinese residency. For a long period of time, *Hokou* served as a tool for the government to control population mobility and allocation of food as well as other public benefits. Since the economic reform, this residency control has been loosened up and people are able to move to a place where they can find a job and prefer to live. Urban residency gives Chinese families privileges in housing, employment, health care, and retirement than rural residency. Types and size of the family in residency registration can be associated with different amounts of the benefits. Families may keep the residency registry in a way that maximizes their possible benefits. This means, for example, a person may live in a household or a family may live in a place different from the place in their official registration. Large scale survey studies that used random samples found that this discrepancy was reported by 50% of the participants in Shanghai (Xu, 1995a), 45.7% in Fuzhou and 57.2% in Xiamen (Jiang, 2002). More recently over one in four Shanghai permanent residents (27.4%) and 20-25% of Beijing permanent residents did not live in the place/household where they registered for residency (Chi, 2011; Qiao, 2008; Shanghai Bureau of Statistics, 2011). These numbers did not count farmer workers and their families who migrated to big cities for jobs and a better life. One-third of Beijing population is "temporary" or "migrant." The gap between the registration and actual living arrangements is believed to be even higher among domestic migrant workers.

That one family owns multiple apartments is another factor contributing to the higher percentage of small families revealed by recent census data. The economic reform has brought wealth to many families and allowed them to afford buying apartments. Before the housing reform, urban residents rented an apartment from their employer or from the city for a token rent. The apartment was small. Housing was always tight due to the large population. Since then, housing has been privatized as a part of the economic reform. Now families can buy and own apartments. Families with means are able to buy multiple units for improved living conditions and for investment. Besides it is a Chinese custom that the groom's parents provide housing to the newly wed. Today parents in the rural area build a house for their son and those in cities buy an apartment. Most young couples own a housing unit whether or not the young couple will live separately from their parents after the wedding. Each unit is registered under one person's name as a family in residency record. Therefore, the number of families goes up and the average family size goes down while the total population (total number of people) remains the same. The census data reflect the records of residency registration whereas large scale surveys gathered the data of actual living arrangements of the families. The actual size of households in which family member function may not be small or nuclear as it appears in census records.

The extended family is the dominant family in which a Chinese family takes care of the young and the old, and the family completes its full family life cycle despite that the nuclear family is the most common form.

Family is the smallest social entity around which living activities are collectively organized for an individual member's physical and financial well-being (Fei, 1982) and more importantly for his/her emotional well-being in Chinese society. Dramatic changes have taken place in Chinese economic system and social structure in the last 30 years. However family structure has relatively unchanged. The 2006 China General Social Survey (Li & Bian, 2006) shows that over two-thirds of the families are nuclear families and one-third of them are extended families (See Table 1). The Chinese extended family takes various forms: the three-generation household, the two-generation household with one generation of married siblings, and the grandparent-headed household with parent absent, e.g., children of migrant farmer workers. Some Chinese scholars argue that the extended family is the basic Chinese family structure even if only one-third of the families are reported as an extended family (Ma, 1986; Guo, 1989, 1995; Shen, Li, & Zhao, 2009). Such an argument may be understood from three cultural perspectives: 1) The number of extended families is not shrinking with industrialization and urbanization; 2) The extended family fulfills the complete tasks throughout the family life cycle, providing the care for the young children and aging parents; and 3) Chinese nuclear families are unique in that many are not completely independent but anchored within an extended family network, and have constant physical interactions and emotional and financial exchanges with other kinship members, i.e., parent and parent-in-law families.

1) The number of extended families is not shrinking but shows the sign of growing in the process of industrialization and urbanization. According to modernization family theory, as the level of industrialization rises in a society, there are fewer extended families and more nuclear families. In the more recent 2011 China General Social Survey (CGSS, 2011)¹, when asked "Whom do you like most to live with after you are 60 years old?" only 26.8% Chinese respondents would like to live with their children. However, the data show that extended families grew gradually from 26.6% in big cities in 1982 to 34.3% nationwide in 2006 (See Table 1). A separate survey in 2007 showed that the percentage was higher in farming areas (43.3%) than in cities (30.7%). Even in the Shanghai area, the most industrialized region in China, extended families were 29% of the total families with 27% in cities and 47% in the countryside (CGSS, 2011). Today the generation of the only child who was born after the implementation of One Child Family Policy has reached the age of marriage. Studies have found that in urban areas two-thirds of married couples of the only children live with their parents (Feng, 2006) and in rural areas four out of five married couples of the only children live with their parents (Feng, 2010; Wang, 2012). Future studies should examine if lowered fertility rate and increased number of the only child contribute to edging up of the number of extended families.

2) The extended family provides the care for young children and aging parents throughout the family life cycle. The roles and functions of family members in Chinese culture are different from those in the Western culture during the family life cycle. For example, many Chinese parents believe that they are obligated to take care of their grandchildren while their sons or daughters are at work. Many young parents are also feeling more comfortable to leave their only child to their parents than leave them at a daycare center. At the same time, adult children are obligated to take care of their aging parents. Young couples may own an

¹ CGSS, 2011 was conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Sociology.

