marital home, unless she goes to extraordinary lengths to document her financial contributions.

Even if the woman earns a very high income, the fact that the most valuable asset in the marriage, real estate, is registered in her husband's name is likely to reduce her bargaining power in the relationship. Since the typical woman possesses far less wealth in the marriage, has weak property rights, and is not permitted to share a bank account with her husband (at the time of writing), she is more likely to remain trapped in the marriage if her husband is abusive.

If an abused woman tries to seek help from the police, from the courts and from family, she is unlikely to find the support she needs to escape a violent marriage. By seeking help openly, she may open herself up to further retaliatory violence from extended family members for "exposing family ugliness" to outsiders. A court is extremely unlikely to rule in favor of an abused woman, because there is no specific law preventing intimate partner violence and marital rape is not a crime in China, so the perpetrator of the violence is likely to suffer no legal consequences for his actions. Even if the woman manages to sue her abusive husband successfully in court and the court rules in her favor, the ruling is often not enforced, according to feminist activists.

Given the lack of legal protections for women who are abused in marriage, or whose property rights are violated, what can women do to protect themselves? Chapter 6 explores the ways in which Chinese women resist systemic gender discrimination, in spite of the repressive state security apparatus.

SIX

Fighting back

Women's resistance in the authoritarian state

Li Maizi is the public name of a 24-year-old feminist activist who grew up in the countryside outside Beijing. Openly lesbian, university-educated, an only child of poor farmers, Li lives with her girlfriend in a rented apartment in Beijing. She is one of several low-paid employees of an unregistered grassroots women's rights group which has organized public acts of "performance art" to protest gender discrimination.

"In China, the space for activism is very small, so if it's a direct and public action, then we cloak it with the outward appearance of art. So the outward form is gentle, but the content is powerful," says Li, who does not wish to disclose the name of her group for fear of being shut down by the government.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, various forms of authoritarianism have prevented the formation of a spontaneous, large-scale women's rights movement. Feng Yuan of the Anti-Domestic Violence Network in Beijing says there is a difference between the Communist Party's "movement of women" (*yundong funü*) – a top-down mobilization of women in service to the nation – and a bottom-up "women's movement" (*funü yundong*). "Outside of the government's official mobilization of

women, there is basically no space for an independent women's movement," says Feng. Feng's own group is a "non-governmental organization," but is registered with the government and required to work in alignment with agencies such as the All-China Women's Federation. (See Chapter 5 for more on the role of NGOs in lobbying for legislation to tackle intimate partner violence.)

Some of China's most radical feminists, like Li Maizi, do not belong to any officially registered organization, choosing instead to work outside the system to bring about a greater awareness of women's rights in Chinese society. For example, in 2012 Li and other young women dressed in white wedding gowns splattered with red, blood-like paint in downtown Beijing to highlight China's epidemic of domestic violence. They posed for photographs holding placards that said, "Violence is right beside you. Why are you still silent?" and "Love is not an excuse for violence." Li and other volunteers also distributed postcards of their naked torsos, some splashed with red paint, in a campaign to collect 10,000 signatures to push for legislation on intimate partner violence.

In the "Bald Sisters" campaign, Li and three other young women shaved their heads in public in the southern city of Guangzhou to protest gender-based quotas favoring men in university admissions. Many university programs require women to score higher than men in entrance examinations, apparently in response to the fact that women now outnumber men at both undergraduate and Master's levels, according to the Ministry of Education. Li and other volunteers shaved their heads in support of a female student who was rejected from the University of International Relations after scoring 614 on her university entrance exam, or *gaokao*, which was below the required score for female

applicants of 628. Were she a man, she would have been admitted: the program requires male applicants to score only 609.

After the Guangzhou campaign was covered in the Chinese media, women also shaved their heads in Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and other cities to protest widespread gender discrimination in university admissions. Lü Pin and Huang Yizhi from the Media Monitor for Women Network NGO followed up by writing a formal letter to China's Ministry of Education, complaining of discriminatory policies against women, which the Ministry said were necessary "to protect the national interest."

Li Maizi does not use the word "protest," preferring to speak of "actions" (*xingdong*). "Our actions are not very politically sensitive compared with other, more extreme actions, because we want to cooperate with the traditional media, so we choose topics that are more mainstream," she says. Since Li's group receives very little funding, members write their own news reports on their gender "actions," hoping the message will get out. Li says that of all the feminist "actions" she has helped organize, the "Occupy Men's Toilets" campaign had the greatest impact.

