4 Navigating Racial Patriarchy

> I lost myself somewhere, because whatever the case, it is a different culture, language, cuisine; your opportunities to realise yourself here are very limited.[1]

> When I upload videos to Douyin, most of the comments I get are: 'Can you bring more women or show us more women from your country? Why are you so beautiful?'[2]

When the women realised and experienced the objectifying character of the marriage and immigration structures they had become subject to when they married across the border, they adapted, questioned, negotiated and resisted. While few questioned their status as a 'Chinese wife', a term some women used to describe themselves, they were not willing to accept the limitations imposed by state regulations and familial and societal expectations. Transitioning from the patriarchal norms of their home societies to a new system in China – one that valued their bodies as potential capital for Chinese men and their families – prompted them to re-evaluate their life experiences and the norms of married life.

Valued for their ability to reproduce the Chinese nation and to contribute to the success of their Chinese husbands, the women responded in varied ways to the social roles assigned to them. They were neither entirely reduced to nor wholly accepted these roles. Some met the expectations with anger, frustration or humour, while others knowingly and creatively played the gendered race card. Prestigious and privileged only insofar as they adhered to the patriarchal boundaries of the Chinese marriage and immigration systems, some women viewed it as a necessary sacrifice and made a virtue of patience, so they could earn legal status in China after five years and capitalise on their bodily looks.

In this chapter, I discuss how my research participants have navigated the norms and cultures that commodify them as sources of Chinese

[1] Interview with Katya, Beijing, 5 June 2017.
[2] Interview with Sonya, Henan, 5 July 2018.

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national desire and reproduction, valuing the white woman's body in the Chinese marriage market and immigration regime as social capital for the Chinese husband and his family and as a 'free womb' for nurturing future Chinese citizens. Margery Wolf's study on 'uterine power' in rural Taiwan in the 1970s showed how, after marriage, daughters were neither seen as members of their natal family nor fully accepted by their husband's family. They remained as suspicious outsiders yet essential as bearers of a new generation for their family.[3] Wolf put forward the idea of 'the uterine family' as a source of woman's power in patriarchal social structures. Women in Wolf's field leaned on their relations with their children to circumvent the patriarchal family structures. In the context of Chinese–Slavic families and marriages of the twenty-first century, foreign women remain as foreign guests in their own families and uterine power is not sufficient to guarantee their inclusion and form of belonging. They draw on a web of their maternal instincts and relationships, citizenship regimes and loopholes in the state bureaucracies to guard themselves from family control and patriarchal state incursions.

4.1 'Women Marry because They Feel Useless Otherwise'

At the beginning of our conversation Lena asked me if I knew what 'face' (she used the Chinese '*mianzi*') meant. I said yes, but didn't offer an interpretation of the term, and she went on to explain that to approach the topic of Chinese–foreign marriages and understand women's experiences better, I needed to have a firm grasp of the importance of face in Chinese society. 'Having a foreign white wife is a solid foundation for having face in China. A white woman is like a precious stone to them. It is beautiful and prestigious. You will have beautiful and clever children,' explained Lena.[4] I have come across variations of this statement in nearly all my conversations on my research topic in China. Whereas *mianzi* was the term often used to explain Chinese men's perspectives on marriage with a foreign woman, *podkupit'sya* (to be bribed into) was the word used by the women themselves to explain their choice of husband. 'They bribe us into marriage (*oni nas podkupayut*) by their level of attention and care,' concluded Lena when I asked her about her marriage decision. She then quickly corrected herself, saying that this was probably not the correct word. She then went on to explain:

> From the first day of our meeting each other, my future husband took care of my needs completely, including in [the most] mundane things. [For example,]

[3] Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1972), 167.
[4] Interview with Lena, Vladivostok, 16 August 2016.

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although I had ordered drinking water for my home on my own in the past and managed to do so successfully with my very limited Chinese, when we started dating he would say, 'I will order the water for you. Firstly, it is not difficult for me to do. Secondly, you live in my country and there are a lot of things you don't know. I can do it, while you might make a mistake somewhere.'

Similarly, Olya and Katya, who were married and lived on the outskirts of Beijing, noted during our conversation in a Starbucks café in the Chaoyang district of Beijing that 'they [Chinese men] bribe us emotionally with their promises of a good life, constant presents and attention'.[5] The women said that they were seduced by the attention and care with which their future husbands cosseted them during their courtship – a form of treatment that they had never observed, expected from or experienced in men in Ukraine and Russia, their home countries.

