LUND UNIVERSITY • CENTRE FOR EAST AND SOUTH-EAST ASIAN STUDIES

Negotiated Resistance:

An Ethnographic Exploration of the Experiences of Chinese Elder Sisters with Younger Brothers Born under the One-Child Policy

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Abstract:

This research examines what was at stake for young Chinese women who are negatively conceptualized as *fudimo* 扶弟魔. Drawing on feminist theories of everyday resistance and relational autonomy, it explores how they resist intersecting gendered power relations in everyday life. The thesis draws on ethnographic methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 15 women aged 21–26. While the interviewees appropriated neoliberal ideals of self-realization, their autonomy remained constrained by entrenched gendered power relations within and beyond the family. Yet by capturing how resistance fluctuates across spatial fields, treating emotion as a necessary condition of relational autonomy, and expanding the concept of everyday practice along a temporal dimension, the research argues that these elder sisters' everyday resistance, despite its constraints, gradually expands their agency within concrete social relations and opens new possibilities for embodied resistance. Employing the concepts of "local" and "programmatic" autonomy, the research argues that these women employ tactics such as performative obedience, geographical distancing, adaptive compromise under dual fears, and embodied claims to reproductive autonomy. The research illuminates the complexity of gendered power and broadens the understanding of women's everyday resistance in the context of contemporary China.

Keywords: Chinese elder sisters; One-child Policy; Intersubjectivity; Autonomy; Embodied Resistance; Gendered Power; Chinese Family

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“No matter what, I will not now, nor will I ever, choose to become a *fudimo* 扶弟魔 (hereinafter *fudimo*)” (interview, January 12, 2026).

I. Introduction

In the Chinese context, the label *fudimo*[1], literally “demon who supports her younger brother”, captures a predicament long faced by women with younger brothers and a stereotype about those women. Although the term superficially points to the younger brother, it targets women who provide excessive care and unconditional support to their brothers, often at the expense of their own interests or those of their nuclear family (Wang & Cui, 2024, p.22).

In addition to sparking widespread discussion on social media, some studies suggest that due to Chinese parents’ son preference, elder sisters with younger brothers often face significant oppression, such as having to drop out of school at an early age to save on their brothers’ tuition or having to start working at a young age (Yang & Liu, 2022, p.76). Moreover, beyond these familial roles, as women, they are also constrained by broader gender norms in China, facing pressure and judgment from people around them and from the public sphere regarding their marriage, reproductive choices, and life plans.

Since the relaxation of China’s two-child policy in 2016, some studies have begun to examine young women who have transitioned from being only daughters to elder sisters with younger brothers, exploring their active and passive participation in maternal practices and identifying the features and effects of the motherhood role (Feng et al., 2024, p.5). In this context, the concept of “sis-therhood” has been used to capture the intersection of motherhood and sisterhood within the Chinese sociocultural setting (He & Liu, 2025, p.86). However, few studies have focused on elder sisters of brothers born during the one-child policy era. Even when research does attend to women in this specific position, it often concentrates on rural China, treating them as a key site for observing women's predicaments at the intersection of generational and gender power, a focus closely tied to the history of the one-child policy.

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[1] The term has gained wide popularity in public discourse, partly because its pronunciation is identical to the Chinese translation of “Voldemort” from the *Harry Potter* series, and partly because the character *mo* (魔), which means demon, carries strong pejorative connotations.

In the early days of the one-child policy, the rule “one couple, one child” admitted almost no exceptions, embedded in the goal of “later, longer, fewer”. Yet rural areas, lacking the relatively comprehensive welfare systems of cities, saw parents depending on children, especially sons, for old-age support, which further reinforced son preference and attachment to larger family structures (Jiang et al., 2013, p.195-196). Besides, the high demand for male labor due to low rural productivity has led to widespread dissatisfaction with the one-child policy in rural areas. To address this issue, China subsequently introduced the “1.5-child policy”, allowing couples in rural areas to have a second child if their first child is a girl (Eklund, 2011a, p.14). However, in urban areas, having a second child is often illegal and subject to severe penalties, and parents in certain professions or with specific statuses may even be forced to conceal the existence of this extra child for a long time. This makes it quite difficult to research the life experiences of the elder sisters in these families, as some are not permitted to acknowledge the existence of a younger brother.

Although the one-child policy is a history, this institutional intervention by state power into family life continues to profoundly shape individuals’ life trajectories. The policy not only contributed to the widespread emergence of one-child families and the 4-2-1 family structure, consisting of grandparents, maternal grandparents, a couple, and one child (Jiang et al., 2013, p.204), but also deeply affected reproductive decisions and familial arrangements within multi-child families. Family decisions regarding childbirth were often made under the constraints of the policy. Were younger brothers born within the legal boundaries of the policy? If not, what consequences did their births bring to the family, and how did they shape the life experiences of their elder sisters? Amid China's social transformation, how do these questions continue to affect women's lives through pressures in areas such as family ethics, marriage, reproduction, and employment? These are questions worth pursuing.

However, when explaining why women continue to act as *fudimo* after experiencing parental discrimination, existing analyses often resort to the emotional sunk costs associated with sibling bonds and voluntary self-sacrifice rooted in filial piety (Yang & Liu, 2022, pp.77–78; Wang & Cui, 2024, p.30). Criticism of *fudimo* discourse is also frequently confined to concerns about social harmony and moral customs (Yang & Liu, 2022, p.83), thereby reducing complex power relations to private-sphere problems attributed to traditional culture, which is shown by such backward ideas, and women's low self-perception.

While these studies have revealed familial exploitation driven by gender bias and certain macro-level mechanisms of gender inequality in China, they generally portray elder sisters as passive victims under patriarchy, lacking agency and subjectivity, and unable to capture the differentiated and complex micro-situations of lived experience, nor do they recognize the unique social relations in which individuals are embedded. Cross-cultural research on gender relations shows significant links between women's socialization, self-esteem, and empowerment, which has consistently been one of the most common long-term goals of development projects (Croll, 2002, p.10). Thus, this research goes beyond analytical approaches that treat elder sisters as merely passive victims of gendered power systems. and refrains from the urban-rural binary as an a priori point of departure[2]. Instead, it returns to the everyday experiences of elder sisters in their real-life situations, making their self-understandings visible.

The 2021 Chinese film *Sister* reveals the complexity of this predicament through cinematic means. It tells the story of a couple who, having long desired a son, finally conceive a boy after the two-child policy takes effect, and both died unexpectedly in an accident when the boy was six. The protagonist, the elder sister, suddenly takes on full responsibility for caring for her younger brother, sacrificing considerable time and energy originally intended for her postgraduate entrance exam preparation, while her romantic relationship is pushed to the brink of collapse (He & Liu, 2025). With its strong sense of realism and powerful performances, the film struck a deep chord with countless women with similar experiences beyond the screen (Yi, 2021).

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[2]. It means specifically focusing on rural areas, urban areas, or using the urban-rural divide as a variable for comparative studies on China’s gender issues.

Moreover, it brings to light the role of the family, long overlooked in China's public discourse. In addition to the roles of mother, wife, and daughter, the role of "elder sisters" and their experience also need more detailed research (He & Liu, 2025, p.87). The film *Sister* leaves the audience with an open-ended cliffhanger that sparks the imagination. Yet life off-screen is vivid and ongoing. Consequently, this research focuses on young Chinese women in real-life contexts, examining their embodied resistance within a power matrix embedded in relations and revealing the subtleties and complexities of their agency.

Accordingly, the following core research questions are proposed: Within these multi-layered and heterogeneous power relations, how do elder sisters practice resistance in everyday experiences? What do those resistances do with power, strategic negotiation, reinterpretation and appropriation, adaptive compromise, or more complex patterns? Do these embodied, everyday resistances effectively cross the boundaries of power, or do they instead expose the limitations of those resistances?

To address this overall question more concretely, the research proposes three sub-questions:

· How do elder sisters respond when they perceive inequality in the family, both emotional and material, or when they are dissatisfied with expectations regarding sibling responsibilities?

·What are elder sisters’ views on employment, marriage, intimate relationships, and childbearing, and how do they address the conflicts between personal aspirations and parental expectations in these areas?

·What are elder sisters’ opinions on the obligations and responsibilities across generations, and how do they balance between personal desires and obstacles within family and social relations?

To address these questions, this research adopts an intersubjective perspective to examine the power relations experienced by 15 young Chinese women who welcomed a younger brother during the one-child policy era. Through in-depth narrative interviews and participant observation, this research focuses on their self-expressions, the contradictions and struggles of their multifaceted emotions, and how they understand themselves, make choices, and engage in embodied resistance within specific life contexts. Furthermore, this research evaluates the characteristics and limitations of these forms of resistance, offering a richer perspective for understanding their subjectivity and agency.

Overall, through an in-depth analysis of Chinese women’s experiences, this research aims to deepen our understanding of the complex, intertwined patterns of power in contemporary Chinese society and how they shape individual life experiences. It also seeks to contribute new insights and reflections to feminist resistance theory and broader theories of power.

II. Literature Review

To understand how elder sisters with younger brothers engage in resistance within complex power relations, this chapter proceeds on three levels. First, it traces the long-standing son preference in China and its reconfiguration. Second, it explores how the roles of daughters and sisters are intertwined and reshaped in the background of family and kinship institutions that have transformed since the 1970s. Third, it focuses on the self-realization narratives of contemporary young Chinese women in different systems and their conflict with the state and the social level.

1. Evolution of Son Preference in China

In ancient China, the state promoted a Confucian patrilineal descent system that tightly linked bloodline, ancestral rituals, and land rights, enabling lineages to exercise regulatory functions at the grassroots level. Only those incorporated into the patriline could obtain a legitimate identity, residency rights, and channels for upward mobility. In the realm of belief, sacrifices by male descendants were regarded as a prerequisite for the survival of ancestral souls; without a son, ancestors would become “hungry ghosts” and bring misfortune upon the living. This structure makes the birth of a son an obligatory duty essential to family survival and personal destiny (Das Gupta, 2010, pp.131–133).

