GIRL POWER: YOUNG WOMEN AND THE WANING OF PATRIARCHY IN RURAL NORTH CHINA[1]

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Since the early 1950s, several generations of young women in rural north China have responded to social changes brought about by state policies and practices, gradually altering their position in the domestic sphere from statusless "outsiders" to new players in family affairs. While favorable conditions in larger social settings are necessary and important, equally important have been the agencies of young women who took advantage of the new opportunities to challenge the patriarchal order of family life. By focusing on individual young women, the previously marginalized members of the family, this article identifies and provides a better understanding of the most active driving force of family change from within. (Young women, agency, family change, China)

Although there are still many issues under debate among students of the Chinese family, it is widely agreed that the decline of parental authority and power is the most visible and significant change that has occurred in the domestic sphere in rural China since 1949. Such a trend began in the heyday of socialist transformation during the 1950s (Yang 1959) and continued in both the collective period (Parish and Whyte 1978) and the post-collective reform era (Davis and Harrell 1993; Bossen 2002). Thus far, most studies see the decline of parental power and authority as a result of a set of social changes occurring in larger social settings, such as the implementation of the new marriage law and other government policies, the state-sponsored attack on patrilineal ideology and kinship organization, and public ownership that disabled the family as a unit of production. The contribution of individual agency to the shifting power balance across generational line, especially the role played by young women, however, has been by and large underplayed, if not completely ignored. To balance the previous emphasis on external, social causes, this article explores the active role played by young women to redefine intergenerational power relations in particular and other dimensions of private life in general.

Throughout this article the term "young women" is used to refer to rural women between the ages of 15 to 24, or as defined by social terms, those who are going through the transition period from a teenage daughter to a young daughter-in-law. For a rural woman, this is the most difficult and important period in her life, full of changes and challenges (Wolf 1972). In the areas where this study was conducted, young women in this age group are referred to as *guniang* or *yatou*, which may be translated as "girls" in English. But guniang or yatou refer

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only to unmarried young women. Once a young woman marries, she is no longer a girl; but has been transformed into a daughter-in-law (*xifu*) and an adult woman.

In a traditional family, young women were marginal outsiders with only a temporary position, as daughters married out and new daughters-in-law entered the domestic group under the rules of patrilineal exogamy and patrilocal post-marital residence. Thus, daughters were commonly regarded as a drain on family wealth and new daughters-in-law were seen as a potential threat to the existing family order. In comparison to their male siblings, girls were statusless, powerless, and somewhat dangerous; they could acquire a proper place in the domestic sphere only by becoming mothers (Baker 1979; Freedman 1966; Watson 1985, 1986; Wolf 1972; Bossen 2002).

As a result of their anonymity in family life, young women have drawn little scholarly attention thus far and, admittedly, they also constitute the most difficult age group to study for a male researcher. Male informants are the usual sources when conducting fieldwork. When I tried to reach female informants, I found myself more often talking with older women, the supposedly more knowledgeable and certainly more powerful woman in a household, typically the mother (or mother-in-law) who manages the household budget. However, from the numerous complaints about their daughters, daughters-in-law, and recollections of their own life histories, and also from more serious complaints by men about women in general, I came to realize that ever since the 1950s young women have been perhaps the most active agents in initiating significant changes in intergenerational relations and patterns of family life.

This article will demonstrate that, over a period of five decades, several generations of young women have challenged patriarchal power in terms of mate-choice, marriage negotiation, and family division, thus altering the domestic sphere. The second part of the present study explores the social context in which these young women have developed their identities and have progressed from voiceless dependents to active agents in family life. The conclusion discusses the limitations to girl power and explains how these limitations may also contribute to the emergence of such a power. Data for this article were collected from fieldwork in Xiajia village, Heilongjiang province, northeast China, in 1989, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1997, 1998, and 1999, as part of a larger project, being an ethnographic account of the transformation of private life in this rural community from 1949 to 1999 (Yan 2003), wherein the rise of power of young women is merely one of the many important changes that occurred to the domestic sphere.