Lena also acknowledged that she felt that she 'had never before met such a prince' in her whole life.[6] After one year of dating and receiving a marriage proposal, she was not sure she wanted to marry, for fear of spending the rest of her life with someone with whom she did not share a common language and because of her uncertainty about her future in China. Having dated for another year and being constantly impressed by the level of attention paid to her by her Chinese boyfriend, Lena finally agreed to marry him when she was just over thirty years old. She liked the fact that he took unfailing care of all her needs in China. 'I liked the fact that he decided everything for me and I let him do it,' she concluded.[7] He started paying for her Chinese-language courses, rented a comfortable apartment for her and took care of all her basic domestic needs. She had come to China from Vladivostok with some savings and had always been materially independent. Initially, the idea of depending on a man was alien to her. But she continued, 'I could not accept it at the beginning, yet by the end of year two, he was paying for all my expenses in China.'[8] This all-encompassing care, other women also noted, was a trait that they had never experienced or observed back home. 'Podkupit'sya' in this context means to be attracted to someone by the level of their care and attention, both material and sentimental, but stresses the objectified position of the person led into (or subjected to) a marriage. Some women found it difficult to accept their financial reliance on their Chinese husbands and their inability to earn their own living in China as a result of the restrictions of Chinese immigration rules. Oxana, for example,

[5] Interview with Olya and Katya, Beijing, 5 June 2017.
[6] Interview with Lena, Vladivostok, 16 August 2016.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

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explained that she could not abide her financial dependence on her husband, because she had always been an independent person and had always earned her own living. But she had got used to her dependence, because she could not work on her family visa and did not want to break the law for fear of being deported.[9]

Some women faced pressures from their own and their Chinese extended families in relation to childbearing. Ana felt flattered by her boyfriend's attitude towards her. She liked the fact that he did not insist on starting intimate relations straightaway, did not take advantage of her and did not treat her, in her words, as 'a sexual object'. However, two or three weeks later, after they had started living together, he brought up the topic of having a child together. She told me that she felt pressured by his constant nagging about 'the beautiful child' that they could have together. Ana's parents added to the pressure: 'You are twenty-three, it is time to have a family. Look, your classmates already have a child … it is time to start thinking about a child.' When Ana replied that, if they kept on saying these things, she'd have a child with a Chinese man, the first time round her mother was opposed to this prospect, but the second time her reaction was: 'Well, any husband would do, even a Chinese one!' So, six months after Ana had first met her Chinese boyfriend, they started planning to have a child. Ana continued, 'If I could turn those years back, I would never have done it. But you only learn from your own mistakes.' It was normal for the women to highlight the pressure that some husbands and their families placed on women to have a child to make their man desirable in the eyes of others:

> After we had been married for a year, my Chinese relatives started getting on my nerves by asking, 'When will you have children?' When one distant relative asked me, 'How about kids?' I answered, 'Have you been to the toilet today?' She was surprised and asked, 'Why do you ask such a thing? This is not polite.' I answered, 'Why do you ask me about something private? This is not good.' After this exchange they never asked me about our plans.[10]

Marriage and childrearing remain the dominant societal norms and route to self-realisation for women in post-Soviet states, as in post-Mao China.[11] This shared social norm and expectation led the women to characterise their experience as escaping from one type of patriarchy only to end up in another. The social and cultural value of marriage as the main life goal of a woman was further amplified by the family and social pressures to marry 'in time'. Olga was working in a Chinese company in Belarus and she said it was a source of pain to her family that she was still

[9] Interview with Oxana, WeChat, 20 August 2018.
[10] Interview with Ana, WeChat, 3 June 2018.
[11] I-Chieh Fang, 'The Girls Who Are Keen to Get Married', in *Ordinary Ethics in China*, ed. Charles Stafford (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 66–79.

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unmarried at the age of thirty-three. She felt that people were looking at her with sympathy as if she were a 'leper' (*prokazhennaya*).[12] Then, when she finally decided to marry a Chinese man whom she had met through her company's connections in China, people expressed their pity: 'People said I couldn't find anybody so I married a Chinese man. They asked me why I hadn't found a different type of foreigner, since I speak English.'[13] Yet to her it was important that her husband was a practising Catholic as this meant that she would feel comfortable putting up religious icons in her home. One of the biggest challenges to Olga, who held two university degrees in foreign languages and law and had worked since she was seventeen years old till the moment she arrived in China, was to accept her independence being infringed upon by the family visa regime in China.