Table 1

**Overview of the Chinese Family Structure from the Large Scale Surveys in
1982, 1993-94, 1993, 2006 and 2007.**

	5-City family Study Project	National Survey		Family (CGSS) Survey in Seven Cities		Family Survey in Four Areas	
	1982	1993-1994		1993	2006	2007	
	Large Cities	Urban areas	Rural areas	Large Cities	Nation	Urban areas	Rural areas
Single-person family	2.4	3.4	2.4	1.8	3.4	5.1	2.9
Nuclear Family	68.8	74.3	74.1	68.8	63.9	68.8	55.7
Conjugal Couples only		8.4	5.1	12.1	21.2	15.9	11.7
Couples with children	66.4	61.2	65.6	54.3	35.4	47.7	41.1
Single-parent with children		1.3	1.0	0.6	3.9		
Extended Family	26.6	23.0	24.1	31.7	34.3	30.7	43.3
Stem Family	24.3	19.5	22.8	25.3	27.3	27.2	39.2
Multi-generations	-	1.2	0.5	2.2	3.2	1.1	0.1
United family	2.3	2.3	0.8	2.2	3.8	1.3	4.0
Others	4.6	2.7	1.8	2.2	1.8	1.5	0.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	4385	3577	9334	5616	3208	3432	1640
Mean number of persons in one household	4.08	3.78	4.29	3.59	5.09	3.25	

Note: “-” = N/A

Data Source: Five-City Family Study Project Group (1985). *Chinese Urban Families*. Beijing: Shandong People's Press. Shen, C. L., Chen, Y. Y., & Gao, Y. (Eds.) (2000). *The Third Survey of the Societal State of 100 counties and/or Cities*. Beijing: China Encyclopedia Press. Shen, C. L., & Yang, S. H. (Eds.) (1995). *Contemporary Chinese Urban Family Studies*. Beijing: China Social Science Press. Shen, C. L., Li, D. S., & Zhao, F. (2009). *Urban and Rural Families in Transition*. Chongqing: Chongqing University Press.

apartment and live separately from their parents after their wedding. They often move back to their parents as soon as their child was born. It has also become common that young couples drop their child at their parents' place before work and come back to their parents' for dinner after work, and then go home with their child at night. In the latter case, the family operates as an extended family in spite of the young couple living in a different apartment. Both parents and young couples choose to enjoy some privacy as well as time together, sharing resources and taking care of each other.

Chinese family development may be different throughout the family life cycle. Although Chinese individuals go through the same life stages from birth to death, a Chinese family may be viewed to begin and end with an extended family. For example, American aging parents take pride in not becoming a burden to their children. The parent-headed stem family ends when both parents deacease. Unless Chinese children have a job in another area, they live with parents and possibly grandparents in an extended family until they marry. The newly wed may continue to live with or live separately from their parents now that many Chinese families can afford buying a new apartment. The new couple is a “branch”/a part of the extended family (Shen, Li, & Zhao, 2009) even if they live in a separate apartment. Most young couples choose to live close to their parents. Upon the arrival of their child, they either move back with their parents or ask their parents to live with them if the young couple lives

and works in a different part of the country. With their child growing up, the couple may not need as much assistance from their parents and may live independently. If any parent is sick or dying, adult couples live with their parents again and become major caregivers. At this time the parent-headed step family shifts to adult-child headed step family. Chinese aging parents take pride in having children who take a good care of them (*filial piety*). Most Chinese elderly dies in an extended family. During the different stages of the family life cycle, Chinese couples and their parents live interchangeably in a joint or separate household, depending upon the needs for the caring of family members. Relationship between households within the kinship network is dynamic and interactive (Bian & Logan, 2001; Pan & Lin, 1987; Xu, 1995b). The change from nuclear to extended family is fluid and somewhat elusive.

The young and the old are more likely to live in extended families in China. Studies of both rural and urban have provided empirical evidence for such a cultural phenomenon. In Shanghai, 57.9% survey respondents live in extended families (Xu, 2001). Seventy-five percent of married couples and 85% of the only-child couples in rural Jiangsu and Sichuan provinces reported living with their parents (Feng, 2010). The Longitudinal Chinese Family Study (CPPS, 2010) shows 40% of married couples under ages of 40 in cities were living with their parents at the time of the survey (Xu, 2013). Other studies show that 40-50% of Chinese of ages 60 and above lived with their children in an extended family (Logan & Brian, 1999; Whyte, 2005). Wang (2012) surveyed rural and urban families in seven provinces and found a higher percentage, 53% urban and 67% rural parents over 65 reported living with their children. The follow two figures illustrate the changes in percentages of the extended families throughout the family life cycle (See Figure 2 and Figure 3). The older the people were and the poorer their health is, the more likely they lived with their children. Widows or widowers were more likely to live with their children (Logan, Bian, & Bian, 1998; Logan & Bian, 1999). With industrialization, job market has become competitive and pace at work has become demanding. Young couples need child care support from parents in order to stay competitive. Cutting living expenses by living with parents and sharing financial resources is essential to Chinese young couples with less earning (Xu, 2013).

3) *Chinese nuclear families are unique in that they are anchored within the extended family network, and have constant physical interactions and emotional and financial exchanges with extended family members.* Cultural and social contexts may explain the uniqueness of Chinese nuclear families. Firstly, in China, most women remain employed after becoming a mother. Young working parents need childcare and afterschool care while they are at work. Quality care is not sufficiently available in urban areas and even less available in rural areas. Quality childcare is also very expensive. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, it is customary that grandparents take care of grandchildren. Working parents would rely on their own parents for childcare to save the childcare cost. Thirdly, having only one child heightens parents' concern about child safety. Young parents of the only child may feel more at ease to know their child is in the care of the family.