Although such son preference extended into modern Chinese society, the sex ratio at birth had yet to be seriously skewed, considering that many families may have multiple children in the hope of having a son (Ebenstein, 2010). However, the One-Child Policy, formally proposed in 1979 and fully enforced in 1980, fundamentally reversed this situation. During this period, Chinese state governance shifted from “family” to “population”, which means the population was seen as an entity that had to be modernized for China to regain its status (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005, p.321). In official policy discourse, overpopulation was framed as a national crisis, and birth planning was articulated as a basic state policy, which was also imbued with the meaning of collective sacrifice for future generations and the “overall national interest” (Greenhalgh, 2009, p.210).

The harsh enforcement of this policy clashed with many families' desire to have sons. To cope with this predicament, some women concealed their pregnancies and entrusted their newborns to relatives, while others, known as “excess-birth guerrillas”, crossed provincial borders to give birth in hospitals on the outskirts of cities or in remote rural areas (Greenhalgh, 2003, p.206). Ebenstein (2010) also notes that under the one-child policy, the probability of having a second child drops significantly if the first child is a boy; if the first is a girl, families often continue to have children in the hope of having a son. This led to some female fetuses being selectively aborted or abandoned after birth, and the widespread use of ultrasound technology further exacerbated gender-selective abortion (Croll, 2002, p.35). Arguably, the severe imbalance in China's sex ratio at birth stems primarily from the interaction between the one-child policy and ultrasound technology (Chen et al., 2013, p.60).

It has been suggested that son preference might ease with continued urbanization and the joint efforts of the state and civil society (Das Gupta et al., 2003, p.154). However, despite China's rapid industrialization and urbanization after the opening-up and reform, large numbers of rural residents still exhibit a strong son preference. In response, the state tended to frame son preference as a feudal, anti-modern ideology (Greenhalgh, 2003, p.203; Eklund, 2011a, p.4), thereby sidestepping structural issues such as the mode of agricultural production and imbalanced social welfare between urban and rural areas under the household registration system (Fei, 2022).

What's more, after realizing that a highly imbalanced sex ratio and declining total population would lead to a severe problem for state development (Greenhalgh, 2009), the Chinese government, therefore, promoted the slogan "giving birth to a boy and a girl is equally good", encouraging couples to have daughters. Yet the construction of daughters' value centered on traits such as being more docile, sensible, and considerate (Eklund, 2011a, p.5). More parents began to favor daughters, believing that daughters are more filial, more obedient, and better at providing support than sons. This reinforcement of gender stereotypes perpetuated son preference in a more insidious form without substantially raising daughters' status.

Moreover, as the work-unit system gradually dissolved in the 1990s, the son preference became even more obvious than before in modernized urban cities. Parents thought that only sons, as men, would have a better chance of success in society, so that their old age care would be promised (Eklund, 2011b). Similarly, some highly educated urban women who held egalitarian gender views preferred sons, reasoning that women face many disadvantages in society and that, as mothers, they needed to protect their children from the "hardships of female life" (Zhou, 2025, p.375).

Yet another scenario is also emerging. Many Chinese men are subjected to a "marriage squeeze" now because of the severely skewed sex ratio, and the phenomenon of bare branches is especially prominent in rural areas with scarce economic capital (Eklund, 2011a, p.6). Whether in urban or rural settings, the groom's family normally needs to pay a high bride price to get married, and these costs are typically borne by the groom's parents (Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012, p.10). This enormous financial pressure has led many families to prefer daughters instead. However, this shift is not so much a sign of gender equality as a strategic adjustment by families under pressure in the marriage market (Shi, 2017).

In sum, the evolution of offspring sex preference in China has accompanied the transformations of its social institutions, shifting from a straightforward son preference to a complex form today, and the value of daughters has been repeatedly redefined. From birth, elder sisters are situated within this very structure that systematically devalues women while instrumentally reassessing the utility of daughters under certain conditions. It is therefore necessary to focus on their everyday experiences and observe how they concretely perceive and respond to this potentially predetermined value while coexisting with this tension.

2. Daughters, Sisters, and Intertwined Roles in the Family Since the 1970s

For a long time, the family has been regarded as the core site where Chinese patriarchy operates along the twin axes of generation and gender (Santos & Harrell, 2016, p.11). In China's traditional patrilineal pattern, daughters were defined as temporary members in their natal families and often placed in a subordinate position in their natal homes and even excluded from family rituals (Croll, 2002, p.18). Parents tended to minimize their investment in daughters who were seen as a "double loss":

parents had to invest resources in raising them and preparing a dowry, yet could only expect limited returns, and a married daughter ultimately became a member of the husband’s family and fulfilled corresponding domestic obligations (p.122).

Following China’s reform and opening up in the 1970s, the traditional family structure gradually loosened. Extended families gave way to nuclear families, and the patrilineal model of co-residence based on male blood ties steadily declined: women were no longer required to move into the husband’s multi-generational household after marriage. Instead, it became increasingly common for both the bride’s and groom’s families to jointly establish an independent nuclear household for the couple (Yan, 2018). Today, daughters often need only to manage the intergenerational relationship with their parents daily, although the intergenerational influence of grandparents persists.

Although the rigid inheritance and residence rules of China’s long-standing patrilineal kinship system are being eroded by the demands of living and working in an industrialized economy, China has yet to see the emergence of a bilateral kinship system as defined by Das Gupta (2010, p.126), one in which kinship is recognized on both sides, inheritance is possible from either side, and couples may reside with either set of parents or independently. Today, newlyweds in China may live independently, but they often rely on the groom’s family’s financial support to purchase a home, and the custom of bride price further solidifies the husband’s role as the provider within the marriage. This residential pattern, which falls between a traditional patrilineal and a bilateral kinship system, has been termed “neo-patrilocality” by Eklund (2018, p.304).

Moreover, China’s market reforms of the 1990s prevented Chinese families from dissolving amid the post-reform individualization process. Instead, the bonds of intergenerational responsibility and emotional obligation were reinforced. This “new familism” (Yan, 2018, p.184) brought filial piety once again in both official and private discourse. The filial piety in China refers to two dimensions that are tightly intertwined. *xiao* 孝 refers to the duty of supporting one's parents, while *shun* 顺 means obeying parental authority (Hu & Scott, 2016, p.1270). As a result, a married daughter is not only a member of her husband's family but also is expected to fulfill filial duties to her natal parents as expected.

For women in multi-child families, especially those occupying the position of "elder sister", the situation is more complex. Becker & Tomes' (1976) "quantity–quality trade-off" theory posits that under limited family resources, the number of children is negatively correlated with their quality. Under the Chinese patrilineal family system, which continues to sustain the son preference (Murphy et al., 2011; Hu & Shi, 2020), this trade-off shows more gendered inequality. Research has shown that, under this institutional inertia, elder sisters in Chinese family may get less education opportunities, exploited in terms of material and nutritional needs (Wang, 2005; Hannum et al., 2009; Ye et al., 2024; Croll, 2002), use the bride price received as dowry to fund a brother's wedding, or draw on marital resources after marriage to cover a brother's exorbitant bride price or housing costs (Wang & Cui, 2024, p.27).

However, as Croll (2002, p.17) points out, daughters' disadvantaged position within the family does not stem solely from economic rationality. Son preference is based not only on economic factors but is also deeply rooted in cultural assumptions about gender. These two dimensions are sustained by cultural expectations surrounding gender roles and are constantly intertwined in the daily practices of family life. This is particularly evident in the pattern of intergenerational reciprocity. Research indicates that although daughters receive economic and caregiving support comparable to or even greater than that of sons, parents still tend to transfer money and time to their sons, and sons are typically not required to shoulder equivalent responsibilities or make comparable contributions (Hu, 2017, p.740).

On the other hand, the elder son is typically granted relatively greater authority within the sibling hierarchy. In China, under the influence of Confucian hierarchical norms, this order of seniority and respect is particularly pronounced and exhibits significant gender asymmetry (Santos & Harrell, 2016). The "elder brother" is not only expected to assume the responsibility of caring for and protecting his younger siblings but is also endowed with symbolic authority akin to patriarchal power. In contrast, the responsibilities taken by “elder sister” manifest primarily in emotional labor. Lei (2013) indicated that in rural areas, sons generally provide more economic support, while daughters and sons bear nearly identical responsibilities in emotional support and care. In urban areas, daughters provide more material and emotional support to parents than sons do. Although the specific forms of responsibilities vary between urban and rural areas, the gendered role expectation of female offspring centered on emotional labor remains stable.

Together, the above constitute the specific context of the elder sisters’ everyday lives in the family. However, existing research focuses more on the consequences or specific manifestations of this situation; thus, observation and analysis of how they react with those situations are needed.

3. Young Chinese Women in the Post-Socialist Era

To understand young women’s narratives of self-realization and liberation, it is necessary to trace the level of cultural beliefs through which gender is organized into a system of inequality. Ridgeway and Correll (2004, p.511) point out that widespread hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and their continuous operation in social relational contexts are the core mechanisms that sustain and modify the gender system. If gender is a system that organizes inequality based on difference, then the cultural belief system that defines men’s and women’s distinctive characteristics and prescribes their expected behaviors is the axis of that system. Traditional Chinese society arranged the division of labor and personal destinies through an essentialist gender belief system: Confucian culture long upheld ideas of “male superiority and female inferiority” and “men outside, women inside”, and defined women as objects that could be defined and possessed by men, with norms including the “three obediences and four virtues” (Wolf, 1985). Today, gender hierarchies based on biological differences between the sexes remain prevalent, rooted in cultural assumptions and beliefs that men have higher status and authority than women (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004, p.522). Chinese women, for a long time, have been confined to stable, light jobs that emphasize emotional service.

With the economic reforms launched in the late 1970s and the advent of the era of globalization, the dynamics of gender discourse in China have also been profoundly reshaped. The consumer market and mass media rediscovered the commercial value of "femininity," which had long been suppressed during the Mao era, leading to a constant influx of information and products related to fashion, beauty, and lifestyle. Meanwhile, the widespread expansion of education and the implementation of national gender equality policies have significantly narrowed the gender gap in education (Wang & Zhang, 2022). The one-child policy enabled only daughters to receive unprecedented intergenerational support and educational investment, as they did not have to compete with brothers for resources; objectively speaking, they were "empowered" (Fong, 2002, p.1098).