Olya and Katya summarised the specific traits of their upbringing and social environment shared by many women of their generation: 'They don't value women in our countries. We are all brought up by mothers [who say to their sons-in-law at home] "Thank you very much for taking my poorly brought up, uneducated daughter in marriage. Thank you for marrying her, thank you for looking after her."'[14] Alyona agreed, saying that she felt that Chinese men's style of courtship replenished the empty hole in the souls of many post-Soviet women, which was caused by the social attitudes and upbringing styles in their home societies: 'I have a feeling that women marry because they feel useless otherwise.'[15] Their decision to marry was a response to a social norm and even an obligation that many internalised as their own desire. However, having freed themselves from the economic, social and familial pressures they had experienced at home, the women then encountered the peculiarities of Chinese marriage culture.

4.2 Negotiating Bride Price

Women often reflected on their first-hand experiences of the commercial character of social relations in China. For example, Sonya observed that 'in China everyone exchanges money. You give money as a present and then get exactly the same amount in return.'[16] She believed that her parents-in-law went to weddings to give money so that this money would be returned to them at the wedding of their child. She said that she and her husband had to organise their wedding to please her Chinese parents-in-law rather than do it for themselves. Ana also noted that in China the

[12] Interview with Olga, WeChat, 4 August 2018.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Interview with Olya and Katya, Beijing, 5 June 2017.
[15] Interview with Alyona, Beijing, 31 May 2017.
[16] Interview with Sonya, Hebei, 5 July 2018.

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weddings are for the guests. Chinese parents insist on the wedding, because it is a fundamental and essential tradition in the eyes of the wider society. It can take place one year or more after registration, but it has to take place. She added, 'I don't know if they do it on purpose or not: they have to show off their foreign daughter-in-law. She is a foreigner, after all!' Ana did not have very clear memories of her wedding: 'In Russia the wedding is for the young couple. Here out of the two hundred people at our wedding I knew at most fifteen. There were about eleven or twelve guests from my side. I had to spend two hours greeting everyone. It was an unforgettable experience. I wouldn't want to repeat it!'[17] Viktoria's sentiments about her wedding were similar. She told me that they had celebrated the wedding in the home village of her husband and her parents-in-law had organised everything. She continued, 'To be honest, I didn't want this wedding, because I work as a singer and see those weddings all the time. But it was essential for my parents-in-law to have the wedding, because in China registering your marriage doesn't really count. The community only recognises you as husband and wife after the wedding.'[18] Yaroslava, who had lived in China for ten years, first studying and then working in the sphere of export and imports in Shanghai, was dating and getting ready for a wedding in China at the time our conversation took place.[19] She told me that she did not want a big wedding but her Chinese parents-in-law insisted on it, because otherwise 'How would people know that you were married?' She believed that her parents-in-law had to show her off to their family and friends (*kidat' ponty* or *vydelyvat'sya*).

That the Chinese family model was founded and run primarily as an economic unit has been long noted and described by anthropologists of China.[20]A specific trait of society after the Chinese reform era that sets it apart from post-Soviet marriage practices is the widespread custom of monetary exchange (彩礼 *caili*) with the groom's family, which is negotiated by the bride (or her family on her behalf). Bride price continues to be a normal and widely practised tradition that accompanies the establishment of a new family.[21] The moral foundations of the culture and the revival of Confucian patriarchal values in recent years, fuelled by the negative impact of family planning policies and decades of extensive

[17] Interview with Ana, WeChat, 3 June 2018.
[18] Interview with Viktoria, WeChat, 21 June 2018.
[19] Interview with Yaroslava, WeChat, 22 June 2018.
[20] Yunxiang Yan, *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village, 1949–1999* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 2–3; Yunxiang Yan, 'The Drive for Success and the Ethics of the Striving Individual', in *Ordinary Ethics in China*, ed. Charles Stafford (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 263–291.
[21] Quanbao Jiang and Jesus J. Sánchez-Barricarte, 'Bride Price in China: The Obstacle to "Bare Branches" Seeking Marriage', *History of the Family* 17, no. 1 (2012): 2–15.