Chinese population is aging. The care for the elderly is not institutionalized in China and most elderly live with their adult children, not in nursing homes (Xia, Wang, & Qin, 2013). If both husband and wife are the only-child, the couple may find themselves taking care of four aging parents at the same time. Many young and old couples choose to live in separate apartments but close to each other to benefit the convenience and mutual care (Long & Feng, 2007; Shen, 2013). Daily living activities are organized within an extended family. Many nuclear families are engaged in its daily activities such as cooking, eating, cleaning, picking up kids from school, or taking the sick to hospital, etc. Such a nuclear family also has its own

Figure 1**The Divorce Rates Across Nations from 1980 to 2011(%)**

Data sources: Calculated using data from The United Nations Population Statistics Yearbooks, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/dyb/dyb2.htm>, Japanese Population Trend Surveys <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/list/81-1a.html>, and Chinese Civil Affairs Statistics Yearbooks. China Statistics Press

Figure 2.**Percentages of Children (only-child) Living in Extended Families at Different Ages**

Data Source: China General Social Survey, CGSS2011.

space and maintains some level of independence. Therefore a Chinese nuclear family is an essential part of an extended family network within which the nuclear family members constantly interact and share resources with other members of the extended family (Pan & Lin, 1987; Xu, 1995b). Most Chinese nuclear families are not a nuclear cell completely independent of their parental families (Ma, Shi, Li, Wang, & Tang, 2011). Within this extended family network monetary and nonmonetary resources are shared frequently.

Contemporary Family Structure is Fluid and Dynamic

In classical family studies, family structure has been understood as a fixed characteristic. That is, different family structures are exclusive to each other. For example, a nuclear family is grown out of the parental family. There is a clear boundary of each family. Life tasks are organized independently around two families. When an adult child's family has to move back to parental home temporarily, it is not considered "normal," and eventually children will be on their own feet. However, it is common that contemporary Chinese families organize their living arrangements to fulfill family functions. Family development is not linear throughout the family life cycle. A nuclear family that is spun off the parent family may join it again later. In the new extended family, the head of the household can be adult children or their parents. What is unique in Chinese families is that in reality, there can be two heads of the household, both adult children or young couple and their parents or older couple. There appear to be a quiet "re-shaping" of the family or family system accompanying the social and economic reform in China. The process of reorganizations of the family is fluid and dynamic. As such, they are able to meet the needs of individual family members and balance between family and increasingly demanding work.

In the two-headed household, young and older couples while living under the same roof, they may or may not share living expenses, i.e., food and utilities, or each maintains separate finances or budgets, but only share the space, spend time together and care for each other. Another common arrangement is that young and older couples may stay in separate apartments, but join during the day and contribute to living costs while keeping other finances apart. China General Social Survey (CGSS, 2011) found that over 50% of the two-headed household families shared the dwelling but maintained their own finances.

The two-headed family does not fit the description of any conventional family form and structure. It is a new living arrangement that contemporary Chinese families have created to meet the needs of the family under the new circumstance during rapid socio-economic development. Such a family structure not only makes it possible for family members to be close and interdependent but also allows for autonomy and independence of an individual family member. It is an innovation of Chinese families to balance traditional and modern values, and adapt to the rapid changes in the social, economic and cultural context (Xu, 2001). Over time Chinese one-headed household family becomes two-headed household family with either one head/couple joining the other, the two-headed family may split again into two independent one-head household families, and these two sometimes rejoin again. The transformations back and forth are based on the needs and tasks of the two families at any stage of the family life cycle.

Below is one typical family's story to illustrate the complexity, fluidity and dynamics of reshaping. A young couple with a 2-year old child was very busy with their jobs. Parents and parents-in-law took turns to babysit during the day. Husband's parents lived close and came to the young couple's apartment 4 days a week. They took care of the toddler and cook, and usually went back to their own apartment after dinner. If they couldn't come because of

illness, wife's mother would fill in three days a week or whenever she was needed. The maternal grandmother stayed with her daughter and son-in-law while she was taking care of her grandchild. On weekends when the young couple was not busy, they would care for their own child. Sometimes either set of grandparents took their grandchild to their own apartment for a few days. Whenever the child was sick, wife's mother would stay in her son-in-law's parents' place to provide care for both the sick child and the paternal great grandmother who could not live independently. The constant shifts of living arrangements are child-centered. In residence registry, they may appear to be three independent families, a young couple with a child, an older couple with an aging mother, and another older couple. They functioned as one extended family or extended family network to meet the needs. The family boundaries are not rigid, rather temporary and transitional. They share living resources, but maintain separate family finances. Such living arrangements and family forms are seen everywhere (Shen, 2013). Child-centered, fluidity and diversity are the marked characteristics of Chinese families during the social transition.

Diverse Forms of Families Emerge and Take Small Percentages of the Population

In accompany of rapid urbanization and industrialization, a dramatic improvement in living conditions has taken place. Some families having benefited from the reform become very rich while others are disadvantaged and struggling. Children born after the implementation of One Child Family Policy have reached marriage age. Different forms of Chinese families have emerged. Although most Chinese live in nuclear or traditional extended families, an increasing number of individuals live in single-parent families and single household families, and live in emerging forms of Chinese families such as families with double income and no kid (DINK), cohabitant household and two-headed household as mentioned earlier, and other nontraditional families. In rural families, adult sons' families may take turns to care for their aging parents. Parents live with one son's family for one or two months and move to live with another son's family. When it is a son's turn to care for parents, his family is an extended family during that period. When it is his brother's turn, his family becomes nuclear family again and his brother's family becomes an extended family. Zhang (2009) and Wu (2009) dubbed it as "care-in-turn family." Other family forms are also documented in the literatures: An "nontraditional nuclear family" consists of a father working away from home and a mother caring for their child with the help of relatives (Pan, 2006). A "temporary stem family" (Yao, 2012) or "intergenerational nuclear family" (Kong, 2011) is a grandparent-headed household that consists of grandparents who live with and are caregivers of their grandchildren. There are rural parents whose adult sons and daughters took jobs in cities and left their children behind to the care of grandparents. In other words, the emerging forms of families are the living arrangements chosen by Chinese in response to their own needs and circumstances. The so-called family transformations in Modern China may just be family's creative living organizations discussed by Strauss and Duby (1996) in the current social economic context. The relationships that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) described as post-familial families, e.g., "without formal marriage or without children, single parenting, conjugal succession, or same sex partnerships, part-time relationships and companionships" (p.99) are still uncommon in China.