With a population of 1,492 in 1998, Xiajia village had been fairly successful in collective farming prior to the implementation of the decollectivization reforms in the early 1980s; today it still remains a farming community. The

heavy reliance on farming has been one of the major obstacles to economic development in the village, keeping the average per capita income slightly below the national average during the 1980s and 1990s. But the villagers' livelihood has been closely tied to the market through raising cash crops, household sideline businesses, labor migration, and the impact of the mass media and urban consumerism.[2]

GIRL POWER AND CHANGES IN PRIVATE LIFE

Examining the major changes in the private lives of Xiajia villagers shows that there are many areas in which young women have played a major role in changing pre-existing patterns of family life, such as establishing wife-centered family networks after marriage, altering the previous standard of kinship distance, and creating new rituals that celebrate women's reproductive power or the importance of their natal families (Yan 1996:53–54 and 2001:234–36). Mate-choice, marriage transaction, and family division, however, are particularly noteworthy, because young women challenged patriarchal power in these areas, and their efforts have had profound influence on current patterns of family life.

Mate-choice and Courtship

As noted by many scholars of contemporary rural China, the autonomy of rural youth in mate-choice has been steadily increasing since the 1950s, although the trend varies a great deal depending on the region and the time period (see, e.g., Chan, Madsen, and Unger 1992 [1984]; Parish and Whyte 1978). But scholars have not yet noted that in rural China, youth autonomy in mate-choice is reflected mainly in the increasing power of young women as a result of two factors. First, the current customs of courtship and marriage proposal allow young women to make the final decision regarding mate-choice; second, there has been an artificial shortage of women in rural areas, which has put young women in a more advantageous position.

In Xiajia village, as in many other communities in the surrounding area, youth autonomy in mate-choice emerged during the late 1950s, but it remained limited by certain local customs and ritual procedures. With inter-village marriages, agreement for a match had to be worked out in stages. Usually, it started with initial inquiries from the male's side about the suitability of the intended young woman. Then there was a preliminary meeting in which the young couple would see each other and talk for a while. While the inquiries and meetings were arranged between the parents and the go-between, the opinions of the young couple were an important basis for the next move. If they made a good impression on one another, their parents would seek further information

and negotiate the marriage finances for the proposed engagement. But even though daughters normally did not formally initiate their choices at an early stage, they could veto proposed mates whom they did not like.

In cases of intra-village marriages, things were simpler, as the two young people may have known one another from childhood. Interestingly enough, village endogamy appears to be the preferential form since the 1950s. During recent decades, one-fifth of Xiajia men found wives within their own village. Some of the marriages within the village took place after a brief dating period.

The young women's power to veto a marriage proposal was first recognized after the implementation of a new marriage law in the early 1950s, which was gradually routinzied as part of local custom. A young woman can exercise her veto power many times until she finds a suitable match and she can use this power to change slightly the rules of the game, such as by defying her parents' will, or even selecting a husband by herself. In general, securing the daughter's consent is a basic element of any marriage proposal and, to my knowledge, since the early 1970s all parents have recognized a daughter's right to reject an undesirable suitor.[3] A survey in 1993 of 78 marriages since the late 1980s revealed no cases in which the bride had been forced into a marriage by her parents or by anyone else. Furthermore, more than two-thirds of these young women had previously refused marriage proposals at least once.

Naturally, parents are reluctant to give up their power to manage the marriages of the younger generation, as this is perhaps one of the most efficient means of controlling their adult children. During the 1950s, each time a young woman tried to use her veto power to test the waters, she inevitably provoked parental disapproval, and generational conflicts occurred. Gradually, such actions became accepted during the 1960s and 1970s and have been considered the norm since the 1990s. The most common source of conflict is when a young woman wants to marry someone whom her parents strongly oppose. However, as shown in the following three cases, parental power in this respect has also been declining.

In a 1961 case, the local Communist Party secretary's daughter insisted on marrying a young man who was poor and addicted to gambling. To stop this romance, the parents tried both tough and soft methods, including the threat to oust her from the family. The daughter was determined, however, and as a Communist Party member, she sought support from upper-level government agencies. Eventually she married the man but paid a high price. Her father refused to see her for the next two decades and forgave her only when he was dying in 1993.

A similar case occurred in the early 1970s when a young woman from a cadre's family fell in love with a young man in her production team and asked her family to approach his family. But her family strongly opposed the idea

because the young man's family had a bad class label. After a long struggle, she finally married the man, but her husband was not welcomed in her family until after they had a child.

In the third case, a strong-willed young woman became engaged in 1990 to her boyfriend from the same village, despite her parents' disapproval. After the engagement, she frequently stayed at her fiancé's parents' home; the two would walk together arm in arm on the village streets, just like a pair of urban lovers. This caused much criticism and gossip from the older and more conservative villagers, especially older women, but was welcomed and imitated by their peers.