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control over the bodies of women have further contributed to the commercialisation of family relations in post-Mao China.[22] In recent decades, with the growing shortage of women of marital age, women in China have found themselves with increased bargaining power. It is common for Chinese women and their families to receive a certain amount of money at marriage (the amount depends on her household registration [*hukou*], her level of education and her family status).[23] Historians, psychologists and anthropologists have long noted the peculiarity and continuity of Confucian patriarchal structures of dominance and inequality that survived decades of historical and political upheaval and continue to underwrite the Chinese political and economic order.[24] With the expansion of international marriage markets, international marriages have also been studied as part of the growing trend of the 'commodification of intimacy', in which 'intimacy or intimate relations can be treated, understood or thought of as if they have entered the market'.[25] My interlocutors often raised this topic and expressed different attitudes to the bride price tradition in China which was not familiar to many of them.

Some of them believed that their Chinese family's friends and family thought that marrying a white woman was a stroke of luck for a Chinese man, because they did not demand anything in return for their decision to marry. For example, Sonya said that she received no money from her in-laws and later heard comments that her Chinese family was very lucky, because they did not have to pay her anything while the minimum bride price in their area was 100,000 RMB (14,500 USD).[26] According to another interviewee, the bride price custom seems bizarre to the European mind or, in the words of another woman, it is simply

[22] Susan Greenhalgh, 'Controlling Birth and Bodies in Village China', *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 1 (1994): 3–30; Sheila Hillier, 'Women and Population Control in China: Issues of Sexuality, Power, and Control', *Feminist Review* 29 (1988): 101–113; Ellen R. Judd, *Gender and Power in Rural North China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

[23] See, for example, 'Forget Dowries: Chinese men have to pay up to $24,000 to get a bride', *The Quartz Obsession*, 9 June 2013, https://qz.com/92267/in-a-reversal-of-the-dowry-chinese-men-pay-a-steep-price-for-their-brides/; 'Tianjin fell off of the top three: The latest ranking of bride prices', 7 September 2017, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5MjIxMjY3NA==&mid=2651502476&idx=1&sn=0dac25c4f8f608a4ca07793f25962047&chksm=bd57a4218a202d37c4e2ff7033e85fca9485b8b104ce6ac0a604c2c4b7e4d486bde45cb64891&mpshare=1&scene=5&srcid=1001vObstzwd3oGmda2AqYjw#rd,

[24] Charlotte Bruckerman and Stephan Feuchtwang, *The Anthropology of China: China as Ethnographic and Theoretical Critique* (London: Imperial College Press, 2016); Gonçalo Santos and Stevan Harrell, eds. *Transforming Patriarchy. Chinese Families in the Twenty-First Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

[25] Nicole Constable, 'The Commodification of Intimacy: Marriage, Sex and Reproductive Labor', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 38 (2009): 50.

[26] Interview with Sonya, Hebei, 5 July 2018.

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'feudal'.[27] Other women said that marrying a white woman brought prestige to a Chinese man and that some Chinese men married to earn face, yet did not reward them sufficiently for doing so. For example, another interlocutor, Dasha, felt cheated when she was given an empty red envelope at her wedding. This gave the guests the impression that she had been presented with a gift by her parents-in-law but she did not get anything and did not know what had happened to the money that was supposed to be in the envelope.[28] Several women felt that they had been let down by their husbands because they had not been adequately informed about Chinese marriage customs and that they had been misled into entering into a free marriage deal:

> My husband's family kept asking me 'What are your conditions? What are your conditions?' I couldn't understand what conditions they were talking about. And what could I offer in return? What am I? I am just simply myself. I couldn't understand at the time that simply the fact that I am educated, good-looking, tall, active and can work is of value in itself. My husband didn't explain this to me and I didn't demand anything in return.[29]

In contrast, Viktoria's parents-in-law found out how to give her family the money in a roundabout way. Viktoria explained that 'they were offering me money, 10,000 RMB (1,500 USD), this is the minimum in China, but my parents didn't want to take it so when they came to visit us, my in-laws gave them a red envelope and my parents didn't understand what it was for. When they looked inside they saw the money.'[30] Women often blamed themselves for their lack of knowledge and their adventurous spirit, expressing certain regrets for not learning enough about Chinese traditions and the Chinese mentality before embarking on their journey and for not adapting to the Chinese way of life: 'They [Chinese] are not bad; we are making them bad,' concluded Lena.[31] Olya and Katya concurred that 'we made the mistake in showing them that we can do everything ourselves and don't need help'.[32] In the process of negotiating their married status, they struggled to accept and adapt to the cultural conventions of marriage in China.