Have Chinese Shifted Their Values From Family Collectivism to Individualism?

Since the beginning of Chinese economic and social reform over 30 years ago, Chinese family values and relationships have been influenced by the extensive changes in the human ecological systems such as employment, housing, child-rearing, health care, elderly care and education, etc. Chinese enjoy more freedom in mate selection and marital satisfaction.

Meanwhile the divorce rate is increasing. Privatization of housing allows for greater individual space and privacy. Increased mobility and booming economy provide employment opportunities while jobs become more difficult to secure and work becomes more stressful. Quality child care is more available while child-rearing and education become more expensive. Young couples gain more independence in career development while they need parents' support for child care in order to be successful. Consequently filial piety is challenged by an increasing emphasis on individualism (Yan, 2006), especially among the young generation of the only-child (Liu, 2011), but at the same time family collectivism is needed and valued.

The increasing emphasis on individualism has caught researchers' attention. Studies show that Chinese family members are struggling between their individual interest and collective interest of the family (Shen, 2013). Career opportunities and living away from home weakened family kinship tie. Chinese culture strengthens the tie through social function of a family. In China, marriage is the union of two families, not two individuals (Pan, 2010). Family stability is the foundation of stability and solidarity of the society, and has implications for national security and prosperity (Meng, 2008). As such, Chinese laws hold family members mutually obligated to each other. Chinese Marriage Law stipulates that parents be obligated to provide care and education to their young children while adult children bear the responsibility of caring for their aging parents. The Amendment to the Law on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly (NPCPRC, 2012) further states that family should attend the emotional needs of the elderly members. They should not be ignored and neglected. If adult children live separately from their parents, they should visit them regularly. Chinese culture tends to discourage or prevent divorce, cohabitation, infidelity and failure to fulfill family responsibilities through social influence and control (Cui, 2007; Pan, 2010). During the transitional period, the struggle between collectivism and individualism will continue. It is too early to conclude that Chinese have become "me-first" in the family.

Family Members are More Relying on Each Other to Overcome Life Challenges

Independence, freedom and individual right are the core concepts of individualism. A nuclear family in Western culture is isolated with a clearly defined boundary. According to Parsons (1943), a nuclear family lives separately from and is financially independent of parents. The nuclear family is also apart from other kinship members and rarely has economic exchanges with them. Children in the Western families are socialized to be independent at a very young age, for example, they have their own bedroom and sleep in a separate bed. When grown up they choose their college and major for study, friends to be with, whom to date and marry, and where to live. When getting married, they do not expect parents to cover all the wedding expenses and to provide housing for the newly-wed. When getting old, they do not expect to live with and be taken care of physically and financially by their adult children. In contrast, Chinese children are raised to be socially sensitive to others. Fei (1981) once said:

When a child begins to walk, he is surrounded by a net of people who will keep him on the track or under control. . . . What a child is criticized for in an hour must be more than what an adult is criticized for in a year.

Growing up in Chinese culture, children are seldom involved in the decision associated with their education. Parents tend to interfere with their children's choices of job, dating and marriage. It is the norm that parents take care of everything, from the cost of college

education to the payment of housing after marriage. On the other end, Children rely overly on their parents financially. Unmarried adult children continue to live on their parents. Married young couples expect the groom's parents to buy them an apartment. Children take granted for parents' support. In exchange, aging parents expect adult children to attend to their needs physically, financially and emotionally.

The exchange pattern of financial resources and mutual dependence is obvious in Chinese rural families where parents do not have pension. They invest all their life savings and time in their children by providing or building a house when they get married and child care after they have children. Chinese Family Values Survey (CFVS, 2008) found three-quarters of the parent participants said parents should be responsible for their children's college education. The proportion is higher among rural parents of ages 50 and over. Only one-third disagreed that parents should provide housing for their married sons. Among the respondents younger than 35 years old, 63% of married children lived in the housing units either owned or rented by their parents of which, 85% were owned and only 15% were rented. More rural parents (84%) than urban parents (51%) provided children with housing. Rural parents could use up all their life savings to build a house for the married son in expectation for being taken care of by him and his wife when they need.

Families Prioritize Collective Interests Over Individual Interest

Filial piety has long been the core Chinese virtue. Close family relationship and interdependence in modern era has been documented in literature. A survey study in Shanxi and Fujian showed that majority of respondents in their 20s of all levels of education attainment reported they would take responsibility and take care of their families including parents and siblings. These young respondents would take their family and family input seriously into consideration when choosing job, place to live and dating partner, and financially supporting parents and siblings. They reported to assert their freedom and individual right to choose their marital partners if parents and siblings interfered with their choice. Family members were most likely to intervene with their decision about the marital partner (Hansen & Pang, 2010).

