

## THE PROMISE OF EDUCATION AND THE PRACTICE OF FILIAL DUTY: A STORY OF INTER-GENERATIONAL APORIAS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

*A PROMESSA DA EDUCAÇÃO E A PRÁTICA DO  
DEVER FILIAL: UMA HISTÓRIA SOBRE APORIAS  
INTER-GERACIONAIS NA CHINA CONTEMPORÂNEA*

**Susanne Bregnbæk\***

**RESUMO:** Com base em dez meses de pesquisa em uma universidade de elite em Pequim (Universidade de Qinghua) esse artigo enfoca os dilemas existenciais vividos por muitos jovens na China de hoje. É abordada a situação paradoxal enfrentada por jovens, que estão entre os poucos afortunados que chegaram ao topo de um sistema educacional muito competitivo, experimentarem uma profunda ambivalência sobre seu próprio futuro. Assim, através da etnografia detalhada de uma jovem mulher, Jing Jing, bem como da história de várias gerações de sua família, examinamos seus dilemas existenciais vis-à-vis às relações intergeracionais que se estabelecem entre o cidadão e o Estado na China contemporânea. Nesse sentido, relacionamos essas questões às transformações histórico-políticas incluindo as políticas educacionais do Estado chinês com foco na melhoria da sua “qualidade” para a população, sem, no entanto, reduzi-las a esse aspecto. Argumentamos que Jing Jing enfrentou um duplo compromisso traduzido em dois imperativos sociais opostos, quais sejam, o “auto-sacrifício” e a “auto-realização”. No caso de Jing Jing, isto é acentuado por uma incapacidade de conciliar o desejo de viver de acordo com seu dever moral de cuidar de sua mãe durante a sua velhice com o seu desejo de viver seus próprios sonhos acerca do ensino superior. Recorrendo a uma abordagem existencial para a antropologia, os autores relacionam esses conflitos às aporias

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\* Ph.D; Post-doctoral research fellow Institute of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen; Copenhagen, Denmark, e-mail: [Susanne.bregnbæk@anthro.ku.dk](mailto:Susanne.bregnbæk@anthro.ku.dk)

existenciais, ou seja, dilemas morais que não admitem nenhuma resolução e refletem as contradições intrínsecas à condição humana.

**Palavras-chave:** China; ensino superior; gerações; inter-subjetividade; antropologia existencial.

**ABSTRACT:** *Based on ten months of research at an elite university in Beijing (Qinghua University) this article focuses on the conundrums of life for young people in China today. It addresses the paradoxical situation faced by many young people, who are among the lucky few, who have made it to the top of a very competitive educational system yet feel deeply ambivalent about their own futures. Through a detailed ethnographic case story of a particular young woman, Jing Jing and her family history going back several generations, it explores the existential dilemmas imbedded in intergenerational and state citizen relationships in contemporary China. It sees these as linked to but not entirely reducible to China's historical and political transformations, including the Chinese state's educational policies focused on improving the "quality" of the population. I argue that Jing Jing faced a double-bind, in the form of two opposing social imperatives, those of "self-sacrifice" and "self-actualization". In Jing Jing's case this is accentuated by an inability to reconcile the wish to live up to her moral duty to take care of her mother during her old age with her wish to live out her own dreams of higher education. Drawing on an existential approach to anthropology, the authors sees these as tied to existential aporias, moral dilemmas that admit no resolution and reflect contradictions intrinsic to the human condition.*

**Keywords:** *China; higher education; generations; inter-subjectivity; existential anthropology.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When I first met Jing Jing, a thirty-year-old Qinghua University law major during the Spring of 2005, one of the very first things

she said to me was that she wanted to ‘give her mother a better life’. As we sat together amidst a crowd of loud students at a café called ‘Sculpting in Time’ in Beijing’s university district, she started to cry and apologized for ‘wasting my time’, since she felt that she could not go through with the interview. From the second floor of a high-rise building we had a view to Beijing’s elevated train, where crowds of people energetically made their way forward. Jing Jing herself struggled to find the way forward, since she felt torn in different directions and this sense of division is the topic of this article in which I argue that coexisting social imperatives made Jing Jing feel torn in different directions, unable to both live out her own dreams and live up to her filial obligations she faced a double-bind<sup>1</sup>.