4.3 Losing the Sense of Self-Fulfilment

Adapting to the realities and the tremendous emotional upheaval of life as a migrant spouse requires a thoroughgoing mental adjustment, which

[27] Fieldwork notes, 20 August 2016.
[28] Interview with Dasha, WeChat, 11 August 2016.
[29] Interview with Katya and Olya, Beijing, 5 June 2017.
[30] Interview with Viktoria, WeChat, 21 June 2018.
[31] Interview with Lena, Vladivostok, 16 August 2016.
[32] Interview with Olya and Katya, Beijing, 5 June 2017.

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many women struggled to adapt to on their own. The topics of isolation, boredom, loneliness and intercultural misunderstandings came up in every conversation. Sonya had been living near Beijing for ten years when we met for our interview. She summarised her first decade in China as follows: 'When you have lived in China for so long it feels as if you have fought in a war. Although it is not a war, there are many challenges and people who go through these challenges with you become very close friends. I call them my family.' Ana echoed Sonya's experiences: 'When I go back home to Russia, I tell my family that every day I have to fight to survive in China. We are nobody here. Nobody will protect us unless you have connections or a lawyer.'[33] The women talked about the challenge of everyday communication, as well as institutional hurdles, such as when you go to the bank and are not allowed to exchange currency, or when you want to make a transaction and they say that your country is on a blacklist. There were many everyday struggles like this. When I met Sonya, it had been a month since she had received a ten-year residence card (green card) that she hoped would simplify her life in China. The card entitled her to work and to qualify for insurance and medical care. She could also buy train tickets using the fast lane rather than at the window for foreigners. With this green card, she noted, 'I should be able to scan the card at the barrier at the train station and get through, but I haven't tried it yet.'[34] These are just a few examples of how useful the long-term residence card was perceived to be.

Natasha recalled the early days of her married life in China in a similar way:

> At the beginning, I really wanted to go back to Ukraine. I didn't like China. I couldn't get used to it. Then, when my husband went to work abroad I sank into a depression. Here I am, all by myself. It was very hard. I had to get used to his family because I lived with them and I had to get used to my life, to China, as well as to pregnancy, everything.[35]

Katya found consolation and started developing coping mechanisms with the help of a psychoanalyst she had contacted via Skype. Katya said:

> I simply started losing it. I want to work freely, but they don't understand why I need to. So it happens that you feel like you lose a sense of yourself. This is very hard, very hard. [The] psychotherapist helps me and I have noticed improvements, because at some point I just didn't want anything. You lose

[33] Interview with Ana, WeChat, 3 June 2018.
[34] Interview with Sonya, Hebei, 5 July 2018.
[35] Interview with Natasha, Beijing, 4 June 2017.

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your own self to such an extent that you don't have any desires or interests. I can't call it depression; it is just complete indifference.[36]

Feminist geographers have written about the emotional labour involved in performing Confucian gender roles in the context of Chinese transnational families. For example, Chien-Juh Gu's research with Taiwanese families in the United States highlights the emotional labour of being an obedient daughter-in-law and the 'mandatory' nature of performing Confucian patriarchy.[37] Giving 'face' to their husbands by hosting guests, showcasing their family's economic wealth, expressing filial piety and obeying mothers-in-law were among the most common practices women had to adopt.[38] Gu thus underscored the central role of emotions and their relations with place, culture, gender, class, morality, subjectivity and self-play in transnational Chinese families. Similarly, the stories that my participants shared with me were infused with a wide range of emotions.