In addition to the decision-making, which is the most important aspect in mate-choice, another important change in courtship results from young women's pursuit of freedom and intimacy. The early trend of youth autonomy in mate-choice developed into a "romantic revolution of courtship" by the end of the 1990s (Yan 2003:64–85), characterized by three major developments. The first is an increase of intimacy in courtship and post-engagement interactions, including the increasing popularity of premarital sex. To a certain extent, premarital sex for engaged couples has become socially accepted, and has transformed the post-engagement time from a preparation for marriage to a passionate and erotic period of romance. Second, contemporary young women pay more attention to their future spouse's individual characteristics, such as physical appearance, respect and caring, emotional expression, and communication skills. Third, young women of the 1990s tended to be more open and vocal in expressing their emotions. In addition to conventional ways of caring, many young women expect a direct and passionate expression of love from young men. Pop culture and mass media seem to be the most obvious and direct influence on the development of the language of love and intimacy, which both enriches and alters the discourse on an ideal mate and the practice of mate-choice. Here the new emphasis on communication skills, particularly on whether one is able to speak *fengliu hua* (romantic talk) shows that the imaginative/subjective world of youth is expanding, and the idealization of the partner is emerging as an important part of mate-choice.

These three major changes are all related to the subjectivity construction among village youth, a development that was not documented in Parish and Whyte's 1978 study. In comparison to their parents and older siblings, Xiajia youth of the 1990s preferred to control their own fate; they enjoyed making decisions and had a strong sense of entitlement to claim their rights. It is interesting that during both the collective period and the post-reform period, village women played a leading role in pursuing romantic love and the freedom of mate-choice. In most cases of free choice that occurred in Xiajia village, young women were far more active than their male counterparts, either by directly confronting parental authority or by using their veto power to resist

parental interference. Similarly, in almost all cases of engagement break-ups, the initiators were women.

Marriage Negotiation

An important phenomenon of family life in rural China is that, despite all the reforms made by the state and despite radical changes in the organizational modes of production and reproduction, the practice of bridewealth—that is, the flow of gifts in cash and in kind from the groom's family to the bride's family—still continues. In fact, the cost of bridewealth has been increasing in the past two decades in both the wealthier and poorer areas of China. The interpretations of this phenomenon include the persistence of cultural tradition and the need to compensate for the loss of a female laborer, but missing is the role played by young people, especially young women.

My interviews with older village women and a study of engagement documents reveal a process by which several generations of young women transformed the institution of bridewealth. Bridewealth in Xiajia village consists of two parts: money and material goods (Yan 1996:176–209). Until recently, monetary gifts were given by the groom's parents to the bride's parents, and material gifts were purchased by and remained with the groom's parents, to be placed in the new couple's room. During the 1950s and 1960s, engaged young women were not directly involved either in negotiating or in purchasing marital gifts, but they tried to protect their interests by monitoring the preparation of the material gifts prior to the wedding date. They adopted many strategies to detect whether the groom's family kept to their side of the bargain, such as trying to pick out the items themselves or sending someone to check the gifts before the wedding day. If the groom's family spent too little on the material goods, the bride might refuse to attend the wedding.

The bride's role became more active after a local custom, *zhao dinghunxiang* (taking engagement photos), emerged. Beginning in the early 1970s, engaged young women participated in purchasing material goods for their own betrothal. The bride and groom went to a nearby city (either the county seat or the provincial capital, Ha'erbin) to buy clothes and other personal items on the gift list. They also sat for an engagement picture in a photo studio. More important, most couples spent a night or two together at a hotel. The village office (the production brigade during the 1970s) issued them an official letter which entitled them to rent a single room in a hotel as a couple. Along with the custom of having an engagement photo, brides gradually began to take control of the actual purchase of the material goods and, accordingly, new categories of material gifts were created and the value of these goods increased.

By the 1980s, the monetary gift in bridewealth, which was given directly to the bride's parents, was insignificant in comparison to the material gifts purchased first under the supervision of the bride and later entirely controlled by the bride. That is, the bride took over the major part of the bridewealth by purchasing these goods. A more radical change followed.

In 1984 a young woman demanded, for the first time in the village, that her betrothal gifts be converted into a lump sum of cash given to her. Of that amount she spent only a small portion for her wedding. This behavior was regarded by many as absurd and scandalous because at that time a bride could only control a small part of the bridewealth as trousseau money spent during the shopping trip.