In an article entitled ‘On the Fate of Filial Piety’, the China scholar Martin King Whyte sets out to examine what has happened to the emphasis on family obligations and filial piety in contemporary China. ‘If the sense of obligation to support and care for elderly parents has already been weakened, then older Chinese face a bleak future. If, on the other hand, filial obligations remain strong, the task of supporting an aging population may not produce a crisis’, he writes<sup>2</sup> (Whyte, 1997, p. 2). Based on a large survey of 753 parent-child pairs carried out in the city of Baoding in Hebei province in 1994, Whyte found that young people emphasize their duty to look after their parents during their old age to an even greater extent than the latter, and he concludes that ‘filial piety remains strong’ (Whyte,

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory Bateson coined the term ‘double-bind’ to characterize the situation faced by a person who is receiving contradictory messages from another powerful person (Bateson, 2000, pp. 271–9). The classic example is that of a child who is confronted with a parent who communicates withdrawal and coldness when the child approaches, but then reaches out toward the child with simulated love when he or she pulls back from the coldness. The child is then caught in a double-bind. No course of action can possibly prove satisfactory. Bateson felt that this kind of mixed communication may underlie the development of autism and schizophrenia. However, it is necessary for my purpose to clearly separate the notion of a double-bind from any clinical content of this sort.

<sup>2</sup> According to Whyte, there are a number of a priori reasons to suspect that family loyalty has been weakened in China. During the Maoist era, official propaganda tried to emphasize that loyalty should be given to the Party and the nation, not to one’s family, and Confucian values were attacked. The most radical attack on parental authority was when youths were mobilized to attack their parents during the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 and 1969 (Whyte, 1997, p. 2). He also points to the revival of Confucianism as possibly providing a renewed focus on family obligations among the young.

1997, pp. 4-5). A very high percentage of both parents and children responded that grown children should observe their filial obligations to their parents, no matter how the latter may have treated them when they were young (Whyte, 1997, p. 7). I agree that it seems unlikely that children raised in a Western family would respond in this way. However, it is not so surprising that the young people provided what sounded like morally correct answers. I find that missing from his analysis is a reflection of the difference between ideals (world view) and practice (life world). The issue of filial piety is a particular expression of intergenerational reciprocity involving resources, love and care, and lived out variously in the course of inter-subjective relationships. It cannot be reduced to a question of values alone, as if culture were a pool of which one could measure the ‘temperature’ or intensity of particular human emotions.

Furthermore, time is the key to this relationship, since the always ambiguous question remains: when are the tables turned, so that the young become responsible for caring for the old?

## 2. UNDER THE ANCESTOR’S SHADOW?

Filial piety has long been recognized as one of the key moral concepts in Confucian ethics and as one of the major principles structuring Chinese society (Weber, 1930; Marsella, 1988; Tu, 1985; Freedman, 1991). In many scholarly accounts of China, family loyalty is seen as the overriding motif in Chinese life, leading to the idea of the socio-centric character of Chinese society, which is usually seen as being in sharp contrast to the focus on individualism in Western societies<sup>3</sup> (Weber, 1930; Freedman, 1979; Hsu, [1954] 1971; Tu, 1985; Potter and Potter, 1988; Whyte, 1997). The work of Maurice Freedman has had enormous influence on the anthropological study

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<sup>3</sup> I agree with Arthur Kleinman in his critique of the distinction between individual-centric and socio-centric societies, which comes close to what Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) saw as the colonial project of seeing the cultural other as the opposite of what we hold ourselves to be (Kleinman, 1996, p. 180). Kleinman argues that ‘such a view entails portraying homogeneous, unidimensional stereotypes, not real people. It overlooks examples of the opposite, and above all it leaves out any shared human qualities (ibid.)’.

of Chinese kinship.<sup>4</sup> Imperial society was understood to exist ‘under the ancestors’ shadow’ (Hsu, 1954) and to be organized around familial ideals based on hierarchical relationships of age, generation and gender (Brandstädter and Santos, 2009, p. 5). After Freedman, ‘kinship’ became strictly associated with descent, property and lineage organization (Brandstädter and Santos 2009, pp. 6-7). In this view, patrilineal descent organizes the distribution of property and people while linking family relationships to the imperial polity, making Chinese kinship look like ‘an extreme and non-fluid version of patriliney’ (Stafford, 2009, p. 38).