However, such resource concentration on only daughters resulted more from the aggregation effect of having fewer children than from a fundamental shift in gender-based logic within the family (Ye & Wu, 2011). Despite massive educational investment, parents still held gendered and stereotypical expectations of daughters. For example, they often opposed daughters choosing science majors, believing that "girls who research science easily become somewhat masculine and their taste becomes rather dull" (Liu, 2006, p.495). This means that, despite improvements in opportunity structures, deeply rooted essentialist gender beliefs in China continue to be transmitted across generations in subtle ways. Thus, the empowerment of only-child daughters does not represent a subversion of the existing gender order but rather its incorporation (Wang & Zhang, 2022, p.8).

Since the late 20th century, with the deepening of the market economy and the advance of globalization, Sino–Western interactions have become more frequent. The global waves of neoliberalism and consumerism brought the value of self-realization into public discourse, strengthening notions of gender equality, personal freedom, and autonomous choice and profoundly shaping the younger generation's understanding of life planning (Yan, 2010, p.503). Women gradually became aware of their subordinate position and began to advocate for female independence, namely, self-worth and personal autonomy. Lifestyle magazines and official media vied to report on successful women who achieved social mobility through self-determination and wise choices (Andrews & Shen, 2002).

Increasingly, young women no longer identify with the role of the self-sacrificing housewife devoted to the family. Instead, they yearned to pursue career development and discover personal talents in the marketized space of freedom, valuing their own happiness and satisfaction. In the realm of marriage, the previously dominant model of parent-arranged marriage that emphasized "matching the doors and windows", meaning matching social ranks (*mendanghudui* 门当户对) (Zhong & Wilkinson, 2025, p.129), gradually gave way to an ideal of intimate relationships based on personal will and emotional connection.

Yet this narrative of self-realization does not exist in isolation, but it remains in constant tension with official discourse and traditional expectations. When defining the female ideal, the state still emphasizes a balance between the "modern" and the "Chinese" (Johansson, 2001), the core of which urges women to cultivate and display traditionally Chinese feminine qualities. No matter how successful a woman is, she must retain feminine gentleness, fulfill the duties of wife and mother, and maintain an elegant image derived from inner cultivation and shrewd choices (Andrews & Shen, 2002). In 2007, Chinese authorities introduced the derogatory term "leftover women" (*shengnv,* 剩女) to refer to marriageable but unmarried women aged 27 to 35, implying that marriage remained a necessity for Chinese women (Fincher, 2014) and that marital status was not fully determined by women's subjective will.

For the younger generation of Chinese women, the gender ideology of the Mao era is difficult to reconcile with their modern ones, while the imported Western neoliberal feminism is compromised by its entanglement with individualism and consumerism, along with the femininity (Thornham & Feng, 2010, p.209). Women are expected to constantly balance the contradiction between family responsibilities and career demands. Thus, it is necessary to continue examining how the elder sisters construct their subjectivity and engage in resistance with the confrontation of these highly mixed cultural and ideological resources.

In sum, existing research has provided important groundwork across multiple dimensions, which include son preference and kinship transformation, and female subjectivity in contemporary China. Yet it rarely integrates them into a unified analytical framework to investigate how elder sisters resist when these gendered power relations converge in everyday life. This is precisely the central focus of this research. Through a critical review of the relevant literature, this section provides the knowledge for the subsequent analysis of elder sisters' embodied resistance in concrete situations.

III. Theoretical Framework

To examine the resistant practices of the "elder sisters" in this research, this chapter develops an analytical framework in three moves. First, it moves beyond an agonistic model of power by adopting an intersubjective perspective that locates sisters' subjectivity and resistance within their concrete familial and social relations. Second, it engages with theories of resistance, especially everyday resistance, and defines the concept of resistance approached in this research. Third, it draws on relational autonomy theory to provide analytical grounds for assessing the boundaries between resistance and power in elder sisters' everyday lives.

1. Beyond the Agonistic Model of Power, Understand the Unfinished Subject Through Intersubjectivity

Foucault's analysis of power as omnipresent coincides with feminist theory that power operates precisely in those domains that traditional liberalism regards as private or apolitical, such as the family (McLaren, 1997, p.114). Foucault stresses that power is productive and consists of multiple relations rather than a top-down binary force; in this sense, gender is never an abstract structural oppression, but a lived social relation embedded in everyday experience (McNay, 2004). This view helps shift gaze from "elder sisters and younger brothers" in terms of subordination marked by domination and victimhood within power structures, such as patriarchy or the state government, toward a more nuanced understanding of the role power plays in their lives.

The feminist dilemma in Foucault's theory soon becomes apparent, however. Feminist scholarship deeply influenced by Foucault has tended to hold that the subject is constructed by power relations beyond its control, reducing the formation of subjectivity to a highly homogenized process (Heller, 1996, p.78). Foucault's (1978, p.95) famous sentence, "where there is power, there is resistance," seems to affirm agency. Yet it fundamentally dissolves agency's ground: resistance is possible only because power relations already presuppose a free subject, whose very freedom is produced by power. Consequently, an elder sister's discontent with the family resource distribution, or her decision to move to another city to escape the pressure of caring for her younger brother, appears to lose its transformative significance. She remains, regardless, trapped within the power system.

The root of this impasse lies in conceiving power as an omnipresent relational mechanism that reduces the subject to a thoroughly permeated element with no "outside", while power analysis attends only to institutional construction and neglects the perspective of the subject of power (McNay, 1991, p.134). Such a negation of the subject, and the mere investigation of the inner processes that shape women's sense of freedom and choice, are far from sufficient (McLaren, 1997, p.110). Women's "freedom" refers not only to the objective possibility of maneuvering within or resisting power dynamics, but also to whether women genuinely feel empowered in concrete life situations (Deveaux, 1994, p.234).

Poststructuralist analysis, inspired by Foucault focuses on the subject and subjectivity rather than on the self and experience; it treats the subject as an epiphenomenon of particular cultural systems, reduces subjectivity to action or the effect of "performativity" as Butler (2002) puts it, and defines agency as the practice of altering society through the repetition and citation of discourse rather than as originating in the subject. In this optic, the self is portrayed as multiple, fluid, open, and externally constituted rather than a unified entity of inner essence. This new set of binary imaginings tends to displace the investigation of individual lives, multiple intersubjectivities, and affective politics with attention to discourse and representation (Biehl et al., 2007, p.13), thereby reducing agency to a property of language and an abstract structure rather than situated interaction, which leaves it ill-equipped to account for such core features of agency as intentionality and reflexivity (McNay, 2004, p.182).

Considering this, this research approaches an intersubjectivity perspective, arguing that subjects are neither products of unilateral power nor isolated entities detached from society. Rather, subjects are generated through continuous interaction and mutual recognition within specific social and personal relations. Based on this, this research, beyond an agonistic model of power relations, is expanded by viewing power as not the suppression of one party by another nor the trade-off of a zero-sum game. In this sense, subjectivity, as Biehl et al. (2007, p.10) argued, has contingency and openness, and the ongoing trajectories of individuals reveal a certain existential element: the subject is unfinished and unfinishable.

Therefore, to understand the resistance of Chinese elder sisters, it is essential to return to their embodied everyday experiences and interpret them within the context of specific life situations based on relations, as the same time pay attention to the features and patterns of their practices as resistance.

2. Understanding Elder Sisters' Everyday Resistance in the Chinese Context

Resistance is the most classic and direct expression of human agency and the core concept of this research. Traditional political science and sociology place the individual and structure in binary opposition, treating the individual as passive, always subordinate to structure. Later, Giddens (1984) argued in his structuration framework that knowledgeable human agents act by putting their structurally embedded knowledge into practice; subjectivity can thus be understood as resistance, because individuals do not passively and obediently accept dominant social rules and structures. Structure and agency are mutually constitutive, with particular emphasis on how structure is reproduced and transformed by human agency, revealing a constant, delicate balance between resistance and compliance.

Yet, approaches overemphasizing material and biological constitution tend to overlook the deeply entrenched constraints within long-term patterns of social interaction (Srivastava, 2022, p.320). In contrast to traditional resistance theories that focus on insurrection, open confrontation, or violent action as overt political resistance, theories of everyday resistance point out that subordinate groups often respond to power in more covert and fragmented ways. Scott (1985) developed the concept of "weapons of the weak", suggesting that seemingly trivial acts such as foot-dragging, feigned ignorance, delay, and evasion of responsibility can undermine the effectiveness of power (Scott, 1989, p.51). However, Johansson and Vinthagen (2019, p.38) argue that his analysis relies too heavily on a class perspective and tends to define resistance as acts with political intent. Such a definition easily overlooks women's experiences deeply embedded in everyday life, many women's actions emerge from navigating complex family and intimate relationships (Deveaux, 1994, p.234) and cannot simply be classified as "resistance" or "non-resistance".

Compared to Scott, De Certeau (1984) pays greater attention to how ordinary people creatively appropriate the rules of power in daily life. He distinguishes between “strategy” and “tactic”: strategy belongs to those who control institutional resources and spatial power, such as the state, corporations, or institutional organizations; tactics are the ways subordinate actors temporarily and opportunistically re-use rules within an existing order. De Certeau thus moves beyond understanding resistance solely as open political confrontation, emphasizing that ordinary people can tactically reconfigure power resources in everyday practice. This shift opens possibilities for grasping the uncertainty and complexity of women’s social experiences (McNay, 1996), and resistance is redefined as a diverse practical continuum unfolding within interpersonal relationships: it may appear as confrontational refusal of power, or be implicit in strategic compromise, accommodation, reinterpretation, and appropriation.

However, this simplified top-down model of power still tends toward a binary opposition, turning strategy or tactic, compliance or resistance into rigid either/or choices. More importantly, such a notion of resistance can romanticize any deviation from the norm as a “tactic”, treating all different behaviors as resistance. As a result, power paradoxically vanishes from the analysis amid the contradictions of everyday life (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2019, p.43). For example, when an elder sister declines a job opportunity in another city and returns home, this act may involve a rejection of urban competitive logic, yet may also mean a re-inscription of gendered family responsibilities. Without further analyzing the social conditions and reflexive processes shaping her action, defining it as resistance directly makes it difficult to evaluate whether such agency weakens or sustains existing power relations.

This research, therefore, holds that Chinese elder sisters’ everyday resistance can neither be viewed as passive compliance nor romanticized as general resistance. Under China’s familism and gendered intergenerational obligation structure, elder sisters are often tacitly assigned responsibilities for family care and resource yielding, duties that frequently take the form of internalized ethical obligations. To more accurately capture this complex experience, the research requires a theoretical approach that preserves the agency while identifying the boundaries of resistance.