The bride made such a bold request because the groom had four younger brothers waiting to be married and the economic status of the groom's family was below average. Although she had grown up in a similarly poor family, she was confident and forthright by local standard. The young couple grew up in the same village and, by the time of engagement, the groom was already dependent on her to make decisions. Thus, the groom's family complied with her demands because their son was afraid of losing her. Her parents initially protested her aggressiveness, but they backed down, knowing their daughter had always been determined.

This new and strange change of the bridewealth, *ganzhe* (converted bridewealth), occupied the center of village gossip for only a short while because villagers regarded this case as too unconventional to be taken seriously. But in the following year, 1985, there was a rumor that there would be no extra land allocated for house construction. Those planning marriages at that time worried about not being allocated a plot, so many grooms suggested that their brides ask only for cash as betrothal gifts, following the 1984 ganzhe model that was still fresh in their minds. The large amount of cash that a bride would receive was to be used by the young couple to purchase construction materials, after which the village office would allocate them a plot of land. This idea was welcomed by parents on both sides because they too were worried about the proposed government policy. As a result, ganzhe quickly became popular, and this model has been followed by young villagers ever since. By the summer of 1997, most villagers with whom I spoke considered converted bridewealth to be a normal practice, and a number of more articulate youth had resorted to the rhetoric of individualism to justify this.

Since the emergence of ganzhe, young women have shown unprecedented enthusiasm to negotiate marital gifts with potential in-laws. In a 1991 case, for example, the toughest negotiator at the engagement table was the prospective bride. She insisted on a ganzhe gift of 5,500 yuan when the groom's family had offered 4,000 yuan. Ultimately, 5,000 yuan was agreed to, plus 500 yuan to be

paid to the bride for her serving cigarettes and wine at the wedding. When she returned from the engagement ceremony she had pocketed 3,000 yuan and she expected to receive the remaining 2,500 prior to the wedding.

In the 1990s it became common for engaged young women to possess relatively large amounts of cash (several thousand yuan or more). My informants claim that more than half the families in Xiajia village have to borrow money in order to arrange their sons' marriages and, ironically, more than half of these families borrow the money from betrothed young women.

The most significant implication of this change in bridewealth to ganzhe has been the transformation of a marital gift exchanged between two families into a new form of pre-mortem inheritance. The converted bridewealth, which is controlled completely by the bride, plus the dowry she receives from her parents, is considered by all parties involved as a conjugal fund. As this conjugal fund constitutes a major part of the property that a couple can claim when they depart from the groom's parents' family, rural youth have tried to raise the standard amounts for the bridewealth and dowry, resulting in a rapid escalation of marriage costs. Young women have played a key role in initiating and institutionalizing this important change in family life.

Post-Marital Residence and Family Division

The timing of family division is another indicator of how young women have changed family life. According to older villagers, prior to the 1949 revolution most people tried to delay the time of family division as long as possible, usually after the death of the father or after his retirement as household head. By the 1970s, the socially accepted time of family division was after the marriage of the husband's younger brother—which usually involves three to five years of co-residence of the newlyweds with the groom's parents—or at least after the birth of a young couple's first child. In contrast, my 1991 survey shows that nearly one-third of the 36 newly married couples in Xiajia village since 1989 had established their own households before having children, and almost half did so right after the birth of their first child. The trend continued, and by 1994 more than 40 percent of the 49 newlywed couples over the previous three years had established an independent household prior to the birth of a child, and nearly 80 percent of the family divisions occurred prior to the younger brother's marriage. The earliest family division occurred seven days after the wedding in 1991, and by 1994 there were two couples that did not even bother to observe the custom of patrilocal co-residence. Immediately after their wedding they moved into a new house and set up their independent households.

As a result of this rapid change to an earlier family division, a growing number of newly established conjugal families consists of young couples who

have yet to bear children. In 1994, twelve newlywed couples had established conjugal households in this way, including two young men who were the only sons in their respective families. This would have been unthinkable previously.