In more recent ethnographies of China, the individual seems to have emerged from the ancestors’ shadow. Some ethnographies of rural China have begun to put an emphasis on individual persons and sentiments (Liu, 2000; Yan, 2003). Yunxiang Yan has criticized the ‘corporate model of the Chinese family’, which sees it primarily as an economic entity and from which the Chinese individual is missing (Yan, 2003, p. 3). He argues that a ‘triumph of conjugality’ has taken place in the sense that in practice the horizontal conjugal relationship now presides over the hierarchical relationship between parents and children. The newest contribution to the ongoing conversation on the Chinese family in the anthropology of China is *Chinese Kinship* edited by Susanne Brandstädter and Goncalo D. Santos. It is inspired by Janet Carsten’s influential approach to relatedness, with its emphasis on how kinship relationships are created, including an emphasis on nurturance and care (*yang*). Also, the reciprocal relationships between parents and children that link generations are foregrounded as opposed to the earlier strong emphasis on patrilineality (cf. Stafford 2000, p. 52). In addition, as Andrew Kipnis has pointed out, since schools bridge the gap between the private and public spheres, ‘a study of education should have much to tell us about changing notions of kinship, in a manner that should echo the concerns of the new kinship studies’ (Kipnis 2009, p. 9).

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<sup>4</sup> His adaptation of the famous descent group theory, set out in *African Political Systems* (Evans-Pritchard and Fortes, 1940), to the study of China showed that kinship can also be of great social, cultural and political importance in civilizations with an ‘old state’ (Baker and Feuchtwang, 1991).

Some recent studies within sinological anthropology have drawn inspiration from the work of Ulrich Bech and argued that Chinese society is undergoing a process of individualization – not only changing perceptions of the individual but also rising expectations in terms of freedom and choice<sup>5</sup>. In ‘Deep China: The Moral Life of the Person’ Arthur Kleinman et al. explore that social and psychological consequences of these changes in the moral landscape. Drawing on the work of R. D. Laing and William James, they argue that China’s extraordinarily fast modernization ‘may have created a special cultural version of the divided self’ (Kleinman, 2011, p. 23). The authors invoke a famous painting of an owl with one eye closed and the other open, by the Chinese painter, Huang Youngyu, which has been interpreted as a critical wink at the terrible times of the Cultural Revolution but the authors of Deep China argue that this image also speaks to our times. The image of division is telling of ‘a deep structural tension in China’s moral worlds and in the Chinese individual’ who in different ways experience a split between their actual social practice and an inner worlds of contemplation and thus struggle to keep one eye open and the other closed.

This image of division seems to speak to Jing Jing’s story, Put in more simply terms, while I agree that an ethos of individual choice, freedom and fulfilment is being foregrounded – partly due to the retreat of the state in terms of welfare provisions, leaving more in the hands of individual families, to Jing Jing such individual desired coexisted with other social imperatives, including the obligation to look after her mother during her old age, causing considerable tension. This tension can also be seen as a reflection of the contradiction inherent in the Chinese modernity project, which simultaneously seeks to create citizens who through self-development become innovative and creative- changing China from the ‘factory of the world’ to a powerhouse of creativity ‘made in China’ - while simultaneously wanting to foster loyal and filial citizens who are respectful of parents and the authorities (Kipnis, 2011; Yan, 2012). However, I howev-

<sup>5</sup> See eg. Yan, Yunxiang (2009) ‘The Individualization of Chinese Society’. Oxford: Berg and Mette Halskov Hansen and Rune Svarverud eds. (2010) *iChina The Rise of the Individual in Modern Chinese Society*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press.

er, see these tensions as existential *aporias*, that is moral dilemmas between self and other as well as between self and other that admit no ready resolution but entail dilemmas that are only in part cultural and reveal tensions intrinsic to the human condition (Jackson, 2009, p.105; Bregnbæk, 2011; 2012).