3. Assessing the Boundaries of Elder Sisters' Resistance within a Two-Tier Relational Autonomy

Discussions of relational autonomy are generally divided into substantive autonomy and procedural autonomy. The former examines female subjects based on universal normative standards, arguing that actions taken based on ideas that do not conform to specific norms are non-autonomous. However, this easily leads to theories of autonomy evolving into a form of hegemony that suppresses women's self-identity and expressions of agency (Stoljar, 2024). In contrast, procedural autonomy defines autonomy as the capacity to reflectively examine and endorse one's own desires and motivations; its key feature is content neutrality, meaning that judgments regarding whether a female subject is autonomous do not depend on a predetermined answer (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Even if an elder sister chooses to forgo further education to comply with her father's wishes, this choice can still be considered autonomous if it has undergone her reflective endorsement. This analytical approach avoids making arbitrary judgments about women's experiences through the lens of "false consciousness," and instead seeks to understand the constrained agency of women within complex power sites.

Moreover, contemporary feminist theory further argues that women's identity is not a unified, stable, and fully coherent entity. On the contrary, women's subjective experience is often shaped by the intersecting forces of gender, class, generational position, and family structure, etc. (Crenshaw, 1991). In the Chinese context, elder sisters' experiences are precisely embedded in such an intersectional power system as familism ethics under Confucianism, significant disparities in different regions, unequal resource and responsibilities distribution due to son preference. Hence, understanding autonomy solely from the perspective of individual will, or abstract freedom, is insufficient. Instead, the capacity for autonomy shall be examined by situating it back into concrete social relations.

Accordingly, this research adopts Meyers' (1989) relational autonomy position, reframing autonomy as a capacity acquired through socialization. It thereby overcomes the binary opposition between viewing autonomy as resistance to society and viewing the self as a mere social product, the self that can remain autonomous while being deeply embedded in social networks (McLaren, 1997, p.121).

Specifically, different social environments elicit different individual potentials, so the social environment plays a crucial role in whether individuals can recognize and develop their important capacities. Individuals tend to develop those self-attributes that receive social reinforcement and integrate them into their self-concept; in this way, certain social ideas can obstruct the pursuit of an authentic self. More crucially, modes of socialization may selectively cultivate some of the skills that constitute the capacity for autonomy while neglecting others. In the context of Chinese gendered socialization, younger sisters are often encouraged to develop highly acute interpersonal sensitivity but less encouraged to develop the capacity for self-definition, a capacity more likely to be cultivated in younger brothers.

Furthermore, Meyers (1989) distinguishes between "local autonomy" and "programmatic autonomy": the former refers to the ability to weigh one's own desires and decide how to act in a specific situation; the latter refers to the capacity for critical and reflective decision-making on major life questions, such as whether to become a mother or whether to fully commit to a career. Individuals affected by oppressive socialization may display a considerable degree of local autonomy and even make autonomous decisions in certain spheres of life, yet their programmatic autonomy can be severely obstructed (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000, p.18). For elder sisters long expected to shoulder family care responsibilities, this restriction does not necessarily manifest as explicit coercion, but rather as a lack of conditions to imagine other life possibilities. For instance, on questions such as whether to continue schooling, whether to marry far away, or whether to prioritize supporting a younger brother's development, she may be able to make local choices within a limited range, yet never truly possess the social support and cultural legitimacy to refuse these obligations.

In sum, this research constructs a theoretical framework for analyzing the embodied resistance and power relations in elder sisters’ everyday experiences. Within this framework, the intersubjective stance serves to avoid the agonistic model of power, which, to some extent, makes agency unseen. On this basis, the everyday resistance theory adopted in this research is defined, emphasizing the analysis of elder sisters’ embodied resistance within their concrete life situations and social relations. Finally, it delineates the boundaries of their embodied resistance through the two-tier relational autonomy theory, which prevents power from once again being erased in the analysis through an overly romanticization of elder sisters’ actions as resistance.

IV. Methodology

1. Research Design

This research focuses on the everyday experiences of elder sisters and their resistance to gender norms, experiences that are highly contextual, experiential, and meaning-constructing in nature. Such phenomena are difficult to capture fully through preset variables and standardized questionnaires and are better suited to qualitative research, which can deepen and extend understanding of the causes of social phenomena (Hancock et al., 2001, p.4). Accordingly, this research adopts an interpretivist epistemological stance, aiming to analytically interpret the sisters’ attitudes and explore the implicit meanings underlying their expressions.

More specifically, I employ a multimethod qualitative research design that uses multiple forms of qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of Chinese elder sisters' everyday resistance. The core data consist of semi-structured in-depth interviews, guided by the research questions yet allowing interviewees to narrate freely so that their own frameworks of meaning can emerge, thus capturing unforeseen dimensions and nuances of their experiences and offering space to express complex and ambivalent emotions (Adams, 2015). Participant observation and documentary data consist of the local birth policies in force at the time of the younger brothers' birth, provided as supplementary data. The former one situates individuals' accounts in the context of everyday interactions to reveal possible tensions between words and practice (O'Reilly, 2012, p.14). The latter one serves to provide the macro-level institutional context. This multi-source design facilitates methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p.118).

2. Data Collection and Analysis

The sample selection of this research combined theoretical sampling and purposive sampling principles to ensure that the research questions could be fully addressed. I selected 15 Chinese women aged 21 to 26, each of whom had a younger brother born during the birth policy period. This age group was chosen for two reasons: first, they grew up during a critical period of rapid modernization and value transformation in Chinese society, simultaneously influenced by traditional gender norms and modern egalitarian ideals, so their experiences exhibit a distinct temporal intersectionality; second, interviewees in this age group have developed a certain capacity for reflection, enabling them to look back on and reinterpret their childhood and adolescent family experiences, thus providing richer narrative materials for the research. The emphasis on "younger brothers born during the one-child policy era" as a key screening criterion stems from the fact that multi-child families from this period may more directly reflect the tension between institutional constraints and gendered power dynamics, thereby offering further insights for research on women's experiences within the structure of China's non-one-child families.

In terms of sample access, a snowball sampling strategy was employed. Initial eligible interviewees were contacted through personal networks, and the sample was gradually expanded through their referrals (Parker et al., 2019, p.3). To avoid excessive homogeneity, I intentionally included interviewees from different regions, educational backgrounds, and family economic circumstances during the snowball process. Of the final 15 interviewees, 3 came from remote rural areas, 4 from towns, and 8 from cities, distributed across five provinces: Henan, Yunnan, Sichuan, Shanghai, and Guangdong.

For the data collection part, it included audio recordings and transcriptions of in-person in-depth interviews, video recordings and transcriptions of online interviews, as well as visual materials and field notes from participant observation during two months of fieldwork in China. After obtaining informed consent, I stayed in the homes of 4 interviewees for 5–7 days each and took part in the daily lives of 10 interviewees, observing their work and research, shopping, and family meals. Simultaneously, information on the specific local implementation of the birth policy at the time of the younger brothers' birth was collected through online documents or by contacting local household registration staff.

Regarding data analysis, I adopted reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The analysis began with repeatedly listening to the interview recordings, during which I paid particular attention to the interviewees' tone, pauses, emotional shifts, and the hesitations and contradictions in their narratives. These non-verbal cues are key entry points for understanding their experiences (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010, p.30). For example, when discussing their ideas about intimate relationships and their career and academic plans, the hesitation, wry smiles, or silences evident in their tone were all regarded as important research material.

During the coding phase, I used Obsidian and handwritten notes to annotate and organize analytically significant short phrases, keywords, and narrative fragments. In this process, I not only categorized semantic content inductively but also performed interpretive coding on expressions with latent meanings. For instance, statements such as "I only want a daughter" and "If it's a son, I'll have an abortion" were not only treated as descriptive language but also interpreted as the privatization of the exercise of biopower.

Furthermore, I repeatedly reviewed the materials across different interviewees and contexts to identify commonalities and differences, while also drawing on data from participant observation. For example, some interviewees' descriptions of family relations in the interviews contrasted sharply with their behavioral and emotional responses in everyday interactions, reflecting on this contrast further enriched the interpretation of their modes of resistance, gradually forming many themes that reflect the structure of their experiences. By adhering to the principle of "dwelling with the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.332) and thus deepening my understanding of the material, I moved back and forth between reading, coding, writing, and self-reflection, which gradually led to the induction of the themes shown in findings and discussion.

3. Ethical Considerations and Research Reflections

Before the interviews, I sent an informed consent form to all interviewees in advance via Chinese messaging apps or email. The form outlined the purpose and topic of this research, as well as my basic personal information. After the interviewees had signed the form to indicate their consent, I conducted the interviews. Furthermore, all interviewees are identified by pseudonyms, and personal identifying information has been processed in accordance with relevant ethical requirements and the specific requests of the interviewees. Sensitive data has also been encrypted and backed up to ensure that the interviewees' personal privacy is not compromised. During the writing of the thesis, I communicated with the interviewees promptly to avoid misinterpretation or over-interpretation.

In terms of the relationship between me as a researcher and the interviewees, I maintained an intersubjective perspective, viewing the interaction between them and me as a dialogical process of co-constructing meaning. The interviewees thus shifted from passive information providers to subjects of meaning expression and interpretation, making it possible to grasp the verisimilitude of meaning in their subjective worlds (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). During the interviews, I was driven not only by the need for data but also by a commitment to creating an equal and open conversational atmosphere, enabling the interviewees to share their experiences with being understood and listened to.

As an only daughter, I may have been perceived as an “outsider” when entering the field, yet the shared gender identity could also generate a certain resonance with the interviewees. This dual position could offer both hermeneutic advantages and introduce potential biases. Therefore, during the interviews, I avoided projecting my own experiences onto the interviewees’ accounts; when they expressed emotions or emotional needs, I used empathetic listening and non-judgmental responses to maintain the authenticity and openness of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p.164). Furthermore, the researcher’s relative advantage in educational background and academic status might influence the interviewees’ expression (Sultana, 2007, p.381). Hence, in the design and implementation of the interviews, I used everyday language, avoided academic jargon, and built trust through ongoing interactive feedback to mitigate the impact of power asymmetry.

Overall, this research adheres to the principles advocated by Creswell and Poth (2018, p.266), emphasizing rigorous data collection, clear theoretical guidance, ethical awareness, and reflexivity. Through interdisciplinary qualitative research, it provides a nuanced and in-depth analytical pathway for understanding the embodied and agentic resistance of Chinese elder sisters within their everyday experiences.

V. Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the specific findings of this research based on the empirical data. It is divided into four main sections that provide a detailed account of the older sister’s daily life experiences, how she resists the constraints imposed by various forms of power, and the characteristics of these acts of resistance.

1. Performing the “Good” Daughter: “I want to buy time for myself.”

In my conversations with many interviewees, they generally expressed a low desire for romantic relationships. Many single interviewees told me they thoroughly enjoyed their current situation. When I asked about their views on marriage, almost everyone mentioned the same phrase: “Marriage is the grave of love,” a statement also very common in Chinese public discourse.

For a long time, marriage in China has not only been a bond of affection between couples, but also an institution with important social and familial functions, closely linked to the reproductive system. However, China's current gender division of labor and overall level of social development do not encourage marriages based solely on emotional attachment (Fei, 2022, p.108). This also explains why many interviewees highly valued their independence in the marriages they might eventually have to enter. As Xing Xing stated,

> I don't think marriage is necessary. Even if I get married in the future, it must be based on true love." After marriage, I will not depend on my husband because economic independence is crucial for women; we must have our own careers (interview, January 20, 2026).

Despite having more autonomous ideas about marriage and personal development, many interviewees continued to experience specific expectations from their parents regarding their employment, as well as intergenerational pressure to get married. Mijiang, a master’s student at a well-known law school in southwest China, is an example. Ever since her undergraduate years, her father had kept urging her to find a boyfriend and planned to arrange a matchmaking marriage for her immediately after graduation. In our interviews, Mijiang expressed a strong aversion to this. However, when I accompanied her on a visit back home, I witnessed a completely different scene: as her father once again pressed her to *kaogong* 考公 (hereinafter *kaogong*) and to go on arranged dates. While in the car, Mijiang replied in a calm tone, smiling, saying she was already looking at job vacancies and would try to get to know a suitable man if she met one.

In this context, the word *Kaogong* primarily refers to taking the civil service examination to enter China's *bianzhi* 编制 (hereinafter *bianzhi*), normally translated as establishment system. *Bianzhi* denotes staffing quotas formally approved by the state; entering it means becoming an official employee of the state or the public sector, covering government organs, schools, hospitals, research institutions, and other public institutions, whose wages, welfare, and social security are largely funded by state revenue or public resources, offering a high degree of stability (Brødsgaard, 2002, p.363).

Over the following days, she got along harmoniously with her father, and the family atmosphere was warm and pleasant, a stark contrast to the fierce complaints she had voiced in the interview. Regarding this difference, Mijiang explained to me,

> My father is an extremely patriarchal man. When he loses his temper, it's terrifying, and he hits people. You're an outsider, so he treats you very gently. Normally, he's not like that at all. So, I pretend to obey him, and that way I can drag things out as long as possible. At least I can still have the energy to look for other jobs. As long as I'm not in my hometown, even if I don't marry later, his arm won't reach that far (interview, 17 February 2026).

Mijiang's case clearly illustrates how, as this research calls it, "performative obedience" as a resistance tactic works. When facing patriarchal pressure that may be accompanied by verbal or potential violence, it serves as a protective disguise that provides more opportunities for her autonomy. This tactic is also used to cope with the pressure around sexual orientation, which is tightly bound to marital norms. Some interviewees did not identify themselves as heterosexual. While in China, the marriage system is built upon heteronormativity, same-sex marriage is not legally recognized, and parents and grandparents display much less acceptance of homosexuality than the younger generation (Ng et al., 2023, p.2).

Beibei, who identifies herself as bisexual, prefers to be in the dominant position in heterosexual relationships, a pattern she calls “fourth love”[3]. Realizing how difficult it is to find a male partner who fits this expectation, Beibei is more inclined to form intimate relationships with women. Smiling bitterly, she said,

> My mother has already sensed that my sexual orientation might be a bit off (*buduijin,* 不对劲). She’s noticed that I continually refuse to date and am still single. If she knew the truth, she’d be even less willing to help me buy an apartment (interview, 2 January 2026).

During participant observation at Beibei’s home, whenever her parents asked whether she had recently met any new boys or when she would start dating, Beibei would try her best to brush it aside with a smile, saying she was already working on it and they shouldn’t worry, thus avoiding open quarrels. When I later asked her in the interview why she reacted this way, she laughed,

> I’m deliberately putting them off their guard. I’ll never tell them my real sexual orientation anyway, and it’s impossible that I would get married just for an apartment! One day, when they’ve given up trying to persuade me, they’ll just have to accept that I’m not getting married (interview, 2 January 2026).

Bebe’s behavior also exemplifies the tactic, “performative obedience”, to give parents a false sense of control, thereby avoiding the emotional strain of intergenerational conflict. It also saves her time and energy in pursuing non-normative intimate relationships, and her own life path until her parents eventually give up on disciplining or pressuring her out of sheer exhaustion.

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[3] Beibei explained this is a Chinese internet neologism referring to a romantic relationship in which the woman assumes a dominant role and the man a relatively passive one.

In sum, when confronted with the intergenerational parental power over intimacy relationships and personal development, the interviewees exhibit something akin to a divided self (Kleinman et al., 2011). Their private selves are marked by reflection, dissatisfaction, and resentment toward their circumstances, whereas the selves they perform within family relationships are those of “good” daughters who listen to parents’ advice. In this sense, such “performative obedience” functions as a tactic of resistance through which they negotiate greater time and opportunities to reshape their situations.

2. Leaving for Distant Places: “I want to live for myself for once.”

Many interviewees pointed out that leaving their hometown was not only for education or employment but also to escape parental control and the cultural environment of their native place. Bobo, who stayed in Guangzhou after graduation to prepare her doctoral applications, explained with a laugh why she did not return home,

> Because here I feel I can take charge of my own life, be myself, and not have to think about how to deal with my relationship with my parents and younger brother … Moreover, living here makes me feel accepted, unlike back home, where many people are quite conservative (Interview, 13 January 2026).

Like Bobo, some interviewees mentioned that when they returned home during the Spring Festival, they were constantly interrogated by parents and relatives about work, marriage, and life plans, and endured all sorts of pressure. For this reason, they often wished the holidays would end quickly so they could return to the cities where they studied or worked and regain their freedom. The main motivation for many interviewees to leave their hometown was precisely to escape parental control and the conservative culture of their hometown. But for Yueyue, the decision to leave was intertwined with more complex power relations.

The family in China is not only the sphere of private life but also a key institutional unit through which the state exercises population governance and regulates marital behavior (Palmer, 1995, p.113). The one-child policy was implemented differently across provinces according to distinctions between urban and rural areas (Croll, 2002, p.22), also parents' employment status and identity. Although it became somewhat more lenient after 2000 compared with the 1980s, it remained basically stable for a considerable period (Tian, 2024, p.144). Some interviewees living in the cities mentioned that their parents were not in the state-staffed system, and the younger brother could be registered lawfully under the household registration after paying a fine.

For parents who work within the state-staffed system, however, violating the one-child policy often results in more severe sanctions and career consequences. Haohao, whose parents were both civil servants, is a case in point. When she was four years old, her mother became pregnant with her younger brother and hid in a remote village to evade inspection. In the end, a neighbor's report caused her mother to lose her civil servant job and be fined 50,000 yuan, which was equivalent to her parents' total annual income at the time, and the family had to borrow money everywhere to avoid further punishment. After birth, her younger brother was eventually registered under the family's own household.

Unlike Haohao, Yueyue's parents were not only civil servants in Party and government organs but also Chinese Communist Party members. In policy implementation, Party members were usually required to strictly observe the regulations and play an exemplary role; violations often met with more severe punishment (Jing et al., 2016, p.47). As Party members, Yueyue's parents knew full well the consequences of an extra-quota birth. Yueyue recalled,

> To avoid being caught, my mother went to a remote rural area to give birth to my younger brother. After he was born, he was sent to be fostered by another family, and his household registration was placed under someone else’s name. Sometimes when my mom ran into him on the street, she had to pretend not to recognize him, saying, “Oh, what a cute little boy!” Even now, my parents can’t openly acknowledge that he is their child, for fear of being reported by people in their work unit (interview, 6 January 2026).

In Yueyue’ parents’ view, the repeated extreme behavior her brother has displayed in recent years, such as wrist-cutting, skipping school, and threatening suicide, is closely related to his upbringing and is a kind of mental illness. But Yueyue disagreed with this interpretation: “My younger brother is trying to recapture the attention and love he missed before, and he wants to confirm whether he matters at all” (interview, 6 January 2026). Explaining why she moved to Shanghai, she said,

> I’m not obliged to take responsibility for his such bad emotions, and I have my own life to live. I gave up a decent job in a public hospital back home to come to a bank in Shanghai precisely because I didn’t want to face these problems every day… I’ve muted the family group chat, and every time he sends messages making a scene, I just delete them all (interview, 19 January 2026).

For Yueyue, leaving her hometown and reducing communications that made her uncomfortable was, more than anything, a silent resistance against the pressure brought by family relations profoundly affected by macro-level population policy.

Overall, the interviewees used geographical spatial displacement as resistance to the gendered expectations of emotional responsibility and moral obligations embedded in family relations. They refuse to accept the “sisterhood” and “motherhood” but instead pay greater attention to their own development and the realization of a life they can control.

3. Adapting to the Intersection of Dual Fears: “First, survive.”

Although the tactics above display a certain degree of initiative, when facing particularly harsh intergenerational pressure, sometimes accompanied by the threat of physical violence, or existential fears aroused by economic instability and anxiety about the future, many sisters’ responses often took the form of adaptive compromise. Such compromise does not signify absolute submission, but rather a survival calculation under fear: expedient measures taken to preserve oneself and avoid larger risks, within which a striving to find and create opportunities for escape persists.

Caicai’s experience exemplifies fear-driven compromise under violent intergenerational pressure. When I first met her in January, her backpack was stuffed with Japanese-language research materials. She told me she longed for Japan, hoped to work and live there in the future, and had been preparing for the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test. Yet when I interviewed her again after the Spring Festival this year, she said she had suspended her studies,

> My father is a nationalist. When he found out I wanted to go to Japan, he flew into a rage, threatened to disown me, and said he’d break my legs if I went…It is so terrifying. Besides, he keeps pressuring me to come back and *kaogong*. Once I compromise, I’ll certainly be forced into marriage and childbearing next (interview, 18 February 2026).

