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# Living under the Same Roof: A Genealogy of the Family Romance between Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law in Modern Chinese Hi/story

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It appears that feminism can never be free from 'a passion for difference', with differences between men and women as well as the differences among women being regarded as 'the twin pillars of feminist difference discourse' that were developed in tandem in the United States.<sup>1</sup> According to Susan Stanford Friedman: 'the initial stress on sexual or gender difference in the late 1960s and the 1970s gave way by the 1980s and 1990s to an emphasis on difference *among* women, a shift increasingly distinguished with the terms second and third wave feminism'.<sup>2</sup> The essentialist notion of universal sisterhood of all women under the same patriarchal oppression has begun to give way as feminist scholars draw attention to women's heterogeneities by integrating the analysis of gender with other intersecting forms of oppression. Such a trend is evident in the declaration of the Combahee River Collective: 'We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking'.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, multi-axial differences among women and their 'double jeopardy' or 'multiple oppressions' have attracted unprecedented attention in feminist studies. Nevertheless, the issue of age as a central axis of dominance has been understudied in feminist scholarship. As Kathleen Woodward points out, with increasing attention being given to race, class and sexuality, 'only age has remained invisible, not subject to analysis'.<sup>4</sup>

This paper aims to contribute to current feminist studies of differences among women by examining the age and generational difference between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, an issue especially prominent in a patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal-exogamous culture such as China, but which has received little attention from Western feminist scholars.<sup>5</sup> I will examine their common (as women) and respective (due to age and other intersecting differences) power relations with regard to men and the state to see how interlocking oppressions based on gender, age, generation, class and space are articulated through this particular intergenerational dyad.

Since I am trained in the fields of Chinese and English literature and position myself as a literary scholar, my focus will be three symptomatic (as well as problematic) literary texts written by men in different historical periods: *Song of Mother-in-law and Daughter-in-law* (1640–1715), written by a Confucian scholar named Pu Songlin; *The Liberation of Meng Xiangying* (1945), written by a communist writer Zhao Shuli and *Enjoying Later Life in Comfort and Happiness* (1993), written by a contemporary writer Lu Wenfu. I also draw on history, law and anthropology to locate my analyses of the literary texts in a concrete time-space continuum so that the literary and the non-literary can serve as each other's 'thick description'.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, I adopt the approach of New Historicism and call attention both to the historicity of literary texts and to the literariness of history. Examining these three literary texts written by men in relation to various supportive sociohistorical documents, I argue that due to changing historical forces that always favour some women over others in line with their age, generation, class and other multi-axial differences, the traditional pattern of mother-in-law dominating daughter-in-law in the Confucian narratives of late imperial China has been gradually reversed. Although this means that younger women are empowered, older women are nonetheless disadvantaged. Thus the gender stratification in the polity and economy has persisted in modern Chinese culture.

### **The oppressed daughter-in-law in late imperial China<sup>7</sup>**

In late imperial China when neo-Confucianism was the dominant ideology, a mother-in-law enjoyed more power than her daughter-in-law because of her more advanced age and the concept of generation in Chinese culture. This is because unlike the gerontophobia characteristic of Western culture, in Chinese tradition veneration of the elderly (male and female) was the norm, so much so that 'longevity' was considered one of the major virtues honoured and even rewarded by the state.<sup>8</sup> The veneration of the old was bound up with the notion of filial piety, indoctrinated in various state-sanctioned classics such as *The Scripture of Filial Piety* and the Confucian canon *Five Classics*, which were exhorted by neo-Confucians in late imperial China. Governed by the Confucian hierarchy based on 'generation, age, and gender', power was distributed unequally in a traditional family:

The oldest male had the highest status, and women's status, although it increased with the birth of sons and with age, was lower than that of any man. Great emphasis was placed on respect for age differences, and the desires of the young were subordinated to those of the old, just as the wishes of women were subjugated to those of men.<sup>9</sup>

On this basis, a traditional family was usually a legal entity under the leadership of a head (male first, then female) who was usually the oldest and most respected in the family.<sup>10</sup> When men were absent from the domestic sphere due to the division of inner and outer spheres and the taboo against the mingling of sexes, mother-in-law became the dominating matriarch in the domestic sphere due to her seniority.

Mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law had different relationships to men (especially the son/husband), notwithstanding that as women both of them had to submit to patriarchal values and norms. Predicated on the ideology of filial piety, intergenerational bonds were usually more important than conjugal ties. In other words, the relationship between a mother-in-law and her son took precedence over the

relationship between a daughter-in-law and her husband. The bond between a mother-in-law and her son was especially solid and strong when the relationship between the son and his father was awkward, which was usually the case in Chinese tradition, or if the father died early. Thus a mother-in-law was more advantaged than her daughter-in-law in that she could always partake of patriarchal power by seeking recourse to her son, who was usually the representative of patriarchal authority and who was expected to be submissive to his mother in line with the etiquette of filial piety. At the same time, the mother-in-law would try her best to prevent any alliance being made against her by her son and her daughter-in-law. With age and generation as an axis of dominance within a single gender, oppression became the norm for these young women, generating what Tani Barlow terms 'the cult of self-abnegating daughters-in-law' in late imperial China.<sup>11</sup>

The triangular relationship linking the daughter-in-law, the son and the mother-in-law in a traditional family is enacted in *The Song of the Mother-in-law and the Daughter-in-law*, a literary text written by Pu Songlin (1640–1715) in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).<sup>12</sup> Pu's position as a Confucian scholar made his text an expression of the mainstream Confucian ideology that aimed to educate women to behave properly. With a satirical and ameliorative twist, this story revolves around a Confucian literati family, featuring a village scholar An Dacheng, whose father, a distinguished provincial graduate, has been dead for some years; his mother Madame Yu; his younger brother An Ercheng and two daughters-in-law, Shanhu and Zanggu, who are portrayed in sharp contrast to each other.

Shanhu, a teenage girl from a relatively lower-class family, embodies the ideal self-effacing daughter-in-law in accordance with the Confucian protocol.<sup>13</sup> As pretty and well-educated as she is, she shoulders all the household chores while carefully serving her mother-in-law in the domestic sphere. Familial service is the foremost *sine qua non* for an ideal daughter-in-law. According to Tani Barlow: 'the cult of self-abnegating daughters-in-law was, in fact, a testament to the expectation of service'.<sup>14</sup> In late imperial China, service and manual labour, especially spinning, weaving or embroidery, was regarded as a female virtue. Idleness or laziness could ruin a woman's persona and social reputation. According to Susan Mann, courtesans and prostitutes were regarded as indecent by the society precisely because they did not spin or weave.<sup>15</sup> In accordance with this standard, Shanhu is an impeccable daughter-in-law so much so that she is highly praised by her neighbours and relatives for her familial service:

What a pretty daughter-in-law! She was even prettier than the Moon Goddess Chang'e, dressed simply in a plain dress made of cloth. She was impeccable in her practice of filial piety and Confucian protocols. Adding to her personal integrity, was her diligence towards all the household chores, including sweeping floors, washing dishes, cutting cloth to sew dresses, grinding wheat, feeding the chickens, dogs, ducks, and geese. She raised five fat pigs in the winter and reared ten beds of silkworms in the summer. She wove cotton to sew clothes by night and did silk embroidery by day. Early each morning she rose to serve her mother-in-law by combing her hair and washing her face. Her exemplary behaviour was reported to relatives and witnessed by neighbours, and she was said to be such a good daughter-in-law, comparable to the Qiong Flower of Yangzhou: the only one of its kind in this world!<sup>16</sup>

While executing the duties of a daughter-in-law whole-heartedly, Shanhu is always obedient to her mother-in-law and never utters a word of dissatisfaction, despite the maltreatment from her mother-in-law who is unconditionally supported by her son.

Thus Shanhu always remains an outsider in the face of the mother–son bond. One day, she gets up early to serve her mother-in-law as usual. She brings a chamber pot to her and is ready to comb her hair, but Madame Yu criticises her make-up, calling her a seductress. Shanhu immediately returns to her own bedroom, washes off her rouge, dishevels her hair, and puts on a pair of plain shoes. When she returns thus altered, Madame Yu slaps Shanhu in the face, and curses her saying, ‘I am fed up with your filthiness!’ With tears in her eyes, Shanhu begs Madame Yu’s forgiveness, but carried away, the mother-in-law continues to curse her and cry loudly, in the process awakening her son An Dacheng, who is ill in bed. He hurries to his mother’s room and, grabbing a whip off the wall, beats Shanhu until Madame Yu is exhausted from crying. To show further favour to his mother, An Dacheng compiles a divorce paper for the reason that Shanhu has not fulfilled her service obligations to Madame Yu. Feeling ashamed and afraid to go back to her father’s home, Shanhu attempts suicide by slitting her throat with a pair of scissors, but she is rescued by a neighbor, Granny He, and later seeks refuge in the home of Aunt Shen, who is Madame Yu’s elder sister.