Another study of white collar employees in Shanghai found that both parent-child relationship and marital relationship were very important to them. There was a strong bond between parents and their only child who was married (Shen, 2013). It may be that these Chinese parents were willing to continue to contribute to their married children's life. Adult children enjoyed that parents were reliable resources and at the same time they were grateful and wanted to pay back. Filial piety was on the top of the 29 criteria for choosing marital partner among Chinese of 20—30 years old (Li & Xu, 2004). Li (2011) noted cultural and social factor might contribute to the strong bonding between parents and adult children. Launching of a child was not viewed as an essential task of parents in Chinese culture. Parents' overprotection of the only child delayed the “launching” of the child or the “launching” never existed. The married children found it easier to fall back on their parents when there was a financial or relational challenge. With a rapid increase in divorce rate, the married only child might attach the equal importance to relationships with their parents and spouse and might even see the kinship was more reliable than spouse relationship.

Chinese families of low income and in poverty need interdependence to survive. In China today, job market is more competitive and life is more stressful than ever. New social warfare system has not fully developed while the old system is gone. Government assistance is limited. Monetary support, time and physical care from family members are critical to

disadvantaged families with limited resources. Chinese families reported to receive most support from parents, children, siblings and other relatives who provided care for young, elder or ill members and financial relief to a member out of work within the extended family (Gui & Zhang, 2003; Pan, 2006; Xu, 2007; Zhao, 2006). Although two-thirds of urban residents disagreed that “caring for grandchildren is the responsibility of grandparents,” only a little over one-third of rural residents shared the same view (CFVS, 2008). During a stage of the family life cycle, an individual has to rely on others in the family and is not able to be completely independent, e.g., child care. Without enough savings, the current social security or financial aid from the government are not sufficient for retirement. The additional support for older people in cities and most living expenses of older people in rural areas come from adult children and relatives. Families provide physical care for the elderly whether or not they are urban or rural (Zhang, 2001). Therefore, mutual obligation and interdependence are valued over individual interests by Chinese family.

Table 2

Percentages of Respondents' Choices on a 7-point scale on Attitude Towards “Family Interests are More Important Than Individual Interests” of Different Age Groups (%)

	Age					
	20-35	36-50	51-65	20-35	36-50	51-65
1.Strongly disagree	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.9	1.0	0.7
2.	0.2	0.7	0.7	3.7	3.5	3.2
3.	7.1	5.1	4.9	8.7	9.4	7.5
4.Neither disagree nor agree	9.1	8.6	10.6	19.1	20.1	22.4
5.	39.9	40.7	39.0	34.5	35.3	32.7
6.	29.3	30.6	31.9	19.6	20.7	22.4
7.Strongly agree	14.0	14.2	12.6	13.5	9.9	11.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	1009	1046	960	1009	1048	960
M	5.32	5.38	5.33	4.96	4.87	4.95
SD	1.09	1.05	1.06	1.32	1.28	1.26
F		0.85			1.38	

Has Chinese Marriage Declined in Importance?

Classic modernization theory posits economic development and growth in wealth make a society likely to embrace democracy. New modernization theory suggests that modernization is also associated with cultural changes and postindustrial societies see an increasing emphasis on self-expression and autonomy (Inglehart, & Welzel, 2009). In accompany of economic reform and open-door policy following Mao's era, China amended its 1950 Marriage Law and added no-fault divorce clause to the 1980 Marriage Law (Xia, Wang, Do, & Qin, 2013). Chinese *gross divorce rate* (the number of divorces divided by the population (in a thousand) has increased from 0.33‰ in 1979 to 2.29‰ in 2012 (Ministry of Civil Affairs of P.R. China, 2013). Although it is rare, cohabitation is emerging. Living together without being married has become an alternative living arrangement for couples and has been accepted in industrialized countries. . Has Chinese marriage become less important? The current section examines recent data from China Census for decades and several large scale surveys in order to address this question.

Most Chinese Will get Married and the Age of the First Marriage has Increased

Marriage has been viewed as an ideal path for life by Chinese men and women. The 1982 Chinese Census found that only 3% of men and 0.2% of women were never married (The State Department Census Office, DSCO & National Bureau of Statistics Population Division, NBSPD, 1985). Latest studies show the majority of Chinese view marriage is important and is their primary choice. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents in a recent survey reported man/woman should get married no matter what. Only less than 2% responded "strongly disagree." Significant differences were not observed in gender but in rural (81.2%) vs. urban (69.2%) areas (Xue, 2011). In another survey using random sampling, 99% of participants regardless of age or gender chose "strongly agree" when asked "A good/happy marriage is very important for your life," and nearly none reported "disagree" (Xu, 2010).

In addition, most Chinese will enter matrimony at some point of their lives and the rate of the unmarried has not increased in the past 30 years. The data of the Third Chinese Census in 1982 showed the unmarried men and women of the age of 15 years and above were 32.7% and 24.2% respectively (DSCO & NBSPD, 1985). The Sixth Chinese Census in 2010 observed a lower rate of the unmarried population, 23.6% among men and 19.3% among women. In the age groups of 30-34, only 12.6% men and 5.3% women were never married and of 40-45, the rates dropped to 4.2% and .7% (See Table 3, NBSC, 2012). Only a small fraction of Chinese population is never married and the rate has not gone up in the last three decades.