### 3. MOTHER-DAUGHTER TIES

After we had met several times, for tea or coffee or long walks on the chilly campus, I was gradually able to make sense of her story, which often revolved around her mother. Jing Jing told me how her mother had worked hard as a primary school teacher to raise two daughters on her own. She had even sacrificed her own health for her daughters, she said, as she felt that receiving a higher education was the only way to achieve a better life in the future. Jing Jing insisted that ‘in China the bond between mother and daughter is really something very special’. However, even though she like many of my interlocutors spoke of kinship in this absolute form as though history and context were irrelevant, no human relationship – not even the bond between mother and daughter – is simply given. Rather, it is always made and undergoes many transformations and crises over time.<sup>6</sup>

Coming from Yunnan province in the poor western part of China, Jing Jing had made it to the top of the educational ladder to an elite university in Beijing, which to many Chinese parents would be seen as ‘the most glorious dream they could imagine’ (Kipnis, 2009, p. 209). Andrew Kipnis has pointed out that parental desire for university education for their children at times exceeds that of the state (Kipnis, 2009, p. 210). However, in Jing Jing’s case, her personal ambitions in terms of acquiring a higher education actually

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Jackson describes how the Kuranko of Sierra Leone describe kinship in absolute and abstract terms as a matter of being born (*mui*, ‘to give birth’; hence *mui nyorgoye*, ‘birth relationship’ or agnatic kinship), or of feeding at the breast (*demba*, a nursing mother’; hence *dembaia*, ‘breast-feeding relationship’ or close kinship), or an expression of the mother-child bond, as is suggested by the commonest term for kinship: *nakelinyorgoya*, lit. mother-one-relationship (Jackson, 2011, p. 357). But as Paul Riesman observes, despite the ‘we-ness’ or ‘one-ness’, an enormous effort goes into maintaining these relationships in a stable form (Riesman, 1992, p. 89 cited in Jackson, 2011, p. 357).

surpassed those of her parents (mother). For Jing Jing education was more than a matter of finding a good job and being able to provide for her family, and having already graduated with a major in English from the local university in Kunming, she had taken a second master's degree at the most prestigious university in the country, even though her mother was highly ambiguous about this endeavour and wanted her to remain closer to home. Jing Jing felt she was being torn in two directions, but she hoped that by acquiring a higher education, she would in time be able to repay her parents' sacrifices in terms of the expensive tuition fees, and her dream was ultimately to bring her mother to Beijing to take care of her during her old age and enable her to live a happy life (*guo ri zi*).

However, six months prior to our first meeting, although Jing Jing had graduated with a law degree from Qinghua, she had been unable to find a job. She was still living in a small room erected temporarily for workers on campus, which was soon to be torn down. For Jing Jing higher education had not provided the promised trajectory of social mobility, and as a result she was also unable to reverse the generational contract. Jing Jing's tears and her agony over being far away from her mother while she was ill and her being unable to repay her mother's sacrifices fits well into the cultural trope of filial duty. I am in no way questioning the genuineness of her feelings – on the contrary – but the point I wish to make here is precisely that she suffered so much because, as Biel, Good and Kleinman have argued, 'values and emotions are closely connected and are embodied in interpersonal struggles' (Biel, Good and Kleinman, 2007, p. 15).

It was not until we had met several times that I was really able to make sense of her story. One day she brought a piece of paper on which she had copied down part of an inscription from the family shrine in her home town that had been inaugurated in 1947. We met at a theme park-like café off the campus, which was decorated in the style of a Swiss alpine cottage, remote in every sense from the account of her family genealogy. The following is what she meticulously translated from the family shrine of her mother's patrilineal descent line, starting with her great-great-grandfather:



Jiao's family originated from Nanjing. At the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) it settled in Yunnan Province and lived there for generations. Jiao Wenjia married a young girl with the family name of Yang. They had four sons and five daughters (the names of the sons are listed). They focused all their energy and resources on education, and the children grew up to become successful. The third son Lian Zhu was generous and smart and particularly fond of studying. When he was twenty he was appointed to the office in charge of regional affairs in Zhi Li in Sichuan Province. Several years later, during the revolution led by Sun Yat Sen,<sup>7</sup> he came back to Yunnan province and worked for the civil and treasury department of the province. Later he was appointed to be a member of the bank inspectorate of the province, and he travelled throughout the entire province. Later he became the manager of the Bank of Fudian at Shi Ping. In 1915 he became the manager of Yong Chan (now known as Bao Shan).