Shanhu is also represented as an ideal wife in the sense that she devotes herself to her husband and does not bear a grudge against him even when he beats her on account of his mother. Even after she is divorced, she keeps chaste for three years and still hopes for acceptance again by her husband and mother-in-law. In fact, when she is accepted again later, she says to her mother-in-law: ‘As long as you do not find fault with me after learning that I have never complained about you and never planned to remarry, I would be happy even if I had to die’.<sup>17</sup> In brief, Shanhu is devoted to her husband’s family, despite being constantly abused by her mother-in-law and her husband. Shanhu thus suffers from interlocking oppressions based on gender, age and generation at the hands of both her husband and her mother-in-law, who are united by the notion of the mother–son bond.

In sharp contrast, Xie Zanggu, Madame Yu’s second daughter-in-law (An Ercheng’s wife), who is sixteen or seventeen years old, serves as a foil to Shanhu, and more importantly, a bad example for all daughters-in-law. Coming from a merchant’s family, Zanggu is not as docile and well-educated in Confucian decorum as Shanhu. As she is several years older than her boyish husband, who is thought to be only fourteen years old, she suffers less from the patriarchal power a mature husband might exert on her. Consequently, her mother-in-law’s power, usually contingent on the patriarchal power of her son, also wanes. The *raison d’être* for Madame Yu obtaining another daughter-in-law is that there is nobody to do the household chores after Shanhu’s departure. However, with a pair of three-inch golden lotus feet (a symbol of feminine docility and beauty), Zanggu is unwilling to fulfil her service obligations to her mother-in-law. She waits for other family members to cook rice for her, failing which she sells the furniture at home to buy food, which is deemed a great disgrace for a family at that time. When Madame Yu curses her by branding her as a ‘little slut’, she retaliates vehemently with ‘You old slut! Am I expected to serve you? You are totally mistaken!’<sup>18</sup> Having lost the support of her boyish son and never having suffered from such a dishonour, Madame Yu becomes sick and begins to regret what she has done to Shanhu. It is at this point that Aunt Shen sends Shanhu back to Madame Yu with the latter’s tacit consent, a fact which further attests to the mother-in-law’s power in restoring the honour of a disgraced daughter-in-law, because even the husband has no right to take his wife back due to the priority of mother–son bonds over conjugal ties.

As a Confucian scholar, the author Pu Songlin has his own brand of poetic justice. Shanhu as the ideal daughter-in-law is a positive model for young women to emulate while Zanggu, the demonised daughter-in-law, serves as a negative example to be detested. Shanhu's show of filial piety to her mother-in-law and her chastity to her husband are finally rewarded in Pu's text, while Zanggu is severely punished for her disobedience. When Zanggu overhears that silver is buried under a tree in the garden, she hurries there but only digs out bricks. In contrast, when Shanhu digs in the same spot, she finds silver. Zanggu gives birth to a son and a daughter, but they both die within ten days. She later becomes pregnant again another ten times, but all of the fetuses miscarry – as a kind of textual cruelty. Conversely, Shanhu gives birth to two sons, who later become distinguished provincial graduates after participating in the civil service examination. It is at this point that Zanggu the shrew comes to realise that by offending her mother-in-law she has offended Heaven. With deep remorse, she begins to help Shanhu to serve their mother-in-law whole-heartedly. Zanggu's repentance and filial piety to Madame Yu do bring her rewards subsequently. In her fifties, she finally gives birth to a son and becomes contented, for her security in old age has been guaranteed.

Obviously the author Pu Songlin is guilty of double standards here. While the rigid system of punishment and reward is applied to Zanggu and Shanhu, the young daughters-in-law, it is never applied to the mother-in-law and her son An Dacheng for their abuse of Shanhu. On close scrutiny of this story, it can safely be said that Pu actually aims at advocating filial piety and chastity for young women, who are or are about to become daughters-in-law. At the very beginning of this story, Pu himself also tellingly states that he is composing this story as a cautionary tale warning women against unfilial or unchaste behaviour.<sup>19</sup> The author's position epitomises the then dominant patriarchal ideology based on Confucian values, in the sense that he unequivocally demands that no matter how badly the mother-in-law and the husband treat the daughter-in-law, the daughter-in-law should be unconditionally filial to her mother-in-law and at the same time remain chaste for her husband, even if it means her self-annihilation. Due to the privileged position of the mother-in-law, which was predicated on the notion of filial piety and intergenerational bonds, a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law could assume unequal status within the family, usually with the mother-in-law dominating the daughter-in-law by borrowing patriarchal power from her son.

In a similar vein, the patriarchal state also placed the mother-in-law in a more privileged position over her daughter-in-law. First, by establishing submissiveness, self-abnegation, unconditional self-sacrifice and even self-annihilation as the norms for the daughter-in-law in historical texts, the state actually sanctioned the authority of the mother-in-law. For instance, according to the record of an official propaganda book of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), Mrs Liu, the wife of Han Taichu, cut her finger to mix her blood with the medicinal soup for her paralysed mother-in-law. She bit to death the parasites infesting her mother-in-law's bedclothes, and she even fed her mother-in-law with her own flesh to provide her with nutritious meat. Her self-mutilation was considered an exemplar of filial piety, so much so that the emperor presented her with an exquisite gown and twenty taels of silver.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, a daughter-in-law named Mrs. Hong of the Ming Dynasty showed devotion to such a degree that she even cut her own breasts to make fresh soup for her ailing mother-in-law.<sup>21</sup>

A daughter-in-law's devotion to her mother-in-law was supposed to be unconditional and unidirectional, no matter what kind of person her mother-in-law was and no matter how her mother-in-law treated her. According to an official record, Tang Guimei, a virtuous daughter-in-law of the Ming Dynasty, had a mean mother-in-law. A merchant coveted the beauty of Tang Guimei and he bribed the mother-in-law so that he could enter into a sexual relationship with Tang Guimei. Even though the mother-in-law whipped her and branded her with a red-hot flatiron, Tang Guimei refused to have an affair with the merchant. In a fit of fury, the mother-in-law went to court and accused her daughter-in-law of being unfilial to her. Though the policemen tortured Tang Guimei, she nonetheless refused to speak the truth. When somebody chided her for not revealing the truth after she was finally released from prison, she replied: 'If I had told the truth, I would be innocent, but my mother-in-law would be disgraced. As a daughter-in-law, how can I bear to make my mother-in-law suffer such a shame?'<sup>22</sup> These altruistic, self-sacrificing and even masochist daughters-in-law were set forth as official models for young women to emulate so that when a girl began to look at her relationship with her mother-in-law through the mirror of history, she could only find the stereotypes that had already defined her identity.

Secondly, the state usually sympathised with the mother-in-law. In line with the law of imperial China, a husband could divorce his wife if she committed seven sins, among which disobedience and failure to serve her parents-in-law (especially her mother-in-law) ranked first.<sup>23</sup> If the husband failed to divorce her, he would be sentenced to three years' imprisonment. As divorce was considered a great shame for women, these young daughters-in-law had to be cautious about pleasing their mothers-in-law, who were nonetheless hard to please. In Pu Songlin's text, for example, An Dacheng compiles a divorce paper under the very pretext that his wife Shanhu does not fulfil her service obligations to her mother-in-law. If the daughter-in-law cursed the mother-in-law, she would be sentenced to three years' imprisonment. If she beat her mother-in-law, she would be hanged. If she attempted to murder her mother-in-law, she would be beheaded, regardless of whether she succeeded or not.<sup>24</sup> A legal case in *Women in Historical Records of the Ming Dynasty* serves as an example. General Shen Ahui's mother was drunk, so she asked her daughter-in-law to serve her tea. As the daughter-in-law did not have tea at that moment, she served her mother-in-law soup instead. Flying into a rage, the mother-in-law tried to beat her, but the daughter-in-law managed to dodge the blows. This so infuriated the mother-in-law that she appealed to the court by saying that her daughter-in-law was unfilial to her and the daughter-in-law was sentenced to death. Although the daughter-in-law was not executed after the officials discovered the truth, this case nevertheless demonstrates the state's support of filial piety and its biased protection of the mother-in-law.<sup>25</sup>

A story in *Gossips from the Micro-Reading Hall* written by Ji Xiaolan (1724–1805), a Confucian scholar of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), further illustrates how the state privileged the mother-in-law. Brutally abused by her mother-in-law, the daughter-in-law finally commits suicide. Mr Shen, who is a lawyer, persuades the daughter-in-law's father and brother not to sue her mother-in-law. The ghost of the daughter-in-law appears before the lawyer and complains about the withdrawal of the case. Mr Shen retorts: 'There is no law to punish a mother-in-law who abuses her daughter-in-law to death. Even if I appeal to the court, I am afraid that you would not be satisfied with the outcome'. He adds:

The emperor will not be put into prison if he has done something wrong to his subjects; it's the same with a father and a son. We all feel sorry about your wronged death, but is it not sufficient for you to criticise your mother-in-law for her misdeed? As a daughter-in-law, you even intend to go so far as to sue your mother-in-law. This has already violated the norm between a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law. Even though you appeal to a sympathetic god, he will not take your side.<sup>26</sup>

Hearing this, the daughter-in-law's ghost is pacified and then disappears. There are internal and external reasons for the daughter-in-law's masochism. For one thing, the daughter-in-law may internalise the mainstream narratives, such as the lawyer's speech, and behave accordingly. For another, the daughter-in-law, even if she wants to resist, cannot find the social and legal channels that can do her justice. Just as the lawyer says, even though she complains to a sympathetic god, he will not side with her. Then what is the point of resistance? Deserving of special attention in the lawyer's speech are the binaries between emperor/subjects, father/son, and mother-in-law/daughter-in-law and the analogies he draws between them. The mother-in-law should be unconditionally respected by the daughter-in-law in as much as the father is respected by the son and the emperor by his subjects. Thus the dyad between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law is no longer confined to the domestic sphere, for it is within the larger power system of the state. The relationship between the individual and the state is reciprocal. Hence Mark Elvin observes:

To the extent that the state is able to confer prestige on some of its subjects and, by implication, to withhold it from others, it has a powerful means of influencing social and political behavior. Conversely, it probably draws some of its own legitimacy from its association, through a system of such awards, with persons popularly regarded as of exemplary character.<sup>27</sup>

In accordance with Elvin's contention, as mothers-in-law could obtain certain favours from the state, the state could in turn legitimise its association with them. According to Chinese tradition, the state was regarded as an extension of the family. Margery Wolf notes: 'The ideology of the family system and the ideology of the state were mutually supporting, both being based on a Confucian morality that held sacred a system of generation, age, and gender hierarchies'.<sup>28</sup> Filial piety that was practiced in the family was extended to fidelity to the emperor/state, for filial piety was not a mere manifestation of the love for parents, but was 'concomitantly transformed into loyalty that can be transferred to the sovereign . . . it is only when filial piety is subservient to absolute loyalty to the state that universal peace and prosperity can be achieved'.<sup>29</sup> Thus filial piety practiced in the family was directly translated to obedience to the state. By promoting filial piety in the family, the gerontocratic state could also legitimise its rule by encouraging its subjects to be unconditionally loyal to its emperor, who usually regarded himself as the parent of his subjects in Chinese culture.<sup>30</sup> However, a daughter-in-law's achievement of filial piety towards her mother-in-law was the most difficult to accomplish among all parent-child relationships, for the *de facto* reason that although there were no blood ties between them, they had to live closely every day under the same roof in a patrilocal-exogamous culture. In fact, a daughter-in-law had to live even more closely with her mother-in-law than with her father-in-law and husband, who were usually absent from the domestic sphere. It thus became even more imperative for the state to advocate a daughter-in-law's filial piety towards her mother-in-law, because, deprived of a place in the public sphere and always positioned in the family as good wives and virtuous mothers, these young women's virtues (filial

piety, chastity, submissiveness, self-abnegation and so on), notes Mark Elvin, were considered essential to the stability of the family and, by extension, to the state.

Because of the importance of filial piety in legitimising the imperial rule of the emperor, the state, while exhorting the value of filial piety and promoting model daughters-in-law in official narratives, would usually back the aged mother and/or mother-in-law to punish an unfilial son and/or daughter-in-law in order with incredible cruelty. On 13 April 1809, Emperor Jiaqing issued a decree to his people to emphasise the importance of filial piety and state his legal support of mothers and/or mothers-in-law:

I rule the world with filial piety. My people are gradually civilised in every corner of the world. I also use awards to encourage those fool and stubborn people to make progress in this aspect. Wang Shu, Governor General of Hubei province, reported to me the case of a couple's (Deng Hanzhen, a military student, and his wife surnamed Huang) beating of their mother and mother-in-law. I think the only suitable punishment for the couple's crime against filial piety is to flay them and scatter their ashes. The head of their clan failed to educate his younger generation and should be hanged. Their neighbours, who knew the case but did not report to the office, should be beaten with a staff for eighty times and exiled to Urumqi. The military student's teacher failed to educate his student to do good deeds, so he should be beaten with a staff for sixty times and exiled. The governor of the county failed to rule his people properly, so he should be demoted to the status of an ordinary man, and his descendents would be forbidden to sit for the civil service exam for ever. The blood mother of Huang failed to teach her daughter properly, so she should be tattooed with Chinese characters on the face. After the couple was exiled and paraded in the province, they should be sent back to their hometown in Hanchuan. In front of their blood mothers, they should be flayed and their ashes should be scattered in public. Deng Hanzhen's home should be dug for three *chi* in depth and would never be inhabited by people. As for Deng Hanzhen's mother, she will receive one *dan* of rice and one tael of silver as pension every month from the Civil Office of Hubei province. I ordered the Governor General of Hubei province to inscribe this case on a stone stele as a cautionary tale and present it to other provinces, prefectures and counties. In the future if there are people who dare to commit the crime against filial piety like this, they should be punished like this. Please observe my order seriously.<sup>31</sup>

It should be noted that while the obedient daughter-in-law was promoted as an exemplar for women in neo-Confucian narratives, she still remained an ideal. In real life, there were still some rebellious daughters-in-law who did not buy into the ideology of filial piety. Emperor Jiaqing severely punished the couple's mistreatment of their mother and mother-in-law in Hubei province precisely because he wanted to warn other unfilial sons and daughters-in-law, who were perceived to be prevalent that time. The author Yu Zhi's (1809–1874) introduction to Emperor Jiaqing's decree stated clearly:

There are many kinds of capital crimes, and the severest crime should be the one against filial piety. One cannot help feeling lamented that since education loosed and morality degenerated, there are more and more sons who are not filial to their parents and daughters-in-law who do not respect their parents-in-law. We really cannot tolerate these arrogant and evil practices. If we don't make educational efforts, they will get worse and commit capital crimes.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, not everyone felt obliged to side with the ferocious mother-in-law. There had been constant criticism of the mother-in-law's tyranny ever since the late imperial period. In a poem titled 'The Mother-in-law's Hatred' in the Qing dynasty, Zheng Xie (1693–1765) expressed his sympathy for the oppressed daughter-in-law and his anger towards the demonic mother-in-law. He questioned Heaven for failing



to see unfairness in the human world: 'Alas, if Heaven-Nature ever hears the pleas of the humble, why isn't it touched by the grievances of which she [the daughter-in-law] makes complaint?'<sup>33</sup>

Despite these ideologically aberrant cases, the obedient daughter-in-law was still promoted as an ideal in mainstream narratives. With more and more people buying into the ideology of the Confucian family and state, women would usually internalise these patriarchal ideologies and accordingly assume their assigned roles in their different life cycles. While a mother-in-law, by having a son and creating a uterine family, could be somewhat integrated into the patriarchal system and assume some power in the domestic sphere, the daughter-in-law was situated at the bottom of the power hierarchy based on generation and seniority.<sup>34</sup> Obtaining patriarchal dividends in her old age, a mother-in-law was usually a patriarchal agent 'in upholding and reinforcing social practices that keep young women subordinate to men'.<sup>35</sup> This she achieved by turning her own sufferings experienced in youth as well as her internalised self-hatred towards her younger counterpart. She was supposed to help control the daughter-in-law's spatial mobility, to ensure her chastity towards her husband and her service to her parents-in-law in the domestic sphere.<sup>36</sup> Although a daughter-in-law had to accept her low status dictated by Confucian morality, she could still hope to climb up the age and generational ladder and look to the day when she herself had a son and also became a powerful mother-in-law.<sup>37</sup> Within this rigid hierarchy, the mother-in-law was usually tyrannous in subjugating her daughter-in-law in order to achieve the stability of the family and security in her old age, making the victimisation of the daughter-in-law a common practice in late imperial China. Yi Shaogeng, a poet of the Qing dynasty, recapitulates such a feature of this intergenerational dyad especially prominent in late imperial China. He notes: 'It is difficult to be a daughter-in-law, but easy to be a mother-in-law. The mother-in-law is always angry, while the daughter-in-law is always tearful'.<sup>38</sup>