Table 3

Percentages of the Unmarried Aged from 22 to 44 in 1982-2010 (%)

Age	1982	1990	2000	2010		
				Nation	Urban	Rural
Male						
20-24	72.0	62.5	78.7	82.4	89.8	76.9
25-29	23.1	16.7	24.7	36.3	44.8	31.1
30-34	8.8	7.2	7.5	12.6	13.3	13.7
35-39	6.7	5.7	4.1	6.4	5.3	8.3
40-44	5.7	5.1	3.8	4.2	2.9	5.5
Female						
20-24	46.4	41.2	57.5	68.3	80.1	58.4
25-29	5.2	4.3	8.7	21.9	29.1	16.7
30-34	0.7	0.6	1.4	5.3	7.3	4.4
35-39	0.3	0.3	0.5	1.7	2.7	1.3
40-44	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.7	1.3	0.5

Note. The data from the unmarried aged 44 and beyond were not listed in the table. For 2010, the data from small towns were not listed. All the data were from the third, fourth, fifth and sixth national population survey.

As shown in the table above, the age of first marriage is getting older. Of the age 20-24, the unmarried accounted for 72% of the total Chinese population in 1982, 62.5% in 1990 and 78.7% in 2000 and 82.4% in 2010; the rate was higher in the urban areas than in the rural areas. The average age of first marriage in cities was 25.5 in men and 23.9 in women in 1980, dropped to 24.4 and 22.8 respectively in 1990 and grew back up to 26.9 and 25.1 in 2010 (CNBS, 2012). A similar pattern was observed in rural areas. The average age of the first marriage was 24.4 for men and 22.3 for women in 1980, dropped to 23.2 and 21.6

respectively in 1990 and increased again to 24.8 and 22.8 in 2010 (NBSC, 2012). Overall the age increase for Chinese first marriage is slow and moderate. Compared to other developed countries, Chinese still get married at a younger age. According to The United Nations Population Statistics Yearbook 2010, the first marriage age is about 30 years in many countries and regions, e.g., 29 in Japan, Mongolia, Latvia, Czech and Albania, 30 in Australia, Finland, Belgium, Hungary, Holland and Italy, and 31 in Denmark, Ireland, Nepal, Germany and Slovenia, and 32 in France and Sweden.

Research of the residents in Shanghai about their views on marriage showed younger generation tended to have a more open attitude towards marriage and favor a broader definition of marriage. In 2004, 48.2% of Shanghai women aged 20-30 believed it was an individual choice whether or not to be married (Xu, 2004). A recent survey showed a little over than half (51.7%) of Shanghai women reported favoring a broader definition and the percentage was higher among younger and urban women (See Table 4) (Shanghai Women Federation, 2010). This percentage is much lower than those reported by women in other countries, e.g., 56.9% in the U.S., 98.2% in Britain, 81.6% in Germany, 82% in Sweden, 84% in Japan and 85.1% in South Korea (Japanese Government Equal Opportunity Office for Men and Women, 2003). Given that Shanghai is the most urbanized region in China, this percentage can be expected to be lower in rural areas and nationwide.

Table 4

Percentages (%) of “Marriage is a personal choice, and it does not matter whether married or unmarried” (Shanghai)

	Nation	Residency		Age			
		Urban	Rural	20—30	31—40	41—50	51—64
1.strongly disagree	6.7	5.6	14.1	5.5	5.0	7.1	8.0
2.	31.2	29.5	43.4	24.3	34.7	28.5	34.5
3.	10.4	10.3	10.4	10.6	11.0	11.7	9.2
4.	35.4	37.0	24.2	36.6	36.2	34.0	35.0
5.strongly agree	16.3	17.5	8.0	23.0	13.0	18.6	13.3
Cumulative %	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	2600	2272	328	548	516	494	1042
M	3.24	3.31	2.68	3.47	3.18	3.29	3.11
SD	1.24	1.22	1.21	1.24	1.19	1.25	1.24
F	76.702***			10.826****			

Note. The data were from the Third Survey Study of Shanghai Women Social Status (2010). It was conducted by Shanghai Women Federation.

Pre-Marital Sex has Become More Acceptable but Cohabitation Remains Marginalized

For thousands of years, Chinese feudal society adamantly demanded a woman to remain a virgin before her marriage and held virginity to be the first and primary virtue of women. It continued to be the moral standard for young women and men after the socialist era began in 1949. Premarital sex, especially resulted in pregnancy could lead to severe negative consequences such as stigma, social isolation, losing face of the individual and the family, and even disciplinary actions by employers. Premarital sex was viewed as immoral and dirty.

Among the couples who were married before the economic reform, only 2% reported retrospectively they had premarital sex. Among those who married between 1987 and 1996, 13% reported they had premarital sex while 30% never kissed and 45% never hugged each other (Xu, 1997). On one hand, surveyed couples could underreport their intimate behavior prior to marriage for fear of losing face and on the other hand, this could be an example of strong influence of abstinence culture.

The strict cultural emphasis on abstinence loosened when China began to implement family planning and birth control in early 1980s. Sex education became a part of reproductive health education and made sex less a taboo. In 1989, 68.7% of the participants in a random sampled survey reported people should have no premarital sex, even if they were engaged (Li, 2003). By contrast, only 26.9% of respondents considered premarital sex wrong in a large scale survey nearly two decades later (Chinese Family Values Survey, CFVS, 2008). The percentage dropped to 13.5% among the people of ages 35 and younger. In addition, 42.2% of the respondents showed an acceptable attitude towards cohabitation among older single people. Meanwhile premarital sex and cohabitation increased in China. One in four reported having had premarital sex or cohabitation in the 18-35 age group and there was no significant difference between rural and urban respondents (Li & Bian, 2006) (See Table 5).