Like Caicai, some interviewees do not endorse mainstream marital norms in China, yet their own aspirations regarding life and career are often strongly constrained by patriarchal intergenerational power within the family. But their compromises are often adaptive, functioning as temporary means of averting immediate survival risks. As another interviewee, Mijiang, said: “I have to survive first. Only then can I have a chance to find an escape route" (interview, 27 January 2026). Here, compromise becomes a tactic for preserving the most basic security, "surviving", under the threat of violence, with its aim still being to "escape" one day. Even as they temporarily submitted to discipline, their inner longings have not been extinguished.

Beyond direct violence, an existential fear of economic insecurity also profoundly shaped their practices of compromise. Wanqiu is currently studying for a master's degree in history at a top university in northeast China. She was born into a rural family in a remote mountainous village, and her parents are migrant workers who have worked at a timber processing factory in the south since her birth, returning home only once a year. Originally, she planned to pursue a doctorate abroad through a state-sponsored program at her university, but she eventually gave up the plan. When I asked the reason, her tone was unusually calm, and spoke quickly,

> I don't want to do a PhD anymore, because I don't know whether my parents will still have jobs next year. Lots of carpenters in our village have returned home because the factories suffering from the real estate bubble have shut down. Every time I think my family could face the same situation, I get really scared. So, after I graduate, I want to work as soon as possible (interview, 12 January 2026).

Lirui's experience encapsulates the intersection of these two fears. Her father constantly compared her with high-achieving, high-income relatives, and frequently physically abused her and her brother when she was growing up. Such high expectations for academic performance and the incessant comparisons caused her huge mental stress. Her mother invested a lot in private physics tutoring, but her grades barely improved, leaving her deeply guilty and feeling like a failure. After she failed the postgraduate entrance exam, her parents refused to give her money to prepare for it again, because their attention and money were focused on her younger brother's college entrance exam. Yet her grandparents gave her nearly half their retirement savings to support her. But she failed again. Recalling this period, Lirui said in a downcast voice: “At that time I felt my life was utterly meaningless. I felt I had let my grandparents down, and several times I wanted to end my life” (interview, 7 January 2026).

Over recent decades, Chinese society has formed an evaluation system that places a high premium on educational achievement, and entering an elite university and obtaining higher degrees are widely seen as the key path to upward mobility (Bregnbæk, 2016). Especially against the backdrop of economic contraction and diminishing employment opportunities in recent years, educational competition has become even fiercer.

Out of fear of her father’s violence, Lirui followed the arrangement: after failing the postgraduate exam, she returned to her hometown and took a job as a bank teller at a state-owned bank. Although the job was stable and the salary was not low, it left her physically and emotionally exhausted,

> The bank said I am a new employee, so from two weeks before the Spring Festival, I must work unpaid overtime every day until the Spring Festival is completely over. I used to handle about 30 transactions a day; now it is suddenly over 100. The other teller who worked with me retired, and the bank doesn’t hire anyone new to cut costs. If I report this to the labor bureau, I’d certainly be fired. (Sighs) How can one person who is nothing like me possibly change this power system? (interview, 12 February 2026).

When I asked why she didn’t quietly resign and leave home, Lirui gave a resigned smile, looked out the window, and said,

> A state-owned enterprise like this won’t let you resign so easily. The moment you hand in your resignation letter, they will immediately contact your family to pressure you. Just for entertaining the idea of resigning, my father has beaten me,

> I don't know how many times. If I resign, I may be beaten to death before I even walk out the door. (Interview, 2 February 2026)

Lirui's situation reveals how the fear of unemployment and the fear of domestic violence intertwine, weaving a net of power from which it is difficult to escape. However, shortly after I left China following the conclusion of my fieldwork, she excitedly told me one day that she had been admitted to a graduate program at a University in Beijing. I later learned from her that, despite her extremely heavy workload, she had been secretly preparing for the graduate entrance exams. With a sense of relief, she told me, "At least there I'll be free, even if life is harder. Here, I can only be at my father's mercy, living a life more painful than death" (interview, March 27, 2026). It can be said that Li Rui's compromise with the power exerted by her father within the family and by the state apparatus in the workplace is an adaptive one. However, this adaptive compromise is temporary and unfolds as a form of resistance that trades time for space.

Overall, interviewees often experience a dual fear permeating both family relationships and the social system. The compromises they make stem from different forms of existential demands: first, the desire to "stay alive" under the threat of physical violence; second, the desire to "be able to survive" under the pressure of economic uncertainty. Such compromises do not constitute absolute submission to power; on the contrary, as adaptive strategies, they provide individuals with the possibility of avoiding greater risks and seeking more opportunities.

4. Upholding Reproductive Autonomy: "I prefer a daughter" and "My daughter must never be an elder sister."

Regardless of their attitudes towards marriage, the interviewees who believed they would eventually enter marriage showed a remarkably consistent stance when discussing childbearing. This stance can be broadly summarized at two levels: a preference for daughters in terms of offspring sex, and an insistence on the intergenerational relationship that “my daughter must never be an elder sister.” The preference for daughters over sons stems mainly from their own life experience as elder sisters and daughters and is also closely related to their direct encounters with gender bias in the social sphere. Many interviewees, because of their parents’ absence when their younger brothers were small, were forced to assume responsibility for caring for the brothers. Like Wanqiu said,

> When my brother was still an infant, I changed his nappies and had to soothe him to sleep at night. When he got a bit older, I had to put up with his rebelliousness and help him with his studies. But these are things my parents ought to have done! His existence made me feel I had already been a mother once; I know what that feels like, so I don’t want to go through it again (interview, 11 January 2026).

As daughters, they also witnessed the hardships their mothers went through giving birth to their younger brothers. Zuhua remarked with deep feeling,

> During mom’s postpartum recovery, she looked as though she had aged ten years overnight. I think if my younger brother hadn’t been born, she wouldn’t have had to suffer all that (interview, 21 January 2026).

In addition to facing inequality within their own families, the interviewees also encountered gender discrimination in the broader social environment, and this perception of women’s circumstances further shaped their childbearing preferences. While searching for a teaching position, Zuhua expressed strong dissatisfaction with the gender-biased hiring practices she encountered,

> I want to be a teacher. For one position I applied for, there was one quota for men and one for women. I had to compete with hundreds of others, and the

> cut-off score was higher, but only a few men applied, and the cut-off score for them was lower. And just because they're male, they get promoted faster (interview, 21 January 2026).

As Siwei, who also experienced gender discrimination during job hunting, said: "Women have already suffered so much injustice, so surely they should be given some more preferential treatment in childbirth" (interview, 27 January 2026). In this context, daughter preference is not simply an emotional attachment to girls but is also shaped by the interviewees' critical awareness of the structural advantages continuously enjoyed by males in wider social relations.

At the level of intergenerational relations, the interviewees' insistence on "my daughter must never be an elder sister" stems directly from the gender inequality they experienced as elder sisters within their families. The skewed allocation of family economic resources toward the sister was rarely a neutral process; those resources were often reserved for a younger brother not yet born but already anticipated. Even if the traditional patrilineal system has weakened somewhat, the logic of expectation, based not on biological difference but on a gendered division of labor and family roles, which Croll (2002, p.17) named "gender reasoning", has not disappeared. Instead, it is naturalized in specific contexts. This gender reasoning also explains why Beibei's parents, though financially well-off, were never stingy with her pocket money and were affectionate towards her, still refused to help her buy an apartment and expected her to be motivated (*shangjin*,上进) by marrying after she started working. This is not merely a matter of the degree to which parents prefer the younger brother or undervalue the daughter; it reflects a gender reasoning that, albeit changing, still defaults to the assumption that a woman will eventually marry out (Fincher, 2014).

Moreover, with market-oriented economic reforms in China, higher education has gradually expanded, while social competition has also intensified. An increasing number of multi-child families have begun to expect educational and career achievement from their daughters, with fewer concentrating resources exclusively on sons (Liu, 2016, p.156). The findings further support these observations, while also revealing a more conditional dimension of son preference. In some families, when interviewees' younger brother is deemed to have no future due to the bad school performance, the preferential treatment he previously received in various areas, compared to her, may be scaled back or even withdrawn, and resources and attention will shift to her as the more hopeful elder sister.

As Tian Tian put it, her parents' attitude toward her younger brother was: "They think his grades are terrible and he has no future anyway, so they basically don't *guan* 管(hereinafter *guan*) him anymore" (interview, 23 January 2026). The word "*guan"* in the Chinese context includes not only supervision and discipline but also love and care (Bregnbæk, 2016, p.6). Even though she receives more "care" from her parents than her younger brother, the underlying gender reasoning has not disappeared. Because only when the son, who is viewed as the priority, fails to meet his parents' expectations do those expectations shift toward the daughter. During this transition, traditional intergenerational authority remains in effect, while gender reasoning continues to operate in more subtle forms.

It is precisely in this context that the notion that "my daughter must never be an elder sister", a vision of future childbearing, constitutes a form of embodied resistance. Under no circumstances, however, would they allow their daughters to assume the role of older sister, as they themselves had done. As Yueyue said on this point: "Trust me, true fairness in a family can never be realized. No matter how hard you try, you can never level a bowl of water completely" (interview, 10 January 2026). Among interviewees who held similar views, gender inequality was seen not as accidental but as a seemingly unavoidable fact within the family. To prevent such inequality from recurring, they tended to avoid placing a daughter in the position of elder sister through carefully arranging the birth order of children.

Sometimes, this preference for daughters and specific birth order design can intertwine in more radical ways. For example, Yuanyuan said of her reproductive plan,

> To me, marriage is more like a mutual arrangement of needs. He needs to meet his parents' expectations, and I need him to give me a daughter, so that I can imagine raising myself anew. If the first child is not a girl but a son, I will abort. If it is a girl, I will not have a second child. And no matter what, I will not divorce, even if he has an affair (interview, 10 January 2026).

Yuanyuan's expression should not be simply reduced to an individual psychological issue. In Chinese family culture, the integrity of a marriage is often endowed with strong moral legitimacy and social visibility (Hao, 2022, p.83). Her insistence on not divorcing is a way of relying on this socially recognized order and identity to preserve an intact form, while within that form, through absolute control over the sex and number of offspring, she carries out a highly individualized resistance, as she said to me, "re-raising herself".