### Reviving the oppressed daughter-in-law in early socialist China

Although there had been criticism of the mother-in-law's tyranny ever since the late imperial era, it was the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that radically reversed the power relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law through political activism, culminating in their revolutionary movements towards liberating young daughters-in-law, especially child brides. The custom of child brides can be traced back to the Song (960–1127) and Yuan (1279–1368) dynasties, and it was only with the introduction of the Chinese Civil Code of 1931 that it was no longer legitimised by law, but nevertheless continued as a common practice in later years.<sup>39</sup> When a poor family could not arrange for a young woman to marry the son because of the great expenses, the head of the family would usually buy a little child bride at a very low price to be brought up as the son's future wife. In fact, Mao Zedong was quoted as saying: 'A poor man who doesn't have a child bride must be satisfied with an old woman'.<sup>40</sup> Abuse of these poor child brides, who were usually from lower-class families, by their mothers-in-law was so common that the name 'child bride' remains a term describing a miserable life even in contemporary Chinese language.<sup>41</sup>

The communists attached special significance to these young daughters-in-law, because they had the greatest enthusiasm for revolution thanks to their young age

and class background. With its doctrine based on Lenin's famous notion that 'the success of a revolution depends on the extent to which women take part in it', the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had generally attached great importance to the role of women for revolutionary causes. In communist narratives, the liberation of women from feudalism had great political significance, to the point that the victimisation of feudal women became a necessary political construct for the salvation of the nation.<sup>42</sup>

Under the discourse of most victimised/most progressive, women were stratified by age and class to indicate their degree of revolutionary fervour. The case of the Jiangxi Soviet (a local communist-controlled area in Jiangxi Province) illustrates that the ideal revolutionary woman was a healthy semi-literate woman of eighteen to thirty-five who could 'destroy her familist outlook and serve [the state even when called upon to make] government transfers'.<sup>43</sup> The CCP advocated that young women aged sixteen to twenty-four should participate in the Young Pioneers movement and those aged twenty-four to thirty-five should join the Red Guards, with everyone armed with a weapon to fight for the revolution.<sup>44</sup> Young women were highly valued for their enthusiasm for the revolutionary cause, as 'almost all young women in the Soviet state are very active in participating in revolutionary wars and common struggles'.<sup>45</sup> It was especially on this basis that the communists established the *qingfu bu* (Federation of Young Women), and one of its guiding principles was for the young women members to fight against tyranny and abuse by their mothers-in-law.<sup>46</sup> Besides age stratification, in 1927 the Communist Party also divided women into four different classes, namely child brides, wealthy women, ordinary women from the peasant and worker classes and prostitutes. By comparing their 'revolutionary attitudes', the Party concluded that child brides, who had suffered more than ordinary women, had the keenest enthusiasm for revolution if properly mobilised.<sup>47</sup>

Having the keenest revolutionary spirit based on the axis of age and class, these young daughters-in-law became high on the agenda for Communist projects concerning women, as 'to mobilise young women and child brides for struggle can greatly strengthen the revolution'.<sup>48</sup> Their documents generally regarded young women (especially child brides) as more revolutionary than the older generation, and their families as backward under the control of old clan heads. This viewpoint is reflected in a document, 'The Directive in Commemorating March Eight', which states:

We need to intensify our mobilisation of young women's struggles, to fight against old rituals, feudal forces, and parents-in-law's oppression of young daughters-in-law, especially their abuse of child brides. To struggle against those families who prevent young women from participating in revolutionary movements and attending various Red Schools.<sup>49</sup>

In many 'red' areas controlled by the communists, movements for liberating these young daughters-in-law were launched, and tyrannical mothers-in-law were criticised, shamefully paraded through the streets, punished and even executed in public. While the little daughter-in-law was regarded as *dang de hao nüer* (the good daughter of the Party), the mother-in-law was derogatively referred to as *e popo* (evil mother-in-law). She became the symbol of backwardness, as 'it is generally implicitly assumed that individuals become more conservative with age or that aging per se has a conservative effect'.<sup>50</sup> While there was no law in late imperial China to punish a mother-in-law who abused her daughter-in-law to death, the law of the communists sympathised with

young daughters-in-law. For instance, the *Taiyue Daily* reported in March 1943 that a child bride named Chunye was abused to death. Her mother-in-law Madame Liu did not have the sympathetic reception of her ancient counterparts, as the Communist state rallied the masses to criticise her and she was sentenced to death.<sup>51</sup>

This politicised intergenerational dyad became the object of the Party's propaganda narratives, especially in the early tumultuous socialist era when the CCP sought every method to mobilise the masses to consolidate and legitimise its revolution. In 1943 Mao Zedong launched the 'Yan'an Forum' that demarcated the cultural policies of the Communist Party for those working in literature and the arts, and it stated that their activities should only serve the political purposes of the Communist Party. Zhao Shuli was one of the Communist writers, and at the end of 1943 he was established as a famous 'writer of the people'.<sup>52</sup> As a communist writer, the majority of Zhao's works are propaganda of communist ideologies. His short story 'The Liberation of Meng Xiangying' (1945), characterised by peasant realism and revolutionary idealism, optimism and progressivism, propagates the Communist effort to revive Meng Xiangying, the little daughter-in-law, under the tyranny of her mother-in-law in a remote village where the communists have not consolidated their rule and are feeling threatened by the return of the Nationalist troops and the Japanese Imperial Army.

Working with the binaries between old and young, past and present, evil and good, enemy and the people, Zhao Shuli divides Meng Xiangying's relationship with her mother-in-law into two contrasting periods, with the intervention of the Party as the watershed. Before the Party's intervention, this intergenerational dyad and the relationship between husband and wife are still the same as those of late Imperial China:

The custom was the same as that which existed during the reign of Emperor Guangxu in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). The convention was that the daughter-in-law should be beaten, but she could also beat her own daughter-in-law when she finally became a mother-in-law herself. Otherwise, she could not have the awe and dignity of a mother-in-law. The norm governing men and women was that 'a married wife is just like a horse bought from the market; it's up to me to mount or beat'. Whoever failed to beat his wife was a henpecked coward.<sup>53</sup>

In line with this tradition, Meng Xiangying, a seventeen-year-old daughter-in-law from a lower-class family that is too poor to give her a decent dowry, is destined to suffer from multiple oppressions based on age, gender, generation and class. As was the norm in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the relationship between Meng Xiangying, her mother-in-law and the son Meini is still governed by the rule that intergenerational bonds should have priority over conjugal ties. Whenever there is a conflict between Meng Xiangying and her mother-in-law, the latter always uses the power of her son to subdue Meng Xiangying. One day when she offends her mother-in-law for no apparent reason, her mother-in-law immediately summons her son Meini back home to aid her. Without uttering a word, Meini wields a staff and tries to beat Meng Xiangying, but since Meng Xiangying is one year older than him, she seizes the staff instead. This infuriates her husband, because 'in line with the old convention, if the husband beats his wife, the wife can only be beaten for a while before neighbours come to mediate'.<sup>54</sup> Feeling ashamed, he grabs a sickle and strikes Meng, making a big hole in her head. Nobody cares why the husband beats Meng Xiangying, because 'in accordance with

the old convention, the husband can beat his wife for no reason'.<sup>55</sup> The ideology is so inveterate that all neighbours think it is acceptable for her husband to beat Meng Xiangying; they merely suggest that he should beat her somewhere else instead of her head, the most vulnerable part of the body. Feeling hopeless and frustrated, Meng Xiangying twice attempts suicide by swallowing opium and hanging herself, respectively, but fails to kill herself.

This power relationship between Meng Xiangying and her mother-in-law is reversed with the intervention of a male Communist cadre. Just as the mother-in-law has support from her son, Meng Xiangying also resorts to the support from a male Party cadre. As the son's power is inferior to that of the Communist cadre, who represents the intimidating power of the communist state, the mother-in-law's power over her daughter-in-law gradually wanes. Supported by the cadre, Meng Xiangying is selected as dean of the Women's Liberation Committee in her village. Disobeying her mother-in-law and counting on the power of the Party cadre and the Communist State, Meng Xiangying unbinds her feet first, and is followed by other enlightened young women. She takes a class and becomes educated. She even enthusiastically participates in various political activities to criticise publicly Ren Erhai, a GMD (Guomindang) secret agent, and parades him in disgrace around the village. She does such an excellent job in leading a group of women to do the farm work with her unbound feet that she is highly praised as an exemplar in local newspapers of the area under the communist leadership.