In 1923 he moved to Burma as a manager and acquired a glorious reputation. In 1929 he felt that his health had become fragile, and he resigned from his position and returned to Yunnan to educate his sons. He was very devoted to Buddhism and built a monastery. He acquired scriptures to be sent from Suzhou and Hangzhou (and because of this, Buddhism is still widely practiced in Tao Jian, she added). Here he diligently studied the classics, both Buddhism and Confucianism. He lived in a stoic way and was famed for his devotion to help others in need. In his family he respected his father and his elders, and in his work he was a person of his word. He was also very capable in mediating in disputes. Therefore he was widely respected in the region. Lian Zhu put strong emphasis on education. He thought that 'A person cannot not study, a home cannot not be educated, study to become accomplished, teach without effort. Without education, having sons is like not having sons, having a home is like not having a home'.

Although he was very preoccupied with his work at the monastery, he educated his sons day and night and invested a lot in their education with a view to 'look from a high place and see far away', 'sparing no effort'. Jia wei (Confucian term for the educational status

<sup>7</sup> Sun Yatsen founded the republic of China in 1911, overthrowing the last imperial regime.

of the home) was built up, and in the following decades his sons all made great achievements within their families and for the country. His wife was named Li, and she supported her husband by taking care of the home. They had five sons and two daughters (the names of the sons are listed). The first son, Shu (Jing Jing's grandfather) graduated from the National South East University of Nanjing. Two years later he went to America and got a master's degree from the University of Michigan. When he returned to China he was appointed to a key position within the nationalist Guomindang government.

The account is paradigmatic in describing traditional Chinese society as characterised by the subordination of the young and of women to the dominant patriarchal ideology and power structure (Yan, 1999, p. 75). However, what is notable is that Jing Jing told me the story of her *mother's* ancestors, not her *father's* patriline, and that she took for granted that she and her mother ought to have been given the same opportunities for education and self-actualization as those of her male ancestors.

Why did Jing Jing choose to narrate this long tale to me, a foreigner and a near stranger? Does it make any sense to see her as living in the shadow of her ancestors? Did she intend to validate her choice to gain higher education through the moral standing her (male) ancestors had obtained through higher education? By showing me her mothers' patrilineal descent line, rather than the descent line of her own father, was she emphasizing the close sense of connectedness with her mother and trying to evict her father from her life? Did she wish to provide a basis for the story of her mother's suffering and agony she now faced by being unable to reciprocate the generational contract? Or did she aim to address the political injustice that befell her family after the 1949 revolution, as this links up with her desire to study law and work towards a more just society?

#### 4. THE CURSE OF JING JING'S FATHER

One day Jing Jing told me that her father had been in prison for twelve years. Before then he had been more or less absent from

the account of her life, which had revolved around the ambiguity of wanting to give her mother a better life and to pursue her own dream of higher education. Jing Jing's father's place in her life required substantial explanation – it was almost as if she was keen to explain to me that his presence in her life was the result of larger social forces, and not something her mother was responsible for. Jing Jing continued the story where the family shrine had ended the account, explaining that her grandfather's entering the Guomindang entailed a tragic turning point in her family history. The iconoclasm of the 1949 revolution involved an attack on old ideas, old values and bourgeois education. The class categories were to be overturned and the 'new man of socialism' was to be created. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) her grandfather was forced to perform 'self-criticism'. In a staged performance peasants gathered at twilight to watch the confessions of the previous ruling classes and the intelligentsia, who were labelled 'rightists', 'revisionists' and 'black elements'. Their houses were confiscated, and any items that did not conform to Mao's values were smashed. Jing Jing said that after her grandfather's death she had found his diary in which he had described the degradation and humiliation of the physical and spiritual torture he had been subjected to. As a result of her grandfathers' political status, as a child Jing Jing's mother was bullied by her peers, as well as by some of her teachers.

Because of her unfortunate class status, Jing Jing's mother was forced to marry someone with a 'better', that is, less bourgeois class background. She fell in love with a landlord's son, but her parents arranged that she be married to Chen, Jing Jing's father, instead, since he had a peasant background and was a devoted revolutionary. Jing Jing's mother had no choice but to agree to the marriage. But she seems almost destined to stumble into catastrophe after catastrophe, since this marriage, which was intended to salvage her fate, actually ended up causing her great suffering when her husband was imprisoned after the end of the Cultural Revolution, despite his socialist credentials. After Deng Xiaoping came to power, her husband was imprisoned because the political tide changed and he belonged

to the Mao fraction, not the Deng fraction. This caused him to be sentenced to twelve years in prison as a scapegoat for other people's crimes, Jing Jing said. When he was sentenced in 1978 Jing Jing was only three years old, and she remembers that her older sister cursed the public loudspeakers of the village when the sentence was announced. For years her mother had continually tried to have his sentence reversed, but without any luck. 'In China this in reality means asking for mercy, since the government would never admit to having been wrong', Jing Jing said.