Table 5

The Percentages of Differences on Pre-marital Sex and/or Cohabitation Between Urban Areas and Rural Areas (%)

	Age			Education			Sum
	18—35	36—50	51—70	Elementary and below	Middle/high school	College and above	
Urban	24.5	10.7	6.3	6.2	13.2	21.1	12.6
Rural	23.8	6.1	5.4	6.2	16.1	15.0	10.9
Total	24.1	8.1	5.8	6.2	14.8	20.4	11.6
N	777	1029	1055	1173	1523	167	2861

Data source: Chinese General Social Survey, CGSS2006. The data were from the Sub-project of Families of CGSS 2006.

Chinese adolescent dating was strictly forbidden by both families and schools in the past. Today parents and schools still highly discourage adolescents to date, believing this can distract them from focusing on their education and preparation for the competitive college entrance exam. However their attitude and measures taken against it may have loosened up. A survey of 1,593 Chinese adolescents of ages 14-17 found that 50.4% of boys and 34.9% of girls dated before, and 13.5% boys and 13.8% of girls reported having a dating partner at the time of the survey. The percentages of the adolescent respondents had experiences of kissing, caressing, and intercourse are approximately 38%, 26% and 15% for boys, and 20%, 17% and 11% for girls (Huang & Pan, 2012). A majority (65.4%) did not believe “the more adolescents know about sex, the more they would engage themselves in sex that may lead to pregnancy.” On the contrary, they agreed that sex education help prevent sexually transmitted diseases and teenage pregnancy (CFVS, 2008).

Despite that premarital sex and cohabitation become more acceptable and are not used as criteria for judging an individual's moral character, values and beliefs about sex and marriage are deeply rooted in the Chinese culture for thousands of years and remain influential on

people's sexual behavior. Dating partners are careful and try to protect themselves and their families from losing face. In addition, Chinese family laws do not protect the rights of couples in cohabitation and children born to unmarried couples do not have the same rights and benefits in health care, child care and education as other children do, hence also influencing the people's attitude and behavior. Chinese Family Values Survey (CFVS 2008) reported only 11% of the participants believed that premarital sex was absolutely normal and 77% felt less secure in cohabitation than in marriage. Surveys repeatedly found only 1% of the total survey respondents and 3-5% of younger respondents in cohabitation. Thus, the percentage of Chinese couples in cohabitation will still be small and marginalized in China. It will be long time before cohabitation, premarital sex and birth, and same sex marriage are recognized by law in China (Li, 2006). There will still be stigma and prejudice against single household family, childless marriage, and single parent family (Mao, 1996; Xia, 2004; Xu & Zhang, 2003).

Divorce Rate is Growing Higher While a Marriage "for better and for worse till death" is Still an Ideal Union That Many Couples Continue to Pursue

Over the last 60 years China has seen several peaks of divorce (Xia, Wang, Do, & Qin, 2013). The first peak occurred soon after the current government took office in 1949 when the first Chinese Marriage Law in 1950 stipulated that people should be free to choose their marital partner and be equal within marital relationship. The second jump followed the Amendment to the Marriage Law in 1980 when No-Fault divorce clause was added. However, Chinese culture emphasizes the interests of the family and the country over the interests of an individual. Marriage stability has been viewed as critical to maintaining the financial and political stability of the nation. Individuals seeking divorce could be seen to be selfish and a flaw or the deteriorating of moral character. An increase in divorce rate was viewed as a serious risk for national security. Between 1950 and 1980, most marital conflicts and divorce were intervened and mediated informally by the couple's families and friends, and formally by their employers and neighborhood associations. For example, a divorcee's promotion might be called in question because he or she was viewed as lack of moral character or problem solving skills. During this period, it was very difficult for couples to seek the dissolution of a marriage in court.

With the ending of Mao's era followed by China's Economic Reform in late 1970s, external influences from employers and neighborhood associations, and the government tight control over the marriage were loosened up. Stigma associated with divorce was weakened. Emotional well-being became more important after the Economic Reform brought wealth that allowed many families to enjoy improved living conditions. Chinese couples began to pay attention to the quality of their marital relationship. Meanwhile getting divorce became less difficult when No-Fault Divorce was added to the Marriage Law. Chinese *gross divorce rate* has been growing over the last 30 years. It was 0.33‰ in 1979, 0.69‰ in 1990, 0.96‰ in 2000 and 2.00‰ in 2010, and 2.29‰ in 2012 (Ministry of Civil Affairs of P.R. China, 2012). However, the number of divorced individuals of ages 15 and above is not high in China due to a high remarriage rate. The 2010 Chinese Census Data (NBSC, 2012) showed the percentages of divorced individuals in the total population of ages 15 and above were 1.5% for men and 1.2 for women. Between the ages of 35 and 54, the rates were higher, 2.5% for men and 4.9% for women respectively. The rate was lower among residents in rural areas, 0.4% for men and 2.6% for women (See Table 6).

Compared with other countries, China continues to have a low *gross divorce rate*. China was ranked 58th among the 86 countries with data in 1998 and 58th among 84 countries in 2006.