In February 2012, several female volunteers in Guangzhou occupied some men's toilets and invited women into the vacated men's stalls to shorten their typically long wait. The volunteers held up placards saying, "More convenience for women, more gender equality" and called on local governments to provide more public toilets for women. The protest received widespread media coverage, in response to which Guangzhou officials later pledged to increase the ratio of women's toilets to men's. "This issue isn't that politically serious, but it's a problem every woman has to deal with every day, so many women and men were able to see the inequality and to support the cause," says Li.

Yet when Li's group organized the same campaign in the Chinese capital, Beijing, it found that the environment for public actions or gatherings of any kind was more repressive than in southern China. Several days after the Guangzhou protest, Li and several volunteers tried to occupy some men's public toilets in downtown Beijing, but a group of police officers told her that they were assembling in public without permission. They detained her and another volunteer at a nearby restaurant for the rest of the day.

"The police came and asked who the organizer of the action was, and I said, 'I am,' which was very stupid," says Li. "I really should have just run away, but I didn't have enough experience then." That night and for some time afterwards, the keywords "Occupy men's toilets" were blocked on Sina Weibo, and the police began to monitor Li's phone calls. Li had planned another action against the requirement that all women applying for civil service jobs undergo an invasive gynecological examination to screen for sexually transmitted diseases and malignant tumors. She was intending to hold a placard in front of the civil servants' personnel office, calling on government departments to drop the requirement, but the police showed up on her doorstep the morning of the action and took her to the police station "to drink tea" – a euphemism for interrogation.

"What are you planning to do?" asked the police. Li did not divulge any details and spoke instead about other matters.

"Are you planning a protest in front of the civil servants' office?" asked the police.

"Oh, so you know everything already," replied Li.

"You are not permitted to do it! You are also not allowed to write about this on Weibo! You are not allowed to do anything! Just go home and wait there quietly until you get further instructions from us," said the police.

Li went home. The following morning the police knocked on her door again at 7 a.m., fearing that she would proceed with her protest, and took her back to the station. They also dispatched officers to monitor the entrance to the civil servants' personnel office in case other activists appeared. At the time, Li was a senior in college, so the police called her university to complain that she was a troublemaker who needed to be controlled. The university vice president summoned Li for a talk in his office, and offered her a work-study position on campus for RMB 120 a month in exchange for her staying out of trouble. Li laughed at the gesture and told the vice president: "How's this instead? I'll give you RMB 250 and you give me back my freedom." The university prohibited her from taking part in activities off-campus, but she sneaked out several times anyway before her graduation that summer.

The difficulty Li Maizi experienced in organizing a simple call for more public toilets for women illustrates the elaborate "stability maintenance" (*weiwen*) system set up by the Chinese state to absorb popular protests and ensure the ruling Communist Party maintains its grip on power. Sociologists Ching Kwan Lee and Yonghong Zhang detail in their 2013 paper "The Power of Instability: Unraveling the Microfoundations of Bargained Authoritarianism in China" how the state is able to manage social unrest, manifested in the dramatic increase in "mass incidents" from 10,000 a year in 1993 (according to China's Ministry of Public Security) to 180,000 a year in 2010 (according to sociologist Sun Liping).

Through years of ethnographic research among grassroots Chinese officials responsible for "stability maintenance" in Shenzhen and Beijing, Lee and Zhang provide extraordinary insight into how deeply the "grassroots state" penetrates into local communities to gather information on citizens and defuse conflict that might threaten social stability. They write that one of the most common government strategies is to "buy stability" by making cash payments or giving other benefits to key people who stage public protests, or by drawing on local "stability maintenance funds" to pay for urgent services such as electricity or water supply when these become the target of protests. All district governments in Beijing, for example, had "stability maintenance" annual budgets in 2008, ranging from 1 billion RMB (around US$146 million in 2008) to RMB 2 million (US$295,000), according to their research. By bargaining with and fragmenting protesters, co-opting some and threatening others, grassroots Chinese officials absorb acts of resistance and achieve "authoritarian domination," according to Lee and Zhang.

Human rights activist and feminist writer/film-maker Zeng Jinyan has experienced the worst of China's "stability maintenance" apparatus. Zeng began blogging in 2006 about police persecution of her husband, Hu Jia, a leading critic of Chinese government abuses. Hu, winner of the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in 2008, has become such a famous dissident that many people only know Zeng Jinyan as his wife. When I met 30-year-old Zeng in September 2013, she indicated that most foreign reporters who have interviewed her over the years have only been interested in what her husband is doing or feeling. Although Zeng is well known for her marriage to dissident Hu, Zeng reflected that "we haven't had any time to

manage a marriage, basically." For most of their marriage, Hu has either been in prison or in "forced disappearance," meaning that Chinese police have detained him without telling Zeng or anyone else where he is. In 2006, Zeng wanted to study abroad but she and her husband were both placed under house arrest, under strict police surveillance. Authorities also confiscated Zeng's passport in 2007 so that she could not leave the country.