During the stressful period leading up to the college entrance exams, in 1990, Jing Jing's father was released from prison. He was thirty years old when he had been imprisoned and was forty two when he was released. According to Jing Jing he had become bitter and took his anger out on Jing Jing's mother. Due to the situation at home she was unable to concentrate on her studies. Jing Jing despised the way her father, whom she had never really known, acted unreasonably while presenting himself as if he were a hero. Due to the violent conflict between her parents and the pressure of having to take the college entrance exams, Jing Jing attempted to run away from home several times, and she also attempted to commit suicide. After this failed attempt, her mother had performed a kowtow (*ke-tou*) a ritual display of filial piety whereby a young person kneels before his or her ancestors. As she begged her daughter never to attempt to take her own life again, Jing Jing's mother was reversing the relationship between parent and child, and Jing Jing remembers this inversion of filial piety as the most harrowing experience of her life.

Jing Jing then failed the college entrance exams, but as a result of her mother's ability to persuade and bribe local officials, she was allowed to take the exams the following year. Jing Jing passed the test this time but did not get a very high score and was admitted to the University of Minorities in Kunming, where she took a master's degree in English and received one of the highest grades in the university. However, Jing Jing felt that the level of education there was low, and after graduation she applied to the law school of Qinghua University in Beijing and was accepted from among thousands

of other applicants. Because of her fathers' unfair trial and an acute awareness of the injustice of society, she was attracted to the idea of studying law and ultimately working for a more just system. Although her mother had always urged her to acquire a higher education, her mother found these ambitions dangerous and naive and she urged her to stay closer to home and to lead 'a quiet life', by which she meant getting married and having a child. We can recall that Jing Jing struggled with the ambiguity of wanting to acquire a good education, of wanting to pursue higher education in order to 'learn more and experience more in life', as well as hoping that this would enable her to find a good job and help her mother live a better life in the future, while at the same time feeling guilt and self-reproach since this meant being thousands of miles away from her mother at a time when she needed her most.

Jing Jing did manage to persuade her mother to let her pursue her own dream of higher education, and she travelled -train ride away from her home town, and became a student at the most prestigious university in the country. However, when she returned home during the Spring Festival to visit her family during her first year, she discovered that her mother was not well. The family had kept this a secret in order not to worry her and to enable her to focus on her studies. She felt responsible for her mother's poor health because she had left her alone with her father who acted tyrannically and also physically abused her. When she was periodically hospitalized, Jing Jing's sister visited her as often as she could, but she had also moved to the capital of the province and therefore mostly had to depend on her husband. In China, when people are hospitalized, it is customary that a person's family plays a substantial role in their treatment through practices of *yang*: providing food, linen, washing the patient, and providing them with care and company. At a point where she was under the pressure of having to take several important exams, and at the same time was consumed by worries about her mother, Jing Jing desperately needed someone to talk to, she said. Although she was sharing a dormitory with several girls, she found that the difference in their backgrounds, as well as an element of

competition between them, made it impossible for her really to express her feelings to them.

Therefore, at some point she contacted one of her teachers, who she felt genuinely *cared* about her well-being, but who was not able to help her in any real sense. In some ways she only exacerbated Jing Jing's experience of being torn in two directions, since she found Jing Jing's preoccupation with her mother's well-being to be crucial, and at the same time she urged her to concentrate on her studies, since it was important to manage the upcoming exams. After this conversation, however, Jing Jing said that she to some extent regretted having imposed her problems on her teacher and was now worried whether this would in any way compromise the impression she held of her academically.

Jing Jing felt guilty about being far away from home, and also due to the fact that her parents and her sister were sending her money to enable her to continue studying, money that was also needed for her mother's treatment. However, she continued to cling to the hope that, by obtaining a good education, she would eventually be able to help her mother live a better life in her old age. Therefore it is easy to understand her desperation when her aspirations seemed to fail and she was unable to find a job after graduation.

