CSDS-Asia Matters Podcast In Partnership with the Lau China Institute at King's College London — 6/3/2022

Women's Lives in Modern China — Edited Transcript

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Guests: Ye Liu, King's College London
Deborah Davis, Yale University

The following is a lightly edited transcript of our recent podcast recording.

Andrew Peaple: Hello and welcome to CSDS-Asia Matters, the podcast where we aim to look deeper into some of the biggest issues in the world's most dynamic region. I'm Andrew Peaple.

And for this edition we're pleased to be working in partnership with the Lau China Institute at King's College London, as part of a special series of China focused episodes. The Lau China Institute is the largest China centre in the UK. It exists to build a greater understanding of China, both in the UK and across the globe through education, research and outreach. So to find out more, please visit www.kcl.ac.uk/LCI

In the course of this podcast, we are going to talk about some of the issues and factors affecting the lives of women in China, ahead of International Women's Day on March 8th. To do so I'm pleased to be joined by two renowned experts.

Ye Liu is a senior lecturer in international development at King's College London, and her research has focused on education and gender inequalities in China. Hello to you, Ye.

Ye Liu: Hi, Andrew.

Andrew Peaple: And Deborah Davis is joining us as well. Deborah is a professor of sociology at Yale University. And her research focuses on contemporary China. Her 2014 book, 'Wives, Husbands and Lovers' focused on marriage and sexuality in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and urban China. Welcome to you to Deborah.

Deborah Davis: Thank you.

Andrew Peaple: And, as I say, thank you so much to both of you for joining us today. And let's get our discussion underway. We all know that China has seen this extraordinary economic growth over the last few decades. And we also know that the government has, in recent years, loosened restrictions on the number of children that families are allowed to have. Yet despite all this, the birth rate in China has dropped to its lowest level on record and women in China are marrying much later in life, if at all. Ye, can I start with you: What are some of the factors

shaping young women's attitudes towards balancing work life and families in today's China, and how have those been shifting in the last few years?

Ye Liu: Like young women across the whole globe, in many other countries, young women in China are still facing the same dilemma of having it all, balancing career and family. There are some micro level factors. For instance, young women nowadays are concerned about a lack of reliable and affordable childcare. And they're also concerned about the educational cost, for instance, for raising a child or two children, particularly in urban areas. Women are also concerned with the 'motherhood penalty' on their careers, their income, and also a sense of self worth, because a lot of highly educated young women nowadays, they have a very strong sense of themselves as career women, that's a very important part of their identity, and they don't want that to be taken away.

And also at an individual level, we should not just be led by statistics and fertility rates in China — we also need to look at what has happened in individual families, what has happened between husbands and wives. There is a kind of never ending negotiation between wives and husbands about childcare: it's more than just school runs and extra-curricular study, it's also a constant kind of back and forth between six adults, between grandparents, and husbands and wives. And this kind of very complicated intergenerational relationship, also complicates their decision making.

Andrew Peaple: Lots to unpack there. Ye, you've done a lot of research on the ground in China, talking to young women in particular, what were the key themes that came through that work that you've done, in terms of how attitudes towards family life and work life are changing particularly amongst younger women in today's China?

Ye Liu: I think younger women are having more and more confidence in themselves. And they certainly talk a lot about worthiness, their identities as a professional; they talk about their careers a lot, they sometimes downplay their private roles as wives or mothers. The confidence-boosting is very important among young women. And we need to pay more attention to their priorities in life, building meaningful careers, and also kind of minimising the concerns of the 'motherhood penalty'.

Andrew Peaple: Deborah, can I bring you in here? What have you found in your similar research that you've done in China, in terms of the way that attitudes towards these sorts of issues are changing in China, in families, both amongst the younger generation and — as you hinted — amongst the older generation as well.

Deborah Davis: Yes, I very much agree with Ye on her description of the pressure on these young urban women, particularly the college educated. And in this recent essay that she did with 82 interviews, terrific piece, she emphasises that there are these different levels at which one thinks: a moral one, a financial one, and one's status and then self worth.