Hu's constant disappearances and imprisonment meant that Zeng took sole responsibility for meeting the emotional, financial, and physical needs of their daughter and Hu's parents, all while being harassed by the police and prevented from holding a regular job. Zeng explains:

> When Hu Jia returned from his forced disappearance, we were still under house arrest. We had no psychological support, no financial support, no resources, nothing, except that some friends maybe would send greetings and make phone calls at first... So at that time I developed a concern for family members of political prisoners or rights activists. I eventually lost my job and the police harassed all of our relatives. I researched other families of rights activists and found out that many of them also lost their jobs or couldn't get any opportunities for future development... Usually, when a rights activist is detained, the parents' medical needs and children's educational needs can't be satisfied. So usually the wife is the only person to handle all of these problems.

Just forty-five days after Zeng gave birth to a baby girl in late 2007, police barged into their home in Beijing and formally arrested Hu Jia for "harming state security," a vague charge thrown at individuals seen as a threat to the government. A policeman asked Zeng to cooperate with them and provide evidence against her husband, but she refused. One policeman attempted to convince Zeng to leave her husband. "You have admirers elsewhere, try to get rid of your husband," he said. When that strategy failed,

another policeman threatened to take Zeng's newborn baby away from her and allow her to breastfeed just once every few hours.

The police never followed through on this last threat, but during some lengthy periods of house arrest they refused to let Zeng take her baby outside. "My daughter needs fresh air and sunshine," Zeng pleaded with the police. "You can get that through the window," the police replied. During the times that Hu was at home, Zeng says, it was impossible to have a normal marriage while being forced to live with the police presence for weeks or months. "You want to keep your dignity. The police have a group of psychological experts and brainwashing experts, so you need to be very careful, and you're extremely nervous, and you overreact to normal things," she says.

Since 2006, Zeng Jinyan has gained worldwide recognition for her blog about the constant police surveillance (although authorities block access to the blog in mainland China). In 2007, *Time* named her one of "the 100 men and women whose power, talent or moral example is transforming the world." She and Hu made a video documentary, *Prisoners in Freedom City*, which vividly portrayed their experience of house arrest.

Yet Zeng was intensely lonely; her blogging was no substitute for real human interaction. "When Hu Jia was in prison or forced disappearance, many times I wished I was the person in prison because there are too many things out of prison you have to handle," she says. "I had been isolated by the police from society. Even though I could express myself a little bit on the Internet, I was personally isolated in real life."

Zeng used to consider herself a "very emotionally sensitive" person, but the years of extensive police interference in her daily life – especially since she became a mother – changed her:

> I had to learn how to negotiate with the guards around me, around the clock. One time, on the June 4th anniversary [of the government's brutal crackdown on 1989 democracy protests in Tiananmen Square], I thought I would be put under strict surveillance, but I didn't know I was not allowed to go out to buy food. I wasn't allowed to go out and I didn't have anything in my fridge. I panicked... I need to suppress my emotions and my desire for anything, because if you don't have any needs, there won't be any opportunity for the police to pressure you. But it's impossible, right? As long as you have a child, you have needs. And you have to eat or you're going to die. You have to work to earn money... And your child needs to go outside every day.

For many years, Zeng could not sleep well because the police kept moving around in the middle of the night:

> The police had to sleep on chairs on my staircase, so they had to move their chairs often to make themselves comfortable. I can understand. But it happened in the middle of the night very often, so it was also a kind of threatening message. That was at first. Later, I just dreamed about the police noises, whether they were there or not.

Zeng used to like her Beijing apartment because she felt it was a safe space for her to escape from the police harassment. Then one of the policemen warned her to be careful because when she was not at home the police would enter the apartment to check on things, so she no longer dared speak openly in her own home:

> I knew my home was monitored, so I didn't talk too much. But there will be problems if you don't communicate with people around you. You have family problems and many, many other problems because it's difficult to speak out about what you are thinking... At first I thought, if I leak my emotions and feelings, it's very easy for the police to detect and it's risky... But if you continue to repress your emotions over a long time and you have no support, no communication; it's very difficult to handle the situation. The pressure is extremely intense, and in the end you'll just collapse.

Zeng says that a common method used by Chinese police to control rights activists is to pressure the wife or other family members, telling them to persuade the activist to stop making trouble. Relatives may lose their jobs as a result of the activism of someone in their family. Police have frequently harassed Zeng's parents, parents-in-law, and other relatives. "When my grandpa passed away, we went to his funeral and the police followed us every step of the way. The whole family clan was unhappy with me, Hu Jia and the police," says Zeng.