It seemed as if her social status was blocking the road of upward mobility, despite her talent, hard work and Qinghua diploma. She suspected that the reason she was being bypassed when applying for positions as a civil servant was to be found in her *dang an*, the personal dossier of every Chinese citizen, which contains details of a person's family record. In other words, she suspected that it was her father's prison sentence that was exerting power over her life. Her road towards social mobility and adulthood was therefore blocked. She spoke of the discrimination of the labour market by referring to the popular phrase *bei nan dang*, a term implying that success comes more easily if one is from Beijing (**bei** jing), is a man (**nan** shi) and is a member of the Communist Party (**dang** yuan). As a Dao minority women with a convicted father and no personal connections, she seemed to be jinxed.

About a year later everything seemed to have taken a turn for the better. Jing Jing had married and found a job in a foreign company in Beijing. Having spent the spring festival nurturing her husband's family, 'which was expected', she said, Jing Jing and her husband were happily preparing a room in their apartment for the arrival of Jing Jing's mother, who was to come and live with them. The idea was also that she should look after the child they hoped to have in the future.

## 5. THE DEATH OF JING JING'S MOTHER

However, when I returned to Beijing in February 2007 to continue fieldwork, I received the devastating news that Jing Jing's mother had passed away. She never fully recovered from her illness and she never made it to Beijing. Jing Jing had spent several months taking care of her in her home town. Because she had been away from her job for such long time, Jing Jing had been fired. She was depressed and asked me to forgive her for not wanting to see anybody. After some time she sent me a poem by a Han Dynasty poet, Han Ying (180-157 B.C.), taken from the Book of Songs, which is said to have been compiled by Confucius himself:

*The tree may wish to be calm,  
but the wind will not subside.  
The son wants to take care of his parents,  
but the parents are no longer there.*

树欲静而风不止  
子欲养而亲不在

The poem mirrors her experience of losing her footing when she was bereaved and deprived of the possibility of taking care of her mother during her old age. Even though Jing Jing had spent several months looking after her mother during her terminal illness, she was full of self-reproach, regretting having spent time on her own further

education and neglecting what she saw as her moral responsibility to take care of her mother during the last years of her life. She blamed herself for having taken the wrong decision, to study at Qinghua – to see education as the most important thing in life and abandoning her mother at a critical time after her father had been released from jail. This brings to mind Hannah Arendt's distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplative*, the distinction between life as it is chaotically lived and the way in which we make post-hoc rationalizations of the events that befall us. Arendt emphasizes that human action always involves more than the singular subject because it occurs within a field of social relations or what she calls 'the subjective-in-between'<sup>8</sup> (Arendt cited in Jackson, 2007, p. 23). Arendt quite radically argues against the idea of an intentional actor, saying that human existence happens in the indeterminate space *between* actors. This approach finds resonance in the Taoist image of a small human being on a boat between two towering cliffs. The person has an oar to steer with, but the force of the river places a limit on his ability to navigate (Jackson, 2007, p. 36). This image closely ties in with a vernacular expression of Chinese society/history as a 'tide' that sweeps across people's lives, with dramatic, sometimes devastating results on those lives, as was the case for Jing Jing's grandfather and parents. The poem Jing Jing sent me about the tree that wishes to be calm, but the wind that will not subside, can be seen as expressing a similar experience. As Jackson points out, such a view is not to be mistaken for the kind of fatalism or determinism that the West so often ascribes to the East. People everywhere do the best they can in whatever circumstances they find themselves in: we do not necessarily know what we are doing when we are acting (Jackson, 2007, p. 25).

Even though Jing Jing was uncertain about her choice to go to Beijing for further education, when she simultaneously felt an

<sup>8</sup> This is the force field that Michel Foucault refers to as 'governmentality', where power is not an intrinsic property of persons or institutions (such as schools or the state) but finds expression between interacting subjects (Jackson, 2007, p. 24). Phenomenology and Foucault's post-structuralism are often seen to be antithetical, but here I wish to emphasize that what they have in common is the view that the world is socially shaped (Gammeltoft, 2007, p. 155). An important difference, however, is that Arendt succeeds in getting rid of the notion of an entirely free and agentive subject without reducing history to anything as abstract as discourse (Jackson, 2007, p. 25).



obligation to be at home and to be able to take care of her mother, she hoped that by acquiring a higher education she could eventually ‘give her mother a good life’ by bringing her to Beijing. But time ran out. In other words, I think her case shows that her desire for self-realization in the form of living out her dream of obtaining a higher education and wanting to ‘experience more in life’ does not mean that her sense of obligation to look after her mother was not equally strong. The two imperatives of self-realization and self-sacrifice coexisted and could not be separated. However, in practice, she was unable to realise both.