The communists' struggle against the mother-in-law in order to revive Meng Xiangying is best embodied in her spatial mobility, with the issue of foot binding, which is deemed the remnant of feudalism, at the centre. As the mother-in-law desperately tries to confine her to the domestic sphere in the family, the Party attempts to free her by drawing her into the *dang de zuzhi fanwei* (the organisational sphere of the Party) in order for her to serve the new Communist State like a man. Before the coming of the Party cadre, Meng Xiangying's mother-in-law has bound her feet and confined her mobility. In accordance with her mother-in-law's expectations, a real daughter-in-law should be self-effacing and diligent in her household chores:

She should have a pair of tiny bound feet, and pour tea, cook rice, grind rice and wheat, serve soup and prepare water for her in-laws' personal washing, sweep the floor and mop the table . . . . She should empty the chamber pots early in the morning and make beds at night. She should always be available to be ordered about. She should withdraw silently when a stranger visits the family, so that the rest of the world could never know that the mother-in-law has a daughter-in-law unless she herself reveals it.<sup>56</sup>

In their efforts to mobilise Chinese women, the communists advocated that since the purpose of foot-binding was to prevent women from stepping out of their homes, the practice should be abolished.<sup>57</sup> Those who refused to unbind their feet were derogatively termed fundamentalist and reactionary *xiaozu po* (hags with tiny feet) because according to the communists' statistics, these *xiaozu po*, unable to do farm work with their bound feet, desperately needed to depend on men for a living, so it was usually these feudal and unenlightened *xiaozu po* who prevented their family members from joining the Red Army and participating in other revolutionary activities.<sup>58</sup> When Meng Xiangying becomes more and more revolutionary in support of the Communist Party

and begins to unbind her feet, her mother-in-law, a *xiaozu po* par excellence, feels anxious about her daughter-in-law's newly-gained spatial mobility which can do harm to her chastity and filial piety. She comments: 'Her feet are getting bigger and bigger every day. She climbs mountains and crosses hills with her feet hardly touching the ground. A Jiaokou village is not big enough for her to fly around in. Now she even flies 10 miles away!'<sup>59</sup> She imagines that her daughter-in-law probably wants to betray her husband by seducing some young men in the fields far away from home. She also worries that with more mobility, Meng Xiangying is less likely to stay at home to serve her. However, intimidated by the power of the new state, the mother-in-law has to loosen her grip on Meng Xiangying. In the end, Meng Xiangying moves out to live alone so that she can serve the communist state wholeheartedly away from the confines of her traditional family.

The struggle between Meng Xiangying and her mother-in-law is vital because it is not only a battle between two women, but also a class struggle charged with political significance. The traditional class hierarchy of the richer mother-in-law dominating the poorer daughter-in-law has been reversed under the communists' utopian goal to liberate the poorest of the poor so that equality can be finally achieved and communism realised. Just as Meng Xiangying, belonging to the proletarian class, is delineated as the enlightened *dang de hao nüer* (good daughter of the Party) reborn in the communist state with the Party as her intimate flesh and blood 'mother', the mother-in-law, affiliated with the *fu nong* (rich peasant class), is portrayed almost as a potential class enemy. What is worse is that she does not trust the new government founded by the CCP; instead she believes in Niu Chacha, who used to be a landlord and a GMD agent, who keeps spreading rumors that the Japanese and GMD armies would soon return to take over the village and that all the villagers loyal to the CCP would be executed.

From another perspective, the youthfulness of the communist government and the daughter-in-law also naturally allies them together in opposition to old and backward forces, personified as the *e popo* (the evil mother-in-law). To be more specific, the communist state of that moment could be likened to a miserable daughter-in-law par excellence, oppressed and pursued by her powerful GMD mother-in-law, who spares no effort to wipe her out before she can become mature and strong enough to fight back. Thus it is in the revival of Meng Xiangying the daughter-in-law that the revolutionary Communist Party justifies itself, albeit at the cost of the mother-in-law. The dyad between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law in the family thus epitomises the struggle of the early communist state against its dominating political rival.

Furthermore, the revival of the daughter-in-law bears testimony to the Party's ability and efforts to right the wrongs of the old society, because the daughter-in-law herself, like other village women, does not have the *juewu* (consciousness) nor the ability to liberate herself by liberating society. It is for this reason that Meng Xiangying has to be revived and transformed by a male Party cadre so that the Party's rule can be legitimised. Thus Meng Xiangying, a passive object who needs to be revived, becomes only an instrumental tool for the Party's much-needed legitimacy before it took power in 1949. Although in later socialist China, the Party's infiltration and control of the family was lessened a little bit and the severely criticised Confucian morals of filial piety even returned, the revolutionary daughter-in-law and evil mother-in-law nevertheless became the reified stereotype of the socialist age.<sup>60</sup>

### The treacherous daughter-in-law in the post-socialist era

Since the communist state adopted the Economic Reform and Open-door Policy under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China has embarked on a journey of rapid modernisation and globalisation, which has favoured the young under the discourse of the free market. While the early Maoist state manipulated the younger generation in the cause of political struggles, the state under the aegis of Deng Xiaoping mobilised the nation's youth mainly for economic reasons. Hu Qili, a senior Party official was quoted in the *People's Daily* as commenting: 'Whether or not China's modernisation programme is successful depends largely on the young people of today'.<sup>61</sup> Accordingly, young women and their male counterparts all had a vital role to play in the country's modernisation, while older women were doubly disadvantaged because of their age and gender in the relentless free market. This viewpoint was reflected in a *New York Times* article (13 October 1998) under the headline: 'In China, 35+ and Female = Unemployable'.<sup>62</sup> Ding Juan, a researcher for the Women's Federation of China, also points out that as early as the 1980s, people had begun to advocate that older women should go back home so that the younger generation could take over their positions. This point was brought home in the following slogan: 'Mothers, please have mercy on us and offer your positions to the younger generation'. There has even been a recent trend towards 'Occupations Especially Reserved for Young Women', which has made it difficult for women above thirty-five to secure positions.<sup>63</sup>

Having more opportunities in employment and freer social mobility than older women, young women no longer dread their mothers-in-law. Insofar as the traditional power relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law governed by Confucian decorum was disrupted under the Maoist politics, it was further challenged under Deng Xiaoping's policy of market economy, although the current state does not overtly support the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law as it did in the early socialist period. Economically empowered, young daughters-in-law began to take over their mother-in-laws' powerful positions in the family, and their maltreatment or even abuse of mothers-in-law, especially in rural areas, became a phenomenon frequently reported in various media. For instance, it was reported in the *Lanzhou Evening Paper* that a mother-in-law named Li Guizhen was brutally abused by her daughter-in-law Liu Fang, who had control of the family finances. Besides beating her mother-in-law at will, Liu Fang also poured icy water on her mother-in-law's bed during winter. She gave her no food so that she had to eat in her own daughter's home whenever she was hungry.<sup>64</sup> With the traditional power cycle of dominating mother-in-law and obedient daughter-in-law having been reversed in the post-Mao era when money became the master, the norm governing the current intergenerational dyad is that a daughter-in-law abusing her mother-in-law would be abused by her future daughter-in-law too. As outcasts of the free market, old women have become the most disadvantaged and most oppressed group because of their 'double marginality' in the country's inexorable quest for economic prosperity.

This intergenerational dyad between the despised mother-in-law and the dominating daughter-in-law centring on the economy in the 1990s is best manifested in a short story, *Enjoying Later Life in Comfort and Happiness* (1993), written by the contemporary male writer Lu Wenfu. In this story, which takes place in Suzhou, the positions of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in the family are determined by class difference.

Dubbed the 'Super Career Woman', daughter-in-law Zhe Guifang is an iron-fisted Vice Manager at a Joint Venture Restaurant. Holding a high salary and appreciated by her Western boss, she lives a modern life with a modern mindset. In sharp contrast, her mother-in-law, Ma Yuying, who had come to Suzhou as a refugee when she was still young, has been working for half a century like a *coolie* (manual worker) by delivering alveolate coal balls in a manual pull-cart to residents in the neighbourhood. She is only paid eighty cents for delivering fifty kilograms of coal balls each day.