In January 2012, when Zeng was traveling for a project, she left her daughter alone with Hu for a few days in Beijing. Eight policemen entered their apartment, confiscated the couple's laptops, and shut their 4-year-old daughter in a small room for more than an hour while they interrogated Hu in the dining room. Following that incident, Zeng announced on Twitter that she was separating from her husband. After the US government mediated departure of the blind legal activist Chen Guangcheng from China in mid-2012, Zeng was able to obtain permission to move with her daughter and pursue graduate studies in gender and sexuality at the University of Hong Kong.

Even though Zeng is separated from her husband, she wants Hu to be an engaged parent, so she asked him to take care of their daughter for a few days in July 2013, while she spoke at a "BlogHer" conference for women bloggers in Chicago. But when Hu celebrated his fortieth birthday with their daughter and some friends at a restaurant in the southern city of Shenzhen, police again broke up the party and detained Hu. Zeng heard about his detention through Twitter, and she was seized with fear. She did not know where her five-year-old daughter was for several hours, until another friend told her that she was safe:

> I was very nervous, so when I came back, I wrote my final will to arrange my daughter's life just in case I have an accident. I don't want my daughter to live with her father, not in everyday life. For some holidays it's OK, because maybe the risk can be controlled, but I don't believe it's OK over the long term... I need to have a back-up plan. So it's very sad actually, for him, for our daughter, and for me. Because anything could happen, even when Hu Jia is just having a birthday party... I wish that my daughter didn't have to understand these kinds of things at her young age. The later, the better. I just want her to have a normal, simple kid's life.

As a feminist blogger and gender researcher, Zeng knows all too well how the authoritarian repression of the state has dampened prospects for a nationwide women's rights movement in China. "Control is tightening on the whole of civil society, so I don't think there's any possibility of a real women's movement in mainland China," she says. Zeng also faults the international media for largely leaving women out of their stories on rights activism in China. For example, Zeng has studied the 2005 media coverage of hundreds of villagers – mostly women – who organized protests demanding the removal of the Taishi Village chief in Guangdong province for abusing his power. Prominent women's studies scholar Ai Xiaoming made a documentary about violent clashes with riot police at Taishi village, and she herself was beaten by police while filming. Yet Zeng says that the struggles of the female activists did not get enough attention in mainstream media. She cites a paper by sociologist Sophia Woodman, "Law, Translation and Voice: the Transformation of a Struggle for Social Justice in a Chinese Village," which argues that the village women largely "became a mere backdrop to the dramatics of mostly male 'heroes'." As Zeng explains, "I don't mean that the work of men is not important, but the process is that local women protesters'

voices are carried by male heroes, most of whom are outsiders, so the original images and voices of women are obscured."

The voices of women are obscured in many contemporary depictions of China, not just in media reports about rights activism. Zeng Jinyan's experience as a persecuted dissident and single mother is obviously not representative of all women. Yet in some ways her heavy domestic burdens are common to wives and mothers throughout China, who work hard to support the household but whose contributions are invisible and unrecognized.

Another beleaguered rights activist and single mother is Ye Haiyan, also known by her blogger name "Hooligan Sparrow." In 2003, she stayed at the home of some sex workers, and was so moved by their experience that she started a website to help young women working in the sex industry. Her website was constantly hacked, and she began to think about quitting the campaign, but then she learned of the murder of a 23-year-old sex worker named Yaoyao, who had actively contributed to her site. Ye told journalist Paul Mooney:

> I was tired and people were opposing me and attacking me every day... But the death of Yaoyao gave me the determination to carry on. I felt their vulnerability for the first time. I began to understand their lives even better, and it was frightening.

In 2006, Ye Haiyan founded a grassroots women's rights center in Wuhan, but it was unable to register as an NGO. In the meantime, Ye took part in more visible protests calling for an end to discrimination against sex workers, who are reluctant to report violence by police or customers for fear of being arrested. For a time, Ye even had sex with customers for free in order to understand better the lives of sex workers. Ye was often harassed and "invited to tea" by the Wuhan police, and in 2011 she was

forced out of the city back to her home province of Guangxi, where she continued to be harassed. In 2012, a group of men ransacked her small office.

Refusing to be cowed, in May 2013 Ye travelled to Hainan province to protest against child abuse in Chinese schools; a school principal there had been accused of raping six schoolgirls in a hotel room. Ye posted a picture of herself online holding a sign that said "Principal, get a room with me – leave the school kids alone." The post went viral on Weibo and thousands of Internet users across China – some of whom posed naked, some of whom were celebrities like artist Ai Weiwei – imitated her action by posting online pictures of themselves holding the same sign, or playing on Ye's original language.