These figures poorly reflect the actual impact on the parents of early family division or of an only son's departure. A concrete example may be more illuminating. Mr. Fang has four sons. The eldest was named Gold (*jin*), the second was named Silver (*yin*), the third Full (*man*), and the youngest Storehouse (*ku*). Together their names mean a storehouse full of gold and silver. This expresses the most common wish of all Chinese villagers; that is, to have sons for security in old age. In Mr. Fang's case, however, things went contrary to his will. During the past decade, he and his wife had to finance all their sons' marriages, which had become increasingly costly. When the youngest son became engaged in 1990, the old couple thought they had reached the end of their bridewealth obligations. They were soon disappointed because the prospective youngest daughter-in-law demanded a separate new house prior to the marriage and an early family division after the marriage. In less than two months after the youngest son's wedding, Mr. Fang and his wife were living alone in their old house, back to their financial condition when they had first established their household more than 30 years earlier. When we discussed his family history, Mr. Fang said, "All the gold and silver have been taken away by my sons. What is left is only a shaky, empty storehouse, guarded by an old man and an old woman. It was just like a dream, a bad dream."

As can be expected, older villagers blame their young daughters-in-law instead of their sons for the rush to an early family division. Many older villagers complained that it was always the young daughter-in-law who initiated and actually managed everything, from the early tough demands for a large bridewealth to the request for an early family division. They saw their married sons as too weak to stand up for their own parents; instead, young men always followed the orders of their wife.

This has always been an issue in Chinese family politics. A new daughter-in-law has long been viewed as a threat to family order by both senior males and older women, and especially by mothers-in-law. In an extended family, daughters-in-law are always blamed for causing conflict between married brothers, which would lead to family division (Cohen 1976; and Freedman 1966). The difference in the 1990s is that young women can (and do) initiate early family division without resorting to any devious strategies, such as using gossip and sly maneuvers. In many cases, engaged young women openly declare their intention to live independently long before the wedding and they even pressure their parents-in-law into offering help, such as by specifically requesting a fully decorated and equipped (with major appliances) new house as part of their bridewealth. Sometimes, young women's insistence on an early family partition

appears to be economically irrational. In one case, the parents did all they could to satisfy the demands of the bride of their only son, including offering the largest converted bridewealth at that time and allowing the young couple to keep their income for themselves after their marriage. As the groom's father was a well-respected school teacher and the mother had made a small fortune in developing businesses, many villagers expected the young couple to stay with the husband's parents. But the bride demanded family division only three months after the wedding, without any reason other than that she felt it was inconvenient to live with her in-laws.

The most important implication of early family division is the radical reduction in the time of post-marital co-residence. As findings from a large-scale survey show, co-residence has become a ritual performance rather than a long-term domestic arrangement in many areas of rural China (Lavely and Ren 1992:391). In Xiajia village, until the late 1980s, young people's demands for early division still frequently caused family disputes, as many parents regarded early family division as a sign of their failure to raise filial sons and thus they opposed any attempt to shorten the duration of co-residence. Some parents even threatened to end the parent-child relationship if their son insisted on moving out too soon. Nowadays, however, parents have begun to deal with the issue by helping their married son move out. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, ironically, prolonged co-residence indicated a negative image of parents who are unable to help their married son set up an independent household (Potter and Potter 1990:219).

THE ROAD TO EMPOWERMENT

The role that young women play in defining important moments in their lives represents a remarkable change in comparison to their previous situation in the traditional Chinese family, whereby they could not even have a proper personal name for themselves (Watson 1986). However, the power and agency of rural young women did not surge ahead overnight in the post-Mao era, but has been the result of a long and gradual development, beginning with land reform, developing over the collective period, and continuing in the post-collective era. In this long process, generations of young women responded to state polices, social reforms, and new economic opportunities which helped them gain more independence from parental control. From early on the state advocated reforms relating to family life, including freedom of mate-choice, late marriages, simplified weddings and other rituals, gender and generational equality in family relations, and freedom to divorce and remarry.[4] These policies and reforms had a positive influence on improving the social status of young women. Of the other external empowering factors, collective farming, women's participation in public

activities, and better chances for social mobility through marriage appear to have been quite important.

Front-Line Women in Collective Farming

Although it bears little resemblance to urban employment, collective farming has expanded young women's power. Since the 1950s, young women have become an important part of the labor force. In Xiajia village, female laborers were divided into three groups in accordance with their age, marital status, and working capacity. The unmarried young women and the newly married women were called *yixian funu* (front-line women), young women with small children were called *erxian funu* (second-line women), and the rest were called *sanxian funu* (third-line women). Only the young women, namely, the front-line women, participated in agricultural production as full-time laborers, partly because they were young, energetic, and without the burden of much household chores, and partly because collectives did not need so many female laborers on a full-time basis. The other two groups of women were mobilized to work only during the busiest seasons, such as during the spring planting and the autumn harvest. Since decollectivization in the early 1980s, unmarried young women leave the village in search of jobs in the cities, while married women stay home and do the household farming. The same is true regarding women's participation in other public activities, such as political meetings and voluntary work during the collective period. The social mobilization of women is thus more relevant to young women rather than to older, married women.