For my work, I step back to generalise very often about all of China. And that means breaking it down. So most young women are born in villages, and currently are migrating. That's the plurality. And these migrant women are less likely to be only children, they very often have siblings, but they are also much better educated than their mothers, just like the urban women. And they also have dreams for self-realisation and career. So it's very interesting, I think, the way in which these younger rural born women, whether they're living in large cities, or towns, face some of the same concerns that Ye has just outlined. And this impacts the fertility, it impacts on whether they are they going to have a second child? How do they relate to the grandparents who may still be in the village, pushing for the birth of a son. So I think there are ways in which this issue of work-life balance is there for all young women.

But I also would stress on this shifting, that we don't forget what happened in the 1950s, or even otherwise, in which women didn't have choice, whether they were in rural areas or urban: they were going to be full-time workers. That was part of the revolution. So that the experience of being a mother and a wife, really through 1980, was one in which work was not a choice. Job was not a choice. We're now in a new place in that I do think this issue of choice is much more salient.

Andrew Peaple: That's very interesting. That impact of the sheer number of people in China, particularly from rural areas who are working away from home, often 1000s of miles away from their home, and their family support structures these days: How big a factor is that in terms of the overall effect it has on things like the birth rate, because people simply don't have the family support structures that they might have done when people were less mobile across the country.

Deborah Davis: The migration is the largest structural factor which has transformed family life. Currently, about 40% of all children in China spend the school year with one or no parent. When we look at who's marrying, this is primarily migrants, the largest group. And so this issue about marriage, which is part of what we're going to be talking about today, is critically different. These are young people, men and women, far from their families, moving about from place to place. And for those who began in the village, this is a huge change, because they have this freedom, and also this sexual revolution, which was perhaps inadvertently started by the one-child policy which gave everyone access to birth control — almost abortion on demand — a freedom to have romantically liaisons, inside marriage, outside marriage. This was truly a revolution for post-1949 China, which up to this time, had really conflated marriage and sexuality.

So going back to what Ye was talking about, the young, urban woman, college educated, this is part of what's changing her life also. So directly on migration, it has the most impact for the rural born. It indirectly impacts those already in the city, because it brings into the city, into the town, literally hundreds and 1000s of young people from different backgrounds, and people are mixing in this context. In terms of childcare, which Ye has described so well with the four grandparents hovering about the one grandchild, and the way in which young couples have to negotiate that, the rural families, these split families, their big concern is do they send the child back to the village. Do they keep the children in the village, and this has raised a whole series of crises over childcare. And then that impacts how young women and young men understand being parents

and whether they would consider having an additional birth. Because for them, childcare is so difficult and it often means leaving their child behind. And this is excruciating. So it's expensive. It's problematic, and it also impacts their decision whether or not to have another birth.

Andrew Peaple: Ye Liu, you referred at the start to the fact that these sorts of issues are issues in countries across the world. But can you give us some insight into what childcare support is like in China, in terms of what the state provides, what families provide, and what is lacking in terms of where things would need to be in order to give people more security about having larger families.

Ye Liu: So China's public spending on preschool childcare has been historically low compared to other OECD countries, and recently had increased to around 0.4% of GDP. But at the crucial age of childcare, ages 2-3, it is practically non existent. So Chinese families, urban or rural, still rely on their own family support system, Deborah just mentioned about the rural migrants, they still have to rely on their family members, parents, grandparents, from the countryside to come to the city to help them with childcare, or they have to make the important decision whether they have to leave the children behind.

Urban women are also moved around a lot. They have families close to their work, not necessarily close to their parents. So they're also involved in almost military-like planning, arranging childcare support. I interviewed 82 women who were brotherless, sibling-less, the first generation of a one child policy. They call themselves the experimental generation. Rich or poor, they still rely on their parents for support. When I asked them why they still want their parents for support, even some of the women who are highly educated, really professionally accomplished, and also had a really good income, they also kind of opened another can of worms. The primary market for childcare providers is hugely under regulated and not professionalised, which means urban families do not trust private childcare providers for those between the age of 0-3. So this kind of lack of trust, coupled with this anxiety over bringing up another generation: They're under a lot of pressure to have more children, and also the government encourages people to have more children for our future economy and for the ‘harmonious society’. But particularly the women I interviewed are still very cautious and not convinced by the prospect of having more than one child.