The class distinction has assumed new meaning. While Granny Ma may have been advantaged by her status as a proletarian in the Maoist era, she becomes the abject subaltern pitied not only by her Chinese neighbour Liu Yichuan, a well-educated old man of over seventy, but also by Western tourists seeking the exotic. While Zhe Guifang may have been labeled as a reactionary agent colluding with the 'foreign devils' in the Maoist era, she has become in the post-Mao era one of the elite respected and even envied by the local people in Suzhou for her high salary and transnational mobility. Naturally, distribution in the form of money, instead of status based on age and generation, becomes the norm governing the current female hierarchy, as 'women who could not earn money were the weakest, and they could by no means become confident and tough'.<sup>65</sup>

In a similar vein, money also becomes the norm regulating the relationship between the wife and the husband. As a result, the two women's relationships to the son have also changed. Conjugal ties now begin to take precedence over intergenerational bonds. The augmentation of the daughter-in-law's power thus miserably sandwiches the son between his mother and his wife.<sup>66</sup> Unlike An Dacheng and Meini, who are the breadwinners of the family and who unconditionally side with their mothers, Granny Ma's youngest and studious son, Ma Taibo, has to submit to his wife no matter how much Granny Ma loves and spoils him, because while his wife earns a lot he 'reads many books but earns little money'.<sup>67</sup> While a woman can be masculinised with the power of money, a man can also be feminised by his inability to earn money. Thus the family pattern has changed:

The norm which governed this family was one in which the *yin* essence dominated the *yang* essence, and the wife was in charge of the outer sphere while the husband took care of the inner sphere. Ma Taibo had to do all the household chores traditionally supposed to be done by women. Zhe Guifang bought an imported washing machine dubbed 'Panasonic For Your Loving Wife'. One of Ma Taibo's colleagues jokingly put a sticker on it, changing its name to 'Panasonic-For Your Loving Husband'.<sup>68</sup>

The son no longer sides with his mother unconditionally because it is the daughter-in-law that has the final say. With regard to the son's complicity in disrespecting the mother-in-law, the narrator observes: 'The son was unwilling to support his mother. It was usually because he had to listen to his wife. The daughter-in-law controlled the finances of the whole family, and there were constant conflicts between the two women'.<sup>69</sup> Thus, conjugal ties have trumped the mother-son bond. Unlike traditional daughters-in-law who had to live together with their husbands and mothers-in-law under the same roof, present-day independent and wealthy daughters-in-law like Zhe Guifang are no longer willing to live together with their mothers-in-law. In many ordinary urban families the mother-in-law usually functions as an unpaid baby-sitter so that her son and daughter-in-law can work full time and earn money in the world

outside. Zhe Guifang's case is not an exception to this trend, because more and more daughters-in-law, if they are independent and well-off enough, choose to live separately from their mothers-in-law. Hence, while the couple's modern nuclear family lives in a sunny apartment with modern facilities, Granny Ma continues to live alone in an old courtyard repossessed from a landlord and allocated to her by the Communist government in the Maoist era. When Liu Yichuan, a retired male intellectual in his seventies, visits Granny Ma's home, he is startled at its condition and remarks that Granny Ma's circumstances are rather lonely and desolate and that she 'looked like a beggar, a mad woman, and a scavenger'.<sup>70</sup>

The state is also embroiled in this intergenerational dyad. Urged on and supported by Liu Yichuan, Granny Ma goes to court to sue her daughter-in-law and her son for not supporting her. However, the aged Liu Yichuan and Granny Ma are not as worldly wise as Zhe Guifang. As shrewd and manipulative as she is, Zhe Guifang promises that she will give Granny Ma a monthly allowance, on the condition that Granny Ma should refrain from pulling her cart to earn a living. She argues: 'The court decision should apply to both parties. If you make a judgment that I should pay for the monthly allowance for my mother-in-law, you should also forbid her from pulling the cart. Otherwise, she would continue to propagate the idea that I am abusing her'.<sup>71</sup> Since she is willing to offer money and her suggestions sound very persuasive, the judges finally accept this appeal and advocate that the masses should not allow elderly women to work. Although the court decision may not necessarily mean that the state overtly sides with the daughter-in-law, it is nonetheless the product of the manipulative and intellectual power of the daughter-in-law.

The court's decision therefore has a different impact on the two women. While it is a 'double-win' for the daughter-in-law Zhe Guifang, it turns out to be a disaster for Granny Ma. Zhe Guifang does not offer her own money for Granny Ma; instead she demands that Ma Taibo give up smoking so that the money he uses to buy cigarettes can be given to Granny Ma as her monthly allowance. In addition, manipulating the court to forbid Granny from working is a face-saving gesture for Zhe Guifang because as a VIP in Suzhou, she hates to have a *coolie* mother-in-law who advertises the daughter-in-law's unfilial acts.

As for Granny Ma, earning money in rivalry with her well-paid daughter-in-law is not only expedient for survival, but also the only way for her to promote social recognition as a producer on a par with her daughter-in-law instead of being a mere consumer. As a low-paid manual labourer, she feels despised and misrecognised, especially by her daughter-in-law. She confides her feelings to Liu Yichuan:

I just want them to regard me as a human being instead of a dirty beggar. Even my grandson is not allowed to see me. It's as if I have contagious diseases. You don't know, Mr. Liu. My daughter-in-law does all this purposefully. She wants to infuriate me so that I can die of anger and bitterness as soon as possible, lest she loses her face and status.<sup>72</sup>

The main reason for Granny Ma's anger towards her daughter-in-law is their emotional rivalry for the son, because Granny thinks that with money and a high social status, her daughter-in-law Zhe Guifang has actually taken her son, and later her grandson, away from her. Regarding her daughter-in-law as a young and rich 'female bandit', Granny Ma believes that it is only through money that she can win back her son and grandson from her daughter-in-law. She enjoys using her money to buy cigarettes



for her son and chocolates for her grandson in order to please them. No wonder Granny Ma feels happy and fulfilled whenever she has earned some money: 'Whenever she put the money she had earned into her pocket, Granny Ma's heart softened, as if the parched land had been watered. Aching bones, shaky legs, the heavy weight of the coal balls when she climbed up the stairs, and so on –all this seemed irrelevant, as if they had not happened at all'.<sup>73</sup> She even dreams that with hard work and frugality, she could save enough money to buy an apartment for her grandson. She wants to prove that as a manual labourer, she is not inferior to her well-paid and well-recognised daughter-in-law.

However, the court decision dashes Granny Ma's hopes. When she later finds that the monthly allowance is not from her well-paid daughter-in-law but from her poor son, she refuses to accept the money any longer so that her son can still have the money to smoke good cigarettes. What is even worse is that she cannot work any more because the court decision has been circulated among her neighbours, so that her old customers dare not ask her to deliver coal balls. They comment:

Granny, you are so old. Do you intend to carry your money to your coffin? Your son and your daughter-in-law are not unwilling to support you. Why don't you enjoy your later years in comfort and happiness? The court has made a decision forbidding you to deliver coal balls. Whoever asks you to deliver coal balls is committing an act against the law. Who would dare to ask you to work?<sup>74</sup>

Several days later the coal-ball shop posts the following notice:

Whoever wants to rent a pull cart to deliver coal balls should be under the age of 60. People above the age of 60 or those below the age of 60 but who have retired are not eligible to rent a pull-cart and deliver coal balls. This is so that the old can be cared for.<sup>75</sup>

While this policy frustrates Granny Ma, it nonetheless pleases the younger generation in this trade. They tell her: 'Granny Ma, you should have retired and enjoyed your later years in comfort and happiness much earlier. Why do you insist on fighting over this rice bowl with us? Now you can introduce your old customers to us'.<sup>76</sup> As a young man soon takes over Granny Ma's job, Granny Ma finally has to give up her work, and this deals a heavy blow to her. She tells her grandson: 'My little one, your granny cannot earn money any longer. Granny cannot buy something for you. Granny cannot buy an apartment for you. Granny cannot buy good cigarettes for your dad'.<sup>77</sup> The three 'cannots' almost cause Granny Ma to lose her purpose in life. Forbidden to work, Granny Ma is deprived of spatial mobility and is totally confined to the domestic sphere: 'For the entire long and dreary winter, Granny Ma sat in that broken rattan chair with armrests near the stove, staring at the coal balls, which she had worked on for half of her life. She looked at them turning bright and hot and finally burning into ashes'.<sup>78</sup> Frustrated by her eternal defeat in the economic battle against her daughter-in-law to win back her son and grandson, Granny Ma dies of disillusion and depression the following spring.

The daughter-in-law's victory over her mother-in-law is highly symbolic of the current discourse of modernisation and globalisation. Although the daughter-in-law can be questioned for her shrewdness and even relentlessness in treating her mother-in-law, she is nonetheless portrayed as a young, intelligent, decisive, rebellious and economically independent career woman on a par with men, an admirable and imitable type of woman in the new era of modernisation and globalisation. Although

the mother-in-law deserves sympathy for her emotional frustration and her lack of a decent occupation, she is depicted as uneducated and irresolute, easily manipulated by Liu Yichuan to appeal to the court without knowing what on earth she really wants. The daughter-in-law's economic triumph over her mother-in-law is actually the victory of brainwork over manual labour, mechanisation over handicraft, modern individualism over familial collectivism, an inevitable outcome in the country's rush for modernisation and globalisation.