Beijing women's rights activist Li Maizi was among many who shed their clothing to post an online picture in support of Ye Haiyan's protest. Yet what started out as an imaginative and popular Internet meme soon became yet another case of the state persecuting someone perceived to pose a threat to social stability: when Ye returned to her home in Guangxi province, several people charged into her home and attacked her. Ye tweeted on Weibo and Twitter that she was picking up a knife to protect herself and her young daughter, then fell silent. Police detained her for a couple of weeks and then charged her with wounding three women in a struggle. Following Ye's release from detention, she was evicted from several rented apartments, where the landlords had apparently been told not to allow her to live there. In another sign of the importance of home ownership to a Chinese citizen's security and well-being, Ye's supporters organized a fundraising drive in mid-2013 for her to buy a home of her own, so she would no longer be subject to eviction by landlords.

Activist Li Maizi observed: "Ye Haiyan was held by the police not because of her action against child abuse, but because she had already become known as a [politically] 'sensitive person'." I asked if Li and her girlfriend – also a feminist activist – ever feared being kicked out by their landlord because of Li's occasional trouble with the police. "We told our landlord we are women's rights activists and she supports us. She has two big dogs; the Public Security Bureau told her it's against the law to own big dogs in downtown Beijing. I said I could start an action to help her, and she said, 'yes, yes, yes!'" said Li.

Gender and LGBTQ activism

Only 24 years old, Li Maizi has been out as lesbian, or *lala*, for years. In university she founded a support group for lesbians because she discovered that China's rising gender inequality was not just confined to heterosexuals: it is also evident in the LGBTQ community. "Male gays are in the MSM (men who have sex with men) community, so they get a lot of funding for HIV issues, plus the media reports mostly on gay men and hardly ever reports on lesbians," says Li. "Chinese men are much richer than women, so many gay men have a lot of money too, and their sex life is considered much more lively. So they have venues like public baths for gay men, but there are no public baths for lesbians because we're poorer and there's not a big enough market."

Many of China's most committed women's rights activists outside the government system are lesbian. Li says that while women tend to be straight or uncertain about their sexual orientation at first, once they have become feminist activists they may begin to identify as lesbian, or at least as bisexual. She quotes

a saying from her lesbian feminist friend Da Tu: "They go in straight and they come out bent." Although Li has long identified as lesbian, she believes that the political decision to engage in grassroots feminist activism in China causes women to think more radically about all aspects of their lives, including sexual orientation: "Feminism allows for more possibilities as a person; it lets women see that we can make a different kind of life choice." Also, Li argues that it's much easier for lesbians to break free of the "traditional binds of Chinese society." Those include, of course, intense pressure to enter into a heterosexual marriage.

Xu Bin is head of Tongyu, or 'Common Language', a grassroots rights group for lesbians, bisexual women and transgender people in China, founded in 2005. Xu, who is in her early forties, observes that there has been a gradual increase in the Chinese public's acceptance of the LGBTQ community since the government took homosexuality off its list of "mental diseases" in 2001. During Xu's first years in college in the 1990s, she had already had secret romantic relationships with women, but was unable to find any information that did not make her feel bad about her sexual identity:

> Homosexuality was not just a mental disease, but also a "hooligan crime." The definition of the crime was very vague, but any kind of "indecent behavior" could cause you to be expelled from your job, put in jail, or sent to a labor camp....In college I knew homosexuality was very bad, horrible; you could be punished; you're a hooligan, a mad person – it was all bad and far from my world. I had a very difficult time trying to relate homosexuality to myself. Then, when I was in my last year in college, suddenly my school had basic Internet service – just basic news groups – but I found another world. Through the Internet, I got access to LGBT news groups, I don't know where they were from – the US or Europe – but it really opened the world for me and a lot of information came in.

After college, Xu Bin went to graduate school in the United States and became involved in various LGBTQ groups on campus: "Suddenly, all these things from the Internet and the books I read became real in my life." When Xu returned to Beijing, she continued her advocacy work for lesbians through a new, unregistered group started in 1998, called the "Beijing Sisters". It organized a lesbian culture festival in 2001, which was raided by the police. "The activists were detained and the whole group was crushed after that," says Xu.

Xu was able to set up the Tongyu group in 2005, which started out with lesbian community building:

> In Beijing, we have lesbian gatherings every week to talk about marriage pressure, coming out, coming out to oneself and how to deal with intimate relationships, and also with parents, family members; it's like a support group. We try to encourage individuals in different cities throughout China to set up similar groups. Grassroots groups are very important for lesbian, gay and bi people to reach out to the many people out there who are alone and are struggling.