As the family ceased to be a unit of production during the collective era, paternal leadership in household farming was replaced by leadership of village cadres. Thus, youngsters spent most of their working hours under the supervision of people other than their fathers. Unless he was a cadre, the father would occupy the same status as his sons and daughters, and they all had to follow instructions from the team leaders. The new order in production management inevitably undermined paternal power and authority within the family. As a result, there was a growing sense of autonomy and demands for self-development among young women in the village.

Moreover, the work-point system in the collectives individualized the contributions made by each member of a household to the family economy, thus fostering a consciousness of individual identity among the young. Under the accounting system of the collectives, one's daily contribution was recorded in terms of work points which were then transferred into a cash value after the harvest. The records of work points were made public by annually posting them on the walls of the production team headquarters. That a youth 's contribution to the family was publicized in a clear manner made an important difference to the

youth, especially to young women, because a father could no longer deny or understate the contributions made by others to the family economy, as was possible traditionally. Usually, a young woman could earn 1,800 to 2,000 work points per year, while an average male adult earned 2,800 to 3,000 points (the difference mainly resulting from the local custom that women in Heilongjiang province usually do not work in the fields during the long winters). But it was not uncommon that a capable young woman earned more work points than a weak male laborer.

During the entire collective period, there were always some families in which young women were the major bread-winners. This occurred for reasons such as the senior male members worked outside the village, the boys were too young to work, or there were no male laborers in a family. Consequently, as they became aware of their importance to the family economy, young women became increasingly conscious of their importance, and this awareness led to their increasing pursuit of autonomy. By the same token, the parents from both their natal family and their husband's family gradually ceded patriarchal power over the young women. This resulted in the changes described above, in the increased autonomy and power of young women in mate-choice, marriage negotiation, and family division.

Active Participants in Public Activities

Probably the most dramatic change to have occurred to young women in the village during the collective period is the opportunity to receive a formal education. As Thornton and Fricke (1987:755–58) have pointed out, the expansion of formal schooling increases peer connections outside family networks, and introduces youth to knowledge and new ideas, resulting in their empowerment. This is particularly true for rural young women. In Xiajia village, most boys and girls graduated from primary school during the 1960s. The village school added a junior high program in the late 1970s and opened a preschool class for children aged five to seven in 1975. By 1985–86, 75 percent of the boys and 48 percent of the girls in Xiajia had completed junior high school, while virtually all school-age children were enrolled and ultimately graduated from primary school. Graduates of senior high school became common during the same period. School enrollments declined in the second half of the 1980s, but this mostly affected high school students because many chose to seek employment in the cities rather than continue their studies. In short, most village teenage girls spend at least six years in school, and also participate in social activities with boys outside the home. It is noteworthy that the better-educated young women tend to be more active in mate-choice, marriage negotiations, and demanding early family division. In other words, the more years they spend in

school, the less likely they will become the traditional type of good daughters-in-law. This is actually a repeated comment made by many older villagers. It is also the better educated young women who tend to enjoy a more intimate and equal relationship with their husbands in their own conjugal families, and they are more likely to be praised as good wives by their husbands and peers.

During the collective period, young women had more opportunities than older women to participate in public activities. They constituted the core members of the Women's Association and of the Youth League. Some young women were also recruited into more selective small organizations, such as the Youth Scientific Research Team or the village troupe that combined traditional entertainment with political propaganda. Although female members had to quit once they married, there were always eight to ten young women active in the performing group. The troupe also served as a center of popular culture for village youth and as a model for young women in particular, before it was replaced by television sets and music cassettes in the post-collective era.

After decollectivization in 1983, the Youth League, the Women's Association, and other village organizations gradually stopped functioning, and organized public activities declined rapidly. In the 1990s government-sponsored public activities ended. Young women, along with other age groups, found themselves returning home and working on family farms individually. The shrinking public sphere and the disappearance of public activities no doubt constitute a drawback for young women in terms of participation in public life. However, other new developments sustain the growth of girl power.