Alyona, who ran art workshops, explained that she was often overwhelmed by feelings of sadness and loss, which she attributed to her dependent status and precarious residence in China: 'I had occasional psychological meltdowns. From time to time there were moments when I felt like packing up and going home.'[39] She attributed her feeling of loss to having no right to work legally on a Chinese family-visitor visa. When we met, Alyona's income was irregular and depended on the sale of her paintings and her tutoring work. Yet she expressed her strong belief that for 'a modern woman' it was important to have her own income and not to depend on her husband, because if 'the husband provides for a woman completely, she becomes a slave. Even if he is a kind and caring man, not a tyrant, she depends on him.'[40] She went on to explain that most of her conflicts with her husband were related to domestic finances: 'When I run out of money I naturally ask him, as he is earning quite a lot. And, because I spend his money, he thinks that he has the right to blame me for spending more than I should have and I react to this.'[41]

For a foreigner in China, it is a challenge to feel fully accepted as a family member and member of society. Lena concluded that 'in Chinese families we are always guests.'[42] In her view, even if 'they nominally accepted you into their family, you are never truly close to anyone.'

[36] Interview with Katya and Olya, Beijing, 4 June 2017.
[37] Chien-Juh Gu, 'Gender Morality and Emotion Work in Taiwanese Immigrant In-law Relations', *Gender, Place & Culture* 25, no. 20 (2018): 248–267, p. 264.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Interview with Alyona, Beijing, 31 May 2017.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Interview with Lena, Vladivostok, 16 August 2017.

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Recalling a time when her marriage was under stress and she did not have anyone close by to confide in, Lena said: 'I ran out of the house and spent half a day in the park. I switched off the phone and burst into tears. In this situation, I just wanted someone to listen, feel sorry. I didn't have anyone like that at home.' When I asked whether she had shared her problems with her family in Vladivostok, Lena said that she couldn't tell her mother because it would upset her:

> Why should I upset her? First of all, I was in a different country and married to a foreigner, and it would only make her worry. Secondly, I felt ashamed, because it was my choice, after all. Many of us live in this way without our parents knowing much about our life. We don't know the local law and even if we did, we don't know how to use it. There is no one to protect us – our relatives live far away. Not only do we not ask for help, we are ashamed of talking about it with our relatives.[43]

Busy with her new role looking after her baby, Lena gradually noticed that her family life was deteriorating. There was no longer any intimacy between herself and her husband and he was regularly absent on business trips, including during the holidays that families in China normally spend together. Lena started analysing herself and initially thought that she was the problem. But she soon discovered that her husband was living parallel family lives – one with her and one with a Chinese woman. She challenged him, asking why he needed to marry her, to which he replied that it was because she had become pregnant first and that if she did not like the arrangement she could pack up and go back to Russia. The last straw for her was when her husband told her in front of his mother that, if he wanted to, he would bring the other woman home and put her in his bed.[44] That night Lena decided to leave secretly with her son and she moved in with a friend. From that point on, the husband continually asked her to leave their son with him. The main reason why Lena might have left their son with him was that she could still get married again and nobody would consider a woman with a son as a reasonable marriage prospect. When Lena first talked about her personal problems and opened up about her divorce from her Chinese husband in one of the WeChat groups, women started befriending her and seeking her advice on their own family problems.

4.4 Encountering the 'Second Wife' Status

Ksyusha was one of the first women I met and interviewed in Beijing in November 2015. At that time, she was living with her daughter and an

[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.

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Italian boyfriend in a rented flat in the Chaoyang district of Beijing. She shared with me her story of her Chinese marriage with a certain degree of detachment, as the most painful period was over and fading into the past. Ksyusha had left Russia for China after breaking up with her boyfriend in Russia, with no clear job prospects. She met her Chinese boyfriend in a bar. Soon after their first meeting, he told her that he was divorced and had a son from a previous marriage. He was ready to start a family again and have a child with Ksyusha and on her part she was ready to marry him. She got pregnant and they celebrated the occasion by hosting a big engagement party. As Ksyusha's pregnancy advanced, she asked if they could officially register their relationship. At that point the boyfriend told her that he could not marry her because he was not officially divorced from his first wife. Ksyusha was four-and-a-half months pregnant at the time and found the news devastating. She told me that she could not believe this was happening to her, because she came from a happy and stable family. She said that she found out only subsequently that it was normal for men in China to informally practise bigamy. She returned to Russia intending to have an abortion, because she didn't want to give birth without being married. She could not understand why her boyfriend's family and friends had gone along with the fake engagement and joined them in celebrating their union.