Tongyu has since expanded its activities to embrace public education on LGBTQ issues and policy work on intimate partner violence and censorship of LGBTQ media. As with many other feminist grassroots groups, Tongyu has been unable to register either as an NGO or even as a commercial enterprise, despite many attempts over the years. This inability to register as an organization severely impedes the group's visibility and access to funding. Xu Bin explains: "Even for overseas funding, we need to have legal status – they can't fund organizations using personal bank accounts, so it's hard for us to raise money, to pay rent for an office building and the overheads for financial management."

LGBTQ websites are routinely targeted in "anti-pornography" media crackdowns. LGBTQ films are banned from being shown in public, and must be screened quietly in people's homes or non-public spaces. Still, Xu says that the popularity of social media like Weibo in recent years has created a vastly expanded online space for the LGBTQ community in China:

> Before, many people were kind of in the dark; they didn't have any access to LGBT information... But the Internet changed all that. For the first time, many people realized, "Oh, there are people like me." [LGBTQ] websites, underground films, magazines, and books may not have a license, but they still play an important role for gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities in building an identity and empowering them.

In addition to having to cope with societal discrimination against the LGBTQ community, lesbian groups are marginalized by officially registered Chinese women's rights groups, including some NGOs. Xu points out that (at the time of writing) the All-China Women's Federation has rarely included work on lesbians or bisexual women because they are considered "too sensitive." Xu's group conducted a survey in 2009 on intimate partner violence against lesbian and bisexual women in eight cities, which found that the primary perpetrators of domestic violence were the *parents* of lesbian or bisexual daughters, and, secondly, intimate partners. While women's rights NGOs and lawyers are lobbying for the introduction of legislation on intimate partner violence, Tongyu has pushed for an acknowledgment that same-sex couples should also be protected from violence. Yet other women's groups tell Xu that without the imprimatur of the All-China Women's Federation, they do not dare raise issues related to lesbians.

Xu argues that lesbians in China are far less privileged than gay men, in general, which is why her group caters specifically to women who are lesbian, bisexual, or transgender:

> The media often use HIV and AIDS as a way to talk about gay issues, but lesbians are not so visible. Gay men sometimes argue that they have more pressure to marry and carry on the family line, so women are just tools [for them to marry], but that statement itself shows the gender inequality. Economically, women are more disadvantaged in general. Lesbians and transgender people in other places work more hand in hand with the women's rights movement, but this hasn't happened in China because we don't have a real women's rights movement; it's more about state-supported women's organizations that support very mainstream issues... Lesbians in mainland China have so few resources and not enough allies, unlike in Taiwan, where the women's rights movement is strong, and there is very strong advocacy for LGBT rights.

Activist Li Maizi is even more blunt: "We're happy to work with gay men who support gender equality, but some gay rights organizations oppose women, so why should we work with them?"

"Why would they oppose you?" I asked.

"Because they're men; they don't care that we're all queer," says Li. "Some gay men are very patriarchal, just look at all the *tongqi* [straight women unwittingly married to gay men] – I can't understand this, it's just corrupt morals!" says Li, referring to the fact that the majority of gay men in China are married to or will marry straight women, according to Zhang Beichuan of Qingdao University Medical School.

Li Maizi concedes that gay men are under pressure to enter into a heterosexual marriage (although, just as with straight men, it is far more socially acceptable for them to marry later than women.) But she says there's no excuse for deceiving women who are themselves under intense pressure to marry. "There are so many gay male QQ [chat] groups, saying, 'oh, I need to marry right now! It's time to find myself a wife!' It's all very easy for them to do," says Li.

Xu Bin points out that just as there is less funding for lesbian groups than for gay men, there are also far fewer studies of lesbians than of gay men in China. Gay marriage is still not legal, so in recent years, gay men and lesbians in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou have started to marry each other in weddings of convenience or "functional marriages" (*xingshi hunyin*). In such arrangements, a gay man marries a lesbian in order to present a facade of heterosexual marriage to alleviate pressure from parents and extended families, while carrying out their "real" love life among their own circle of friends, often in another city. These "functional marriages" have become very popular in some LGBTQ circles. However, Xu Bin is wary:

> I myself wouldn't recommend it. I think it's a passing phase because of the great pressure people are under to get married... There are different ways to fight against the institution of heterosexual marriage. Some people – if they have resources and options – can remain single or in a same-sex relationship without pressure... But for many other people, they don't have those options, so their options are: you either marry a heterosexual spouse and hide your identity, or you try to marry someone who understands your situation and maybe needs your help... It's a good example of how marriage as an institution has nothing to do with romantic love.