Andrew Peaple: Can I follow up on that? I'm quite interested in how women in particular respond to those government calls to have more children and to have bigger families. It's all about the health of China into the future. Clearly, there's going to be an economic problem for China, as it is for so many countries, having an ageing population. But do people listen to those sorts of exhortations and encouragement from the government to have more children? Or do they kind of turn a blind eye to that?

Ye Liu: You know, it's difficult to give a kind of straightforward answer, particularly for women from an urban area. Let's talk about younger women born under the one child policy, they have more education than their parents’ generation. They had very empowered childhoods, girlhoods. And they have a great prospect of pursuing a meaningful career. And for them, the women I

interviewed, they felt like they are experimented on by the state. They call themselves the guinea pigs. They call themselves the experiment generation of the one child policy. And now they're the first generation of women who are legally allowed to have additional children. But they feel torn between the top-down approach in terms of population planning.

Deborah Davis: So in Ye's piece, she has examples of people who choose to have a second child because of the state invocation. Sometimes it's indirect, in that they've decided to take a certain state position in their office, and this secures them a certain kind of protection and security, which they didn't have if they hadn't gone along with the recommendation to have a second or third child.

In my work in this area, I find this a very small minority. Men and women are making a decision about having another birth, or even having the first birth, based on what they can economically afford. And for both the highly educated with well paid jobs, and the urban working class who do not have highly paid jobs, and are facing early retirement, and elderly parents, this is really problematic. So most of the people I interviewed in the cities who were thinking about having a second child, they did this in the 2017 interviews, a little bit before Ye's project, but when the second child was possible: Nobody in this group would want a second child, including the grandparents, because the grandparents said, we've done it for the first we're not doing it for a second. So this bringing on a second child, when there is no alternative to intensive mothering in the home, means that very few men and women are responding positively to the state's invocation.

Now in the past, and if we go back to when they implemented the one child policy, there were some carrots, but mainly they were sticks, right? You would have lost many things if you had an out of quota child, or you had a child before you were allowed to have a child. And that, I think, is what of course has changed a lot. What kind of carrots and sticks does the Chinese state have now? Are there any carrots and sticks?

Ye Liu: So on this kind of carrot and stick argument: The Chinese government, I think, in a way they have listened to people's concerns, they've seen a lot of surveys about why people don't want to have more children. And the first kind of clear signal from the Chinese government is to crack down on private tutoring, to kind of step in on intensive parenting, the toxic competitiveness. It has been a kind of a phenomenon, the Chinese called it [unclear], which means intensive parenting plus concerted cultivation type of parenting, or other family two families' investment and commitment concentrated on one or two children.

Deborah Davis: What I was picking up — it wasn't part of my formal interviewing, so it may be more anecdotal but it does make sense — is that actually closing the tutoring meant that there would be more pressure on the mothers to be the education, as we used to say in Japanese, the education mama. The mothers are who is going to have to take up the slack, because as you yourself write, and have mentioned, the economy remains cutthroat competition. The path to getting into the best lower middle school, the best senior middle school, and then to the best university, remains as difficult.

Ye Liu: I think the rationale for the government to introduce this crackdown on private sector tutoring was to ease the burden on individual families, to create a kind of ushering in of a new era that would be called ‘Happy learning, Happy study’. But the issue remains.

China has been through this really competitive exam-based education for so many years since the reform and opening, and China has also had 2,000 years of encouraging an exam based system. It's very difficult to uproot this kind of cultural norm overnight.
Urban families develop different strategies; for the really rich families, they hire an English tutor as the nanny, as a domestic support, and pay them a huge monthly salary. Another trend is for urban parents to increasingly invest in extra-curriculum activities. Some urban parents, for instance, in inland provinces, they travel for hours on the train to have a one-hour piano lesson with a very renowned music teacher in Shanghai. So it's kind of the government policy, there is a kind of mismatch between the policy intent and the preliminary kind of outcomes of the policy, which has made urban families even more anxious. It's a very interesting crossroads in China. You know, how can we define success? How can we make our children successful?

Andrew Peaple: Deborah, can I come to you, I just wanted to ask whether in the course of your research, you saw any signs of changing gender roles within families at all: whether men for example, are taking on more of the burden of things like childcare and cooking and cleaning and so on within within the household? Are those kinds of changes taking place in China, as these pressures on younger families seem to intensify in terms of achieving success for their children?