Table 6

**The Gross Divorce Rates (ratio of divorced population to the total population)
Nationwide and by Gender and Residency of ages 15 and above (%)**

Age	Nation		Urban area		Small town (zhen)		Rural	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
15+	1.5	1.2	1.8	2.2	1.4	1.2	1.4	0.6
15—19	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
20—24	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.3
25—29	1.0	0.9	0.5	0.7	1.0	0.9	1.4	1.0
30—34	2.1	1.7	1.6	2.1	2.1	1.8	2.4	1.3
35—39	2.5	2.1	2.5	3.5	2.4	2.2	2.6	1.0
40—44	2.6	2.1	3.2	4.3	2.4	2.1	2.3	0.7
45—49	2.5	2.1	3.8	4.9	2.2	2.0	1.9	0.6
50—54	2.3	1.8	3.7	4.2	1.9	1.5	1.6	0.4
55—59	1.6	1.2	2.6	2.8	1.4	1.0	1.3	0.4
60—64	1.3	0.8	1.7	1.7	1.1	0.7	1.1	0.4
64+	0.8	0.5	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.5	0.8	0.4

Note. The data were from China Census 2010.

Figure 3.

**Percentages of Children (non only-child) Living in Extended Families
at Different Ages .**

Data Source: China General Social Survey, CGSS2011.

The standing for China barely changed because the divorce rates of others were moving up during the same period when the divorce rate was increasing in China (See Figure 1).

The *gross divorce rate* counts the number of divorces in general population including children, the never married and the widowed, thus a less accurate measure of divorce rate. An alternative measure is *refined crude divorce rate* that counts the number of divorces in a thousand of married couples. Based on census data, the National Bureau of Statistics of China, NBSC (1985) estimated, Chinese crude divorce was 2‰ in 1982, namely, one divorce in every 500 married couples. In 2000, the rate increased to 3.6‰ and 7‰ in 2010.

Chinese marriage is stable in spite of the increase in divorce rate. China General Social Survey Li and Bian (2006) found that 83.6% of respondents rated their marriage satisfactory or highly satisfactory. When asked if you could choose again, would you choose the same person as your spouse, 45% responded absolutely and 43% responded most likely whereas 3.9% said absolutely not. When asked if Chinese law should make it more difficult to get divorce, less difficult or no change, over one-third liked it to be more difficult though the majority thought it should be no change. These results are consistent with findings from the Chinese Family Values Survey (CFVS, 2008). The CFVS found that when asked how often they think of divorce, 93% of respondents reported never, 4.3% rarely, 1.7% sometimes, and only 0.9% often. Over three-quarters (87%) of the respondents agreed they would try their best to keep the marriage whereas only 7.1% disagreed. The same survey also found that about 28% of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed while 52% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that a person's happiness would be preferred over an unhappy marriage, indicating a growing interest in individual well-being. Individuals with higher education attainment and residing in urban areas reported a higher interest than those with less education and residing in rural areas. Approximately one-fourth agreed that children would be better off if their parents separated or divorced than stayed together, fighting all the time whereas two-thirds disagreed.

The statistics above indicate that a traditional belief is no longer popular. That "Marry a chicken, live with a chicken for life; marry a dog, live with a dog for life" is an old saying that Chinese are taught to follow for thousands of years. Chinese divorce rate is on the rise. However, marriage does not crumple. Chinese people are committed to long-term marital relationship. Most Chinese couples are concerned about the negative impact of divorce on children. They would keep their marriage for the sake of children.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTION

Changes in family structure, values and relationship have occurred in accompany of rapid social and economic development over the past 30 years. Before the reform, the old systems, i.e., communes in the countryside and state owned faculties in cities guaranteed life necessities at the minimum level but left individuals and families no mobility and no choices. The changes in housing, education and job market have brought opportunities, choices and wealth, and at the same time posed many challenges and stress to Chinese families during the social transition. They seek support and relief from their marriage and family. These changes have strengthened the utility of intergenerational relationships. Family collectivism and mutual dependence are preferred over individualism and continue to be the dominating family values.

Empirical evidence shows most Chinese families are no longer controlled by "zuzhang," the chief of a large extended family. There are more nuclear families than any other forms of

families in “modern” China. Extended families do not seem to shrink, but also prove to be highly functional in addressing the needs of family members. Extended families play a critical role during the stages of child rearing and death and dying in the family life cycle. China is yet to develop a new system of public support now that the benefits from the old systems are dropped. Struggling families are left with limited resources and turn to their extended families. Physical, financial and emotional supports from extended family network become their most reliable resources in performing family life tasks and in coping with stress and challenges. The extended family is a network of mutual obligations and benefits. As such, Chinese family structure is “extended” in nature whether a family member is in a single household, nuclear family household, extended family household or other forms of living arrangements. Chinese families are different from western families in the transitional period in that mutual responsibilities still come before individual growth. Chinese nuclear families enjoy a close relationship with extended family members. The instability resulted from the social and economic transition does not weaken marriage and family, but forces them to be highly functional in modern China.

Contemporary Chinese families take various forms, “temporary extended family,” “grandparent-headed nuclear family,” “single parent family,” “single household family,” and “two household head family.” The new forms of families have not become the major family organizations and they may continue to evolve. Such diversity suggests that modernization of family in China take on Chinese social, economic and cultural flavors. Namely, family changes are influenced by not only by thousands of years of history and culture, but also by policies and reform implemented after the Mao's era, and the interactions among all these influences. Family transformation does not occur in a linear, staged process as predicted by Western modernization theory. Chinese families are marked by multiple formations, temporary organization, and fluid and dynamic transformation.

Existing studies have not examined how economic reform and development affect Chinese women's role and status in the family and women's self-expression. In the past 60 years, both before and after the economic reform, China has been implementing two different economic systems and different housing, health care and welfare policies in rural and urban areas. Little research has documented the differences in structure, function and relationship of rural and urban families in the process of modernization.

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