Much more research needs to be carried out on "functional" marriages between a gay man and a lesbian. But it is possible that these marriages may result in the same kinds of unequal, gendered financial arrangements that are prevalent among heterosexual couples, such as relying on the woman's income and assets to help finance a "marital" home registered solely in the man's name.

The future of women's rights in China

When asked whether she is optimistic about the future of women's rights in China, Li Maizi replies, "I am an idealist, but I am not in a hurry to see real change."

Since the Chinese government imposes such tight restrictions on public demonstrations of any kind, Li's group has adopted a strategy of "low-profile group, high-profile content." She explains:

> All of our actions are launched by [relatively unknown] individuals, to avoid being labeled [politically] "sensitive." The authorities always want to know who the organizer is. But if there's no organizer, you have no idea who to arrest. So our actions are spontaneous... We don't have a prominent Internet presence, except for a couple of women's websites, but they're basically decoration, they're just put there for people to look at. We all look out for a message, and then we get together to plan an action; there's no organizer.

And, although Li Maizi frequently comments on Weibo addressing her thousands of followers, she says that social media are not the "primary battlefield" for her group:

> Weibo is very patriarchal. It's a platform for scolding and abusing women, so there's no way it can be used effectively to support women. Especially now, when there is still no widespread consciousness about citizens' rights yet. The people who like to comment on Weibo are mostly men, and these men tend to have no gender awareness at all. And women's time is eaten up by all their social and family obligations, like housework and childcare, and they don't like to speak out. So it's particularly difficult to use Weibo to mobilize women.

Since Li's group is not registered as a company, most of its activists are volunteers. "We want to challenge and deconstruct power, to build an equal society ... so we're very careful not to build up opinion leaders. We want to attract and create more and more feminist activists; we don't just want a few people to lead this movement," says Li.

Yet at the time of writing, the political space for women's rights activism – or any form of rights activism – appeared to have contracted. By December 2013, over a hundred activists had been detained or arrested that year on charges of "unlawful assembly" or, in some cases, "inciting subversion", according to human rights groups. One crackdown focused on the "New Citizens' Movement," a coalition of academics, lawyers, and liberals calling on Chinese officials to disclose their assets and curb corruption. Eva Pils, founding co-director of the Center for Rights and Justice at the Faculty of Law of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, told the *Telegraph* that the goal of the "New Citizens' Movement" was "to create a kind of civil society force that through solidarity is able to affect the political process, to bring about political change." Pils added that the group was set up as a "leaderless movement, which would be able to continue operating even if key figures were detained."

Since Li Maizi's group also uses the "leaderless movement" strategy, the crackdown on "New Citizens' Movement" members has had a chilling effect on her group's plans for future actions. "Beijing has been too repressive lately; other groups have been closed down, and we don't dare organize any actions for the time being," says Li. Yet government crackdowns ebb and flow, activists groups lie low for a while, then re-emerge with new initiatives.

"In the initial part of our social movements, the 'action' [protest] is very important, but it's easy to make noise. To push, push, push is very hard," says Li. "We have to turn to different forms of advocacy at different times." For example, although Li's group has staged some dramatic street "actions" addressing

intimate partner violence in China, feminist lawyers and academics have worked behind the scenes for more than a decade to pass national legislation on domestic violence. As of November 2013, the legislation still had not been approved. Since the political environment is so repressive, for the time being Li and her colleagues have turned to survey research and letter writing rather than engaging in public street actions. Her group is now trying to come up with more effective strategies to fight for women's rights without increasing the political risk.

"It will require a very long, drawn-out period of struggle to see any progress, especially when it comes to gender issues," asserts Li. She is encouraged by the increase in Chinese society's acceptance of LGBTQ rights over the past decade and a half, but says that conservative attitudes toward women and families will take much longer to change. "I think that in about thirty years, we should be able to see some real change," says Li.

Meanwhile, many women have spoken or written to me about their private anger, which they feel unable to voice in public. Consider just a couple of comments posted to my Weibo account in July 2013:

> This kind of language [about "leftover" women] shows that there is a premeditated, organized effort both from above and from below to plunder, pillage and humiliate women. The tragedy is that Chinese women are not in a position to rebel.
>
> We don't even have human rights. How can we ask for women's rights?

Given the political risks involved in organizing an independent women's rights movement, some educated women are fighting back against gender discrimination on an individual level, by rejecting the institution of marriage. One university-educated

woman in her mid-twenties spoke at length about her frustration after attending one of my talks on "leftover" women at Yiyuan Gongshe, an informal space for activists and academics in Beijing. During the question-and-answer period, the young woman explained why she is exercising a deliberate choice to stay single:

> My strongest emotion is anger. The government has inserted itself into the tiniest, most minute details of an individual's life... All of a sudden I have the feeling that everyone around me – my mother, all my elders, my grandmothers on both sides – suddenly become really worried about my not being married... The scariest thing is that individual matters are so controlled by official power, by the power of the state... plus the enduring values of patriarchal culture. These forms of power all hurt women. So I'm extremely angry. You really shouldn't enter into that trap; you need to find a way out. The institution of marriage basically benefits men... The most rational choice is to stay single.