What is more important is that while the daughter-in-law stands for the dignity, competitiveness and the advanced means of production of the modern country on a par with her Western counterparts in the global economy, the mother-in-law, associated with backward means of production, nonetheless constitutes a national shame relished by Western tourists in their orientalist fantasy of seeking the exotic and the abject in the secluded and shabby lanes and streets of China with their cameras. Lu Wenfu's story begins with this very national shame the mother-in-law invites:

A group of Western tourists unanimously raised their cameras and kept shooting pictures in the lane beside the Donglin Temple . . . . The manual pull-cart and the alveolate coal balls already seemed exotic enough for the Westerners, what more that the person pulling the cart was a gaunt old granny. With hoary white hair, this old woman had such deep wrinkles all over her face that her face looked like a dried and fissured marshland. Her eyes were two parched ponds, and her tightly shut mouth was a river deplete of water. Except for her white hair, she was black all over as her body was covered by coal ash.<sup>79</sup>

Liu Yichuan happens to see foreigners taking pictures of Granny Ma. Feeling pangs of shame, he decides to safeguard the honour of the country by preventing Granny Ma from pulling the cart, the effect of which is rather counterproductive for Granny Ma herself. Liu Yichuan's persuasion of her suggests his superior position over Granny Ma, a fact which draws attention to what Susan Sontag calls the 'double standard of ageing', because while Granny Ma suffers a lot in her old age, Liu Yichuan seems unaffected by his old age, as he is still integrated into the society as one of its elites due to his advantageous gender and class status (as an intellectual).<sup>80</sup> Liu Yichuan can also be regarded as the persona of the writer Lu Wenfu himself, who, as a conscientious modern male intellectual concerned with the fate of the nation, has to make Granny Ma (who symbolises the old and outmoded means of production) die in his text so that the wheels of modernisation and globalisation (embodied in the daughter-in-law) can inexorably keep running forward. The fact that Lu himself benefited a lot from the market economy (he ran several tourist companies and restaurants in Suzhou) further reinforces his identification with the young daughter-in-law, albeit he is also sympathetic to Granny Ma. The title of the story, *Enjoying Later Life in Comfort and Happiness*, is therefore ironic, because mothers-in-law can no longer enjoy their later lives in comfort and happiness without money and work in the relentless market dominated by their daughters-in-law.

### **Conclusion: living under the same roof of the 'house of difference'**

This article has delineated the changing power relations between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law as represented in three literary texts from three historical periods:

the mother-in-law's domination of daughters-in-law under the patriarchal ideal of filial piety in late imperial China, the liberation of the subjugated daughter-in-law from the tyranny of her mother-in-law through political mobilisation supported by the paternalistic CCP and the daughter-in-law's dominance over the mother-in-law through her economic and educational superiority in the new order of the free market economy. From this trajectory, we can see that the mediations that make up social positioning – age, generation and class in this case – are always in flux and the traditional pattern of mother-in-law dominating daughter-in-law has been gradually reversed. Although this means that younger women are empowered, older women have to pay the cost. Thus women are not liberated as a whole group and gender stratification in the economy and polity remain in force.

By privileging three literary texts, I have approached women not so much as real historical persons as representations. If literature is a mirror, it may truthfully reflect history, but it can also distort it. My aim is therefore not to push for a concrete historical and sociological argument; rather I emphasise the notion of mainstream ideology and ideals reconstructed in these male-centred narratives, which may have some historical relevance. Under the male gaze, women's real lives and their own subjectivities may be lost. Also, covering such a long historical duration in a short article, I have inevitably ignored the subtleties of historical changes and tended to over-generalise the picture. Conscious of my eclectic approach, yet still eager to articulate my position, I adopt what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has called the method of 'strategic essentialism'. That is, I strategically essentialise the changing power relations between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law and present their collective identities in three historical periods in a somewhat simplified yet expedient way to achieve certain goals.

My goal is to engage with international feminist studies on the issue of differences among women. While current feminist studies in the West are fascinated with race, class, sexual and other kinds of differences, I want to highlight the issue of age and generational difference between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in Chinese culture, a topic that is less significant in the West but very prominent in a patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal-exogamous culture. In this way, I hope to destabilise the notion of 'woman' as a universal sign of sisterhood under the same patriarchal oppression by highlighting the age and generational differences between Chinese women. This is not just an aesthetic and literary issue but also a political one that can attract critical attention and advocate real change for women. It is with this goal that I conclude my article by citing Audre Lorde's insight that although the house we are living in is a 'house of difference', it is after all the same house in which all of us (as different as we could be in terms of nationality, race, age) live under the same roof for shelter and for the preservation and glory of which we need to fight in our joint, yet varied efforts.<sup>81</sup>

## Notes

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Susan Stanford Friedman and Tani E. Barlow for their insightful comments. I am also indebted to the editors of the journal and the three anonymous reviewers for their invaluable suggestions for further improvement.

1. Henrietta L. Moore, *A Passion for Difference: Essays in Anthropology and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 1; Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 69.
2. Friedman, *Mappings*, p. 69.
3. 'A Black Feminist Statement: The Combahee River Collective', in Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim (eds), *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 164–71, here p. 164.
4. Quoted in Anne M. Wyatt-Brown, 'Introduction: Aging, Gender, and Creativity', in Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen (eds), *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), pp. 1–15, here p. 1.
5. In late imperial China, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law were usually called *gu* and *fu* respectively. Ever since the early twentieth century, they have been called *po* and *xi* respectively. For the convenience of English readers, I translate both terms as 'mother-in-law' and 'daughter-in-law'. However, I am deeply aware of the cultural connotations that might be lost in translation.
6. Stephen Greenblatt, 'The Touch of the Real', in Catherine Gallacher and Stephen Greenblatt (eds), *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 20–28, here p. 31.
7. Late imperial China here is loosely defined as the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.
8. Wyatt-Brown, 'Introduction', p. 7; Jon Hendricks and Cynthia A. Leedhan, 'Making Sense: Interpreting Historical and Cross-Cultural Literature on Aging', in Prisca von Dorotka Bagnell and Patricia Spencer Soper (eds), *Perceptions of Aging in Literature: A Cross-Cultural Study* (New York, London: Greenwood Press, 1989), pp. 1–16, here p. 2; Mark Elvin, 'Female Virtue and the State in China', *Past and Present* 104 (1984), pp. 111–52, here p. 112.
9. Rita S. Gallin, 'The Intersection of Class and Age: Mother-in-law/Daughter-in-law Relations in Rural Taiwan', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 9 (1994), pp. 127–40, here p. 129.
10. Chen Chiyen, 'The Foster Daughter-in-Law System in Formosa', *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 6 (1957), pp. 302–14, here p. 302.
11. Tani Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 47.
12. All translations of Chinese texts are mine unless otherwise indicated.
13. In general, men and women were married at an early age in imperial China. Men were supposed to be married between the ages of fifteen and thirty, and women between the ages of thirteen and twenty. See Chen Peng, *Zhongguo hunyin shigao* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p. 385.
14. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, p. 47.
15. Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 14.
16. Pu Songlin, 'Gufu qu', in Pu Xianming and Zou Zongliang (eds), *Liaozhai liqu ji* (Beijing: Guoji wenhua chubanshe, 1999), pp. 52–97, here p. 55.
17. Pu, 'Gufu qu', p. 79.
18. Pu, 'Gufu qu', p. 75.
19. Pu, 'Gufu qu', p. 54.
20. Zhang Tingyü, *Mingshi* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1935), p. 2087.
21. Zhang Shudong and Li Xiuling, *Zhongguo hunyin jiating de shanbian* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1990), p. 197.
22. Zhang and Li, *Zhongguo hunyin jiating de shanbian*, p. 198.
23. The seven sins were: disobedience to parents-in-law (especially the mother-in-law), inability to bear a son to carry on the family line, adultery, jealousy, incurable illnesses, excessive talkativeness and theft. See Zhang and Li, *Zhongguo hunyin jiating de shanbian*, p. 197.
24. Zhang and Li, *Zhongguo hunyin jiating de shanbian*, p. 197.
25. Li Guoxiang, *Ming shilu leizuan: funü shiliao juan* (Wuhan: Wuhan chubanshe, 1995), p. 692.
26. Ji Xiaolan, *Yuewei caotang biji* (Chongqing: Chongqing chubanshe, 1996), p. 74.
27. Elvin, 'Female Virtue and the State in China', p. 111.
28. Margery Wolf, 'Marriage, Family, and the State in Contemporary China', *Pacific Affairs* 2 (1984), pp. 213–36, here p. 213.
29. Donald Holzman, 'The Place of Filial Piety in Ancient China', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118 (1998), pp. 185–99, here p. 192.
30. The parent-child relationship between the ruler and the people is expounded in an ancient classic text *Commentary of Zuo*: 'he (the ruler) nourishes his people as though they were his children, shelters them