Deborah Davis: No. There have been many surveys, as well as many people doing more ethnographic [research], as well as novels and movies. Because the gap between male and female wages has increased over the last 30 years, and in particular it accelerated in the last 15 years with the rise of particularly highly paid professional managerial jobs…This has accentuated the actual dominance of men in the household, it also means that for men, the rewards are in the workplace. So every hour they have to spend in the workplace, they should invest there, and they'll be supported by the rest of the family, the wage return justifies that. I think many of us have found that the return of the idea of a dominant man is very important, and he should be socially recognised. Sharing housework is not part of that.

Also, because I am interested in this generational comparison, I have three generations I'm looking at: When work was not as competitive, when the state really was pushing — both rhetorically and economically — male-female equality and economic returns, it was also possible for men to take up more of the burden of cooking, of shopping. I tracked this quite in detail in the 1980s. At that time, life wasn't as easy: picking up the coal, picking up the rice, picking up the children, if you're the one who had the bicycle.

And now China's in a new place. For the migrants, I think of Suzanne Choi's work, called *Masculine Compromise*. And this is a study of what migrant men have experienced, being separated, having their wives often come with them but working in other kinds of jobs, the couple separated, but having to support the parents of, particularly, the husband in the

countryside. And what she describes is this enormous pressure on these rural migrant men to be powerful, strong and good providers, and of course, good sons. And this is extremely difficult. The pressure on these migrant couples is huge. It's one reason the divorce rate is so high for them. And being manly, expressing oneself in a stereotypical manly way is, I would say, more pronounced in family life for urban people now than it was in the early 80s and the 1970s.
Andrew Peaple: That's very interesting, because we've seen recently, some leading government figures railing against what they've called, in inverted commas, ‘sissy men’: this idea of young men, some of them the older generation see as somewhat effeminate and so on. Is that something that you've picked up on as well, this kind of desire at different levels of Chinese society for, as you say, more ‘manly men’, again in inverted commas? And conversely, does that lead to any changes in what society sees as a woman's role or the ideal woman? How has that changed it in recent years?

Deborah Davis: In our work here at the Tsai Center, the Yale Legal Studies Centre for the study of China, one of the foci for many years has been the LGBTQ community. And so the sissy boys piece and the sexuality piece is actually, in part, a more recent crackdown on the gay community and gay rights. And it's the latest. One of the things that was so interesting is, as the government restricted activism and environmentalism, restricted the feminist five, even as they passed the new domestic violence law, there was amazing freedom: Gay pride, shows, galas that came from the underground and came above; and then in the last year, we watched Gay Pride closed down. PFLAG, which is the organisation for parents of gay and lesbian youth, has continued, but there is definitely a push back. And one expression of that is to promote a stereotypical ‘being the man of the house’, being physically superior, and of course, being obviously male, as opposed to binary or a sissy man. So I, these two things are linked: what's happened with gay rights and gay life and, and recognition of homosexuality, which was going on a liberating trajectory for almost 20 years. That's part of this sissy man.

On the question of what is femininity? Ye, should speak to this. My short answer is, indeed, this has changed a lot. And because I've been working in China since 1980, and before that, in Taiwan and Hong Kong, it's been interesting for me to see how my students, because I'm generally in an academic setting, and then my younger colleagues, present themselves and what they want to do. And certainly in these last 10 years, there was this emphasis on losing weight, nails, being fit in a certain kind of cross-training kind of fitness, the dress being, quote, ‘more revealing’, more feminine. In other words, highlighting what are stereotypical female traits. And so I do think there is a push, some of it from the market, some from individual people's desires, and some of it from state policy, to promote certain stereotypes both for men and women, which serve the government's interest in the vision they have for its kind of control over unofficial life.

Andrew Peaple: Yem does this tally with what you're seeing in terms of definitions of ideal femininity, ideal masculinity, both at the state level and amongst people in general.