Another young woman offered the following response to my June 2013 talk in Beijing:

> Women's investment in the marriage is invisible... The woman's duty is to take care of the child, take care of the elderly, give birth to the child, do the housework – these burdens are all taken for granted. Hardly anyone thinks that these are the man's obligations. This is so unfair... Nowadays, many urban men don't want the woman just to stay at home not making any money and being a housewife. Men demand that the woman brings her income to the marriage and invests it with him... She brings her income, she brings her assets, she makes the man feel very safe and secure, she gives the man a long and satisfying sex life, she gives birth to a child who bears the man's last name. So this is why officials are putting so much energy into spreading propaganda about "leftover" women. Many women who aren't thinking clearly are dragged into this kind of married life. If it weren't for the propaganda, a lot of loser men [*diaosinan*] would never be able to find a woman willing to marry them.

In Shanghai, one 26-year-old university graduate told me flatly that she refuses to marry because "marriage in China is a living

hell." She has formed close friendships with other like-minded women in Shanghai, who support each other in rejecting the intense family and societal pressure to marry.

Statistical data at the time of writing show that, unlike many women in neighboring East Asian and Southeast Asian countries who are choosing to stay single, few women in China are rejecting marriage altogether. Recent studies, such as the 2013 paper "Coming of Age in Times of Change: The Transition to Adulthood in China" by sociologists Wei-Jun Jean Yeung and Shu Hu, show that 30 to 40 percent of Chinese agree that "a bad marriage is better than being single," based on their analysis of the Chinese General Social Survey of 2005–08. China's 2010 census reported that the average marriage age for a woman was still only 24.9, up slightly from 23.4 in 2000.

Yet statistics are often slow to reflect rapid social changes on the ground. It is possible that the ideas of some of the single, educated, urban women I have interviewed will increasingly take hold in large cities across China. Population specialists Wang Feng and Cai Yong, who have analyzed marriage trends in Shanghai, detect a possible long-term move away from the traditional model of universal marriage. In a paper on the "(re) emergence of late marriage in new Shanghai," Wang and Cai predict the following:

> At least for the highly educated women in Shanghai, almost 7 percent will remain single at age 45 if the marriage trend observed in the decade of 1996–2005 continues. With the rapid expansion of China's high education, especially women's education, if this trend of non-marriage continues, China will soon face a marriage revolution just like what has happened in many developed countries.

While some women deliberately renounce marriage, others are simply embracing their single lifestyles and finding ways to ignore the omnipresent pressure to marry.

Lan Fang is a 32-year-old client-relations manager for a financial company in Shanghai. After graduating from college, Lan went on to get a master's degree in English from a prestigious university in Beijing, then moved to Shanghai, where she now earns a very comfortable income of RMB 20,000 a month (around US$3,200), well above the average monthly pay there. "Where I grew up in Nanjing, I saw so many couples getting into big fights, and most of them seemed unhappy. Plus, so many men have affairs," says Lan. She has thought about maybe marrying one day if she finds a partner who could really make her happy, but she is loath to give up the freedoms she enjoys. Her typical schedule includes going out with friends in the evening for dinner, and perhaps to a movie or a concert; working out several times a week at the gym; reading novels; and taking French classes on Saturdays "just for fun."

The only thing Lan regrets about her single status is that the Shanghai government tightened restrictions on single people buying homes in 2012, such that residents who do not possess a Shanghai *hukou* must be married in order to buy property (see Chapter 3). Lan has a Beijing *hukou*, so she is not permitted to buy an apartment in Shanghai. Still, she believes the government restrictions on buying property will loosen by the time she turns 40. "I want to buy a place where I can take shelter in my old age. The population is shrinking, so I'll probably be able to buy an apartment of my own later in life [assuming property purchasing restrictions are lifted]." In the meantime, Lan is spending only a small fraction of her income on the monthly rent of RMB 2,000

for an apartment she shares with two friends near her office in downtown Shanghai. And she scoffs at the question of whether she might ever marry a man in order to own a home or achieve a sense of security. "Of course not! My life in Shanghai now is very rich, why would I want to change it?" she retorts.

Like many other single women over 30, Lan has to endure pressure from her family and colleagues, and insults from the media, but she has learned to shrug it all off: "This is just gender discrimination and I don't pay attention anymore."

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