Taken together, this research has shown from multiple angles how these elder sisters, in their everyday lives, resist intergenerational authority and the gender norms present in the social and personal relations. Among their practices, the combination of "performative obedience" with the maintenance of physical distance has formed a set of everyday tactics that temporize and spatially flee. Such tactics depend on time and must ceaselessly manipulate events, converting them into possibilities (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2019, p.136). Meanwhile, the body becomes a key space for claiming autonomy by controlling the sex composition and birth order of offspring when they cannot avoid entering the institution of marriage—an embodied resistance unfolded against the gendered social norm that women must eventually marry.

VI. Discussion

The research findings presented above have offered a picture of the resistance among the elder sisters and provided a preliminary analysis. On this basis, this chapter further discusses the limitations these forms of resistance exhibit, and, by probing the relationship among power, resistance, and autonomy, seeks to offer some new theoretical perspectives for understanding resistance.

1. Re-examining the Concept of "Everyday Practices" of Resistance in the Temporal Dimension

Many findings of this research do not revolve solely around the elder sisters' present actions but run through their understanding of past experiences and their imagination of various facets of future life. Former research on everyday resistance practice has tended to emphasize the concrete actions subjects take in response to the present, centering on a particular behavior and the objective changes it produces (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2019, p.45). However, this understanding makes it difficult to discern the possibilities and limits of resistance from a more holistic temporal dimension. In contemporary Chinese society, the divided self suggests that the self can be divided by some "dividers", such as past versus present (Kleinman et.al., 2011, p.5). Therefore, this research argues that elder sisters' intention, consciousness, ideology, and recognition need to be grasped as a form of practice. Their feelings about childhood or youthhood experiences did not remain confined to the past, but rather continued to influence how they anticipated and responded to future situations, which might encounter complex power dynamics.

Many interviewees were often placed in an ambiguous role between "subordinate" and "manager" in the family when they were growing up. They are expected to be a good daughter, and at the same time, they are expected to be responsible for, or *guan* their younger brothers. When their younger brothers have problems with academic performance or behavior, parents often do not regard these as individual issues but attribute the cause to the elder sister's absence or fault. As Wanqiu recalled,

> When my mother realized my brother's grades were terrible and his chances of entering university were slim, she said that if it hadn't been for fear of me being lonely, she wouldn't have given birth to him at all. Then she asked me accusingly why I hadn't intervened when the early signs of his problems appeared (interview, 21 January 2026).

A similar transference of blame also appeared in the brother's personal romantic relationships sometimes. Yuanyuan's parents blamed her for not telling them that her brother's girlfriend is short and not a local Shanghainese, and her mother kept scolding her for being selfish, thinking she doesn't care about her younger brother at all. "But this is not my business at all." (Interview, 10 January 2026) Yuanyuan refuted like this. These responsibility expectations display a clear gender asymmetry, for no interviewee mentioned that any brother or father has ever been subject to such demands.

Although many interviewees possessed relatively strong reflexive awareness and could clearly differentiate their own obligations from their parents' responsibilities, such reflexive awareness did not always prevent self-blaming. Tiantian is one example; she mentioned that her younger brother performed poorly in middle school, making her constantly worried about him. Once when he went missing after school, she posted a missing-person notice online and mobilized local villagers to help search. Yet after this incident, her brother refused to continue attending school and repeatedly mentioned leaving home to work, and the parents likewise blamed her for not having *guan* her brother properly. Tiantian said to me in a slightly trembling voice,

> Perhaps my brother turned out this way, all because of me. The schoolteachers thought that the incident damaged the school's reputation and criticized him, which made him feel humiliated. If I hadn't intervened so much back then, maybe he wouldn't have become like this (interview, 23 January 2026).

This belief that, as an elder sister, one should shoulder certain responsibilities illustrates, to some extent, how asymmetrical gender expectations persist as a moral burden and shape the interviewees' perceptions of their own identities. Furthermore, differing interpretations of past experiences profoundly influence the interviewees' expectations regarding future family obligations, particularly when it comes to caring for aging parents. Among sisters who share similar experiences of being required to fulfill caregiving responsibilities based on their gender, those who express strong dissatisfaction typically reject, with firmness and directness, the notion that daughters are more considerate and responsible than sons when it comes to filial piety. As Mi Jiang put it:

> Praising daughters as more filial and considerate doesn't work anymore. They've spoiled their sons, why should I sacrifice myself? When they grow old, they should rely more on their beloved sons (*baobeierzi* 宝贝儿子) to care for them (interview, February 1, 2026).

Furthermore, they explicitly link the distribution of family assets and resources to the costs and responsibilities they bear, including financial support and emotional care. If their younger brothers receive more of the inheritance or financial support in various aspects of life, the interviewees refuse not only to shoulder disproportionate financial burdens but also to provide more emotional labor than their younger brothers. In their eyes, parental gender inequality in the allocation of material resources already implied an emotional bias towards male offspring. Hence, in matters of elder care, emotional responsibility should properly be borne more by the son, who has obtained more emotional resources. For instance, when mentioning that her parents tried to assign a greater share of caregiving duties to her, Yuanyuan retorted,

> He got everything. Isn’t it his duty to look after the parents and give them money? Also, old people are like children, so taking care of them is very exhausting. If he won’t take responsibility, I’ll fall out with (*fanlian*, 翻脸) him (interview, 10 January 2026).

Such resistance to existing gendered responsibility expectations regarding elder care needs to be understood against a broader social background. During the 1990s, the restructuring of China’s economy markedly reduced state investment in public welfare while widening the gaps between regions and between urban and rural areas in terms of development level and social security systems (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003, p.212). As a result, the responsibility for elder care was systematically shifted to the family, thereby generating persistent intergenerational and gender tensions.

In this research, I found that even among interviewees from economically more developed areas with relatively comprehensive social security, or from wealthier families, such gendered and intergenerational tensions over elder care still existed. More importantly, when emotional bonds between kin are gradually transformed into quantifiably calculable obligations and a field of resistance, this resistance in fact reflects the penetration of neoliberal instrumental rationality into kinship relations. How much change it can bring to the actual gendered distribution of care responsibilities, thus, still needs to be discussed with caution.

In sum, the discussion above indicates that, when seeking to understand resistance in women’s everyday resistance, it is necessary to incorporate consciousness, ideas, and ideology as assertions into the conceptual content of “practice”. Only in this way can their present resistance be more fully understood from a temporal dimension, and the complexity of their resistant practices be observed.

2. Emotion as a Necessary Condition of Autonomy: Resistance Fluctuations in the Spatial Dimension

In addition to the temporal dimension, the elder sisters' resistance also manifested marked fluctuations across different spatial dimensions. For example, Mijiang adamantly opposed any form of arranged dating by her father while away from her hometown, yet after returning home during the Spring Festival, she started wavering, saying she might attend arranged dates and perhaps have a child. However, when she returned to the city where she studied, she once again reverted to her previously resolute stance. Unlike Mijiang and a few other interviewees who gradually shifted from oppositional attitude to adaptive compromise after returning home, there were also some interviewees who, after moving away from their families, gradually altered the oppositional attitude they had previously shown at home.

On this point, this research contends that such dynamic changes in resistance are closely related to the degree to which local or situational autonomy is affected by changing emotional conditions in different fields of power. Some interviewees who have long endured verbal humiliation and emotional pressure within the family suffered systematic erosion of their sense of self-worth and self-trust, which are part of the necessary emotional conditions for autonomy (Benson, 1994). As Mijiang told me with a very dejected tone,

> Every time my father gets together with his friends, they all boast that their daughters have married and had children. Then my father scolds me for making him lose face. This makes me feel I am very useless" (interview, 17 February 2026).

But once leave home and goes back to the city where she studies, she returns to a vivid life attitude and restores self-esteem and self-regard.

Conversely, when individuals enter new fields of power in which emotional insecurity and diminished self-worth become even more pronounced, the forms of resistance they enact within familial relations may also be reshaped. For instance, after leaving home, Zhou Liang gradually experienced forms of emotional insecurity and precarity associated with intense social competition and isolation, which weakened her sense of autonomy to a greater extent than familial conflict had previously done. As a result, her earlier oppositional resistance toward her parents gradually shifted into a more adaptive form of resistance.

Apart from those spatial changes within China, it can be more broadly discussed that China itself as a space also influences elder sisters' emotions in certain aspects. A particularly noteworthy finding is the "spatial sexual fluidity" exhibited by some interviewees. The cases of Mijiang and Lirui are especially illuminating. Both initially clearly identified themselves as homosexual and, when faced with their fathers' urging marriage, displayed a resolute attitude of "I'd rather die." Yet after several conversations, Lirui confided,

> In senior high school, I often fantasized about falling in love with a man. But the men around me made me feel that very few of them are loyal or truly respectful of women. The kind of man who is family-oriented, loyal, considerate, and financially capable seems to exist only in Korean dramas (interview, 26 February 2026).

This narrative vividly confirms the "sexual fluidity" proposed by Diamond (2008). At the same time, this research further found that this fluidity is not merely an intra-individual change, but also a response to a particular social space and its embedded power relations. In a Chinese social space where women's empowerment is suppressed and heteronormativity is strongly integrated (Ng et al., 2023), deep disappointment with and critique of the former may further lead to deviation from the latter’s norms. In this sense, the interviewees’ sexual orientation is a form of evasive resistance against the patriarchal patterns that pervade real-life heterosexual relationships, which have disappointed or disillusioned them.

Overall, discussing relational autonomy solely from a rationalist perspective, if subjects possess varying degrees of autonomy based on some form of self-reflection (Meyers, 1989), is insufficient. This is because emotion, as a necessary condition, profoundly influences the interviewee's dual autonomy: local or situational and programmatic autonomy. Here, spatial change is a crucial mediator affecting emotions as a condition of relational autonomy. When the power center of an individual's space causes greater damage to their emotional conditions, their local autonomy is suppressed, further impacting the exercise of their programmatic autonomy.