Jing Jing’s mother therefore died before Jing Jing was able to reverse the generational contract. She later told me that the fact that her mother had passed away also meant that she was vexed about the issue of having a child, as she could not see how this could be reconciled with her desire to work now that her mother was no longer there to take care of the child. This highlights the dilemma between the need to nurture others and the need to nurture one’s own dreams and desires. In Jing Jing’s case, her remorse for having put her own education ahead of her mother’s welfare now translates into her guilt about putting her own needs above the potential needs of her child.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, I have attempted to put into brackets generalizing tropes such as individualism and collectivism in order to show that both perspectives, although contradictory, coexist. I have looked at how the relationship between Jing Jing and her mother evolved over time. Having explored intergenerational reciprocity as tied to an idea of sacrifice, we see that sacrifice and self-interest are not entirely oppositional terms. According to Jackson, ‘One of the most compelling paradoxes of human existence is that humans often feel that they have more to gain from self-sacrifice, giving away one’s life than from merely clinging on to it’ (Jackson, 2009, p. 205). Arthur Kleinman has called the generation of Jing Jing’s mother, who had their years of education disrupted by the Cultural Revolution, as

a 'lost generation', as the Chinese state has written this generation off and is instead concentrating on the next generation (Kleinman, 1996, p. 177) . At stake here is also the fact that, when the members of this 'lost generation' places their own (lost) aspirations on their children, it is not only a form of self-sacrifice, but also a way of giving meaning to their own lives, through their children, as well as being connected to securing children observant of their filial obligations who will take care of them in the future. From Jing Jing's perspective, it turned out that the desire to give her mother a good life during her old age was also connected to a desire that she could at the same time take care of the child she and her husband hoped to have. Again sacrifice and self-interest were intimately connected.

The ambiguities and uncertainties of how to go about the intergenerational contract is often the source of conflict, and here time is a central concern (Whyte et al., 2008, p. 6). With the strong focus on higher education, those who make it to the top of the educational ladder remain in the period of youth for longer than young people with less education. They remain dependent on their parents for a longer period of time, as they graduate and consequently marry and set up their own households later. Jing Jing now regrets the choices she made and thinks that, if she had remained content with her MA from the University in Kunming, she could perhaps have married, found a job near her natal village and looked after her mother. But having higher aspirations, she wanted to take another degree at a better university, and in doing so she delayed an inversion of the generational contract further than was possible. In Jing Jing's case, prolonged education as well as her mother's early death made the expected inversion of the generational contract impossible, meaning that she was unable to grow up in a moral sense. The gift of life remains unpaid and continues to haunt her. Furthermore she cannot see how she can have a child now that her mother is not there to take care of it, and thus she is not sure as to how to continue the family line. Like Jing Jing, the students I interviewed emphasized, without exception, their sense of responsibility to look after their

parents during their old age.<sup>9</sup> However, like the students of Whyte's investigations, most of my interlocutors had not yet graduated, and thus this was not as yet a practical concern to them.

Jing Jing's perspective placed her in a double-bind or a situation in which it was impossible to 'have it both ways'. Yunxiang Yan's description of the individualization of Chinese society and the desires of self-determination as being a new phenomenon among rural youth to some extent applies to Jing Jing's desires for higher education and to live her own life in Beijing. However, when Jing Jing travelled to Beijing to acquire a higher education and cried because she recognized her mother's sacrifice that had made this possible, she was in a sense enacting the role of the 'son' in the Tang Dynasty poem memorized by Chinese primary students. Meanwhile, for Jing Jing, acquiring a higher education was not only a matter of living up to family and state ideals: it was also linked to an attempt to come into her own. However, this does not mean that living up to family obligations and reciprocating the generational contract were not equally important to her, and therefore she was full of guilt and remorse. Perhaps this is why she chose to tell me her story. It is possible that she saw me as someone who would validate her choice to pursue her own dreams rather than be restrained by a sense of family loyalty. In this way, her story illustrates the tensions in the Chinese modernity project and the contradictory demands that the present generation of young people will to some extent face as they enter adulthood.

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<sup>9</sup>This responsibility is most clearly felt by students from rural or poor backgrounds, but all students say that it is their duty to look after their parents during their old age.

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