The most important development in the post-collective era are the new opportunities to work in the cities. The state began to loosen its ban on rural-urban migration in 1981–82, which allowed villagers to seek employment and temporary residence in cities in 1985 (Li 1993:110–11). Since then, millions of villagers have moved to cities every year; by 1993, the number of rural migrants to the cities was estimated to exceed 100 million. Village youth of both sexes constitute the main body of this great wave of internal migration (Yan 1994). In Xiajia, 81 young people worked outside the village for at least more than three months in 1991; in 1993 this figure had increased to 142. Among the village youth who went to work in the cities, slightly less than one-third were young women, for whom urban employment opened a new world, seeing life styles that are unheard of in the village. They have also been exposed to the ideas and information that grew rapidly in the cities after the state relaxed its tight control over popular culture. In addition, most young women were able to save a large portion of their wages for their dowries. More important, along with the gradual improvement of living standards in the village, the new generation of youth has shifted from seeking temporary work in cities and earning money for basic needs to exploring the world beyond the village and experiencing a different life. This

is particularly true for young women, as fewer of them still need to make important economic contributions to their natal families in the late 1990s.

A second new development has been the emergence of a youth culture in village society and the increased influence of one's peer group.[5] By the 1990s, rural youth had their own cultural tastes and life aspirations quite different from those of their parents and older siblings. Accordingly, rural youth also now have their own social space where they interact with their peers and where older villagers feel uncomfortable and unwelcome, such as the pool tables and dance parties (Yan 1999). For example, two shop owners in Xiajia village began to sponsor regular dance parties in their courtyards in 1994, hoping to attract more young customers. Now young men and women hang out there in the evenings, and such activities have sometimes led to courtship and marriage. Although some parents were strongly opposed to the dance parties, they could do nothing to stop the practice because the village party secretary, who is in his mid-thirties, was also a frequent participant. Other forms of youth culture continued to emerge and thrive. The latest one is a small Internet Bar that was opened inside a village shop in the summer of 2006, in which young men and young women play games and chat on line with six computer stations. Two young women told me that they often chat on line with friends they met when they worked in cities.

The Mobility of Young Women, Courtship, and Marriage

Young rural women have enjoyed more advantages than their male counterparts in courtship and marriage since the 1949 revolution. This female superiority is best illustrated in their power to reject marriage proposals and to renege on engagement agreements, which acts are rare for young men. It also reflects the fact that young women introduced ganzhe which enabled them to take full control of marriage transactions, while young men have not achieved anything close to this. While the value of young women as laborers increased during the collective era (Parish and Whyte1978), this cannot explain why they have continued to have the edge over young men after decollectivization.

Another contributing factor may be young women's greater mobility under the household registration system. Since the late 1950s, the household registration system divided the Chinese population into rural and urban residents, but only urban residents could enjoy a variety of state social welfare benefits. The legal ban on rural-urban migration confined villagers to their own communities, making it impossible for a villager to achieve the higher status of an urban resident. Moreover, due to the economic inequalities between regions and even between villages, it was also extremely difficult for villagers to move to better regions. Potter and Potter (1990:306–07) note that serving in the armed forces, becoming a party cadre, obtaining a higher education, or marrying a

worker with an urban registration status were the few possible avenues of villager mobility. They also point out that the first three opportunities were rare and overwhelmingly available only for males (Potter and Potter 1990). Marriage, on the other hand, was a much more common and accessible opportunity for rural young women, due to patrilocal residence.

Although there were no laws or regulations against a husband moving into his wife's community after marriage, it was women who customarily relocated through marriage. By the same token, a local community had no right to refuse accepting an in-marrying woman, even if she was from a much poorer community. This meant that a young woman could choose to better her life by looking for a husband from a more prosperous village. In fact, the general economic conditions of a potential husband's village constituted an important concern for many young women when they made decisions regarding marriage. Once young women began to marry out to better places, young men in the community had to look for brides from villages that were economically worse off than their own. In other words, young women could move up in the hierarchy of residential communities (determined first by the rural-urban dichotomy and then by the economic conditions of each settlement) by marrying into better communities, while men had to take women from the lower levels of the same hierarchy. As Xiajia village is a relatively better off place, it only suffers from losing women to the nearby market town and the county seat, while receiving women from many other villages. Young women are also in a more advantageous position than young men in marriage, for they can always choose to marry up, while young men have to work hard to avoid marrying down.