3. Reflecting on the Body as the Space of Negotiated Resistance

In China, reproduction as a system has long been intimately bound to the institution of marriage (Fei, 2022). This tie manifests in the normative expectations embedded in social customs. Non-marital childbearing is usually stigmatized, while childlessness within marriage is often regarded as deviating from the ideal of “good wife and wise mother” (Gu, 2021, p.66). Against this background, interviewees used the body as a space of resistance and, through highly local autonomy, mounted negotiated resistance against existing power on matters of reproduction in China. Compared with the gender reasoning outlined by Croll (2002), gender reasoning in contemporary China nowadays has developed more subtle and flexible mechanisms. This research finds that the parental generation mostly perpetuates existing gender norms in everyday life in the name of “love” and “care”, and when the elder sisters become mothers in the future, they may practice resistance in and through the reconfiguration of gender reasoning in other ways. Considering that the daughter preference shown by many interviewees is still built on gendered assumptions. As

Tiantian stated:

> When my brother was small, he made me feel that boys are naughty, troublesome … By comparison, girls are cuter, they know how to love their parents, they are more sensible and considerate (interview, 23 January 2026).

On the other hand, many interviewees saw themselves as potential victims overlooked during the one-child policy era, and that the birth of a younger brother utterly changed the trajectory of their lives. They think that the coercive abortions, female infanticide, and the "missing girls" phenomenon caused by unreported births during the one-child policy era (Johansson & Nygren, 1991, p.43) exposed the state's systematic discrimination against and harm of women: men enjoyed more privileges, while women could even be deprived of life itself. Some interviewees further believed that "men have inherent deficits" and therefore did not wish their offspring to be male. Through the biopolitical governance form of the one-child policy (Greenhalgh, 2009), China extended the power of population-quality management onto every female body. The grand narrative of "state-family" thereby politicized the female reproductive body, transforming reproduction from a private choice into a public affair and incorporating it into the state's biopolitical operation.

More importantly, this policy revealed how governmentality treats the population as a statistical object and induces female subjects to govern themselves through birth control. As a sovereign power that "makes die", the policy operated in its early phase by coercive abortion imposed on women; later, it gradually shifted to "letting die" or "not letting live", turning a blind eye to the abandonment and drowning of baby girls and to sex-selective abortion. In China, therefore, "gender" replaced what Foucault described as "race", becoming the key dimension of biopolitics (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005, pp.323–324).

If biopower in modern society is embodied in the state-orchestrated "to make live and to let die" (Foucault, 2003), then in this research, biopower is further manifested at the subject’s own, micro-embodied level, along the dimension of sex, what this research calls “to make her live and let him die”. The “my daughter must never be an elder sister” implies they will avoid another pregnancy through medical means, or, after an unintended pregnancy, they will choose abortion to preclude the possibility of a male offspring being born after the daughter. And the statement, “If it’s a boy, I’ll abort”, reflects that the offspring must be a daughter and an only child. Some interviewees further believe that “men have inherent deficits” and therefore refuse to give birth to a male child. This research argues that such resistance is based on an intersubjectively shaped perception within shared social relations and is closely bound up with a particular historical situation. However, this embodied resistance centered on misandry is fundamentally no different from misogyny: both are merely different facets of the operation of gendered power.

In short, the body as a key space of resistance for elder sisters seems to be the only sphere in which they can fully assert their personal will and maintain their autonomy when they cannot radically challenge institutional power. But this also points to a deeper problem: when embodied resistance is logically isomorphic with the power structure that inflicts the suffering, the endpoint of resistance may simultaneously be the starting point of a new round of power operations.

VII. Conclusion

This research does not treat young Chinese women who are “elder sisters with a younger brother” as passive objects of power within patriarchal structures, nor does it focus solely on urban–rural and regional class divisions or construct abstract identities through discourse. Instead, it returns to their concrete everyday experiences and lived social power relations (McNay, 2004) and examines the complexity and limits of their resistance. The research argues that their resistance is negotiable and strategic, continuously shifting across temporal and spatial dimensions, presenting a complex interweaving of appropriation, reconfiguration, and adaptation within a relational power dynamic.

The research shows that in many cases, the birth of my interlocutors' younger brothers stemmed mostly from the expectations of their grandparents' generation, especially the paternal grandmother, for a grandson. Under the pressure of filial piety, some interviewees' parents felt compelled to have a son even at the risk of policy penalties. In the interviewees' accounts, the parents themselves did not hold the belief that they "must have a son". Moreover, almost none of the interviewees experienced the direct deprivation of educational, medical, or food resources, as emphasized in existing research (Croll, 2002, p.54). The phenomenon of intra-generational exploitation, in which an elder sister's developmental opportunities are sacrificed to concentrate resources on a brother, also occurred rarely (Yang & Liu, 2022; Wang, 2005).

However, this does not mean that son preference, which symbolizes gender inequality within Chinese families, has disappeared. It continues to operate in daily life in more subtle ways, manifesting in structures of opportunity and the allocation of resources, and is rooted in gendered asymmetrical expectations. The interviewees' parents often emphasized that "we treat you all equally," yet their younger brothers typically received a more advanced or elite education than the interviewees themselves, an education that required substantial financial resources and immense effort to secure spots at prestigious schools. In some affluent families, traditional patrilineal inheritance systems persist. Core resources such as family businesses and real estate are often still passed down to sons, while daughters, despite receiving ample pocket money and care in daily life, rarely receive an equal share of these resources. This is because parents typically assume their daughters will eventually marry out of the family, as evidenced by the cases of Bei Bei and Yuan Yuan.

Yet this gendered resource allocation is increasingly characterized by conditionality and instrumentality. Especially in families with limited resources, when a son fails to meet parental expectations for his personal development, family resources and emotional investment may shift toward the daughter. As Eklund

(2011b) points out, son preference in Chinese society is being continuously transformed and renegotiated, and its manifestations increasingly blur the boundaries between “urban” and “rural” or “traditional” and “modern”. The old-age dependency relationship based on the “parent–son contract” (Croll, 2002) has changed but not ended. A conditional allocation of family resources, grounded in neoliberal instrumental rationality, is intertwined with traditional patriarchal logic to jointly shape the gender order within Chinese families.

It is against this backdrop of a change of power relations that the sisters carry out ongoing, negotiation-based everyday resistance. When facing parental power suppression in romantic and marital matters, some interviewees adopted a tactic this research calls “performative obedience” as an indirect way of resisting. When expected to assume caregiving responsibilities and emotional support for their younger brothers, they did not exhibit the unconditional self-sacrifice of the *fudimo* identified in existing research, a pattern of surrendering subjectivity and internalizing responsibility for the natal family and the brother’s life as one’s own (Wang & Cui, 2024; Yang & Liu, 2022). More commonly, they used spatial withdrawal to circumvent the asymmetrical distribution of gendered responsibilities within the family, thereby refusing to be persistently bound to role expectations of “sisterhood” and “motherhood.” The interviewees generally proved to appropriate the ideological resources of individual autonomy, choice, and self-realization from neoliberal governance. They deployed these to resist the gendered moral distribution of responsibilities constructed around intergenerational duties and sibling affection, and consciously rejected treating the notion that “daughters are more filial and considerate” as a natural trait.

While this resistance unfolds, it does not free them from the grip of the existing gendered power system. This is especially evident in career choices. When explaining the divergence between their own choice to return to their hometowns for employment or *kaogong* and their younger brothers’ aspirations to work for companies in big cities or start their own businesses, interviewees invoked explanations such as “it’s reasonable for boys to venture out, strive,” and “parents inherently educate boys and girls differently.” Such rationalizations of gendered life-planning differences may already constitute a restriction on their programmatic autonomy.

At the same time, the appropriation of neoliberal power is accompanied by the reappropriation of biopower. The body becomes a particularly important space of resistance for the elder sisters. Through intentions related to reproduction, their preferences for the sex of their offspring and birth-order design, they resist the gender inequality experienced in childhood and existing patriarchal relations in China. Although they exhibit relatively high local autonomy in this regard, this autonomy often still has to be realized through compromise, by entering the institution of marriage. More importantly, this embodied resistance, through privatized and individualized means, to some extent reproduces the biopolitical logic that the state imposed on female bodies during the one-child policy era (Greenhalgh, 2009). It must re-mobilize agency through gendered discourse, so they may inadvertently reinforce some of the power logics that constitute their oppression and reproduce another form of gender essentialism, for instance, by casting boys as “more prone to cause trouble,” while girls are deemed to “possess greater empathy and emotional sensitivity.”

The research further reveals the importance of incorporating affect as a necessary condition for relational autonomy (Benson, 1994) into the analysis of the elder sisters’ everyday resistance across different spatial fields. It argues that understanding their relational autonomy cannot rely solely on a foundation of self-reflection rooted in rationalism. If affects such as self-trust, sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and self-confidence are eroded within specific power fields, the modes of everyday resistance will also shift.

For this reason, this research attempts to move beyond previous behavior-centered approaches to observing everyday resistance (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2019) and to integrate memory, affect, imagination, and future expectations into the examination of the concept of practice. Thus, interviewees’ memories of unequal treatment in childhood continuously shape their present emotional responses and, to some extent, their overall understanding of intimate relationships, marriage and childbearing, and filial piety. This ongoing process of reinterpreting and reconstructing subjectivity over time also offers a new perspective on the relationship between female subjects' everyday resistance and relational autonomy.

Notably, regardless of whether they came from economically underdeveloped rural areas or highly developed cities, interviewees' understandings of reproduction, women's rights, intimacy relationships closely aligned with mainstream gender discourses widely circulated on contemporary Chinese social media, such as "be your own leading lady," "relying on yourself is better than relying on a husband," and "marriage and childbearing are patriarchal exploitation of women." The rise of cyberspace means that the flow of information and the spread of ideas can partially break free from the constraints of geographical boundaries, allowing many young women to acquire, to some extent, more critical cognitive tools. This gives them greater possibilities for grasping programmatic autonomy and thus profoundly shapes their resistance practices. For gender studies focused on China, this observation offers a direction for transcending the traditional urban–rural dualistic analytical framework and achieving a more comprehensive understanding of females' everyday resistance.

Overall, this research places the elder sisters within the specific context of daily life and intersubjective interactions, examining how they continuously negotiate within a complex network of relational power in contemporary China. The research finds that their resistance is neither outright confrontation nor complete submission, but rather a fluid practice embedded within everyday power relations. The elder sisters do not detach themselves from the existing power system, but rather expand the boundaries of their agency through continuous negotiation and adjustment. As China's gender order continues to evolve, how female subjects will develop new forms of daily resistance, and what limitations they will face, remain questions that require further analysis.

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