Her mother warned her that if she had an abortion she might not be able to have children again. Ksyusha kept the pregnancy and returned to China with the intention of 'making it work for herself and the baby'. With great irony she called the next stage the 'most entertaining part', as her boyfriend started going out to parties and on business trips while she stayed behind at home, heavily pregnant. She concluded that 'as soon as a woman gets pregnant in China, her life is considered to be over, but the man starts to party'. She then decided to go to Russia to give birth and registered the birth there, leaving an empty space in the place where the father's name should have been indicated on the birth certificate: 'I cried so much when I omitted the father's name. I thought it was so wrong, but I don't know why I felt I had to do it. Maybe I wanted to punish him.' According to Ksyusha, her boyfriend promised her a divorce but this never happened.[45] Instead, he rented a flat for her to live in with her child. She did not feel he was to blame or that he was bad. At the end of the day he paid for her apartment, sponsored her business visa through his firm and provided for everything their daughter needed. In Lena's view, 'it is considered normal for powerful men to have a second wife and

[45] In the case of divorce, property and businesses that were acquired in marriage are split equally between the spouses.

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they don't make any attempt to hide it, but this would be shameful in Ukraine and they would keep it a secret. Here it is easy and straightforward.'[46]

Other women also noted that Chinese men don't like divorcing because it is considered to be shameful socially and unacceptable to the family, so some women found themselves with the status of a second wife.[47] But Oxana found out her husband was divorced only at the registration office where they were filling in the forms for their marriage.[48] She told me that the news was a great shock and that she broke down in tears, but her husband did not understand why it was a big deal. She surmised that registering a marriage was not as important to Chinese people as throwing a big wedding celebration.

Researchers on Chinese masculinity in the reform period have studied the importance that money-making and economic power have played in defining post-Mao masculinity. They have found the re-emergence of the phenomenon of the 'second wife' (小霸/二奶 *xiao mi/er nai*), which was common in pre-revolutionary China. Polygamy was outlawed by the first Marriage Law adopted by the Communist Party in 1950, but the cultural practice of concubines regained popularity as China's economic growth boomed. To address this social problem, in 2000 the standing committee of the National People's Congress, the Chinese parliament, considered amendments to the Marriage Law to introduce tougher measures for men who choose to have a second wife.[49] Osburg argues that a second wife became one of the most valuable possessions of Chinese businessmen during the reform era.[50] Engaging in extramarital relations was integral to their social standing and social esteem or face-making.[51] Xiao's ethnography about second wives highlights the importance of the domestic, emotional and symbolic labour that second wives engage in in asserting relational 'class-coded' Chinese masculinity.[52] In addition to promoting the social standing of their husbands, Slavic wives

[46] Interview with Lena, WeChat, 15 March 2018.
[47] Interview with Polina, WeChat, 23 August 2018.
[48] Interview with Oxana, WeChat, 20 August 2018.
[49] John Gittings, 'China to outlaw "second wives"', *The Guardian*, 27 October 2000, www.theguardian.com/world/2000/oct/27/china.johngittings.
[50] John Osburg, *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China's New Rich* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).
[51] Ibid.; Harriet Zurndorfer, 'Polygamy and Masculinity in China: Past and Present', in *Changing Chinese Masculinities: From Imperial Pillars of State to Global Real Men*, ed. K. Louie, D. Hird and G. Song (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016), 13–33.
[52] Suowei Xiao, 'The "Second-Wife" Phenomenon and the Relational Construction of Class-Coded Masculinities in Contemporary China', *Men and Masculinities* 14, no. 5 (2011): 607–627.

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possessed racialised symbolic value and played a racialised reproductive role. Going to business meals with their husbands and their business partners was one of the types of symbolic sexual work that many of my interviewees most disliked. They referred to this practice as *chifan'kat'*, derived from the Chinese word for eating (吃饭 *chi fan)*. Attending these meals entailed 'giving face' to their Chinese husbands in front of their business partners at banquets and business negotiations. As Helga pointed out, 'My man likes to show me off. If we are going to a business meeting, sometimes he tells me: "Today you have to be very beautiful." He is not shy about showing off his foreign wife to his friends.'[53]

4.5 Redefining Agency

Although the family-visitor visa restrictions confined women to the domestic sphere, many tried to find a way of earning their own money to attain a degree of financial independence. Some succeeded better than others. Some tried out their entrepreneurial skills in the expanding e-commerce industry and opened their own online shops in WeChat or Taobao. Others taught in foreign-language schools or gave different kinds of private lessons, from language and yoga to drawing. The proliferation of new digital technologies and platforms opened up opportunities for trying out new ideas. For example, Alisa from Belarus found a way to realise her artistic character in Douyin, a popular mini-video platform that won her 1.7 million subscribers and an income from adverts in just under a year after she had set up her account in 2017. When I talked to her, she said that she earned more money than her husband, who felt uncomfortable about his wife earning more.[54] Her cosplay and comic videos became very popular and after her third video she became a hot trend and was invited to a Douyin party with the most popular content producers.