Ye Liu: I totally agree with Deborah's point on this. [The idea of] ‘manly man’ and ‘family women’ is part of a push back to have this as a clear distinction, a clear binary. So for my

research, I interviewed women [born under] the one child policy, and very likely their husbands are also from a siblingless family. And when I talk to them about the division of labour within the household, and they talk about this relentless pressure to prioritise their husband's masculine roles, I was always very interested in women's kind of consciousness about gender egalitarianism; is there any strategy or attempt to create an equal household, for instance. And the problem related back to childcare, and they describe marriage as very crowded; It's not just between husbands and wives, it's also this kind of ongoing, complicated relationship with mother in laws and father in laws. So that for the men, in order to keep themselves to the traditional masculine role and norms of earning money to support a family, their parents are stepping in to outsource all the household chores to their parents. So the parents, my interviewees describe the parents-in-law as a patriarchal gang, blocking any progressive attempt to address gender equality in an individual family.

I also want to talk a little bit about slightly complicated issues about positional advantages or disadvantages. So women, if they are married to a man below their socio-economic status, or a man who is not from metropolitan cities or from family that is not as well off as their [the woman's] parents, they have more kind of bargaining power, they can have more decision making power in terms of whether to have another child or whether to invest in a family property, they can have a bigger say in the family. But if the woman's socioeconomic status is inferior to the husband, they still rely on their husband's family to pay for their mortgage or pay for their property deposit. They step back, they assume this kind of traditional feminine role. They talk about being 'virtuous', being a virtuous wife and being a good mother too, that's very important to their identity, because their negotiating power is very limited comparative to their husbands. But having said that, even women from a much higher social status, from much more affluent families, they still prioritise their husband's careers. And they still agree it's important for the man to have a career to be the head of household, even though they make more decisions in the family. So this is something very interesting from my research.

Andrew Peaple: Turning to the workplace, and what you've observed there. At the start of this discussion, you spoke about the new self confidence that many women have, particularly in urban places, and that they're looking to have good and fulfilling careers and successful careers. What sort of barriers, though, are coming in their way? What are attitudes towards women like within workplaces? And do women have the sort of role models that they need in society? I mean you stilldon't see that many women amongst the higher reaches of politics and business in China. I think.

Ye Liu: This is a very interesting question. So in terms of the workplace, it's a very, very muddy area. Women experience discrimination from the entry level, a lot of women describe their shock and gender consciousness while they are actually job hunting. A lot of job advertisements in China are still outlined as male only, even civil servant jobs. So at different points of a woman's career, they face this kind of discrimination and different levels of discrimination. So at the entry level, they feel they're not as competitive as their male counterparts in university. And this I just wanted to step back to emphasise, [many of these women] had an empowered girlhood, they went to university and they are also higher achievers than their male classmates. And when

they have their first transition to a labour market, they were taken aback,they were shocked by the blunt gender discrimination. And also once they settle in their jobs, they are facing misogynist and sexist micro aggression on a daily basis.

Now let's talk about women, when they want to have children. So for instance, some of the women I interviewed had to apply for a [place in the] ‘pregnancy queue’, which means they had to discuss their fertility plans with the line managers. And because, particularly small businesses and even some schools, try to avoid a situation where multiple employees are taking maternity leave at the same time, they asked women to declare their intentions. And the women have to have approval from the line manager before they can get pregnant. And even if they had successfully got pregnant, there is a kind of cultural attitude that diminished capabilities are associated with pregnant women and women with young children. They were thought to have ‘baby brains’ and diminished performance potential. They got their projects taken away. They were asked to step back to allow their male colleagues to take leadership of a project for instance. And they feel like this is a very clear penalty on their career.

And it's not just during pregnancy, it also lasted several years. For some of the women I interviewed, they reckoned it would take them around three years to climb back to the level of seniority before they were pregnant. And also China's maternity law and maternity pay are very complicated. China recently introduced new legislation, so that Chinese women across different provinces are entitled to at least 60 to 80 weeks of maternity leave, and a majority of the leave is fully paid. But this is the legislation in theory. In practice, women are still concerned about the penalty when they return to work. For instance, some of the women, they rushed back from their maternity leave, they only took around six weeks and yet they still faced a scale back from the original place they had in their companies. Some of the women I interviewed already held quite senior positions in co-ops and in SOEs for instance, they also talk about the kind of micro-aggressions they face in workplaces. For instance, they may have had a meeting and the male senior managers discuss female virtues. And unless you keep silent, or did not want to share your opinion, you face a punishment for being a difficult woman. And when women speak up and talk about their own ideas, they are stereotyped as having a domineering personality. So there are various kinds of stereotypes and misogynist practices in workplaces, undermining women's potential to pursue and advance a career and to have more ambition.