THE LIMITATIONS TO GIRL POWER

During the past five decades, several generations of young women have exploited social changes brought about by state policies and socialist practices to alter their position in the domestic sphere from statusless outsiders to new players in family politics, an important phenomenon that I call the rise of girl power. Favorable social conditions for the rise of girl power include marriage law, family reforms, collective farming, formal education, and the social mobilization of women. However, equally important have been the young women who took advantage of new opportunities to challenge the patriarchal order of family life. Many young women took the initiative in courtship and dating, to explore the previously forbidden area of premarital intimacy. Young women have been particularly active in negotiating marital gifts, especially after the introduction of the new custom of converted bridewealth that allows them to pocket most of the bridewealth. And, to a great extent, the daughter-in-law now

determines the duration of post-marital residence and the power balance across generational lines in a stem family.

An emphasis on young women in this study by no means indicates the lack of agency of rural young men. Young women alone could not have made all these changes, and as far as the shifting power balance between the senior and junior generations is concerned, there is usually a supportive fiancé/husband behind each powerful young woman. In most cases of dispute or conflict between a young woman and her parents-in-law, the young woman can count on her husband's support (Yan 2003). In marriage negations, it is also common that a young man encourages his girlfriend to request a higher amount of bridewealth from his parents, or request early family division even before their marriage. In this sense, girl power is merely a manifestation of youth power, which constitutes, as I argued previously (Yan 1999, 2003), one of the most profound social changes in rural China since the 1949 revolution.

Nevertheless, mostly due to their previous marginality, young women have been particularly receptive to new family ideals based on gender equality, and more active in pursuing autonomy and independence in the domestic sphere than their male counterparts. Their rising power has also been more effective in challenging and changing the existing patriarchal hierarchy.

It should be noted that the traditional Chinese family was designed so that most, if not all, duties and obligations in everyday life fell on the shoulders of the daughter-in-law, and thus, for all pragmatic concerns, her status had to be kept low and her agency could not be awakened. This is why the development of agency and individuality among young women could give a fatal blow to the patriarchal family. As a witty villager put it, "When the daughter-in-law enters the family home, the father's power is knocked down" (*erxifu yi jin jiamen, fuquan jiu bei dadao*).

There are, however, two major limitations to the further development of girl power, both of which relate to young women's previous marginal and temporal status in private life. First, girl power grows out of the wider social context whereby the power balance is shifting from the senior generation to the junior generation in the domestic sphere, and it challenges patriarchal power instead of androcentric power. Because of this, girl power has not brought about radical changes in gender equality. In all areas—mate-choice, marriage negotiation, and family division—girl power mainly reflects a young woman's ability to impose her will on her prospective or actual parents-in-law, such as with bridewealth or early family division. Young women have altered the traditional expectation of virtuous daughters-in-law and the earlier unfair treatment of new daughters-in-law. In their own natal families, however, young women rarely challenged their parents except in the matter of mate-choice, which is justified by their economic contributions to their natal families. Precisely because girl power mainly poses

a threat only to prospective in-laws, young women can easily pursue their goals without much resistance from their own parents or even from their prospective husbands. In other words, young women's challenge to patriarchal power is realized when they physically move from their own natal families to those of their husbands and as they socially transform themselves from daughters to daughters-in-law. In this sense, girl power is actually the power of young women as new daughters-in-law, and it is limited to the cross-family, inter-generational dimensions of domestic life.

Because it challenges only the patriarchal power of one's in-laws, girl power has another limitation, its temporality. Once young women achieve their goals of acquiring a larger bridewealth, keeping the property under their control, and establishing their own independent households via an early family division, they tend to become increasingly conservative. Gradually they merge into their roles as mothers and then mothers-in-law and thus transform themselves once again, becoming the supporters and protectors of existing family values and patriarchal power. This traditional pattern is captured by the popular saying, "*duonian de xifu aocheng po*" (meaning that after years of suffering as a daughter-in-law, one finally becomes a mother-in-law). However, an important difference since the 1980s is that the power balance has irreversibly shifted to the junior generation, and the next generation of young women is bound to be more self-confident and powerful in pursuing individual interests and initiating changes in family life. Being a mother-in-law in the 1990s often means nothing more than being the target of girl power. Thus, the transition from daughter-in-law to mother-in-law also represents a change from empowerment to powerlessness for an individual young woman. Nevertheless, girl power as a social phenomenon is still on the rise.

NOTES

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2. For details about the history and current state of the community, see Yan (1996, 2003).
3. The last case of an arranged marriage against a young woman's wishestook place in 1971.
4. For an account of early experiments, see Ocko (1991) and Yang (1965).
5. See Yan (1999) for the growth of youth culture in the rural context over the past five decades.

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