- like Heaven, accommodates them like the earth. And when the people serve their ruler, they love him as they do their parents'. Quoted in Burton Watson, 'Introduction', *The Tso Chuan: Selections from China's Oldest Narrative History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. i-xxxviii, here p. xv.
31. Quoted from Yu Zhi, *Deyi Lu*, vol. 2 (Taipei: Huawen shuju gufen youxian gongsi, 1969), p. 897.
  32. Yu Zhi, *Deyi Lu*, p. 897.
  33. Quoted in Mark Elvin, 'Unseen Lives: the Emotions of Everyday Existence Mirrored in Chinese Popular Poetry of the Mid-Seventeenth to the Mid-Nineteenth Century', in Roger T. Ames et al. (eds), *Self as Image in Asian Theory and Practice* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 113–99, here p. 160.
  34. There could be a hierarchy among daughters-in-law, too, as men at that time could have concubines. In this case, the first wife was ranked as the highest among them.
  35. Nancy Foner, *Ages in Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 91.
  36. The notion of a spatial boundary between the domestic and the public spheres and the ideal of the cloistered girl can be traced as far back as the ancient *Book of Odes* in which the 'pure and secluded girl' was celebrated as pure and sage while the 'wandering girls' were regarded as morally decadent. Kang-I Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, *Women Writers of Traditional China: an Anthology of Poetry and Criticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 691. The foot-binding tradition, reaching its peak in the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911), materialised the extremes of female seclusion and spatial oppression imposed upon young girls. It demonstrates male anxiety over women's spatial mobility, which was associated with infidelity and disobedience. Even in Taiwan in the early twentieth century, the mother-in-law would still put some strips of cloth on the wedding bed when the young bride was ushered into her bridal chamber, reminding her of her low status in her new home: she could not run wild and was expected to stay at home to serve her mother-in-law, just as the feet had to submit to the binding strips. Arthur P Wolf, 'Adopt a Daughter-in-Law, Marry a Sister: a Chinese Solution to the Problem of the Incest Taboo', *American Anthropologist* 70 (1968), pp. 864–74, here p. 868. As many scholars have noted, there were class and regional differences in foot binding practice. Women from the lower class could not afford to bind their feet because they had to do farm work. The foot binding practice was not so dominant in Southern China and some ethnic minorities, such as Hakka, did not practice it at all.
  37. The daughter-in-law's desire to assume power by becoming a mother-in-law can be exemplified in a wedding blessing for the bride, 'May you soon bear a son, and may you soon become a mother-in-law yourself', Arthur P. Wolf, 'Adopt a Daughter-in-Law, Marry a Sister', p. 870. Even the idiom *qiannian de xifu biancheng po* (the one-thousand-years daughter-in-law finally becomes the mother-in-law) is still popularly used to refer to those who became oppressive and tyrannical when achieving power and authority, although before that they themselves had endured long-term struggles and suffering. For an example of an oppressed daughter-in-law becoming an oppressive mother-in-law in turn, see Eileen Chang, 'The Golden Cangue', in Joseph S. M. Lau et al. (eds), *Modern Chinese Stories and Novellas 1919–1949* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), pp. 530–59.
  38. Quoted from Zhang and Li, *Zhongguo hunyin jiating de shanbian*, p. 199. Even in present-day Chinese vocabulary, the term *xiao xifu* (little daughter-in-law) is used as a metaphor to refer to those humble, timorous and over-prudent people who can endure oppressions without uttering any words of complaint. This phrase manifests two factors (age and gender) disadvantageous to women: *xiao* means 'young' or 'small' and *xifu* means 'daughter-in-law.'
  39. Chen, 'The Foster Daughter-in-Law System', p. 304.
  40. Quoted in Wolf, 'Adopt a Daughter-in-Law, Marry a Sister', p. 867.
  41. Wolf, 'Adopt a Daughter-in-Law, Marry a Sister', p. 871.
  42. Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (California: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 2.
  43. Quoted in Barlow, *The Question of Women*, p. 57.
  44. Women's Federation in Jiangxi, *Jiangxi suqu funü yundong shiliao xuanbian* (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 1982), p. 461.
  45. Women's Federation in Jiangxi, *Jiangxi suqu funü yundong shiliao xuanbian*, p. 284. Young women were most active in the revolutionary cause, which was manifested in seven aspects: joining the Red Army; helping the Red Army in the battlefield; extending the Red Army by encouraging their husbands or brothers to join the Red Army; serving the Red Army by making shoes, washing clothes and singing and dancing for the Red Army; defending the soviet state; purging enemies and struggling against 'rich peasants' and landlords. For instance, young women loyal to the soviet state could even betray their families by helping the state to arrest their parents or husbands who served as GMD agents. Women's Federation in Jiangxi, *Jiangxi suqu funü yundong shiliao xuanbian*, pp. 284–5.

46. Women's Federation in Jiangxi, *Jiangxi suqu funü yundong shiliao xuanbian*, p. 413.
47. Xia Minghan, 'Zhongguo funü wenti', in Women's Federation in Jiangxi, *Zhongguo funü yundong lishi ziliao* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1986), p. 715.
48. Women's Federation in Jiangxi, *Jiangxi suqu funü yundong shiliao xuanbian*, p. 456.
49. Women's Federation in Jiangxi, *Jiangxi suqu funü yundong shiliao xuanbian*, p. 457.
50. Jessie Bernard, 'Age, Sex and Feminism', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 415 (1974), pp. 120–37, here p. 121.
51. *Taiyue Daily*, 28 August 1943.
52. Gao Jie, *Zhao Shuli Zhuan* (Taiyuan: Shanxi renmin chubanshe, 1982), p. 82.
53. Zhao Shuli, *Zhao Shuli wenji* (Beijing: Gongren chubanshe, 1980), pp. 61–2.
54. Zhao Shuli, *Zhao Shuli wenji*, p. 64.
55. Zhao Shuli, *Zhao Shuli wenji*, p. 65.
56. Zhao Shuli, *Zhao Shuli wenji*, p. 73.
57. The communists held that Chinese women were bound by four feudal ropes, namely the heavy hairpins which forced them to lower their heads, the earrings which discouraged them from listening to others, the foot-binding rags which discouraged them from stepping out of the house and finally the bracelets which discouraged them from moving around at will. Ji Rong, *Zhongguo funü yundongshi* (Changsha: Hunana chubanshe, 1992), p. 54.
58. Women's Federation in Jiangxi, *Jiangxi suqu funü yundong shiliao xuanbian*, p. 65.
59. Zhao Shuli, *Zhao Shuli wenji*, p. 74.
60. Deborah Davis Friedmann, *Long Lives: Chinese Elderly and the Communist Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 129.
61. *People's Daily*, 9 November 1982.
62. *The New York Times*, 13 October 1998.
63. Ding Juan, 'Xiandai shehui zhong de funü diwei', in Dalin Liu (ed.), *Zhongguo hunyin jiating bianqian* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1998), pp. 242–301, here pp. 251–64.
64. *Lanzhou Evening Paper*, 9 May 2005.
65. Lu Wenfu, 'Xiangfu' *Zhongpian xiaoshuo xuankan* 71:2 (1993), pp. 3–15, here p. 6.
66. 'The sandwiched man' or 'the two-sided adhesive tape' is now popularly used to refer to the son who is subject to simultaneous claims and pressures from both his mother and his independent wife. Liuliu, *Shuangmian jiao* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2005). This is a story about the rivalry between a wealthy, modern, independent and privileged Shanghai daughter-in-law and a peasant mother-in-law from northern China, with the son miserably sandwiched between them.
67. Lu, 'Xiangfu', p. 5.
68. Lu, 'Xiangfu', p. 6.
69. Lu, 'Xiangfu', p. 6.
70. Lu, 'Xiangfu', p. 8.
71. Lu, 'Xiangfu', p. 13.
72. Lu, 'Xiangfu', p. 8.
73. Lu, 'Xiangfu', p. 6.
74. Lu, 'Xiangfu', p. 14.
75. Lu, 'Xiangfu', p. 14.
76. Lu, 'Xiangfu', p. 14.
77. Lu, 'Xiangfu', p. 15.
78. Lu, 'Xiangfu', p. 15.
79. Lu, 'Xiangfu', p. 3.
80. Susan Sontag, 'The Double Standard of Ageing', in Marilyn Pearsall (ed.), *The Other Within Us: Feminist Explorations of Women and Aging* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 19–24.
81. Regarding the trope of 'house of difference', Audre Lorde says: 'Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay-girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different. Each of us had our own needs and pursuits, and many different alliances. Self-preservation warned some of us that we could not afford to settle for one easy definition, one narrow individuation of self . . . It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather [than] the security of any one particular difference'. Audre Lorde, *Zami: a New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansburg: The Crossing Press, 1982), p. 226.