Andrew Peaple: Those are all absolutely fascinating points. And obviously a lot of change is still needed within China. I think some of those complaints are things that women in other countries and in other companies would probably share. But it's fascinating to hear what the pressures are, what the situation is for so many women in today's China. Deborah, can I bring you in here: Do you want to come back on that?

Deborah Davis: I think Ye’s observations are totally on the mark, particularly for highly educated single women in the cities. But if we zoom out and look at people who don't fit that category, it depends on whether you are in the private or public sector. In both cases, there are many barriers. In the public sector, one of the key things which Ye mentions in her written work is this earlier retirement for women, forced mandatory retirement and that of course, limits the

promotion ladder. It starts very soon, you're not going to advance someone who has to retire at age 55. Similarly, all positions of authority, ultimate authority in any workplace are through the [Communist] party. There is a promotion escalator through the party, which is the main means to authority and power. And in that case, the number of women party members hasn't decreased. But the number of women party members who have authority in the workplace has decreased.

In China, there was a period, when the state control, whether in the countryside or in the cities, was more complete over the economy, there were women's slots. And so women could become accountants, they could become the head of the women's office at the village level, at the county level, and in the cities similarly. So the work that I did in the 80s in Shanghai, was before the reform, and was through the retirement organisation. So I interviewed hundreds of retired or newly retired women and interviewed in factories. And these were women in the textile industry, it was mainly women. So it's women, supervising women, and those kinds of jobs no longer exist.

And this raises the other piece about the rise of the private sector, which is not regulated in the same way, and is all about profits. And so you're going to go for what gives your unit the highest profit rate. And the second part is, if it's private, and family owned, which is key in the countryside, less so in the city, but it’s also important in the city: it's the sons, you invest in your sons, or even your sons in law, when it comes to getting the loans to advance the company, they will go through the man, they are not going to loan money to women. Women, even if it's your most talented daughter, you are not going to make her the head of the company, she may marry and leave. In the Japanese cases, you know, they have a system where they adopt in the son in law, when their own son is not acceptable to the company. China doesn't have that component. So this is another way, I would call a structural and cultural barrier. that was not as intense. It's not that it was not there, but in many ways it was latent. And what the reforms have done by creating this dynamo private sector, in many ways, is to allow cultural expectations in which men are dominant, men are the priority, whether it's in the family, or the workplace. And this disadvantages, of course, educated women, highly competent women and ambitious women.

PS on the side, however, you go down the sector, and we're looking at blue collar manufacturing jobs, what we see in China is what we see in other countries, that when you talk about these new manufacturing jobs, no matter how large scale a factory is, really, we saw it in Taiwan, you saw it in Thailand, now we see it in China, they want young women with nimble fingers, they want women who will be good on the line , who will follow the orders of the foremen. And so the women sometimes get better paid jobs in industry than their male siblings, who are shifted off as uneducated rural boys into the shipping department or into hard labour. And it's the women who have this value.

And so one of the issues when we talked about divorce, and split childcare, etc, for these rural migrants is that it is not uncommon for the young wife to have a better job and be paid more than her husband. And then you get into the conflict of him returning to the village, he has no future. And so I just wanted to zoom out a little bit so that those folks listening on the

programme will, when they talk about China, break it down, not only by generation, this young versus middle age versus old because of their historical experiences, but also be thinking about the complexity of the Chinese economy, not only the agrarian sector, industrial service jobs, but also the private sector versus the public sector.

Andrew Peaple: I think that's absolutely right. And that's a fascinating note to bring our discussion to an end for today. Thank you, Deborah, for those insights. And thank you, Ye as well. So many interesting topics that we've covered there, and probably so many more that we could go on to discuss, but I want to thank you both again for your time and expertise and insights there. Thank you also today to Rebecca Bailey for producing this episode of CSDS-Asia Matters. You can still find our podcasts, obviously on any available platform. We're on Twitter and LinkedIn as well. So do please give us any feedback that you might have. Thank you for listening today and goodbye.