Despite her popularity online, she felt isolated in her everyday life and, confining herself to her home, she began treatment for depression. For her part, Alisa started and administered one of the biggest WeChat groups of women in relationship with Chinese men in China. Another research participant, Sonya, had already established a successful modelling career by the time Douyin took off in China around 2015 and she decided to download Douyin out of curiosity. She uploaded a 15-second video that took her 15 seconds to make. The video recorded an episode from her life, showing her talking to her children, their replies and hugs

[53] Interview with Helga, WeChat, 22 June 2018.
[54] Interview with Alisa, WeChat, 5 June 2018.

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all round. It was a small snapshot of ordinary family life and attracted 20 million views. She told me that she could not quite understand why Chinese users were fascinated by a foreign woman's life in China, her Chinese children and how they spoke Chinese: 'I think they are interested because it is different from their life and I have a Chinese husband.' When 300,000 people signed up to her Douyin channel, the company got in touch with her to sign a contract for six months, according to which she had to upload content regularly and was paid 3,000 RMB (430 USD) per month. Sonya noted that 3,000 RMB was an average monthly salary in her city, but she didn't feel it was serious money, because she had earned it on Douyin without making any effort. She was recording and uploading her videos whether she was paid or not. On one occasion, she recorded a video in the aeroplane before taking off for Belarus, saying, 'I am leaving, but I am going to miss you. I have been away from home for three years and I miss my parents. But I am going to film more videos.' When she landed 12 hours later, the video had been viewed nearly 9 million times, prompting her to send videos from Belarus nonstop. When I asked what kinds of videos she was posting, Sonya explained that her followers had asked her to show them more women, but she felt uncomfortable about doing this: 'I can't just walk up to women in the street and start filming them. Sometimes in the comments people say, "give my son a chance".'[55] She then concluded that the viewers didn't even bother to check her profile, where it was clearly stated that she was married.

4.6 Conclusion

The negotiations that my research participants embarked on as married women in China involved not only a tremendous emotional effort to make the necessary mental and cultural adjustments but also awakened their agency in unexpected ways. Many recognised that, by moving to China, they had merely exchanged one form of patriarchal culture for another, which did not free them from the social and familial pressures that they had lived under and sought to escape from in their home countries. Their status as European-looking women was privileged yet constrained in many legal, social and cultural ways. Their bodies and post-Soviet backgrounds were valued only insofar as they contributed to their husbands' families' social status and to the reproduction of the Chinese nation. However, their educational qualifications and

[55] Interview with Sonya, WeChat, 5 July 2018.

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professional skills were often difficult to realise and most didn't feel a sense of security regarding their future.

The women actively contested their positions within the limited space available to them. Without legal recognition of their participation in Chinese society and lacking trust in the political system to guarantee their rights, they resorted to other ways to secure their position. They acted beyond their 'uterine family' power, exploiting the bustling e-commerce economy, playing the insonsistencies of the immigration and citizenship regimes to their advantage, and taking advantange of gendered white privilege. Wherever possible, these women resourcefully negotiated the domesticating norms of the Chinese immigration regime to capitalise on their bodily features. These strategies were made possible by the market economy that valorised particular racialised and gendered beauty standards that were desired across the society and manifested in the marriage norms (wedding celebrations and the bride price), having a child soon after marriage, taking on second-wife status and the business opportunities unleashed by platforms like Douyin. Most accepted marriage and family life as a destiny they had to embrace.

Slavic women from the former Soviet Union are the favoured choice of foreign wives by Chinese men and are idealised as mothers of mixed-race children, seen as desirable for the reproduction of the Chinese population yet foreign bodies. The status of their children, however, remains a site of struggle and contestation or embodied border sites, which I turn to in the next chapter.

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